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Challenges in Conducting Online Videoconferencing Qualitative Interviews with Adolescents on Sensitive Topics

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Abstract

In the wake of COVID-19, researchers are seeking innovative data-collection methods. Computer-mediated communication platforms have played a pivotal role among these pursuits. However, conducting online interviews present challenges to both researchers and participants. Online data-collection forces researchers to give up control over the study environment due to the varying location participants partake in interviews. Consequently, researchers can no longer fully guarantee the confidentiality and privacy of the researcher-participant conversations. Participants may face difficulties if being asked to disclose private information in the presence of family members. These challenges are heightened when conducting online interviews with adolescents on sensitive topics. Thus, attention to the rigour of qualitative research is a fundamental consideration given these limitations in technical and social conventions with the use of online data-collection methods. Despite the host of challenges, online interviewing creates valuable opportunities for researchers to rise to the challenge of social distancing in their data-collection efforts.

Keywords

interviewing, online, sensitive topics, young people

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In the wake of COVID-19, researchers are seeking innovative data-collection methods. Computer-mediated communication platforms have played a pivotal role among these pursuits. However, conducting online interviews present challenges to both researchers and participants. Online data-collection forces researchers to give up control over the study environment due to the varying location participants partake in interviews. Consequently, researchers can no longer fully guarantee the confidentiality and privacy of the researcher-participant conversations. Participants may face difficulties if being asked to disclose private information in the presence of family members. These challenges are heightened when conducting online interviews with adolescents on sensitive topics. Thus, attention to the rigour of qualitative research is a fundamental consideration given these limitations in technical and social conventions with the use of online data-collection methods. Despite the host of challenges, online interviewing creates valuable opportunities for researchers to rise to the challenge of social distancing in their data-collection efforts.

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We have all been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in our personal, social, and professional capacities. We are asked to engage in the practice of physical distancing, which thus limits our in-person contact not only with our community of researchers, but also with our broader communities, research partners, and study participants. Advances in information and communication technologies have created unique opportunities for interviewing research participants (Kenny, 2005; Lobe et al., 2020; i.e., online computer-mediated communications technology such as Zoom, Skype, Webex, etc.). Yet physical distancing presents challenges to researchers engaged in qualitative health research. Given the recency of the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges associated with online data collection remain an underexplored area of research.

Adolescent Participation in Qualitative Research

Adolescents' inclusion in research has increased exponentially in recent decades among the social sciences and health disciplines (Duncan et al., 2009; Kirk, 2007; Laenen, 2009; Schelbe et al., 2015). Historically, adolescents were viewed as incompetent, passive, conforming, immature, incomplete, and highly vulnerable participants whose participation would be unreliable, and susceptible to adult suggestion; and they would ultimately provide less legitimate knowledge (Farrell, 2005; Laenen, 2009; Mason & Hood, 2011). Shaping current trends towards the greater inclusion of historically marginalized voices in research are the evolving views that children and adolescents are competent research participants (Kirk, 2007; Mason & Hood, 2011; Schelbe et al., 2015). These competencies are viewed in the unique set of expertise that adolescents' knowledge on adolescent-specific health-related

decisions offers (Schelbe et al., 2015). Accordingly, these insights provide invaluable guidance in research by shaping the development of adolescents' appropriate research outputs. With the increased trend towards using social constructionist frameworks in research, adolescents have become active social actors capable of shaping the world around them (Kirk, 2007; Mason & Hood, 2011).

In research with adolescents, qualitative research approaches have advantages in navigating the frequent unequal power dynamics in research. These include flexibility in responding appropriately to varied literacy and assertiveness levels, encouragement of the voices and autonomy of participants, and the opportunity to understand how adolescents think about and experience the world (Schelbe et al., 2015). Other strategies to mitigate the power imbalances in qualitative research include encouraging collaborative, reciprocal interactions; for example, reciprocity in asking and answering questions reduces imbalances and conveys that the researcher is not looking for one "right answer." Despite these advantages, researching sensitive topics such as mental health issues, substance abuse, and sexual and reproductive health with adolescents challenges qualitative researchers. Sensitive topics have ethical implications specifically related to the duty of care for researchers, participants, analysts, transcribers, and readers. This should be a paramount component of any research design; several examples of these ethical implications are available in the literature (Decker et al., 2011). In this paper, however, we focus on the challenges that researchers face in conducting online interviews by using computer-mediated communication technology for qualitative data collection with adolescents on sensitive topics such as the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents. We acknowledge that both ethical and methodological implications are equally relevant and should receive careful and thorough consideration.

Challenges in Conducting Online Qualitative Data Collection on Sensitive Topics with Adolescents

With the COVID-19 global pandemic, physical and social distancing mandates are restricting traditional face-to-face investigations. To researchers' benefit, advances in information and communication technologies offer new opportunities for interviewing research participants. Specifically, online data-collection tools and videoconferencing platforms have been critical and ensure that researchers continue to pursue new knowledge during this time. However, conducting interviews online means adapting researchers' ethical obligations to their participants.

Conducting online qualitative interviews with adolescents on sensitive topics brings forth a host of challenges for both researchers and participants. Given the lack of control over the location in which participants take part in interviews or over the way that internet platforms retain information, researchers can no longer fully guarantee the confidentiality of the information that participants share and the privacy of the conversations. Participants face the difficulty of researchers asked them to share private information with them when parents or older members of the family are at home with them. For example, in our study on immigrant adolescents' sexuality and their experiences with sexual and reproductive health needs, we experienced many challenges in conducting online interviews. During our face-to-face interviews, the participants more freely and openly disclosed intimate and personal experiences that they perceived as embarrassing, humiliating, or awkward. However, when we conducted the same interviews through online video conferencing because of COVID-19 restrictions, the participants were hesitant to share their personal stories because of the fear that their parents or siblings would hear their conversations. Most of them used Chatbox and said, "*My mother or elder sister can hear our conversation, I can't talk about it now.*" In our study, many participants refused to answer some of the questions for this reason, which increased the rate

of participant dropout in the research study because of the fear that their family members would hear their personal sexuality experiences.

Accordingly, the research environment is an important aspect to consider in conducting online interviews with young participants on sensitive topics. The physical and social-distancing measures have forced many people to work from home, and it is difficult to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants' information in online interviews. The impossibility of knowing whether people are present during interviews can lead to researchers' misinterpretation of visual cues such as smiles or the turning of the head that can be nonverbal cues that are relevant to the conversation or responses about the presence of others in the room. To mitigate this, the interviewers wrote notes on the participants' perceptions of what was occurring in the participants' environment—for example, "Participant looking at someone else in the room and shaking head in response to a question/comment from them"—to document the potential role of the surrounding environment during online interviews. However, many times participants do not turn on their cameras during the individual interviews, which makes it difficult to gain insights into their environment. Specifically, researchers will be unable to observe or respond to visual cues and will potentially lose contextual data when they conduct the interviews.

Despite the suitability of online data collection to facilitate innovative and long-distance communication, it limits human contact. This is particularly heightened when the participants' cameras are turned off. The lack of physical or tangible presence compromises the establishment of rapport with research participants. This is critical given the importance of developing researcher-participant relationships to gather rich data on sensitive topics from adolescents.

Discussion

Grappling with the benefits and challenges of our progressively digital world is of critical importance to researchers. Paramount to the realities of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the use of computer-mediated communication applications and platforms have played a pivotal role in continuing to generate research. Researchers' ability to adapt their data-collection methods to strictly online has illuminated significant benefits for future research pursuits. Specifically, online interviews have the advantage of being cheap, convenient, and beneficial in situations in which participants face barriers in transportation. The use of technologies to conduct interviews might be more attractive to adolescent research participants than the traditional face-to-face interview methods.

Nonetheless, significant challenges, particularly in research on sensitive topics with young participants, emerge with the use of computer-mediated-communication to collect data. Attention to the rigour of the study is fundamental given the limitations of technical and social conventions that surface with the use of these data-collection methods. Effective data-collection methods ensure qualitative rigour and the collection of rich, high-quality data (Mackieson et al., 2019; Meadows, 2003; Nelson, 2008). Matters of data credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are fundamental to the achievement of rigour (Meadows, 2003; Nelson, 2008). Yet, as the case scenario above demonstrates, they become compromised in online interviews given researchers' restricted control over the study environment. This has a significant impact on the quality of the collected data and the potential contributions to knowledge in the field.

Qualitative researchers can never fully neutralize their biases; however, minimizing the potential effects of biases is fundamental to qualitative research design (Mackieson et al., 2019; Nelson, 2008; Rettke et al., 2018). Key components of rigorous qualitative research methods include researchers' persistent observation, the use of triangulation, member checking, and the

contextualization of data through reflexive journaling (Nelson, 2008; Rettke et al., 2018). The use of computer-mediated-communication, however, introduces, ambiguity into the online dialogue between researchers and participants. Specifically, the participants' external environments can significantly hinder the content that they disclose and how they do so. Researchers' interviews of adolescent participants on sensitive topics heighten the impact of the external environment. As a result, adolescents' descriptions of a phenomenon in a sensitive topic might lack depth and reveal significant biases in their attempt to avoid being overheard or watched by family members. This can ultimately decrease the quality of the data on sensitive topics. Furthermore, researchers remain unaware of the surrounding external environments of the participant during their data collection. Without the ability to observe beyond the participants' immediate surroundings that are within camera range during interviews, collecting field notes to document their behaviours and engaging in reflexivity (McBrien, 2008) lend limited or incorrect insight into the data. The coupling of participants' external environments and researchers' inability to navigate these surroundings can lead to inaccurate conclusions in the research findings (Yardley, 2000). This raises the fundamental question of the suitability of online interviews in exploring sensitive topics with adolescent participants.

Qualitative researchers' careful planning and documentation can offer guidance during these uncertain times. Moreover, opportunities to engage in member checking and triangulation are still options when they use computer-mediated-communication platforms to collect data (McBrien, 2008; Nelson, 2008). Although online data collection forces researchers to give up control over the study environment, these familiar methods to enhance qualitative rigour can resolve their unfamiliarity with computer-mediated communication in research. These recommendations are indeed preliminary and limited; thus, it is critical to continue to navigate the benefits and challenges of computer-mediated communication as an effective qualitative-research data-collection method. Despite some of the challenges that we have highlighted in this paper, online interviewing creates valuable opportunities for researchers to rise to the challenge of social distancing in their data-collection efforts.

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