Conducting Interviews During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

Becky Self

Abstract: The use of telephone and VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) interviews has become necessary owing to the legal restrictions and safety measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has furthered scholarly dialogue surrounding the choice of interview mode, and the assumption that face-to-face interviews are the "gold standard" (NOVICK, 2008, p.397). The general public has also become more accustomed to utilising VoIP in their day-to-day lives. In this article, I discuss this change in communication methods and the impact it could have on interview modes. Nevertheless, the researcher's and participant's contexts remain paramount when deciding which interview mode to employ. For this reason, OLTMANN's (2016) model has been extended to include VoIP, providing a more complete framework for researchers to make an informed decision when contemplating interview modes.

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1. Introduction

Interviews are widely used in qualitative research and are perceived by some scholars to be the primary method within the qualitative paradigm (SANDELOWSKI, 2002). They are used to gather information on participants' experiences, understandings, and opinions concerning a specific phenomenon or research question (LAMBERT & LOISELLE, 2008). The advantages and disadvantages of interviews as a research method have been extensively discussed by researchers for several decades (KALEKIN-FISHMAN, 2002). [1]

Face-to-face interviews are often perceived as the "gold standard" (NOVICK, 2008, p.397) of qualitative research. Several scholars (e.g. GILLHAM, 2005; SHUY, 2002) have argued that they are more naturalistic than other interview modes. For instance, researchers can create a personal connection with participants due to the physical proximity (SEITZ, 2016; VOGL, 2013). They can also create a rapport and assess and analyse participants' non-verbal cues and body language (HOLT, 2010; LECHUGA, 2012; VOGL, 2013). [2]

Within the literature on interviewing, it is often asserted that interviews should be conducted face-to-face and that the researcher will employ interviews in this mode (OLTMANN, 2016). For example, when reflecting on conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups, LONGHURST (2003) provided an overview of where to meet participants without considering other possible interview modes. Other researchers have gone further and defined interviews as involving a face-to-face encounter (e.g. MAGNUSSON & MARECEK, 2015; TAYLOR, BOGDAN & DeVAULT, 2015). For instance, TAYLOR et al. (2015, p.114) asserted that "[an] interview is a form of social interaction. [That] involves a face-to-face encounter between two—and sometimes more—persons, each of whom is sizing up the other and constructing the meanings of the other's words, expressions, and gestures". However, there is a wealth of literature in which the advantages of using different modes of interview are described, including that of telephone (CARR & WORTH, 2001; HOLT, 2010; SHUY, 2002) and VoIP through platforms such as Skype (HANNA, 2012; SULLIVAN, 2012) and Zoom (ADDO, 2020; ARCHIBALD, AMBAGTSHEER, CASEY & LAWLESS, 2019; GRAY, WONG-WYLIE, REMPEL & COOK, 2020). [3]

In the present day, the legal restrictions and safety measures that have been put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic mean that researchers have to conduct interviews using remote modes. Thus, a decision has to be made over which remote mode to employ, or whether to postpone data collection. This has furthered the dialogue surrounding the choice of interview mode (DODDS & HESS, 2020; SY et al., 2020). It could also potentially disrupt the assumption often presented in research guidelines that interviews should take place face-to-face, and that the perceived "gold standard" is the face-to-face interview. Participants have also become more familiar with using online communication methods in their daily lives. The extent to which this takes place is dependent on their access to technology and the internet, as well as their occupation. This could herald a newfound willingness for participants to take part in research using

remote modes, and an increase in internal validity when employing such methods. Despite the increased use of VoIP, the researcher's and participant's contexts remain paramount when deciding which interview mode to utilise. [4]

In Section 2, I address the technological and social changes engendered by COVID-19 and the implications these could have for research undertaken now and in the future. In Section 3, I highlight a framework for choosing which interview mode to use. This is essentially an extension of OLTMANN's (2016) model. I discuss the researcher's context in relation to the choice of modes. I particularly focus on research budget and time restrictions, as well as factors such as the geographic location of participants and interviewer safety. Next, I discuss the participant's context, which is centred on issues such as power, anonymity, and privacy in relation to research modes. Finally, in Section 4, I summarise the aspects that need to be considered with regard to both the researcher's and participant's contexts. [5]

2. COVID-19 and Beyond

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most researchers have had to alter the way in which they collect their data to keep themselves and participants safe, and to abide by government restrictions and laws. Alongside this, there has been an increased use in VoIP technologies, which have become ingrained within our COVID-stricken society. For example, teachers and students have had to embrace VoIP technology (DIAS, LOPES & TELES, 2020), telemedicine has increased (ABRAHAM et al., 2020), and therapy (BÉKÉS & AAFJES-VAN DOORN, 2020), legal trials (PUDDISTER & SMALL, 2020), and worship (ADDO, 2020) have all taken place online. KOMINERS, STANTON, WU and GONZALEZ (2020) have even gone so far as to argue that the use of Zoom has become central to our society. [6]

This growth in the use of VoIP can be likened to that of the mobile phone (CARR & WORTH, 2001). It has created an intergenerational, globalised, "tech savvy" society characterised by the increased use and acceptability of VoIP. The fact that VoIP has replaced numerous face-to-face interactions during the pandemic may impact debates concerning interview modes and challenge the presentation of the face-to-face interview as the "gold standard" (NOVICK, 2008, p.397). In conjunction with the researcher's and participant's contexts outlined later in the article, the increased use of VoIP offers several benefits that researchers may wish to consider. [7]

The general population has become better equipped to use VoIP. They have been provided with further training and assistance in its use, and there has been an increase in online guides and tutorials which are accessible to all. Participants and researchers are therefore more likely to have both an adequate internet connection and technological understanding. This could decrease the likelihood of technological issues associated with VoIP. Thus, VoIP interviews have the potential to run more smoothly than in the past. [8]

The rise in the use of VoIP and the corresponding development in technological ability may also boost participants' willingness to take part in research, as they may feel more relaxed and familiar with the technology. Thus, the greater number of people who are computer-literate means a sample of participants is less likely to be biased (BAMPTON & COWTON, 2002). The caveat here is that this is clearly dependent on inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the nature of the participants (ibid). [9]

COVID-19 has also blurred the boundaries between the private and public sphere. Colleagues, students, and professionals (such as therapists and physicians) are partially invited into the individual's home through the lens of VoIP. This practice has become normalised during 2020/21 and could be advantageous for social research as participants may be more willing to allow a researcher to "enter" their home via VoIP. BAYLES (2012) has argued that physical proximity between the researcher and participant increases when utilising VoIP, compared with face-to-face interviews. This potential invasion of privacy, and how it may be overcome, is yet to be addressed. [10]

Finally, as participants have become more accustomed to using VoIP, what would previously have been an unnatural set-up has now become more normalised. Participants and researchers may therefore feel more relaxed, making it easier to create a rapport and making it more likely that participants answer questions truthfully, thereby increasing internal validity. Notwithstanding the myriad changes induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important not to romanticise the use of VoIP. Although most people in society have had to embrace VoIP, the extent to which this occurs will differ between individuals and groups. Following the vaccine roll-out, it has been unclear how the use of VoIP will translate into life after COVID-19. [11]

In the remainder of this article, I consider the advantages and disadvantages of using face-to-face, telephone, and VoIP interviews from the point of view of both researcher and participant. I present this in a framework to enable researchers to decide which mode of interview to use during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. [12]

3. Interview Modes

OLTMANN (2016) argued that researchers should take particular care when deciding which research mode to employ as they need to ensure it is appropriate for both the researcher's and participant's contexts. OLTMANN created the criteria illustrated in Tables 1 and 2 to establish whether face-to-face or telephone interviews should be utilised. I have developed this framework further to include VoIP platforms focusing in particular on the use of Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype, making it relevant to the context of research during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. [13]

3.1 Researcher's context

The following section focuses on the considerations that need to be made regarding the researcher's context. These are outlined in the following table.

Time and financial costs
Geographical distribution of respondents
Sensitive or controversial topics
Technological problems
Interviewer safety
Note taking
Interaction effects
Non-verbal language and cues

Table 1: Components of the interviewer's context (OLTMANN, 2016, §9) [14]

3.1.1 Time and financial costs

Time and financial costs are the most obvious components of the interviewer's context. OLTMANN noted that face-to-face interviews take a considerable amount of time to conduct and can be financially costly, because the researcher usually has to travel to the participant. These costs are significantly reduced when utilising VoIP and telephone research modes, given that the need to travel is eliminated (ARCHIBALD et al., 2019; CARR & WORTH, 2001; GRAY et al., 2020). The environmental cost is also reduced as telephone and VoIP modes are more environmentally friendly (HANNA, 2012). However, there are associated costs with telephone interviews. For instance, researchers may be advised to purchase a research phone, and take out a monthly contract to ensure the telephone does not run out of credit. These costs are typically paid for by the institution or organisation rather than the individual researcher (OLTMANN, 2016). By comparison, VoIP modes have fewer associated costs as researchers are able to use their own research laptop/computer, removing the need to purchase hardware. Microsoft Teams and Skype are free to use, as is the free version of Zoom. An important point to note here is that Zoom differs from Microsoft Teams and Skype as calls are restricted to 40 minutes when more than

two participants are taking part (LOBE, MORGAN & HOFFMAN, 2020). This could be problematic when running lengthy focus groups as the flow of the interview could be interrupted and participants may not re-join if the session has to be restarted. [15]

3.1.2 Geographical distribution of respondents

The geographical distribution of participants is another important aspect to consider with respect to the researcher's context. As discussed previously, face-to-face interviews are often limited to a specific geographic area owing to time and cost constraints (SWEET, 2002). Therefore, interviewing people over the telephone and VoIP can widen the geographical range of participants (ARCHIBALD et al., 2019; GRAY et al., 2020; OLTMANN, 2016) to a national or international scope (SHUY, 2002). Nevertheless, it is important to consider the cost of conducting research internationally over the telephone. These costs do not increase when using VoIP platforms. Moreover, such modes can also prove useful in researching populations that are geographically hard to reach. For example, HUBBARD, VENNING, WALKER, SCANLON and KYLE (2015) undertook semi-structured telephone interviews with women with breast cancer in rural Scotland to establish their supportive care needs. Regrettably, telephone and VoIP interviews can also have drawbacks as there may be distractions and background noise present (DEAKIN & WAKEFIELD, 2014) and a potential lack of privacy (GRAY et al., 2020), despite the participant being in a familiar environment (KAZMER & XIE, 2008). These issues can be mitigated somewhat in face-to-face interviews if the researcher carefully reflects where interviews will be conducted (BRYMAN, 2008). However, this is not always the case as the researcher may give the participant freedom to choose where the interview is held, or there may be disruptions beyond the researcher's control. It is evident that by utilising VoIP and telephone modes, a wider geographical area and range of participants can be accessed. [16]

3.1.3 Sensitive or controversial topics

Semi-structured interviews are viewed by researchers as an appropriate format for discussing sensitive topics (BRYMAN, 2008). For instance, the researcher can explain to the participants that they have the right to withdraw and can take a break at any point. The researcher can also debrief participants after the interview and answer any questions they may have to provide further information or clarify any misunderstandings (ibid). Deciding what interview mode to employ is important with regard to the sensitivity of the research topic. Several researchers have argued that sensitive topics have the potential to be embarrassing or awkward to discuss in face-to-face interviews (DOODY & NOONAN, 2013; VOGL, 2013). However, this has been disputed by others who claim face-to-face interviews enable the researcher to build a rapport with the participants, making them feel more relaxed and able to converse (BRYMAN, 2008). It can also be contended that the researcher can judge the emotional state of participants more easily in face-to-face interviews, as it enables them to read and react to non-verbal cues. However, both telephone and VoIP interviews

involve a reduced physical proximity between the researcher and participant (BAYLES, 2012). This may be beneficial in reducing the awkwardness surrounding the discussion of sensitive topics (CARR & WORTH, 2001; OLTMANN, 2016). Telephone interviews also have the added benefit of the "faceless researcher", which may pose less of a threat to participants compared with other research modes (DINHAM, 1993, p.25). The "faceless researcher" can also be replicated over all forms of VoIP by turning off the video setting. This has proved effective when researching sensitive topics. For example, SIPES, ROBERTS and MULLAN (2019) examined the benefits of using SKYPE audio-only when researching sexual identity. Thus, VoIP and telephone interviews are effective means of researching sensitive and potentially embarrassing topics. [17]

3.1.4 Technological problems

Nevertheless, there are problems associated with both VoIP and telephone modes with regard to potential technological issues. These are limited to difficulties with recording devices in face-to-face interviews (BRYMAN, 2008) but can also occur if recording in other modes. Interviews may have to be restarted or rescheduled because of a poor phone or internet signal (CARR & WORTH, 2001), and poor sound and/or video quality (DEAKIN & WAKEFIELD, 2014). This could potentially result in miscommunication during the interview and impact the response rate as participants may be reluctant to reschedule. Concerns have also been expressed that participants may be unfamiliar with the required technology (HESSE-BIBER & GRIFFIN, 2013), or may not have access to the technology. Nevertheless, WARD, GOTT and HOARE (2015) have maintained that telephones have become ingrained in daily life, as has VoIP, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (KOMINERS et al., 2020). This means that participants are more likely to be "tech savvy" and feel comfortable using these modes. Moreover, if participants are unfamiliar with technology, they are usually willing to learn (including the elderly) and see taking part as a valuable learning opportunity (LO IACONO, SYMONDS & BROWN, 2016). Although telephone and VoIP platforms bring technological challenges (ARCHIBALD et al., 2019), the benefits of utilising VoIP modes outweigh the problems. [18]

3.1.5 Interviewer safety

Employing VoIP and telephone interviews also ensures the safety of the researcher. This element is often overlooked and can vary depending on the research question and the nature of participants (OLTMANN, 2016). Utilising face-to-face interviews can potentially pose a threat to the researcher, depending on the time and location of the meeting (WILSON, 2012). When undertaking my MSc research with sex workers, I was instructed by the ethics board not to meet in their homes. This created a potential barrier, as many of the women felt more comfortable discussing their work in their own environment rather than a public space such as a café. Using VoIP or telephone interviews could have helped overcome this issue, as interviews could have been conducted in a safe environment such as my home (SHUY, 2002). Therefore, the safety of the interviewer is an essential factor with regard to the interviewer's context. [19]

3.1.6 Note taking

If participants do not wish to be audio-recorded, or if there is a technical issue with the recording device, telephone interviews can prove useful as notes can be made during the interview. Although note taking is recommended in some qualitative research texts as a supplement to audio recording in face-to-face interviews (OPDENAKKER, 2006), it can be obtrusive and distracting to the participant and should be kept to a minimum (KNOX & BURKARD, 2009). This allows researchers to devote their full attention to listening and responding to the participant. If an audio recording cannot be made, telephone interviews enable researchers to make non-intrusive notes as they cannot be seen by the participant (NOVICK, 2008), although simultaneously making notes and concentrating on the interview could be challenging (STEPHENS, 2007). Note taking in a non-intrusive manner is one of the benefits telephone interviews offer over face-to-face and VoIP interviews. This aspect should be considered carefully, particularly when participants do not wish to be recorded. [20]

3.1.7 Interaction effects

Semi-structured interviews have been scrutinised on the grounds that they convey implicit demands (i.e. social desirability), meaning an attempt is often made to present a version of one's self that meets these demands (DENZIN, 1989) and follows a "cultural script" (ALVESSON, 2003, p.15). Thus, participants answer questions in the way they believe they should, to reflect the desired social response (BRINK, 1991). ORNE (1962, p.780) labelled these effects "demand characteristics" of the interview situation. The more the interviewer and participant differ with respect to ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, and age, the more such effects are exacerbated (BAILEY, 1987). Researchers can sometimes reduce "demand characteristics" in face-to-face and VoIP interviews by presenting themselves as relaxed yet professional in dress, etiquette, and manner (DENZIN, 1989). Demand characteristics can be decreased further by utilising telephone interviews because observable characteristics are no longer visible (TAYLOR et al., 2015). However, HOLT (2010) argued that, when similar, these characteristics can be beneficial in creating a rapport as the participant and researcher can orient towards one another. Moreover, the identity (and differences in identity) of the researcher and participant are of paramount importance when choosing which interview mode to adopt. [21]

3.1.8 Non-verbal language and cues

Finally, one of the reasons face-to-face interviews have been heralded as "the gold standard" is because the researcher can analyse non-verbal cues and body language (HOLT, 2010; LECHUGA, 2012; VOGL, 2013). LO IACONO et al. (2016) contended that to some extent the researcher can analyse such indicators, as it is possible for them to observe paralinguistic cues, for instance facial expression and tone of voice. BAYLES (2012, p.578), however, stated that "in a head and shoulders presentation we lose the full range of postural, gestural, and expressive movement that the body conveys, as well as the intentionality that is carried and expressed in that movement". SEITZ (2016) argued that this can be overcome by listening more carefully to the participants' voices, observing their facial expressions more intently, and deliberately using one's own facial expression to convey emotion and build a rapport. Moreover, most non-verbal cues are inaccessible during telephone interviews, excluding tone of voice and pauses in speech (OPDENAKKER, 2006). This can, however, result in participants and researchers elaborating on their opinions and experiences in greater detail, generating richer text for analysis (VOGL, 2013). Hence, researchers should contemplate the importance of non-verbal cues and how these can be observed when choosing an interview mode. [22]

3.2 Participant's context

The following section focuses on the participant's context. These are outlined in the following table.

Scheduling
Respondent anonymity
Privacy and invasiveness
Stigmatised and marginalised groups
Sensitive or controversial topics
Respondent empowerment

Table 2: Components of the respondent's context (OLTMANN, 2016, §21) [23]

3.2.1 Scheduling

Scheduling face-to-face interviews can exert social pressure on participants to meet at a specific time and place, which can result in a higher completion rate compared with telephone and VoIP interviews (SHUY, 2002). Participants can easily alter the meeting time of telephone interviews if they are no longer available, as they are more flexible (NOVICK, 2008). This is also the case for VoIP interviews. Potential participants who may not have time to take part in face-to-face interviews, owing to other commitments such as work and childcare, may choose to take part over the phone or VoIP. Thus, conducting telephone and VoIP interviews may increase participation. For example, STEPHENS (2007)

indicated that using telephone interviews when researching the ultra-elite and elite was beneficial as they could not spare long periods of time. Therefore, participants may be more willing to take part in research that offers flexibility by conducting interviews over the phone or VoIP, but they are also less likely to attend the interview. [24]

3.2.2 Respondent anonymity

Telephone interviews have been linked with the perceived anonymity of participants, as the researcher cannot see the participant (STURGES & HANRAHAN, 2004; SWEET, 2002). This can be recreated on VoIP by turning off the video function, as WILLIAMS, SHEFFIELD and KNIBB (2015) did in their research on women with polycystic ovary syndrome. But participants may not feel the need to have their camera turned off, as the nature of the online interaction, and the lack of a shared social network, could provide them with sufficient perceived anonymity (SULLIVAN, 2012). This can be beneficial, particularly when discussing sensitive or illegal topics, as it means participants may feel more comfortable and able to disclose information (STURGES & HANRAHAN, 2004). It can also lead to participants expressing their authentic "true selves" (SULLIVAN, 2012, p.56), given that they are able to talk more openly and honestly (CARR & WORTH, 2001). [25]

3.2.3 Privacy and invasiveness

Participants may have concerns over privacy and data protection. The researcher often travels to the participants when conducting face-to-face interviews. This can feel invasive as interviews often take place in the participants' home, place of work, or a public space close to home (WHALE, 2017). This perceived breach of privacy can be reduced by interviewing them over the telephone or VoIP, because the researcher does not physically enter the participants' space (HOLT, 2010; SWEET, 2002). If the researcher chooses to record over software, participants may be concerned about data breaches and a lack of privacy. Zoom, Skype and Microsoft Teams all offer the convenience of recording through the platform; these recordings can then be saved in the cloud or onto the device being used to hold the interview. Researchers must be aware of the ethical issues that arise when recording in this manner (particularly in relation to the ownership of data), and obtain participants' consent to do so. Therefore, it is evident that although VoIP and telephone interviews can provide more privacy than face-to-face interviews, certain ethical challenges may need to be addressed. [26]

3.2.4 Stigmatised and marginalised groups

Telephone and VoIP interviews can be both beneficial and limiting when interviewing marginalised and stigmatised individuals. Participants' identities and abilities need to be considered when choosing the research mode. Hidden and disadvantaged groups who may not have participated in face-to-face research have been reached using online methods. Examples of such groups include Chinese lesbian youths (CHENG, 2018), women with polycystic ovary syndrome (WILLIAMS et al., 2015), and members of the trans community (JOURIAN, 2017). Marginalised and stigmatised participants may prefer to take part in interviews over the phone or VoIP owing to the geographic spread of such participants, the need to discuss sensitive topics, and a greater level of perceived anonymity. GLOGOWSKA, YOUNG and LOCKYER (2011, p.26) argued that telephone interviews have "the potential to enfranchise sections of the population who might otherwise go unheard". [27]

Nevertheless, the digital divide means not all participants can take part over the phone or VoIP (MAITLAND, 2018). They may not have access to the required technology or lack the means to pay for sufficient internet or phone credit. These groups may include homeless people, refugees, and those living in relative deprivation. The cognitive ability of the participant also needs to be assessed, as this can impact the mode of interview utilised. For example, individuals with dementia tend to struggle with telephone conversations but have found VoIP to be a useful form of communication (BOMAN, LUNDBERG, STARKHAMMAR & NYGÅRD, 2014). At the same time, those in the later stages of Huntington's may benefit from telephone interviews rather than VoIP interviews. Thus, access to technology and the abilities of participants need to be taken into account when deciding on an interview mode. [28]

3.2.5 Sensitive or controversial topics

Although sensitivity has previously been discussed with regard to the researcher's context, it is also important to consider this issue in relation to the participant's context. For instance, sensitive or potentially awkward topics may be hard to discuss in face-to-face interviews (CARR & WORTH, 2001). Employing telephone and VoIP interviews may make it easier for participants to disclose and discuss such issues owing to decreased physical proximity and higher perceived anonymity. Thus, participants may be more open and expressive (DEAKIN & WAKEFIELD 2014; GRAY et al., 2020). Being in one's own home or safe environment will facilitate this further as participants may feel more relaxed and able to share their experiences and opinions (GRAY et al., 2020). Having said that, they may not always have privacy in their own environments, which may prevent them from discussing sensitive issues for fear of being overheard. For instance, they may live with a partner, roommate or children, and find it hard to schedule the interview at a time when they are alone. This is increasingly problematic over periods of lockdown when individuals spend more time at home either being furloughed or instructed to work from home. Researchers should acknowledge the participant's context and environment when reflecting on the

benefits of employing VoIP and telephone interviews to discuss sensitive issues. Regrettably, this cannot always be predetermined. [29]

Finally, all interview modes have the potential to be both empowering and disempowering. Semi-structured interviews in general have been presented as a way of empowering participants by providing a platform for their voices to be heard (SKINNER, HANNING, DESJARDINS & TSUJI, 2013). As noted previously, telephone and VoIP modes can include or exclude marginalised and stigmatised individuals, thus challenging or conforming to the current power dynamic within society. Notably, when VoIP and telephone modes are employed, participants have more control over the research process, including when and where the interview takes place (CHENG, 2018; NOVICK, 2008; SWEET, 2002). The participant is immediately removed from the interaction once the interview is terminated (WHALE, 2017). This encourages a more equal relationship between the participant and researcher, enabling participants to comfortably share their experiences and opinions (CHENG, 2018). In fact, participants may feel even more empowered during face-to-face and VoIP interviews as they can see the researcher (SHUY, 2002) and assess whether they are paying attention, addressing this issue, if necessary (STEPHENS, 2007). Unfortunately, less confident participants may not feel able to challenge the researcher; they may find situations like this disempowering and discouraging. Thus, the personality and characteristics of both the researcher and participant influence the extent to which participants feel empowered/disempowered. Perhaps the best way of empowering participants is to allow them to choose which mode of interview they prefer and feel most comfortable with (HANNA, 2012). [30]

4. Researcher's and Participant's Contexts—Summary of Components

The tables below summarise the advantages and disadvantages of using face-to-face, telephone, and VoIP interviews with respect to the researcher's and participant's contexts discussed in Section 3.

Researcher's context	Face-to-face	VoIP	Telephone
Time and financial costs	High time and financial costs	Low time and financial costs	Low time and financial costs
Geographical distribution of respondents	Limits geographical area	Widens geographical area	Widens geographical area
Sensitive or controversial topics	Embarrassing and awkward. However, building a rapport means participants can relax	Reduced physical proximity reduces awkwardness and creates a "faceless researcher"	Reduced physical proximity reduces awkwardness and creates a "faceless researcher"

Researcher's context	Face-to-face	VoIP	Telephone
Technological problems	Recording issues	Recording issues Poor quality possible Needs to be tech savvy	Recording issues Poor quality possible Needs to be tech savvy
Interviewer safety	Higher risk	Low risk	Low risk
Note taking	Obtrusive	Obtrusive when video is on	Less obtrusive
Interaction effect, demand characteristics	Evident but can be reduced Can sometimes be beneficial in creating a rapport	Evident but can be reduced Can sometimes be beneficial in creating a rapport	Less evident
Non-verbal language and cues	Easier to study	Harder to study	Harder to study

Table 3: Researcher's context, summary of components

Participant's context	Face-to-face	VoIP	Telephone
Scheduling	Less flexible	Flexible	Flexible
Respondent anonymity	Less anonymity	Perceived anonymity ('video off' function increases this)	Perceived anonymity
Privacy/invasiveness	More invasive	Less invasive	Less invasive
Stigmatised and/or marginalised groups	May not participate	Easier to reach, but can exclude certain populations	Easier to reach, but can exclude certain populations
Sensitive or controversial topics	Embarrassing and awkward. However, building a rapport means participants can relax	Reduced physical proximity reduces awkwardness Potential lack of privacy in own home	Reduced physical proximity reduces awkwardness Potential lack of privacy in own home
Respondent empowerment	Less control over research process	More control over research process	More control over research process

Table 4: Participant's context, summary of components [31]

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, both the researcher's and participant's contexts should be considered when choosing which interview mode to employ. Face-to-face interviews have multiple benefits and have been heralded as the "gold standard". The researcher is able to recreate a natural conversation, read and assess non-verbal cues and body language, and build a rapport. However, VoIP and telephone interviews also have numerous benefits that should be considered. For instance, they are less costly, ensure the safety of the researcher and participant, permit flexible scheduling, and increase perceived anonymity and privacy. They are also beneficial in researching geographically dispersed participants and sensitive issues. Telephone interviews have the added advantage of allowing the researcher to take notes, reducing the likelihood of "demand characteristics". The extent to which participants are empowered, and whether the interview mode is suitable for marginalised and stigmatised individuals, depends on the identity and characteristics of the participants. [32]

Currently, the traditional option of undertaking face-to-face interviews has been removed for many researchers because of the legal restrictions and safety measures introduced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has initiated a conversation in academia concerning the choice of research modes. Although this conversation is not new, it has been central to interview-based research in 2020/21. This could potentially disrupt the assumption often presented in research guidelines that interviews should take place face-to-face, an assumption that underscores the perceived "gold standard" of the face-to-face interview. There have also been changes in society regarding how individuals and groups interact, with an increased use of VoIP in both the public and private sphere. This could have a positive impact on the take-up rate of VoIP interviews, participants' and researchers' technical abilities, and the internal validity of this mode. However, it is important not to overly romanticise the increased use of VoIP, given that the researcher's and participant's contexts remain central when deciding what mode of interview to adopt. [33]

Acknowledgements

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Author

Becky SELF is a PhD candidate in the Health Faculty at Liverpool John Moores University. She has a background in sociology, having studied this at Oxford University and the University of Warwick. Becky's research interests include reproductive health and medical ethics, sex work and online identity, and gender socialisation and education.

Contact:

Becky Self

Liverpool John Moores University
Faculty of Health
Exchange Station, Tithebarn Street
Liverpool, L2 2QP, UK

E-mail: B.self@2019.ljmu.ac.uk

Citation