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Conducting qualitative interviews via VoIP technologies: reflections on rapport, technology, digital exclusion, and ethics

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research has been strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the possibilities that Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technologies such as Skype, WhatsApp, and Zoom offer to qualitative scholars. Based on the experience of using such technologies to collect qualitative data for our PhD studies, we present how we dealt with the challenges of this interview mode. Precisely, we discuss problems related to rapport, technology, digital exclusion, and ethics frequently pointed out in the methodological literature on online interviews. Thereby we put forward strategies and techniques that helped us to 1) build a rapport, 2) manage technical difficulties, 3) reflect on risks of digital exclusion, and 4) comply with the ethical standards of our institution. In doing so, we draw on our qualitative data to support the arguments. The aim of this paper is, thus, to deepen the methodological debate on online interviews in social sciences.

KEYWORDS

Qualitative methodology; interviews; online research methods; VoIP technologies

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, methodological interest in online interviews has significantly increased (Lee et al., 2017). However, in the past ten years interviews conducted via of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technologies such as Skype, WhatsApp, Webex, and Zoom have received particular attention (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2017; Hanna, 2012; Janghorban et al., 2014; Sullivan, 2012). Discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of online interviews[1] – particularly in contrast to face-to-face interviews, the so-called 'gold standard' of qualitative interview modes – have shaped the methodological debate. Precisely, we identified three advantages of online interviews in the literature (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Self, 2021; Sipes et al., 2019; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021): increased time and cost efficiency; higher flexibility in scheduling an interview and defining the geographical scope of the research; and finally, the simplicity of complying with safety concerns and measures. It is, however, the disadvantages of collecting data in online settings that are mainly discussed in recent literature (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Lobe et al., 2020; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). In order to simplify the multifaceted disadvantages of online interviews, we formulated four types of problems. First, the interrelational disadvantages that arise from the difficulty of building rapport and trust with the interviewee in online settings. Second, the occurrence of technical problems during interviews that might disrupt the course of the conversation. Third, considerations related to ways of dealing with digital exclusion, i.e. that people without the necessary hardware and technical knowledge are excluded from the research. And finally, ethical issues linked to the uncertainty of how to comply

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Table 1. Overview of disadvantages of interviews conducted via VoIP technologies and their types.

Disadvantages	Type of disadvantage
Difficulty in building a rapport and trust between the interviewer and the interviewee	Rapport
Limited access to non-verbal cues	
More susceptible to no-shows	
Reduced access to in-depth contextual/ethnographic data	
Technical problems that disrupt the course of the interview	Technology
Digital exclusion because of required technical knowledge and hardware	Digital Exclusion
Uncertainty regarding best practices for obtaining consent	Ethics
Insecurities on data protection issues (e.g. does the recording of interviews via VoIP technologies comply with data protection and storage standards?)	
Lack of general ethical guidelines from some institutions (e.g. which VoIP technologies comply with the ethical standards of the University?)	

with ethical standards of qualitative methods in online settings. In this paper, we engage in this methodological discussion by focusing on these disadvantages and present techniques and strategies gained from our experience of collecting qualitative data through online interviews.

The paper starts with a review of the methodological literature and a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of online interviews. We then present our individual PhD studies and discuss how we attended to difficulties related to rapport, technology, digital exclusion, and ethics in conducting interviews in an online setting. Finally, we assess our experience of collecting qualitative data via VoIP technologies, notably by situating it in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Methodological literature: a review

This section discusses the advantages and disadvantages of online interviews that have received the most attention in methodological literature. While we identify three main advantages of interviews conducted via VoIP technologies – namely increased flexibility, time as well as cost efficiency, and safety – disadvantages of this interview mode are more complex. Table 1 presents these most important disadvantages and attributes them to a certain type.

2.1. Advantages of interviews conducted via VoIP technologies

One of the main benefits presented in the literature of interviews conducted via VoIP technologies relates to their time and cost efficiency. For both interviewer and interviewee, the online setting cuts travel time to and from the interview location, as well as transport costs (Archibald et al., 2019; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hay-Gibson, 2009; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Self, 2021; Weller, 2015). The possibility of shortening or even completely avoiding return trips to the interview location is not only positive in terms of time and budget management, but it also enables interviewers and interviewees to take, for example, ecological considerations into account (Weller, 2015). Hanna (2012) shows how important it was for his research on sustainable tourism to give his participants the option to be interviewed via VoIP technologies. He states: '[C]onflict could have arisen between their [the participants'] ecological principles in relation to transport and climate change, and the researcher travelling vast distances to conduct the interview.' (Hanna, 2012, pp. 239–240)

A second important advantage of collecting qualitative data through VoIP technologies is the greater flexibility in scheduling dates for the interviews. In the event that a participant or the researcher has only limited time for the interview because of e.g. family or professional obligations, such technologies can strongly facilitate the realisation of an interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Self, 2021). Equally, online technologies allow researchers to define with greater flexibility the geographical scope of their research. Scholars are able to include seldom heard populations into their analysis (Archibald et al., 2019; Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009; Self, 2021;

Sipes et al., 2019), such as geographically dispersed populations (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Sullivan, 2012), or socially isolated groups (Davis et al., 2004).

Finally, health and safety concerns are flagged up in the literature. More precisely, not having to travel for an interview ensures the safety of the interviewer and interviewee, for instance in an area that is considered as risky or if the person's health is fragile (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Howlett, 2021; Self, 2021; Sipes et al., 2019).[2] Thus, VoIP technologies allow both researcher and interviewee to remain in a safe location of their choice (Howlett, 2021; Jenner & Meyers, 2019; Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014; Sipes et al., 2019).

These three elements are not the only advantages of qualitative interviews conducted via VoIP technologies, as they are also considered to increase participation (Hay-Gibson, 2009; Janghorban et al., 2014; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). This can have a positive impact on data richness, as interviewees feel more relaxed and are, therefore, more willing to disclose information. These so-called interactional advantages of online interviews are of particular importance for highly personal and sensitive topics (Howlett, 2021; Self, 2021; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021; Weller, 2017).

2.2. Disadvantages of interviews conducted via VoIP technologies

Nevertheless, qualitative interviews conducted via VoIP technologies have important disadvantages that need to be considered when choosing this interview mode. Four disadvantages are of particular importance: 1) difficulties in building rapport, 2) technical problems that can occur during the conversation, 3) the pitfall of not being able to reach people with no access to Internet or with low digital literacy, and 4) the complexity of complying with ethical standards.

First, the methodological literature on online interviews generally questions the extent to which the interviewer can build a relationship with the interviewee. The main criticism relates to the limited access to non-verbal cues during interviews conducted via VoIP technologies in contrast to face-to-face interviews (Hay-Gibson, 2009; Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009). Also, if video can provide access to visual, non-verbal cues, by offering similar levels of authenticity as in face-to-face interactions (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Sullivan, 2012; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021), such cues are infrequent due to the focus of the camera on headshots (Janghorban et al., 2014; Weller, 2017). Furthermore, a general visual impression might get lost during online interviews. If the interview is conducted, for example, at home or at the workplace, face-to-face encounters allow to complement qualitative interview data with contextual information. This is not necessarily possible in online settings. Thus, 'conducting fieldwork without physically co-locating with the people we study additionally begs the question of whether digital methods are appropriate to answer the same research questions without the same immersive experiences' (Howlett, 2021, p. 5).[3] Also, the literature states that there are more no-shows or drop-outs in online settings than in personal settings. According to some scholars, not being personally present during the interview makes it easier for the participant to drop-out from the interview or not to show up for the interview at all (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Janghorban et al., 2014; Sipes et al., 2019). These studies are, however, indicative and do not demonstrate the robustness of a control design.

A second disadvantage frequently discussed in the literature relates to technical problems such as an unstable Internet connection, network breakage, and difficulties operating the equipment (e.g. camera or microphone) or the software. These problems can complicate the flow of the interview. Indeed, it has been shown that such problems negatively impact data richness (Howlett, 2021; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021) and further complicate the building of a rapport between interviewee and interviewer (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Weller, 2017). However, it is possible that in certain cases such technical problems have 'unintended benefits with regard to establishing rapport, through the proacted joint problem-solving process involved' as Archibald et al. (2019, p. 5) demonstrate in their paper on the use of Zoom to collect qualitative data. Technical problems can therefore have a positive and negative impact on rapport, depending on the interview situation and the participant (see also Thunberg & Arnell, 2021).

Third, the literature shows that online interviews potentially exclude participants because of a lack of necessary technical hardware or knowledge (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Janghorban et al., 2014; Lobe et al., 2020; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Self, 2021). Indeed, the profile of the target group plays an important role. Refugees, homeless people or people in relative poverty may, for example, have difficulty in accessing the necessary hardware or Internet connection to participate in an online interview (Lobe et al., 2020; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Self, 2021). It has also been shown that people in old age are considered to have a lower understanding of online technologies (Hay-Gibson, 2009; Li et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2012). On the other hand, research indicates that individuals whose family members are geographically dispersed have higher digital literacy, because they use such technologies regularly to keep in touch with their significant others (Collin et al., 2015; Nedelcu, 2012). Scholars who plan to collect qualitative data through online interviews need to carefully consider the profile of their target group in order to evaluate if such an interview mode is suitable or not for their research. Furthermore, the context of the research is crucial to assess the adequacy of online interviews. Lawrence (2022), for example, was confronted with the censorship of online platforms during her research in Mainland China.

Finally, many questions regarding the adequate ways of complying with ethical standards of qualitative research in online settings still remain poorly addressed. On the one hand, there are ambiguities regarding best practices on how to solicit informed consent (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). While in personal settings participants are usually asked to give their written consent (i.e. with a signature), this strategy is not necessarily applicable to online settings. For such settings, recorded verbal consent (Sullivan, 2012) and a handwritten or an electronic signature (Lobe et al., 2020; Sipes et al., 2019) are possible options. On the other hand, the protection of personal data is more complex in online settings than in personal ones. Most VoIP software packages offer, for example, the possibility to record conversations (Hay-Gibson, 2009). Although this option can be of interest as it eliminates the problem of weak batteries as well as allowing researchers to record visual-cues, the level of data protection is thought to be lower (Hanna, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). The main problem with this option is that in some cases third-party providers are responsible for recording and saving of the interview (Archibald et al., 2019; Lobe et al., 2020). Also, there is little transparency of how and where these recorded conversations are stored, which makes it difficult to select the appropriate VoIP technology for a research project. It is important that the researcher is aware of the particularities of VoIP software to prevent possible problems in terms of data protection and safety (Lobe et al., 2020; Self, 2021; Young, 2021).[4] In this context, 'Zoombombing' is much discussed. It refers to the phenomena in which uninvited users join Zoom meetings with the intention of disrupting conversations or harassing participants (Elmer et al., 2021; Young, 2021).

3. The PhD studies

This paper is based on our personal experience of conducting online and face-to-face interviews for our PhD studies. Our plan was to start qualitative data collection in spring 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the regulations issued in this context, we had to find 'new' ways to conduct our qualitative fieldwork and to access our participants. Thus, we decided to expand the setting of our data collection from purely personal to face-to-face and online.

The first PhD study analyses transnational ageing processes, i.e. the mobility of people who reached their statutory retirement age in Switzerland and are now spending (a part of) their retirement in Spain. During the semi-structured interviews we discussed topics related to their transnational (im)mobility before and after retirement (reasons, motivations, (im)mobility patterns, future mobility plans); other transnational practices (political participation/activism, feelings of belonging); personal networks; health, and wellbeing. The interviews took place between June 2020 and August 2021. In total, 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 55 individuals of different nationalities, each having lived at least 10 years in Switzerland. Today,

these individuals aged between 64 and 89 are spending (a part of their) retirement in Spain. The 16 interviews conducted via VoIP technologies took on average 2.5 hours and were carried out via Skype (12), WhatsApp (3), and Zoom (1). The remaining 29 face-to-face interviews lasted on average 2.7 hours.

The second PhD study is a mixed-methods research that focuses on the evolution of the practice of fasting outside a traditional religious framework. It is based on two case studies, one conducted in France and another in French-speaking Switzerland. It addresses issues such as how, when, where and why people are fasting for several days in a row, and how this practice is integrated in individual lifestyles. On the one hand, quantitative data was collected through an online questionnaire. On the other hand, ethnographic data was generated during fasting cures through participatory observation. Furthermore, semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out with people aged between 27 and 81 who practice fasting. A total of 35 interviews were held between March 2020 and August 2021: 10 face-to-face, 5 via telephone and 20 using VoIP technologies. More precisely, the online interviews were conducted via Webex (8), Skype (5), Zoom (5), and WhatsApp (2). The face-to-face interviews lasted on average 2 hours, the telephone interviews 1.5 hours and, finally, the online interviews 2.5 hours.

Two elements stand out in the description of these two PhD studies: First, the online interviews were conducted using a wide variety of VoIP technologies. Second, in both PhD studies the interviews took on average the same amount of time. Thus, we can argue that data collected through VoIP technologies are no less important than data collected in personal settings.

4. Dealing with the disadvantages of online interviews

This section presents and discusses some strategies and techniques that help to deal with challenges of interviews conducted via VoIP technologies by drawing our data.

4.1. Rapport

The literature argues that the lack of personal interaction and visual cues before and during an interview hinder the creation of a trustworthy relationship between the participant and the researcher (Hay-Gibson, 2009; Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009). To counteract this problem, we increased the frequency of contact through e.g. email or personal calls (via telephone or VoIP software) to build rapport and trust before the interview. For the fasting study, first contacts were also made in-person, during on-site ethnographic fieldworks. This strategy gave participants the opportunity to ask questions about the researcher, the project, and to summarise some of the main and important elements in connection with their retirement and mobility, or their fasting practices. That such first contacts via email or calls are a successful strategy to compensate for the lack of personal contact, is also supported by the literature (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Equally, the fact that we did not experience any absences or drop-outs during our interviews conducted via VoIP technologies lends support to our argument, that it is useful to increase contact frequency to build trust.

Along with the increased amount of contact with our participants before an interview, the use of video through VoIP technologies, was highly effective in building rapport and trust. Participants of the transnational ageing project took the opportunity of the online interview to give us a tour of their house and garden, as this extract from the interview with

Marianne: *If you want, I can give you a quick tour.*

Interviewer: Yes, I would really enjoy that!

Marianne: So, this is my office and here is my desk.

Interviewer: Oh, you have a nice view.

Marianne: Yes, into the green. This is my husband's family gallery. Can you see it? [. . .] And this is the rest of the garden. There, all the way to the top. And this is the guest room in which you could have slept if you had been able to come to Spain.

Source: Interview with Marianne (75 years old), conducted via Zoom.

With regard to the project on fasting practices, the interviewees used video to show us specific books or objects they considered to be of importance and thereby reinforcing their narratives. Video allowed us to create a personal setting despite geographic distance and to achieve levels of authenticity similar to those stated by other authors (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Sullivan, 2012). In contrast to some scholars who critically question the access to non-verbal cues in online interviews due to the focus of the camera on headshots (Janghorban et al., 2014; Weller, 2017), our examples show that the video option enabled us to get a broader impression of the lives of the interviewees. This was, of course, facilitated by the portability of most devices such as mobile phone, laptop, or tablet. Therefore, video tours can be an interesting technique to build rapport with participants depending on the population under study and the research question.

4.2. Technology

Technical problems and disruptions in the conversations are another disadvantage of interviews conducted via VoIP technologies. To circumvent such difficulties, we decided for both PhD studies to let the participants choose the software of the interview. By adopting this approach, we ensured that the participant was familiar and comfortable with the software, which increased the probability that technical problems could be more easily resolved. We argue that the importance does not lie in the systematic use of one specific VoIP software throughout the whole research, but in the convenience of the software used by the researcher and the participant. This is also upheld by Hay-Gibson (2009, p. 47) who states that researchers need to be sensitive to the 'needs and inclinations' of their participants. This is particularly important as we observed that our participants had specific preferences for certain VoIP technologies. The following extract from an email from Ines preceding an interview about fasting practices, shows how interviewees expressed their preferences towards us: *'A tool I know and that I find efficient for online meetings is Zoom.'* Leaving the choice of VoIP technology to participants proved highly effective and contrasts most methodological approaches presented in the literature discussing the role of technology in online interviews. Indeed, researchers mainly decide to use one specific VoIP software for the data collection. However, multiplying the technological choices for participants is in our experience a valuable technique to give interviewees confidence in their technical skills and, thus, minimise problems.

We did not experience any major technical drawbacks in our interviews, but only smaller technical problems such as screen freeze and lags in live feed. When one of these problems arose, we observed that both our interviewees and ourselves were more confident in asking for a sentence to be repeated or coping with technical difficulties. The most serious problem we encountered was unstable Internet connection when using the video feature. When this occurred, we stopped the video or changed to a more traditional means of communication, i.e. the telephone, in order to conduct the interview. Those technical difficulties did not necessarily have a negative impact on rapport. In some cases, we felt that the common process of resolving technical problems strengthened the relationship between interviewer and interviewee (see also Archibald et al., 2019). There were also cases in which participants anticipated problems with the Internet connection and informed us accordingly. This was the case of, for example, Xana, a supervisor at a fasting facility in France, who asked us via email to be interviewed over the telephone: *'It would be ideal to have the conversation by phone, because I do not have a great Internet connection.'* While this strategy enabled us to carry out the interview through a stabilised and more reliable device, we lost access to non-

verbal, visual cues. Fortunately, the inability to use the video option or a complete change in the method of communication, was only necessary for two cases.

4.3. Digital exclusion

The literature has shown that online interviews are not an adequate methodological choice for all populations, because they potentially exclude participants who do not have the technical knowledge or who have only limited access to Internet or other hardware (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Janghorban et al., 2014; Lobe et al., 2020; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Self, 2021). Therefore, when designing a project using online interviews, special attention should be given to the profile of the participants and the context of the research.

In view of the description of the two PhD studies, *age* is the most important element of discussion in this context, as it has been shown that old age negatively impacts digital literacy (Hay-Gibson, 2009; Sullivan, 2012). While in the transnational ageing project all participants had reached retirement age when interviewed, four out of seven retired interviewees who participated in the project on fasting practices chose to have the interview in an online setting – including the oldest participant aged 81. Interestingly, the age of these participants did not significantly impede conducting interviews via VoIP technologies.

In sum, we see two reasons for this positive experience. First, our participants were free to choose whether they preferred to hold the interview in a personal or in an online setting. If the latter was the case, they were also able to choose a specific VoIP software for the interview. In our experience, allowing people to make their own choices contributed significantly to make them feel at ease. Also, persistence and giving explanations as to why a face-to-face interview was not possible under the current circumstances helped to convince more people to conduct an online interview. This is exemplified in this email exchange with Martin, who is 66 years old: *'I would still prefer to have a personal conversation. I suggest to carry out the interview later when the situation allows you to travel to the Canary Islands.'* Some months later, when we told him that we would not be traveling to the Canary Islands and would be focusing our fieldwork on the Spanish mainland as a result of COVID-19 delays in the project, he answered: *'I also think it is a great pity that the pandemic has disrupted your plans. Of course, I am still available for an interview, preferably via WhatsApp with video.'*

Second, we noted that participants whose family members and friends live in another country are highly used to relying on VoIP technologies to keep in touch with their significant others (see also Collin et al., 2015; Nedelcu, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2022). While this was true for all participants who took part in an online interview in the framework of the transnational ageing project, we made the same observation for some of the interviewees in the study of fasting practices. For example, Alienor who is 75 years old and was part of the latter study, keeps in touch with her children who live in another country via Skype: *'We have two girls but they live in America. So we do little Skype sessions and that sort of thing.'* The fact that many of our participants were already familiar with VoIP technologies before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was instrumental in allowing us to conduct online interviews for our PhD studies. Therefore, we conclude that mobile populations and individuals with geographically dispersed family members demonstrate good degrees of digital literacy. This is also true for ageing populations.

4.4. Ethics

One of the most important ethical considerations of qualitative interviews refers to informed consent. For our two PhD studies we adopted multiple strategies to explain to participants the project and its objectives, topics to be discussed during the interview, the use of the anonymised data, and their right to withdraw their participation at any time. The transnational ageing project asked participants to give their written, and in some cases their verbal consent. The latter strategy was only used in case of health issues, such as impaired eyesight or serious difficulties in writing

caused by rheumatism. This strategy was, however, not only used in online settings, but also in face-to-face ones. For the written consent, the form was sent to interviewees by email giving them enough time to read and reflect on the project and their participation. Both parties, i.e. the participant and the researcher, signed the document either electronically or by hand. The (scanned) document was then sent to the other party. If the necessary technology or technical knowledge was not available, the postal service was used. Nevertheless, this route took more time (particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic) and it was, thus, possible that the signed consent form only arrived after the interview had been conducted. With regard to the project on fasting practices participants were first informed about the project and the conditions of the interview by email, and then verbally at the beginning of the interview. The researcher addressed some specific points (such as the use and storage of personal data and its anonymisation, and the freedom to withdraw from the project, to skip questions as well as to put an end to the interview at any time) and gave the interviewee the opportunity to ask questions. No negotiations were necessary to obtain full consent from the interviewees. As soon as the participant had given his/her oral consent and all queries had been answered, the interview began.

The interviews conducted in the framework of the transnational ageing project were all recorded with a Dictaphone.[5] The study on fasting practices was also recorded by Dictaphone except in one case, in which the interviewee specifically requested to record the interview online, and thereby the VoIP software recording tool was activated. The main reason for not using the VoIP software recording tool relates to data storage and protection issues (Archibald et al., 2019; Hanna, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). A Dictaphone allowed us to be more transparent on these issues. The audio of our interviews are, for example, only stored on our personal server at the University, and in the case of the transnational ageing project, also on an external data carrier. This data carrier is password-protected to comply with the institutional guidelines. Also, as participants could not see the Dictaphone, we informed them when recording was about to begin. In contrast to a face-to-face setting, where interviewees can see the device and observe the movements of the researcher, online settings do not necessarily allow for such visual cues (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). It is, therefore, important to be aware of such differences in order to adapt to the setting and to guarantee the same ethical standards for all participants.

Furthermore, we were in touch with the ethical commission to make sure that our methodological approach complied with the ethical standards of the University. We also contacted the IT department of our home institution to ask for guidance and technical advice (see also Sipes et al., 2019). We did not encounter any difficulties in gaining ethical approval for the collection of data via VoIP software, however, the use of Zoom was not recommended by the IT department. We, therefore, only used this software when explicitly asked for by our interviewees. Coordinating on such ethical issues with the existing institutions is important to avoid misunderstandings and problems at a later stage in the research.

5. Limitations

The last section has presented techniques to deal with the major challenges of interviews conducted via VoIP technologies. We demonstrated that by adopting relatively simple measures, such as increasing frequency of contact, leaving the choice of VoIP technology to participants, or recording conversation with a Dictaphone, we were able to deal with the different types of disadvantages of online interviews. Furthermore, we benefited greatly from the advantages of online interviews. First and foremost, this method allowed us to conduct our fieldwork in times of increased uncertainty and restricted mobility. To conduct interviews via VoIP made it possible to reach our participants living abroad, and not further delay our fieldwork. Additionally, conducting online interviews had a positive impact on the financial budget of both studies. The transnational ageing project – that had received sufficient funding to carry out fieldwork in Spain – was able to transfer the saved amounts towards transcription work to make up for delays brought about by the COVID-19

pandemic. The funding situation of the project on fasting practices was more precarious. To conduct the interviews via VoIP had, therefore, a positive effect on the budget as considerable savings were made. For this project, it was moreover possible to redirect time gained from reduced travel towards conducting additional interviews (see also Janghorban et al., 2014). Finally – and this is of particular importance in a pandemic – we were able to collect our qualitative data in a way that was safe for all (Lobe et al., 2020; Self, 2021).

However, our positive experience in conducting interviews via VoIP technologies has to be contrasted with two limitations: First, we conducted our interviews in face-to-face *and* in online settings, which allowed us to respond flexibly to the different needs and wishes of our participants. This hybrid strategy was particularly important for the transnational ageing project, whose participants were retired. Although some were used to communicating with family members and friends via VoIP software before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to conduct the interviews exclusively online. The main reason for this was some participants' lack of technical knowledge or required hardware. Another reason was that people felt less comfortable with an online interview because of the lack of personal interaction, as this email with a potential participant shows. After explaining that we would unfortunately not be able to visit him personally because he lived in the Canary Islands, he wrote to us: *'It's a pity, but I'm rather old-fashioned in this respect. I'd be happy to meet you in person at any time, but I'd rather not use any technologies (except for good old email).'*[6] To conduct the qualitative fieldwork for this project exclusively online would not have been an appropriate methodological decision. The same applies for the project on fasting practices. As the study took an ethnographic approach combining qualitative interviews and in-person participatory observations, face-to-face interactions remained essential. The second limitation relates to the complexity of adapting a prepared interview guide for a personal conversation to an online setting. Confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic many researchers experienced this difficulty (Howlett, 2021; Lobe et al., 2020; Self, 2021), and so did we. In the case of the transnational ageing project, we were *inter alia* interested in studying participants' personal networks. For this purpose, we planned to conduct a qualitative social network analysis for which we prepared open questions and a map with three circles printed on a paper, on which participants could draw and illustrate their network. Since drawing on a computer seemed difficult, a standardised questionnaire including a social network map was sent to participants by email as a PDF document. However, this plan was not successful because our interviewees were not familiar with working with PDF documents. After three negative feedbacks from our participants, we took the decision to re-integrate this element within the interview itself. We decided not to use network maps, but instead to rely on participant's spoken word. This experience shows that online interviews are less adapted when the research design contains other materials such as drawings, particularly when using these materials in online interviews with older adults or other populations with a lower digital literacy. Nevertheless, the use of interactive whiteboards or other features offered by VoIP software provide interesting support options to use different materials during an online interview (Hay-Gibson, 2009).

6. Online qualitative data collection during COVID-19: a contextualization

Before coming to a conclusion, there is a need to contextualize our experience of conducting interviews via VoIP technologies. The data collection phase of both PhD studies began in early 2020. This time period is directly related to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the various governmental measures to limit the spread of the virus. In Switzerland, but also in numerous other countries around the world, the population suddenly found itself in a situation of working from home whenever possible, significantly restricting personal social contact, and having to protect themselves as soon as they left home. In view of this, the importance of VoIP technologies and digital literacy among the population as a whole grew significantly (Branscombe, 2020; De' et al., 2020; Lobe et al., 2020; Self, 2021). This development had a twofold positive impact on our data collection through online interviews. First, growing technical knowledge allowed us to

access our target group more easily. Along with this increased technical knowledge, it is possible that our suggestion to conduct interviews in an online setting seemed more legitimate to our participants in the context of the pandemic in which health concerns were predominant. Furthermore, these positive technical developments were not just noticeable among our participants but also between ourselves.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated the building of rapport and trust between ourselves and our interviewees through VoIP technologies. As the codes of face-to-face interactions were shaken up during the pandemic, a lot of insecurity arose concerning how to greet people, whether to wear face masks or not, as well as social distancing. All these issues were easily avoided by conducting interviews via VoIP technologies. Being able to circumvent these problems was also useful as governmental measures to prevent the spread of the virus became increasingly politicised (Charron et al., 2020; Kerr et al., 2021). Such questions had, thus, the potential to lead to conflict and hinder the development of a trusting relationship.

That we were able to build rapport with our interviewees is highlighted by the fact that we did not experience any absences or drop-outs during our online interviews. This differs from the experience of other scholars, who pointed to higher drop-out and absentee rates in online settings than in personal ones (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Janghorban et al., 2014; Sipes et al., 2019). A plausible explanation for the high reliability and availability of our participants can also be linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that more time was available for interviews and the enjoyment of (longer) conversations about certain aspects of their life was greater due to limited social contact. Thus, the motivation to talk to someone for a longer period could have been a welcome diversion.

Overall, safety measures adopted by countries following the COVID-19 pandemic have not only motivated us to multiply our data collection settings for our PhD studies, but have also aided us significantly in the implementation of the online interview mode. As the pandemic was a temporary situation, some of the benefits we enjoyed may not be significant in a post-pandemic period.

7. Conclusion

In our opinion, there is a need to deepen the methodological discussion of interviews conducted via VoIP technologies by offering empirically-grounded advice that help resolve disadvantages of this data collection mode. With this paper, we contribute to the methodological literature by presenting our experience of conducting online interviews in the framework of our PhD studies and by discussing techniques to overcome problems faced during the research process. Specifically, we showed that inter-relational problems of online interviews can be counterbalanced by increasing the frequency of contact before an interview and to use video whenever possible. We also suggest using video tours to build rapport and to obtain visual cues. Regarding the technical difficulties of online interviews, we argue that giving participants the choice of VoIP software helps to avoid such problems. In terms of digital exclusion, we have shown that adopting a hybrid strategy can be an interesting avenue of pursuit if the digital literacy or Internet access of the target group is low or varies substantially. To comply with ethical standards in interviews conducted via VoIP technologies we recommend the use of a Dictaphone for more transparency on data protection and storage issues.

Although we believe that most of the presented strategies in this paper will retain their usefulness in the long term, it is possible that in a post-pandemic period researchers will not be granted the same benefits as we have. However, digital literacy has increased greatly since 2020 (Branscombe, 2020; De' et al., 2020; Self, 2021), expanding opportunities for online research. In addition, a wide range of qualitative research was launched or continued during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a wide variety of individuals participating in interviews conducted via VoIP technologies. For longitudinal research, for example, it might be easily possible to revert to this interview

mode in the future. In terms of our own research, a hybrid approach will continue to have more relevance, because of the populations we are studying.

For future research, we recommend to deepen the discussion of exclusionary risks and ethical issues of online interviews. Questions on the validity of recording interviews through VoIP software with non-transparent data storage, situated ethics or the pertinence of using this interview mode with participants living in countries with poor digital infrastructures still remain unanswered and would much benefit from future research.

Notes

1. When speaking of online interviews, we are referring to (synchronous) interviews conducted via VoIP technologies such as Skype, WhatsApp, Webex, and Zoom.
2. Though some research topics may require the presence of the interviewer in 'unsafe' places or contexts.
3. However, ethnographic research increasingly uses online data (see e.g. Howlett, 2021; Kulavuz-Onal & Vásquez, 2013; Skågeby, 2011).
4. For a more detailed discussion on the preservation of the researcher's and interviewee's anonymity and online safety, see e.g. Lavorgna and Sugiura (2020); Sipes et al. (2019); Sullivan (2012).
5. We apply this term to all recording devices.
6. For more information on asynchronous online interviews conducted via emails see e.g. Hawkins (2018); Meho (2006).

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