Conducting an online synchronous interview:
Implications for online assessment

Ho Nhut Quang[1], Ha Minh Tri[1*]

[1]International University, Vietnam National University - HCMC, Vietnam
[*]Corresponding author: hmtri@hcmiu.edu.vn

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper highlights key points and practicalities regarding using online interviews using a recently completed undergraduate thesis as a case study. This case entitles "The consumers' perceptions towards green products in food and beverages sector in Ho Chi Minh City." Online interviewing using Google Meet has become one of the most common data collection methods in Vietnam as it is reasonably easy to use, provides almost all the required functionalities for online research, and is free of charge. Inspired by the experiences and practices from the case study, this paper is intended for use in online research methods and provides implications for application in online assessment.

1. Project overview and context

This case explores "The consumers' perceptions towards green products in food and beverages sector in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC)." Green food consumption has become increasingly popular among HCMC consumers. However, there has been limited research in understanding HCMC consumers' perceptions of green products. For such a motivation, we study the perceptions of HCMC consumers towards the consumption of green products relying on the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Means-End Chain Theory, and Value-Attitude-Behaviour Theory. Our work adopts an exploratory qualitative design. Data collection focuses on young Vietnamese consumers whose ages range from 18 up to and 26. Our study used a purposeful sampling technique. We adopt online interviews because they allow us to reach a wide and geographically dispersed group while also saving time and money for the researcher (Lefever, Dal, & Matthíasdóttir, 2007). Online data collection is becoming increasingly popular due to its advantages (Wright, 2017), especially during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Research design

Our research studies the younger generation in Vietnam, with our respondents' ages ranging from 18 to 26. This study adopts an exploratory research design which provides insights and understanding of the problem set. The qualitative research design is "An unstructured, exploratory research methodology based on small samples that provide insights and understanding of the problem setting" (Malhotra, 2020, p. 153). This approach is chosen because people may be unable to deliver correct responses to queries that delve into their subconscious minds when asked directly. The subconscious ideals, emotional desires, and motives are hidden from the outside world by rationalization and other ego defenses, describing and assessing attitudes and perceptions. In this paper, we focus on the online synchronous interview method using Google

Meet, which is one of the most commonly usedplatformsplatform in Vietnam that is free of charge.

Online interviews are "structured, semi-structured or unstructured interview that is performed via the internet. These can be synchronous interviews that take place in real-time (e.g., by video, webcam, web conferencing, live chats, text, or instant messaging) or asynchronous interviews that are not in real-time and can take place over an extended period of time" (e.g., email, pre-recorded video, microblogs, blogs, wikis or discussion boards) (Dawson, 2020, p. 268). The online interview used in our study is semi-structured and is a synchronous interview that is in real-time.

3. Research practicalities

Online research is becoming increasingly popular due to its obvious benefits, and this was especially true during the Covid-19 lockdowns (Ho & Ha, 2021). Online interviews are now a fairly common data collection strategy used by social scientists. The synchronous online interview, in the way we used it, suggests several benefits. First, it eliminates the barrier of space, allowing research to be readily internationalised without the normal travel expenditures (O'Connor, Madge, Shaw, & Wellens, 2008). In this way, online interviews might be useful for researchers who want to reach out to people who would be difficult to reach otherwise, such as the less mobile, the socially isolated, or those who live in dangerous places. The absence of visual indicators such as age, gender, and ethnicity is indicated to be a positive for online interviews that do not involve video since this can reduce the interviewer's impact throughout the interviews (O'Connor et al., 2008). Online interviews are also said to allow for more introspective replies and might be a good place to ask delicate or humiliating topics (Madge & O'Connor, 2004). When we look at online interaction, we can see how communication might diminish these personal impacts, resulting in the conversation being "hyperpersonal" (Walther, 1996). That is to say, communication is potentially more socially acceptable than what one would encounter in in-person engagement.

A second argument is that the quality of replies obtained through internet research is comparable to the quality of responses obtained through more traditional means of gathering information (Denscombe, 2017). The occurrence of pauses, repeats, and recasts in in-person and online interviews does not differ considerably from one another in terms of frequency (Cabaroglu, Basaran, & Roberts, 2010).

Third, in addition to being time- and cost-effective, this interview method reduces the health and safety concerns for both interviewer and interviewee, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another benefit of the online interview can be found via utilizing the computerized platform as a source of information used as references. During the interview process, when answering the interview questions, the respondents can retrieve needed information to improve the answer quality and quantity. Finally, on the practical front, because online interviews remove the need to travel to an interview venue, the cost of interviewing is minimal.

Alongside these advantages, we also faced several drawbacks. First, technical issues in terms of internet disconnection and the quality of the internet while conducting the interviewing are the common issues (O'Connor et al., 2008). Second, there may be ethical problems to consider, such as obtaining informed consent verbally, which may make the beginning of the interview appear extremely professional and may not create the correct tone for the interview, and recording the conversation on video or audio, which may be unethical (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Third, building rapport can be difficult when interviewing a reserved interviewee (Cater, 2011).

Another drawback of the online interview is the lack of interviewee's opportunity of understanding and learning more about the interviewer's side. As for traditional interview methods, when consumers are invited to the interview meetings hold at the interviewer's campuses

or buildings, they have opportunities to visit the interviewer's premises and facilities. Consumer's positive perception of visitting can affect their motivation in answering the interview questions. It will be more important if the interviewer is a research business in the market.

The advantages and drawbacks of online interviewing in our research can be summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Benefits and drawbacks of the online interview using Google Meet

Issue	*Benefits*	*Drawbacks*
Recruitment	Allows interviewees and interviewers to be more flexible when it comes to scheduling the interview time	If potential interviewers do not understand how to utilise Google Meet, they may be discouraged from participating
Logistical and technological considerations	Less health and safety concerns Cost-effective Time effective Greater flexibility regarding an interview time	In contrast to face-to-face interviews, participants in distance interviews may be more likely to drop out because they feel less committed to the process than they would be in face-to-face interviews Sound quality can be technological problem making recording difficult
Ethics	With the touch of a button, interviewees can withdraw from the process Anonymity can be easily ensured	Giving informed consent verbally might make the interview feel quite professional, which may not be the best way to set the tone for the rest of the interview When making video or audio recordings of an interview, there may be ethical considerations to consider. Participants must be made fully aware of this before to the event Interviewees can be uncomfortable being recorded in their own place
Rapport	In many cases, establishing rapport may be accomplished just as effectively as in in-person interviews with a candidate. The exchange of emails, messages, and reports can help to expedite this process	Building rapport may be difficult

Issue	*Benefits*	*Drawbacks*
Audio or video	Participants can pick the amount of contact they desire to have with the interviewer through the use of audio and video	In certain circumstances, video is not feasible since it might degrade the sound quality
Absentees	Money and time have not been wasted if the participant does not log on and finish the interview in its entirety	Participants may choose to "drop out of the interview" at the last minute or without giving a warning to the interviewer
Source of information	Use a computerised platform as a source of information to support answers	Little opportunity to check the reliability of the information source

Source: Authors (2021)

4. Practicalities

Through the experience of carrying out our study, I learnt about using online interviews to collect research data. This guides researchers who are considering the use of the online interview to collect research data. Below are questions which are worth to consider when deciding to use online interviews:

- Is it necessary to provide participants with device/equipment, or should they bring their own device/equipment with them? (webcams, cell phone or computers, etc.).

- Is it necessary to provide training to interviewers and interviewees in order for them to be proficient in the utilisation of software and devise/equipment? Have you (or any of the other interviewees) gotten any practice in using the equipment? Making sure you have the ideal camera angle and can create "eye contact" with your interviewee, for example, or making sure that microphones and speakers are in the proper area and operating properly are all examples of what you should be concerned about when filming an interview.

- When conducting an interview, how can you ensure that both the interviewer and the interviewee are using reliable equipment that will not interfere with the interview process and will be effective (such as a good internet connection, an effective recording system, and adequate sound and video quality)? When conducting synchronous interviews, this is very important to keep in mind.

- What kinds of misconceptions may arise during online interviews (for example, social, cultural, organizational, or language-based misunderstandings)? What must be done to solve these issues?

- When putting together an interview schedule, what factors should be considered?

- When you introduce yourself and begin the interviews, how do you want to develop a connection with the participants? This can encompass concerns like as civility, respect, honesty, politeness, empathy, and the right use of communication tools, to name a few examples of what is involved.

- Is it necessary to adjust the interview questions to be more suitable to the online interview context?

Does the room used for the online interview have all the needed facilities to support the conversation (electronic switches, lighting, decoration, computers, screens, LCDs, etc.)?

5. Ethics, morals and legal issues to be considered

Below are questions which are worth to consider when you are deciding to use online interviewing for your research:

• What procedures do you propose to use to acquire informed consent? Do all of the participants understand what it means to provide their permission after being informed? Is it possible to guarantee that participants understand the aim of your research, the benefits of participating, as well as the hazards of participating, and that they have enough time to decide? For example, what kind of information should you need to supply (such as the objectives of the study, the length and degree of commitment necessary, opt-in and opt-out terms, and concerns about confidentiality and anonymity) is important. This should include the whole study process, including data collection, analysis, and distribution of findings.

• What measures do you propose to take to safeguard data and keep it safe? Do you have a thorough grasp of the various methods of data protection?

• The interview will happen in a private or public online area, according to your preference. If it's private, can you ensure that it's private? In the case of a mobile device interview, what happens to the interviewee's privacy when the interview is conducted in a physical public space?

• If you're doing an online interview, how can you create trustworthiness and credibility?

• If the interviewees are foreigners, how do you deal with issues of cultural differences, legal differences and time differences?

6. Implications for online assessment

Successful online data collection requires several adaptations, including ethical challenges, new technological and new social environment which are interwined.

6.1. Adapting to ethical challenges

In addition to the standard research ethics issues, the collecting of internet data presents a number of unique problems. For example, numerous types of privacy issues are associated with online data collecting. When a subject engages in online video interaction, a researcher has the possibility to see and hear what is going on in their home. Some communication platforms demand a participant profile, which may include information such as name, date of birth, email address, and/or cell phone number; some participants may not want to establish a profile, or if they do, they may not want to reveal it. People's ability to engage anonymously may be critical for specific demographics or study topics, therefore providing support may be essential. Participants will also require access to a quiet and secluded environment. Individuals who rely on public workspaces to access the internet, for example, will be unable to do so in total privacy at these sites.

During face-to-face research, we employ everyday acts to demonstrate our presence and concern, as well as to build rapport with participants: casual conversation, offering a beverage, providing tissues to a troubled interviewee, and so on. The collecting of data online results in the loss of this embodied caring. Investigators must devise ways for establishing rapport with and comforting a frightened interviewee. We propose the following modifications in order to address these and other significant ethical issues.

In the case of interviewing foreigners, interviewers should be aware of cultural differences, legal differences and time differences. It is very important because many actions, saying and

behaviors are accepted in the interviewer's country but ethically or legally not accepted in the foreign interviewee's countries.

Develop a strategy for dealing with disengagement

These methods, which are commonly used in studies with vulnerable individuals or on sensitive subjects, are recommended for online qualitative studies. Formulate strategies for dealing with an interviewee who appears to be clearly distressed, or moves away from the screen, or does not come back from a break, or engages in troubling interactions with other people in the interviewee's environment. A similar strategy is recommended for focus groups that are dealing with distress, as well as abuse or discriminating behaviors between members of the focus group. Make sure you have a backup plan in case you need to contact a participant, and inform them in advance of the conditions under which you will contact them through this other channel.

Having pre-interview online conversations with potential interviewees is preferable for screening and filtering purpose. The right selection of the interviewees can help avoid or reduce significantly the problem of distress and disengagement.

Make sure video and/or audio recordings are properly saved

Researchers must investigate where recordings are stored on an internet platform, as well as the platform's privacy policies. If using the cloud service of a platform is in violation of local privacy regulations or ethical clearance, consider a system or platform that enables researchers to store recordings on their institutional cloud service or computer instead. The use of an offline audio device (such as a digital recorder) to collect audio during sensitive research increases the security of the information.

Determine how consent will be documented/recorded

Consent protocols for online research can be more difficult to navigate; nonetheless, there are various options available, each with its own set of pros and cons. Participants may feel burdened if they are required to submit a written consent form before to data collection. This requires them to have access to a printer, scanner, or smartphone. Online tools (like as DocuSign) might be efficient, but they can also pose questions about the access of participants, expertise, and security of data. Adobe Acrobat provides a variety of options, including the ability for participants to "sign" through a smart device screen, print, and scan documents. Researchers may get and record verbal consent; this might be preferred since it reduces the burden on participants and encourages them to ask questions prior to participation, both of which are beneficial. Consider doing this at an introduction contact (before the data collecting session), particularly for focus groups, as it enables more attention to be paid to individual inquiries as well as better secrecy. Flexibility is essential since techniques should be tailored to the comfort and capability of the participants.

6.2. Handling challenges: Software and hardware

Planning ahead

Technology logistics should be at the forefront of research planning since online research activities depend on technological operation and control, including software and hardware. Researchers must check that potential interviewees have (1) access to the hardware (e.g., a (smart) device or laptop/computer); (2) a stable internet connection; (3) understanding of the data collection platform; and (4) sufficient assistance to cope with technological difficulties before beginning data collection. Before data collection may begin, participants may require technical instruction and guidance from a trained professional.

Provisions that promote desirable social interactions

Various online platforms provide a variety of features and benefits (Lobe, Morgan, & Hoffman, 2020), and various features allow varying levels of engagement, data capture, secrecy and privacy, as well as security and confidentiality (Box 1). Although, inan ideal world, platforms would be chosen in accordance with the needs of the interviewees, in certain cases, a researcher's institution may compel the usage of specific platforms because of licensing, among other things. The following are some considerations to keep in mind while selecting and managing the technology parts of your internet study.

• Allows either the participant or the presenter to operate their own cameras and microphones, or both at the same time. This is useful for controlling background noise and speaking order, if necessary, as well as for regulating the sequence of the participants' speeches.

• Chat functions: These allow participants to add brief textual comments or queries, which are shown in a sidebar to the right of the main screen, and which do not disturb the spoken dialogue in the process.

• A breakout room is a small subgroup conversation that may be held separately from the main meeting; the host/s may come and go as needed to answer or ask questions, or to guide discussions. Several platforms may allocate players to rooms automatically, and they can also immediately rejoin interviewees back into the main event when they have completed their rooms.

• Screen annotation is a set of interactive textual and drawing tools that are shown on a computer screen and allow users to visually annotate the material displayed on the screen.

Anonymity of participants

If maintaining participant anonymity is crucial, use a platform that allows you to easily regulate username displays and train participants to be in command of how they show themselves on the platform. When joining an online meeting, certain platforms present both first and last names; consequently, attendees should be aware to modify their name properly. Platforms that request a user to register and then automatically disclose the user's account name should be avoided at all costs, since they threaten privacy and confidentiality. Given the fact that participants may participate in virtual research from the comfort of their own places or workplaces, pre-research coaching should include the option of employing virtual backdrops to ensure better privacy protection for participants.

Recording, screenshots and transcription

Certain systems allow you to record online interactions and have audio data transcriptions done for you. Check to ensure the data files are maintained and safeguarded. Anyone who has access to the online event can snap a screenshot of the screen using the screenshot feature. Before beginning any online data collecting activity, it is important to negotiate consent with everyone who will be participating. Once consent has been obtained, the recording can be switched on if needed.

Manually controlled or password entry

Admission can be controlled by the host through the use of a "waiting room", in which the host personally allows attendees to the event. This provides hosts with a better control. Participants may save time by using password entry, which allows everyone who has been issued a password to the meeting to join automatically.

Box 1. Platform functions checklist

Examine the following particular technical affordances when selecting an acceptable platform, making sure they meet the demands of your research technique and participants and are suitable for them:

Participants' privacy, confidentiality, and security are managed through the use of the following procedures:

✓   Password entry

✓   Admission and removal of participants

✓   Username display control

✓   Virtual background

For facilitating effective social interactions online

✓   Microphone and camera control

✓   Chat functions

✓   Breakout rooms

✓   Participant polling

✓   Screen sharing

✓   Screen annotation

For managing data collection and storage

✓   Built‑in video and audio recording

✓   Subtitles and captioning

✓   Secure storage of recorded data

✓   Screenshot

6.3. Handling social difference

When opposed to in-person study settings, researchers may have less influence over any disruptions to online data collection activities since they would not be personally there to offer other arrangements. There will be a number of interviewees who will have past experience with online interactions as part of their daily employment, while other interviewees will have no prior experience with online interactions (Nadler, 2020). It is critical to be prepared to deal with interruptions, unpredictability, and a wide range of comfort levels while engaging in online relationships. We've included some suggestions on how to manage the social aspects of internet research in the section below.

Pre-evaluation briefing/check-in

An informational briefing before the evaluation can assist participants in being more aware of what to anticipate and in becoming more familiar with the online platforms and technologies. In case you are dealing with interviewees who have communication difficulties, or who are unfamiliar with online technologies, it is critical that you address their communication and technical requirements before data collection begin to ensure a successful data collection. This can also aid in the development of rapport, which can improve participants' happiness with their engagement in terms of their interpersonal relationships.

Handle background noise and microphones

Although interviewees' microphones can be muted to prevent background noise, having to flip the mic on and off during exchanges might cause the discussion to become disjointed and difficult to follow. To encourage as much engagement as possible, it is advised that microphones

be left on. It may be helpful to advise interviewees to keep background noise to a minimum. Participants should be informed about their preferred arrangement before the study session begins. This should include discussing when and if mics must be muted.

Establish a back-up plan

Sometimes technology fails (computers break down, unavailability of internet connections), causing the research to be interrupted or inaudible data to be produced. We've previously spoken about how important it is to have a backup plan in place for dealing with stress; this is also true for dealing with technology challenges. Moderators must have phone numbers of all interviewees on hand just in case, and they should have a clear understanding of when their phone numbers will be utilised. It is important for moderators to make a decision on whether to quit the online platform and switch to a backup plan.

Manage unexpected intrusions

"Zoom bombers" are those that show up uninvited to online gatherings. They have the potential to create disruption and humiliation, as well as compromise the confidentiality of a secret study event. "Zoom bombing" occurs when a connection to a meeting is uploaded publicly and is accessible on the internet, and it is particularly common in business meetings. To maintain greater control over your online research events, create a secret password for each one and consider employing a "waiting room". Participants should be explicitly instructed not to publish events publicly should be kept confidential and not made public (e.g., on social media).

Open to receive feedback

Consider including questions regarding the use of technology and an online platform in post-study assessments; feedback may be utilised to improve future research design and methods, as well as to promote methodological research.

7. Some notes for online interview users

If you are considering doing online interviews for your study and are unfamiliar with interviewing procedures, it may be beneficial for you to learn more about interviewing strategies in social research. While Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) give a thorough overview of the subject matter, including ethical and practical considerations, Seidman (2013) offers more practical guidance for people who are interested in phenomenological interviewing techniques. More about online interviewing may be found at Salmons (2014). As well as providing some interesting case studies, this book also includes a helpful first chapter that includes various ways in which online interviews may be carried out, sampling and recruitment methods, as well as the position of the investigator/researcher and the steps involved in choosing the appropriate technology, carrying out the interview, and ethical considerations. It can be beneficial to have a better grasp of the available technology for online interviewing as well with several examples of this technology to be included in the relevant resources section below. In Chapter 33, you will find information about mobile phone interviewing, as well as a discussion of organized, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews. The approach for conducting mobile phone surveys is described in detail in Chapter 34. The next chapters contain information on additional forms of computer-assisted interviewing.

8. Some useful resources

Online interviewing may be conducted using a variety of digital tools and software packages, each of which offers its own set of advantages over the traditional interviewing method. One type is available for no cost and is intended towards the general public, while another is targeted at corporations, market researchers, and others interested in qualitative research. Some of

these have considerable financial implications. The following are some examples that were accessible at the time of writing (in alphabetical order):

- BlogNog (www.blognog.com);

- Dub InterViewer (www.nebu.com/dub-interviewer-data-collection-software);

- FreeConference (www.freeconference.com);

- Google Meet (https://meet.google.com);

- GoToMeeting (www.gotomeeting.com/en-gb);

- Group Quality (http://groupquality.com/products/online-interviews);

- Isurus In-depth Interviews (http://isurusmrc.com/research-tools/qualitative-research-tools);

- ReadyTalk (www.readytalk.com);

- Skype (www.skype.com/en);

- VisionsLive V+ Online In-Depth Interviews (www.visionslive.com/platform/online-in-depth-interviews).

References

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (Vol. 3). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cabaroglu, N., Basaran, S., & Roberts, J. (2010). A comparison between the occurrence of pauses, repetitions and recasts under conditions of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication: A preliminary study. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET, 9*(2), 14-23.

Cater, J. K. (2011). Skype a cost-effective method for qualitative research. *Rehabilitation Counselors & Educators Journal, 4*(2), 3-7.

Dawson, C. (2020). *A-Z of digital research methods* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Deakin, H., & Wakefield, K. (2014). Skype interviewing: Reflections of two PhD researchers. *Qualitative Research, 14*(5), 603-616. doi:10.1177/1468794113488126

Denscombe, M. (2017). *EBOOK: The good research guide: For small-scale social research projects*. London, UK: McGraw-Hill Education.

Ho, Q. N., & Ha, T. M. (2021). The challenges and opportunities of online learning during Covid-19 pandemic. *Ho Chi Minh City Open University Journal of Science-Social Sciences, 11*(1), 3-14. doi:10.46223/HCMCOUJS.soci.en.11.1.1902.2021

Lefever, S., Dal, M., & Matthíasdóttir, Á. (2007). Online data collection in academic research: Advantages and limitations. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 38*(4), 574-582. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2006.00638.x

Lobe, B., Morgan, D., & Hoffman, K. A. (2020). Qualitative data collection in an era of social distancing. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 19*. doi:10.1177/1609406920937875

Madge, C., & O'Connor, H. (2004). Online methods in geography educational research. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 28*(1), 143-152. doi:10.1080/0309826042000198710

Malhotra, N. K. (2020). *Marketing research: An applied orientation* (7th ed.). London, UK: Pearson.

Nadler, R. (2020). Understanding "Zoom fatigue": Theorizing spatial dynamics as third skins in computer-mediated communication. *Computers and Composition, 58*, Article 102613. doi:10.1016/j.compcom.2020.102613

O'Connor, H., Madge, C., Shaw, R., & Wellens, J. (2008). Online interviewing. In N. Fielding, R. Lee & G. Blank (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of online research methods* (pp. 416-434). Retrieved October 10, 2021, from https://methods.sagepub.com/book/the-sage-handbook-of-online-research-methods.

Salmons, J. (2014). *Qualitative online interviews: Strategies, design, and skills*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Teachers college press.

Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research, 23*(1), 3-43. doi:10.1177/009365096023001001

Wright, K. B. (2017). Web-based survey methodology. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 1-14). Singapore: Springer Singapore.