Online 'chatting' interviews: An acceptable method for qualitative data collection

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Abstract

Qualitative research methods allow researchers to understand the experiences of patients, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. Qualitative research also provides scientists with information about how decisions are made and the aspects of existing interventions. However, to get to obtain this important information, qualitative research requires holistic, rich, and nuanced data that can be analyzed to determine themes, categories, or emerging patterns. Generally, offline or in-person interviews, focus group discussions, and observations are three core approaches to data collection. However, geographical barriers, logistic challenges, and emergency conditions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic have necessitated the utilization of online interviews, including chatting as an alternative way of collecting data. This editorial aims to discuss the possibility of online chat interviews as an acceptable design in qualitative data collection.

Keywords

Editorial

Data collection is the process of gathering information on variables of interest using accurate, authentic, systematic, and appropriate techniques to answer research questions, hypotheses, and desired outcomes. Rigorous data collection is essential to maintaining research integrity and scientific validity of study results (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).

Data collection methods are divided into two methods, namely secondary and primary data collection methods. Secondary data is from secondary sources, or sources not compiled directly by the researchers. The data may include published and unpublished works based on research that relies on primary sources (Rabianski, 2003). The secondary data collection method does not take long, and the resources of effort and cost are less. Secondary data is now growing as a preferred source of data for researchers due to the movement of open data science and the emergence of Open Access Initiatives (OAI). Along with open data and OAI, the accompanying policies that promote open access are an opportunity for researchers to gain access to data that may have been difficult to obtain in the past.

In contrast, primary data is real-time data, or first-hand obtained directly by researchers. This usually requires significant time, effort, and cost (Rabianski, 2003). Primary data collection methods are generally divided into quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data is based on mathematical calculations in various formats including inferential and descriptive statistics. The data is usually returned using a questionnaire with closed questions, which are then analyzed using the methods of correlation, regression, prediction, mean, mode, median, and other statistical methods. The other source of primary data is qualitative data, and with this type of data, mathematical calculations are not involved. Data analysis is obtained through words, sounds, feelings, emotions, body language, colors, and other elements that cannot be counted. Qualitative data collection is usually collected using interviews, focus group discussions, and observations which are the core approaches to this type of data collection (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). There are many reasons why a researcher may need quantitative or qualitative data, and this depends on the nature of the research, the concept and phenomena of interest, and the study objectives and hypothesis. Therefore, we do not need to argue if quantitative or qualitative data, secondary or primary data collection is best.

This editorial specifically discusses collecting qualitative data using the online "chatting" method. It should be noted that texting and chatting are often used interchangeably. However, there is a slight difference between the two terms. As nouns, "text" consists of various characters, glyphs, symbols, and sentences, but "chat" is an uncountable informal conversation (Wikidiff, n.d.). As verbs, "text" is sending a text message using either a short message service (SMS) or a multimedia messaging service (MMS) between two or more users via a cellular network or internet connection using mobile devices,

laptops, and other compatible computers (Wikidiff, n.d.). While "chat" is engagement in an informal conversation, or to talk lightly and casually, discuss in an easy and familiar manner, or exchange messages (Free Dictionary, 2022). Texting is part of the chatting itself (Wikidiff, n.d.). In other words, online chatting is defined as an informal conversation over the Internet that offers real-time transmission from the sender to the recipient. Chat messages are usually short so that the recipient responds quickly and is involved in the conversation (Wikipedia, 2022). In addition, chatting and instant messaging (IM) are similar, especially when using WhatsApp, Line, Messenger, or other apps. For the sake of consistency, chatting is used in this editorial.

Conversely, it should also be noted that the literature on online chatting as a qualitative data collection method is scarce and creates many contradictions because it is rarely used. Therefore, its validity and reliability are also often questioned. However, validity and reliability are not compromised when using chats for data collection, but the rationale for this method should be reasonable and justifiable. The following are reasons that can be used as references or strengths for the chatting method.

First, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors learned that it is tough to collect quantitative and qualitative research data, especially in social science, behavioral science, nursing science, or other disciplines related to humans. Face-to-face interviews are not possible because of the COVID-19 restrictions. This first point reflects that researchers cannot force the use of the typical data collection methods, such as face-to-face, focus groups, and direct observation. Instead, online chat interviews, or chatting, may be used as an alternative way of collecting data. It is not impossible that researchers may face situations like this pandemic again in the future, and that researchers have already prepared another way for data collection through chatting.

Second, in addition to the pandemic or emergency conditions, this chatting method is applicable for multi-settings research design. For example, it is common today to find studies conducted in various regions or comparisons in multiple countries, although they are constrained by geographical conditions. With the technology that supports internet-based chatting, researchers do not need to visit the research setting, which saves time and money (Stieger & Göritz, 2006). This provides a convenient option for researchers that eliminates barriers that create difficulties when collecting data from multiple sites across the globe.

Third, there is an argument about the use of telephone or online interviews instead of chatting. To answer this, the authors must first differentiate between telephone and online interviews. Telephone and online interviews are slightly different. Telephone/phone interviews are often conducted without being online, where researchers directly call, or voice-call research respondents through the contact number of the telephone device and mobile phone, or smartphone. Online interviews include (i) telephone/phone online interviews using voice-call features, (ii) video interviews using Zoom, Facetime, Skype, video conferencing, or other video apps, (iii) chat interviews using chat or messenger apps, and (iv) email texting. This online interview may be done formally and informally. However, email texting may not reflect a real-time conversation and take more time (Dowling, 2012). It is important to consider why researchers should use chatting instead of video or telephone interviews, and this is related to who and where, or the interview setting.

Who. Suppose researchers collect data on today's young people, or Gen Z or the internet generation. In that case, the research participants may prefer to use online interviews, especially chatting, such as using Facebook messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram, Line, WeChat, KakaoTalk, and other apps. This is to reduce the formality of the interview itself, which sometimes makes respondents afraid, reluctant, or uncomfortable to answer questions in a formal manner. Researchers will rationally choose a method that makes participants feel comfortable and free to express their ideas and perspectives without limits.

The next element to consider is, why would the researchers prefer chatting over video interviews? Based on the authors' experience in data collection, some respondents felt embarrassed to show their faces in front of the camera, were unconfident, and made the interview environment uncomfortable (Gunawan et al., 2022). Chatting was selected as a data collection technique to promote ease amongst participants. Researchers must also consider the needs and the conditions of the participants. If the participants have physical deficiencies, such as deafness, then it is not possible to conduct telephone or video interviews. Likewise, if the respondent is blind, chatting is not applicable.

Where. This is related to what applications are used, which is in accordance with the location of the target participants. For example, if the research participants are based in Indonesia, using WhatsApp is preferable (Gunawan et al., 2022). As of June 23, 2022, 148 million people in Indonesia use WhatsApp (Rizaty, 2022). WhatsApp has features for phone calls, video calls, chats, and voice delivery. Two studies (Gunawan et al., 2022; Gunawan et al., 2021) used WhatsApp in data collection, and the respondents were happy to answer questions using chat and voice recordings. However, in China, using WeChat is preferable for data retrieval (Weil et al., 2020). Both WhatsApp and WeChat have multiple features that enable options for various data collections in the form of words, chats, sounds, voices, videos, and even attached documents.

Fourth, repeated interviews are also an important factor to consider for chatting. It is not impossible that interviews need to be repeated after the initial analysis of the data. However, this often presents difficulties because it takes time to reschedule face-to-face or online phone/video interviews. Therefore, chatting is a practical and convenient solution to this problem, either to explore more data or to clarify the statements from the respondents. Based on Gunawan et al. (2022) related to research on COVID-19 vaccination, if there are two different statements from two research participants, a clarification is needed. For example, in a statement of "it is mandatory to bring a vaccine certificate to make a driver's license," one participant said yes, and the other said no. A confirmation is necessary between the two. As a result, the statement was clarified, "For those who want to make a driver's license, people who have been vaccinated would be prioritized over people who have not; but, that does not mean they are not served, only the process is slowed down" (Gunawan et al., 2022). Chatting is an opportunity to clarify with less challenges.

Fifth, the practicality and validity of the chatting data collection method are noted. Chatting is more practical than telephone/video interviews. For example, when researchers conduct telephone/video interviews, audio or video are recorded, followed by verbatim transcription before data analysis, and this process is lengthy. Bryman (2012) said that transcribing a one-hour interview takes five to six hours and is costly. While in the online chatting method, all conversations, chats, voices, and attached documents are recorded automatically in the mobile app. Researchers can access the stored archive and re-read the content. Chatting facilitates efficient use of time wherein the researchers do not transcribe verbatim or use additional staff resources to transcribe the interviews. Validity of the data is essential for the researcher, and both chatting and telephone/video interviews require a significant amount of coding amongst the various data sources, but the contents and substances between both are not different (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). The interviewers' skills are needed to ask questions and receive answers according to the study purposes.

Additionally, although chatting can be considered an acceptable method for qualitative data collection, it has a weakness. For example, if the research topic or subject under study requires an in-depth interpretation technique where voice' intonation, rhythm, and volume (emotional tone), as well as body language, are necessary, then chatting is limited and may be inappropriate. However, regardless of the advantages and disadvantages of the chatting method, researchers must control the quality of the data, and this should be addressed for each individual measurement, personal observation, and the entire data set according to the aims of the study.

There are two summary points in this editorial. First, the use of the online chatting method is acceptable if the conditions for video/online interviews are not possible or desirable, either due to limited conditions in the research settings or the study subjects. Second, using chatting as an additional data collection method is suitable if it makes sense and can be accounted. The data collected from different sources in a single study may provide trustworthy findings. However, researchers cannot impose one method for data collection. Freedom and flexibility are needed to gain more understanding of the phenomenon in order to obtain holistic, rich, and nuanced data.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

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Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally in this article.

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Data Availability

Not applicable.

Ethical Consideration

Not applicable.

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