

Factors Influencing Researchers to Conduct Virtual Interviews

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Abstract: Virtual interviews are a valuable tool to save time and money and to protect the health and safety of a researcher and their research participants. This study looked at the efficacy of virtual interviews as a research method, as well as positive and negative aspects the software tools used to facilitate virtual interviews. Despite some technical difficulties, especially with automated transcription tools, surveyed researchers reported satisfaction with virtual interviews and a desire to use this interview format again in future to save time, money, inconvenience, and potential health hazards associated with travelling for in-person interviews.

Keywords: interview method, libraries, virtual interviews, videoconferencing

1. Introduction

Virtual interviews are interviews that occur through a teleconferencing medium, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and WebEx. Virtual interviews have existed for over a decade (and before that, there were telephone interviews). Writing in 2012, Wilson discussed virtual interview formats, saying that virtual interviews minimized costs and travel and could increase the comfort level of participants as compared to being interviewed in-person face-to-face.

For sabbatical in Spring 2021, this researcher originally planned to conduct an in-person wayfinding experiment, including observational and in-person interview methods. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions on travel, as well as the closures of many libraries, this was not possible. The researcher instead pivoted to an entirely different project researching library use of GIS during the Covid-19 pandemic. This topic was chosen because it could be completed following Covid-19 safety protocols through the use of interviews with library practitioners conducted via Zoom.

This experience led the researcher to wonder about the use of virtual interviews versus in-person interviews as a research method prior to 2020,

during 2020-2021 (the time of lockdowns), and currently (2022-future). The research questions for this project were:

- Are virtual interviews equivalent to in-person interviews as a research method?
- What other factors are influencing researchers' selection of virtual interviews instead of in-person interviews?
- Which factors affect the selection and use of virtual interview tools?

The research was originally planned as a literature review. However, the researcher found that a literature review was insufficient to address these research questions due to space limitations and other factors of publication that result in an omission of methodological decisions from published papers. Therefore, a survey was conducted with authors of papers found in the literature review. The combined literature review and survey methods were able to ascertain details that address this study's research questions.

2. Background

A literature review is a useful method when investigating the state of a field (Hillig & Müller, 2021) or defining terms, especially the way a field has defined a term over time (Sample, 2020). A common focus of literature reviews in LIS is a review of the literature in a specific topic area to see which methodologies are being employed to investigate that area. Xie et al. used a literature review to investigate methods used in research on blind and visually impaired users (2021), and Mandel used a literature review to investigate methods used to research wayfinding in libraries (2020). Mandel concluded that "A review of the LIS literature on library wayfinding is a useful mechanism for determining which methods are being used in library wayfinding research, as well as the efficacy of those methods for answering research questions" (2020, p. 187).

A survey is useful for soliciting opinions, feelings, and attitudes (Janssen, 2023). Surveys have been used in LIS to investigate a wide range of topics. This includes, but is certainly not limited to, attitudes of LIS workers (Janssen, 2023), assessment (Decker & Simpson, 2023), and LIS workers' knowledge of a topic (Kipnis, 2023). Like virtual interviews, surveys offer the benefit of reaching a wide audience without requiring travel (Janssen, 2023). Surveys also allow the inclusion of varied question types, so that participants can provide information on their knowledge of a subject area with multiple-choice questions, rate their opinions of statements and concepts on a Likert scale, and share thoughts in their own words via text-based responses (Decker & Simpson, 2023; Janssen, 2023). Surveys also facilitate anonymity for respondents (Kipnis, 2023).

Other studies have found it useful to begin with a systematic literature review and continue with surveying a purposive sample of participants knowledgeable about the subject. One example is to use the literature review to identify key concepts about the selected topic, then build the survey based on that information, as Miller (2018) did to investigate strategic planning practices. Another is to use the literature review and survey to gather information on the

same topic from two different sample groups: published work and experts in the field, as was done in the Urban Library Trauma Study (Comito & Zabriskie, 2021). Some studies recruit both a wide group of participants and a purposive sample identified from the literature, such as Kipnis (2023), who sent their survey to a variety of listservs and to a select group of corresponding authors identified from a literature review.

Themes can emerge from both a literature review and survey that lead to further steps in a research process (Comito & Zabriskie, 2021). Miller (2018) concluded that “The combination of a literature review and survey can help an individual or team tasked with strategic planning to understand the nuance and importance of some of the different pieces to that process” (p. 19). The same could be said of combining a literature review and survey to help a researcher “understand the nuance and importance of” virtual interviews.

3. Methods

As discussed in the introduction, the literature review was insufficient to answer the research questions because many papers do not include explanation of the factors that influence researchers to choose different formats for their interviews. This contrasts with what Mandel had found about the utility of a literature review to investigate methods being used in library wayfinding research (2020). In that study, the overall method was investigated, but in this study, the question was about a specific detail about a method: the format of interviews, not the selection of interviews over another research method. Therefore, the literature review was supplemented with a survey of the researchers who had published papers about using virtual interviews.

3.1. Literature Review

To find papers about interview research conducted in or for libraries from the last decade, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA) database from EBSCO was searched for subject=interview* and subject=librar*, limited to 2013 to 2022. This was further limited to English language out of necessity, then limited by software brand name: Zoom (n=16), WebEx (n=1), and Skype (n=14).

The articles were read to determine whether they were about use of those software tools to conduct virtual interviews for research or about something else. Three of the articles that matched the “Zoom” search, used the word “zoom” in reference to panning and zooming online (McKay et al., 2019), zooming in with a digital camera (Trace & Karadkhar, 2017), and zooming out to a higher-level view of a topic/concept (Niu & Hemminger, 2015). Some were about using the tools in job searching (Blakiston & Mayden, 2015; Brown, 2014; Epstein, 2018; McKerracher, 2017; Trending, 2021; Vogel, 2013) and offering access to virtual interview platforms, such as Zoom, Teams, GoToMeeting, etc. for library patrons (Sauers, 2021). A few were about conducting virtual focus groups via Zoom (Pionke et al., 2022) and WebEx (Greyson et al., 2013). Other topics included virtual library programming

(Amundsen, 2022; DeRosa et al., 2021), Zoom as a tool for office workflows (Pascual & Wallbank, 2021), and virtual reference (Saunders & Ung, 2017).

3.2. *Survey*

A literature review only allows a researcher to read what other researchers have decided to report. It does not allow any further investigation into the logistics of each researcher's methodology. Therefore, this researcher is undertook a brief survey of the authors of the 13 papers that reported use of videoconferencing software for virtual interviews from 2013-2022, plus one author known to the researcher to have conducted research using virtual interview method during the time period.

The survey asked about when participants had used virtual interviews, the platform used, the platform considered best for virtual interviews and why, use of virtual interviews in combination with other interview methods, reasons influencing the selection of virtual interviews, whether interviews were recorded and transcribed, and technical difficulties that occurred during virtual interviews. Participants also were asked for reasons they might use virtual interviews in future and their opinions of virtual interview as a method. After obtaining IRB approval, the researcher recruited the authors of the papers discussed in the literature review as participants.

4. Findings

4.1. *Findings from the Literature Review*

Thirteen papers reported use of videoconferencing software for virtual interviews from 2013-2022. Six papers discussed using Zoom for virtual interviews (Ellern & Cruz, 2021; Lund et al., 2021; Marshall, 2022; Miller & Janke, 2022; Stvilia et al., 2021; Trujillo & Tallman, 2021), and seven used Skype (East et al., 2016; Emanuel, 2013; Luo, 2014; Poole, 2017; Shen, 2019; Yeh & Walter, 2016; Zvyagintseva, 2018).

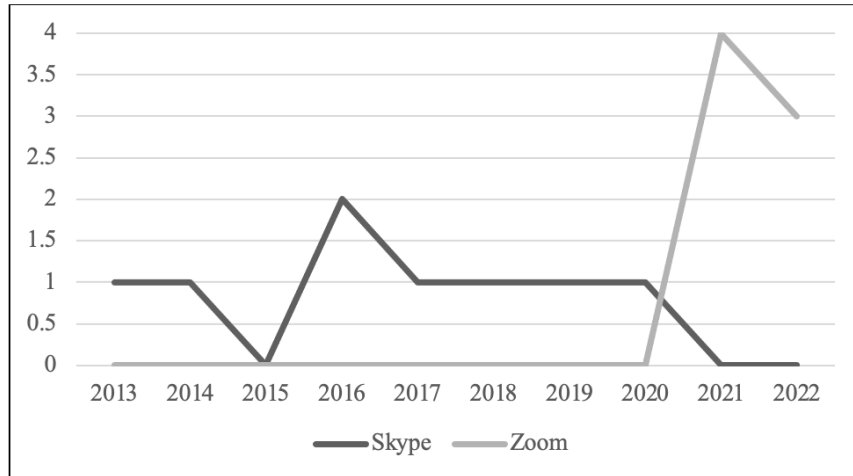
There was no overlap between Zoom and Skype as an interview tool. The seven reports of Skype as a virtual interview platform ranged from 2013 to 2019, and all six of the reports of Zoom for virtual interviews were published in 2021 and 2022 (Figure 1). Since all the Skype interviews occurred before 2019, they were prior to Covid-19. Two sets of Zoom interviews were conducted before Covid-19 lockdowns (Lund et al., 2021; Stvilia et al., 2021), one was conducted during the Covid-19 lockdowns (Miller & Janke, 2022), another was conducted in 2020 although the author did not mention lockdowns (Marshall, 2022), and two papers did not mention the timing of their Zoom interviews (Ellern & Cruz, 2021; Trujillo & Tallman, 2021).

Most of the researchers using Skype for virtual interviews reported using it in combination with other formats (Luo, 2014; Poole, 2017; Shen, 2019; Yeh & Walter, 2016; Zvyagintseva, 2018): in-person, email, and phone. Only two used Skype alone. All of the papers that reported using Zoom used it as the sole interview format.

None of the papers that reported using Skype specified a reason for selecting virtual interviews or Skype, but they all interviewed a set of geographically-dispersed participants. All the papers that reported using Zoom

also interviewed people from a wide geographic region. Most of these papers gave no specific reason for using Zoom, although one discussed the impact of lockdowns on travel limitations (Miller & Janke, 2022). One paper in the entire sample gave a reason for using videoconferencing software for interviews: using Zoom to facilitate recording and transcription (Lund et al., 2021).

Figure 1: Usage of Skype and Zoom for virtual interviews, 2013-2022



4.2. Findings from the Survey

Ten participants completed the survey. Most of the respondents conducted their virtual interview research prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 (Table 1), in Fall 2019 or earlier (n=6; 60%). All but one of the participants reported recording their virtual interviews (n=9; 90%) and transcribing those interviews (n=9; 90%).

Table 1: Timing of the virtual interviews

Semester	n	%
Spring 2022	0	0.0%
Fall 2021	1	10.0%
Summer 2021	1	10.0%
Spring 2021	1	10.0%
Fall 2020	1	10.0%
Summer 2020	0	0.0%
Spring 2020	0	0.0%
Fall 2019	1	10.0%
prior to Fall 2019	5	50.0%

The largest group of respondents reported using Zoom for their interviews (n=7; Table 2), and 90% of respondents said they consider Zoom to

be “the best platform for virtual interviews.” The only respondent who did not choose Zoom in answer to that question said “Not sure. Only Skype was available at the time.” Respondents then were asked why they considered that platform the best for virtual interviews, with allowance to choose as many responses as they felt applicable (Table 3). The most common reason was ease of use (n=9), followed by stability of the platform (n=7) and reliability of audio (n=5) rounding out the top 3.

Table 2: Platforms used for virtual interviews

Platform	n
Adobe Connect	0
Microsoft Teams	2
Skype	4
Zoom	7
WebEx	0

Note: Respondents could select multiple answers so percentages are not reported here.

Table 3: Why participants consider Zoom the best platform for virtual interviews

Factors influencing preference of Zoom	n
ease of use	9
stability of the platform	7
reliability of audio	5
reliability of video	4
reliability of recording	4
cost of the platform	4
accuracy of automated transcription	2
other	2

Note: Respondents could select multiple answers so percentages are not reported here.

Half of respondents (n=5) reported using virtual interviews as their sole interview method in the study they were discussing. Of the other respondents, three used multiple additional interview methods, one used one additional interview method, and one did not respond. Additional interview methods included in-person (n=3), telephone (n=3), and email (n=3).

The most frequently reported primary reason to use virtual interviews was to minimize travel costs (n=4; Table 4). Three respondents used the “other” category to say the primary reason they used virtual interviews was to reach a wider pool of participants from a wider geographic region, which could also be considered minimizing travel costs. Only two people indicated their primary reason for choosing virtual interviews was related to Covid-19: one to minimize exposure and one due to conducting interviews during the lockdown period.

Table 4: Reasons that influenced respondents’ decisions to use virtual interviews

Reasons	Primary		Additional*
	n	%	n
to minimize travel costs	4	40.0%	3
to minimize exposure to Covid-19	1	10.0%	2
to be able to record the interviews	1	10.0%	6
to be able to use an automated transcription service for the interviews	0	0.0%	3
Other	4	40.0%	1

Note: Respondents could select multiple answers for their additional reasons, so percentages are not reported for that question.

When asked for additional reasons beyond the primary reason they selected virtual interviews, the most commonly reported reasons for using virtual interviews were to be able to record the interviews (n=6), minimize travel costs (n=3), and use automated transcription (n=3). One person reported their reason was “A combination of all of the above. The best way to sum it up would be ‘convenience’.” Minimizing travel costs (n=8), and the ability to record (n=8) and use automated transcription (n=8) were the most frequently reported factors that would influence these researchers to use virtual interview methods again in future research (Table 5). The two respondents who selected “other” reported they would use virtual interviews for scheduling convenience and to reduce travel time, both of which are related to reducing travel costs.

Table 5: Reasons that would influence decisions to use virtual interviews again

Reasons	n
to minimize travel costs	8
to minimize exposure to Covid-19, influenza, or other viruses	2
to be able to record the interviews	8
to be able to use an automated transcription service for the interviews	8
other	2
I would not use virtual interviews in the future.	0

Note: Respondents could select multiple answers so percentages are not reported here.

Half reported at least one issue with logging in to their virtual interviews (Table 6). Only 40% reported an issue with the video, one of which was the research participant not turning on their camera. Half reported an issue with audio, all of which seemed to be on the participants' end. Only one person reported a technical issue with the recording not being available after the interview was concluded. One respondent said, "note, the technical difficulties were minimal and rarely experienced." The area with the most frequently reported technical difficulties was automated transcription. The primary issue was with inaccuracy (n=3). One person said "It was awful, so I transcribed myself." Another technical issue that was reported later in the survey related to challenges for participants participating in virtual interviews from work computers that blocked certain software.

Table 6: Technical difficulties experienced when conducting virtual interviews

Technical difficulties	n
<i>Logging in</i>	
participant could not log into the virtual interview platform	1
researcher could not log into the virtual interview platform	0
participant had to log out and back into virtual interview platform	1
researcher had to log out and back into virtual interview platform	0
poor Internet connectivity in general	2
Other	1
None	2
No response	3

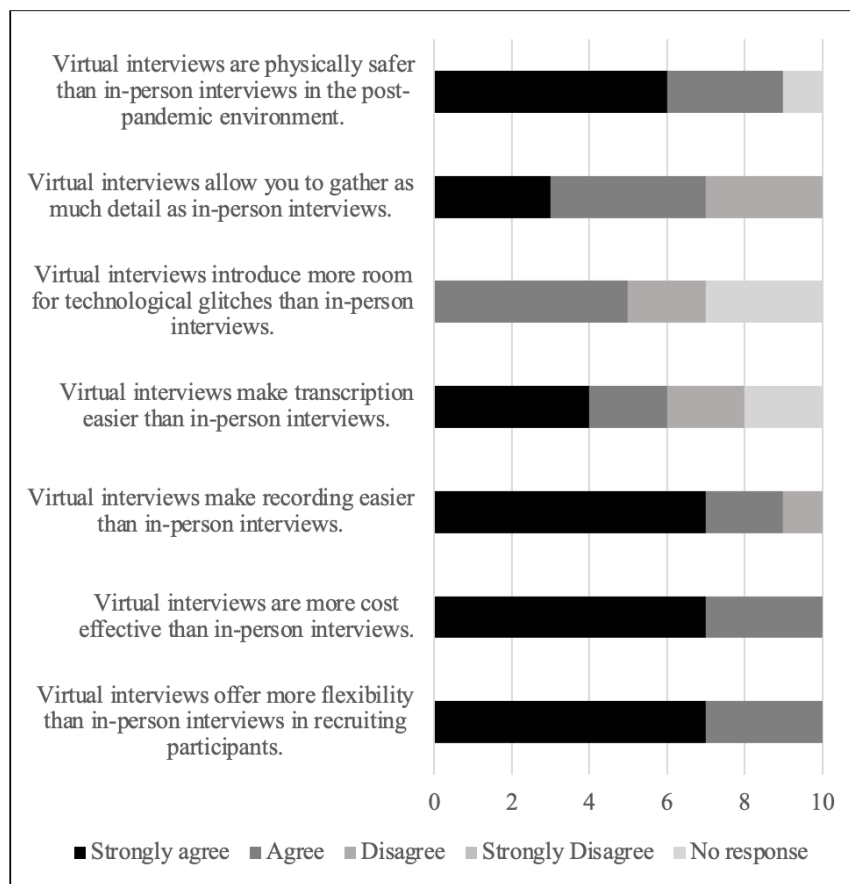
Technical difficulties	n
<i>Video</i>	
participant's video froze during the interview	1
researcher's video froze during the interview	0
poor video quality in general	1
Other	1
None	2
No response	4
<i>Audio</i>	
participant's audio cut in and out during the interview	5
researcher's audio cut in and out during the interview	0
poor audio quality in general	0
Other	1
None	2
No response	3
<i>Recording</i>	
I did not record the interviews	1
recording was incomplete	0
recording was not available after the interview concluded	1
Other	2
None	2
No response	4
<i>Automated Transcription</i>	
I did not use automated transcription for the interviews	3
transcription was incomplete	0
transcription was inaccurate	3
transcription was not available after the interview concluded	1
Other	2
None	2
No response	0

Note: Respondents could select multiple answers for all of these questions so percentages are not reported here.

Overall, respondents reported favorable views toward virtual interviews as a data collection method. Seventy percent of respondents strongly

agreed that virtual interviews offer more flexibility than in-person interviews in recruiting participants, virtual interviews are more cost effective than in-person interviews, and virtual interviews make recording easier than in-person interviews (Figure 2). Sixty percent strongly agreed that virtual interviews are physically safer than in-person interviews in the post-pandemic environment. Seventy percent strongly agreed or agreed that virtual interviews allow you to gather as much detail as in-person interviews. Regardless of the reported issues with automated transcription, sixty percent strongly agreed or agreed that virtual interviews make transcription easier than in-person interviews. Seventy percent strongly agreed or agreed that virtual interviews make recording easier than in-person interviews. Seventy percent strongly agreed or agreed that virtual interviews are more cost effective than in-person interviews. Seventy percent strongly agreed or agreed that virtual interviews offer more flexibility than in-person interviews in recruiting participants.

Figure 2: Respondents' views on virtual interviews



In one area, participants felt that virtual interviews might come up a little short: 50% agreed that virtual interviews introduce more room for technological glitches than in-person interviews. One respondent noted, “my experience is old (2012 I believe), and technology has changed. I’d now use

Zoom and attempt automated transcription since it has improved.” Another said, “I did them before they were cool! They allowed me to have a much larger and more diverse pool than I would have otherwise. I did another study afterwards using Adobe Connect that saved me a lot of travel and scheduling issues.”

Others said, “I really like them,” and “I am glad it is the norm now. In 2016, it felt awkward and like a lot of work, but it allowed me to meet folks I would never have talked to on the phone or in person.” As far as virtual versus other interview methods, one participant noted, “I think it is relatively equitable to in-person interviews, personally, as long as there is video and audio (video, body language is important context). Phone interviews, email interviews, however, are less valuable in my opinion.”

5. Discussion

The literature review found six articles that reported using Zoom for virtual interviews (Ellern & Cruz, 2021; Lund et al., 2021; Marshall, 2022; Miller & Janke, 2022; Stvilia, 2021 et al.; Trujillo & Tallman, 2021), and seven using Skype (East et al., 2016; Emanuel, 2013; Luo, 2014; Poole, 2017; Shen, 2019; Yeh & Walter, 2016; Zvyagintseva, 2018). In addition to these two platforms, survey respondents also reported using Microsoft Teams (n=2). Regardless of platform used in their own research, most respondents (90%) preferred Zoom for virtual interviews.

In the literature, most of the papers reported interviewing people from a wide geographic region. The survey data confirms that is a primary factor influencing researchers’ use of virtual interviews. Commonly reported reasons for using virtual interviews in the past and in the future were minimizing travel costs, convenience of not having to travel, and ability to interview people from a wider geographic region.

In the literature review sample, only one paper explicitly stated a reason for using videoconferencing software for interviews: to facilitate recording and transcription (Lund et al., 2021). When surveyed, only one participant reported that ability to record was their primary reason for using virtual interviews. However, it was a secondary reason for 60% of respondents, and ability to use automated transcription was a secondary reason for 30% of respondents. As with the effects on travel, it seems that the convenience of recording and automated transcription are significant plusses to using virtual interview platforms over in-person interviews.

In fact, one survey respondent explicitly stated that “convenience” was the main reason to use virtual interviews. All of the survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that virtual interviews are more flexible than in-person interviews for scheduling and more cost-effective than in-person interviews, both of which are factors of convenience.

Researchers seem to be satisfied with the effectiveness of virtual interviews as an interview method, and none of the respondents seemed to be put off by technical difficulties. Despite reporting issues with everything from logging in to audio and video to transcription, all 10 respondents to the survey said they would use virtual interviews again. One person used an “other”

response to explain that the technical difficulties they were reporting had occurred minimally and rarely. Ninety percent agreed or strongly agreed that recording is easier in virtual interviews. Seventy percent also agreed or strongly agreed that virtual interviews are as effective as in-person interviews for gathering detail from interview participants.

Of all the areas of technical difficulties, the most commonly reported was with automated transcription, and only 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that virtual interviews ease the transcription process as compared to in-person interviews. Transcription remains an area that could benefit from further technological improvements.

Desire to avoid being exposed to communicable diseases may be a more influential factor in selecting virtual interviews than it would appear at first glance. Only one survey participant said that minimizing exposure to Covid-19 was their primary reason for choosing virtual interviews, and two said it was a secondary factor. From that, it would seem that exposure to Covid-19 is a minimal factor in selection of virtual interview methods. However, 90% of survey participants reported feeling that virtual interviews are safer than in-person interviews in the post-pandemic research environment. It remains to be seen how strongly that feeling affects researchers' selection of interview formats in the future.

6. Limitations

This research is limited to a small sample of published research (16 papers) and a smaller sample of the authors of that research (10 authors). It is also only about virtual interview methods, not about virtual focus groups or any other virtual research methods. Therefore, this research should be considered as descriptive of only the habits of a sample of researchers using virtual interviews and not generalized to other virtual methods. Despite these limitations, the research does provide a clear picture of the methodological choices and views of the sampled researchers and can be a fruitful basis for other researchers in making their own methodological decisions.

7. Conclusion

Virtual life and tools have surged since the Covid-19 pandemic began. During lockdown, people had little choice but to go virtual if they wanted to interact with other people in a synchronous manner, such as occurs during a research interview. Even now, with lockdowns in the past and travel on the rise, some people remain cautious about travelling, sitting down face-to-face with another person, or being around strangers in general. Besides the physical concerns, virtual research methods can save time and money, in planning, travelling, and conducting research. The convenience seems to be the primary benefit for researchers in selecting virtual interviews over in-person interviews: in scheduling, not having to travel, saving money, and not exposing the researcher or research participant to the others' germs. On top of all that, tools like Zoom have added automated captioning that can facilitate quicker

turnaround for transcribing interviews. Although that automated captioning is not yet 100% accurate (and in fact, it can be far from that level of accuracy), it still represents an improvement over having to transcribe an interview from a blank page to a full transcript. Virtual research methods are likely to remain valuable in the future as researchers consider both concerns for health and safety as well as shrinking travel and research budgets. It is, therefore, useful to be aware of the pros and cons of virtual interview methods, and to learn about tips and tricks to make those tools more effective for your research.

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