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Online interviews: potential and challenges for data collection in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic*

Entrevistas *online*: potencialidades e desafios para coleta de dados no contexto da pandemia de COVID-19

Entrevistas *online*: posibilidades y desafíos para la recogida de datos en el contexto de la pandemia de COVID-19

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The social distance resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic strengthened the already emergent process of virtual connections between people, bringing implications also for conducting research. The aim of this study is to present the potential and challenges of conducting online interviews in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a brief communication, based on a review of the technical-scientific literature, which summarized the general characteristics of online interviews, with emphasis on those that occur through videoconference. Platforms that allow online interviews were considered (Google Meet, GoToMeeting, Skype, Webex, WhatsApp and Zoom), emphasizing aspects that help in the selection of resources aligned with the needs of the study and the profile of the participants. Ethical considerations and practical recommendations were also discussed. Despite challenges, online interviews prove to be an alternative for continuing research that was already underway, or even for conducting further studies during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Descriptors: Interview; Information technology; Pandemics; Qualitative research; Methodology.

O distanciamento social decorrente da pandemia de COVID-19 fortaleceu o processo já emergente das conexões virtuais entre as pessoas, trazendo implicações também para a condução de pesquisas. O objetivo deste estudo é apresentar as potencialidades e os desafios da realização de entrevistas online no contexto da pandemia de COVID-19. Trata-se de uma comunicação breve, fundamentada em revisão da literatura técnico-científica, que sumarizou as características gerais de entrevistas online, com destaque para as que ocorrem por meio de videoconferência. Foram consideradas plataformas que permitem a realização de entrevistas online (Google Meet, GoToMeeting, Skype, Webex, WhatsApp e Zoom), enfatizando aspectos que auxiliam na seleção de recursos alinhados às necessidades do estudo e ao perfil dos participantes. Considerações éticas e recomendações práticas também foram discutidas. Apesar dos desafios, as entrevistas online se mostram uma alternativa para a continuidade de pesquisas que já estavam em andamento, ou mesmo para a realização de novos estudos durante a pandemia de COVID-19.
Descritores: Entrevista; Tecnologia da informação; Pandemias; Pesquisa qualitativa; Metodologia.

El distanciamiento social derivado de la pandemia de COVID-19 ha fortalecido el proceso ya emergente de conexiones virtuales entre las personas, también trayendo implicaciones para la realización de investigaciones. El objetivo de este estudio es presentar las potencialidades y los desafíos de la realización de entrevistas online en el contexto de la pandemia de COVID-19. Esta es una breve comunicación, basada en revisión de la literatura técnico-científica, que ha resumido las características generales de las entrevistas online, subrayando las que se realizan por videoconferencia. Se consideraron plataformas que permiten realizar entrevistas online (Google Meet, GoToMeeting, Skype, Webex, WhatsApp e Zoom), subrayando los aspectos que contribuyen a la selección de recursos alineados con las necesidades del estudio y el perfil de los participantes. También se discutieron consideraciones éticas y recomendaciones prácticas. A pesar de los desafíos, las entrevistas online muestran una alternativa para la continuidad de las investigaciones que ya estaban en marcha, o incluso para la realización de nuevos estudios durante la pandemia de COVID-19.
Descriptores: Entrevista; Tecnología de la información; Pandemias; Investigación cualitativa; Metodología.

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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus (Coronavirus Disease - COVID-19) is the most serious public health emergency the international community has faced in the last 100 years[1]. Aside from the economic impacts and repercussions for social and family interactions, thousands of lives have unfortunately been lost as a result of COVID-19[2].

In order to avoid rapid escalation of the number of infections and the collapse of health services, it is necessary to adopt strict social distancing[3]. Thus, the already emergent process of virtual connections between people was expanded and, for thousands of them, contacts beyond the nuclear family occur almost exclusively through social media, with exchanges of messages, videoconferences and phone calls, so that geographic distance is less relevant to interpersonal relationships[2].

These changes also have implications for conducting research, which needs to adapt to new conditions as long as the pandemic continues[1]. In the current scenario, qualitative studies, for example, can contribute to the understanding of meanings and senses that people attribute to their experiences, allowing the investigation of the reasons why they are more or less exposed to the risk of contamination by the novel coronavirus, as well as the planning of prevention actions and interventions aligned with the demands of different social and population groups[4].

The face-to-face interview is the most traditional strategy for collecting qualitative data[5,6]. At this time, due to social distancing, face-to-face interviews tend to become unfeasible, which affects many studies. Therefore, it is necessary to expand data collection strategies in order to include adaptations and new resources that allow for the continuity of research, despite the pandemic[1]. Given the above, the aim of this study is to present the potential and challenges of conducting online interviews in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHOD

This is a brief communication based on a technical-scientific literature review of online interviews, through database searches (PubMed, SAGE, SciELO, Springer, Wiley, Google Scholar), with free periodicity, conducted in August 2020. In this process, descriptors like "*online interviewing*", "*video interviewing*", "*virtual interviewing*", "*online inquiry*", "*qualitative inquiry*", "*online research methods*" and "*qualitative research*" were used.

Mainly international articles were found, which did not adequately address the particularities of ethical aspects for conducting research in Brazil, recommended by the *Comissão Nacional de Ética em Pesquisa - CONEP* (National Research Ethics Commission). Therefore, the CONEP website was also consulted, in order to seek updates to discuss ethical aspects related to online data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the national context. The analysis of the technical-scientific literature allowed us to reflect on the potential and challenges of conducting online interviews in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESULTS

Among positive aspects of online interviews, it is possible to mention: (1) greater geographical coverage, with the inclusion of people from different locations; (2) savings in financial resources and reduction of time in data collection, as there is no need for large displacements; (3) safer for participants and researchers, considering the pandemic context; (4) possibility to investigate sensitive topics, as participants are not in the physical presence of the researchers or in public places, such as universities and hospitals; and, (5) access to socially marginalized and stigmatized groups, commonly more reluctant to exposure[5,7].

Many people may be more comfortable to participate in a study in their own home[5], or they may even feel more comfortable leaving the online interview if they wish, in comparison to face-to-face interviews, which is often done simply by disconnecting the device[1]. In addition,

in the current scenario, due to COVID-19, conducting online data collection is one of the few possibilities for continuing research using interviews.

Online interviews can be conducted individually or with a small group of participants (family, couple), as an alternative or complement to face-to-face data collection[6]. In addition, they can be carried out synchronously, with simultaneous interaction (videoconference, audio conference or instant messaging) or asynchronous, without simultaneous interaction (emails and discussion forums)[6].

Even so, evidence reveals that videoconferences generate significantly more data, compared to text-based interviews (instant messages, emails, and discussion forums)8. In addition, the level of connection between researcher and participant in online video conference interviews is similar to face-to-face interviews[5], potentially due to the use of audio and video resources[6]. Table 1 presents some of the most used platforms in Brazil and abroad for conducting online interviews through videoconferences, with information on: (1) general features; (2) type of recording; and (3) type of access.

Table 1. Videoconferencing platforms for conducting online interviews. Rio Grande do Sul, 2020.

	General features[a]	**Type of recording**	**Type of access**
Google Meet[b]	Free for audio/video interviews, both individual and in group, for an unlimited time until March 31st, 2021. Website: https://apps.google.com/intl/pt-BR/meet/how-it-works	Audio/video recording on Google Drive for paid plans. Allows instant closed captions during interviews.	Participants can download the platform or use it in a web browser. Interviewer and participants need to create a Google account.
GoToMeeting	Paid plan for audio/video interviews, both individual and in group, for an unlimited time. Website: https://www.gotomeeting.com/pt-br	Audio/video recording saved in the platform cloud and sent by email to the interviewer after the interview.	Participants need to click on an invitation link to download the platform and enter the interview, after identifying themselves. Participants do not need to create an account.
Skype	Free for audio/video interviews, both individual and group, for an unlimited time. Website: https://www.skype.com/pt-br/	Audio/video recording available for 30 days in the cloud. Before recording, the platform alerts the interviewer to obtain the participants' consent.	Participants can download the platform or use it in a web browser. Interviewer and participants need to create an account before using the program.
Webex	Free for audio/video interviews, both individual and in group, for an unlimited time. Website: https://www.webex.com/	Audio/video recording available only in paid versions; restricted access to the interviewer.	Participants must download the platform. Participants do not need to create an account.
WhatsApp[c]	Free for audio/video interviews, for up to eight participants, for an unlimited time. Website: https://www.whatsapp.com	Audio/video recording not available.	Participants must download the platform on their cell phone. On the computer, WhatsApp Web does not allow video calls, only exchanging messages.
Zoom	Free for audio/video interviews, unlimited for up to two participants (in addition to the interviewer), and for up to 40 minutes with more participants. Website: https://zoom.us/	Audio/video recording, controlled and accessed by interviewer, who may or may not share it with participants. Paid version allows simultaneous transcription of the recording.	Participants can download the platform or use it in a web browser. Only the interviewer needs to download the platform, create an account, and send the link with an ID and password

for the participant to
enter the interview.

Notes: Table based on Lobe et al.[1]. It is suggested to consult the website of each platform for detailed information on the functionality and updates of each platform. [a] All platforms have privacy and security standards and some (e.g., Google Meet, GoToMeeting, Zoom) follow international standards such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act - HIPPA (https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CRPT-104hrpt736/CRPT-104hrpt736/context, cited on 20 Aug. 2020). [b] (https://apps.google.com/intl/pt-BR/meet/how-it-works/, cited 11 Aug. 2020). [c] (https://www.whatsapp.com/, cited on 11 Aug. 2020).

DISCUSSION

In view of the fact that virtual connections, which have been expanding in recent years, have been enhanced by the pandemic of COVID-19, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become more strongly integrated into everyday life[2]. This suggests that people have been developing new digital skills, which facilitates participation in the different modalities of collecting qualitative data online[1].

However, online data collection requires adaptations. In the case of the interviews, the importance of not extending their duration is emphasized, since the use of ICTs can cause more fatigue to the participants, in comparison to face-to-face data collection[5]. Additionally, to ensure quality, effectiveness and privacy in online interviews, some requirements are necessary, such as: reliability and security of the Internet network and equipment (mobile phone, computer, camera, microphone and headset), in addition to a private and silent environment in which it is possible to ensure the minimum of interruptions, which is valid for both the researcher and the participant[1].

In the process of choosing the platform, the researcher must consider the needs of the study, the cost-benefit ratio, the security of the application, in addition to the degree of difficulty in accessing and becoming familiar with the application, both for the researcher and, above all, the participants[1]. In Brazil, in particular, platforms with free access may be more convenient (especially at this time of pandemic, given the restrictions on research funding), as well as those with unlimited duration for videoconferences (Google Meet, Skype), which do not depend on the creation of an account or an application download (Zoom), or that are already widespread in the virtual communication of a large part of the population (WhatsApp).

Despite this, many people may have limitations in accessing the Internet and equipment to participate in online data collection, which usually occurs in contexts of socioeconomic vulnerability. Research with specific populations, which occasionally have difficulties in using ICTs, such as the elderly[3], also tends to be more affected in the current scenario.

It is recommended that the researcher: (1) become familiar with and test the equipment and the platform that will be used (Google Meet, Skype, Zoom and others), before the interview; (2) use direct Internet connection instead of Wi-Fi; (3) have backup equipment for immediate replacement in the event of technological failures; and (4) have enough space on the computer to archive the recording of the generated files, sometimes large, such as videoconferences[5]. Obviously, it is not always possible to follow all these recommendations (many researchers do not have backup equipment), but they deserve to be considered, to avoid problems, such as the loss of the collected material.

It is also essential that the researcher helps the participant to become familiar with the platform through which the data collection will be carried out and expose possible alternatives in case of technical problems, informing them about the "plan B" [5]. In the initial contact, it is important to be flexible, which includes accepting the possibility of using a platform with which the participant is already familiar or has available, so that there is no need to learn to use or even install the application of a new platform on their computer or cell phone.

Contacts made prior to data collection help in establishing rapport with the participant[5], and the participant's sense of security and comfort concerning the interview tends to be greater when he can see or have access to the researcher's credentials and photo previously[7]. In this sense, researchers can develop pages about the study on the Internet (institutional website, or even on social networks, such as Facebook), through which, in addition to information about

the research being carried out, the research team is also introduced. As the researcher's control over the environment decreases in online data collection, it is important to ask the participant to take some measures to ensure confidentiality and privacy, as well as minimize disturbances as much as possible (using headphones, disconnecting their phone and avoiding the use of other applications in parallel)[1].

In general, the ethical and care aspects related to online interviews are the same as face-to-face interviews[6]. In Brazil, CONEP, on June 5, 2020, issued a statement with guidelines for the appreciation of Human and Social Sciences research in the *Comitês de Ética em Pesquisa - CEP* (Research Ethics Committees), during the pandemic of the new coronavirus[9]. Among the recommendations, it is mentioned that, in studies with online data collection, the modality of registration of consent should highlight the importance that a copy of the document, signed by the researcher, be kept by the participant in their files; and, specify how the integrity and assistance to those involved in the investigation in these cases will be preserved[9]. For researchers who already have a previously approved protocol and need to inform about the change in the data collection strategy (in-person to online), it is necessary to submit an amendment to CEP[1] and wait for its approval, before starting the collections.

CONCLUSION

Like all data collection strategies, online interviews have advantages and disadvantages, which must be carefully weighed to determine whether or not they will meet the needs of the study. Despite challenges, it is understood that online interviews have potential, especially with regard to conducting qualitative studies in the context of social distance imposed by COVID-19, as it is one of the few alternatives in the current scenario, in addition to offering the possibility to investigate various themes present in the lives of people and families who are experiencing social distancing.

Without these online research strategies, it would certainly be more difficult to know and reflect on the new forms of family life, be they pleasant and companionable, or to unveil psychological suffering, conflicts and violence, which are also prevalent in families in the pandemic scenario. It is necessary to analyze violence and its consequences through research, both aiming at prevention and intervention actions with the people involved, as well as to denounce them, as yet another tragic facet triggered and/or exacerbated in the context of COVID-19.

Among the limitations of this brief communication, the relatively small number of studies reviewed is noteworthy, which also reflects the scarcity of publications on online interviews. However, it was not intended to exhaust the topic, but to point out technological alternatives to make online interviews feasible, considering the need to continue research during the pandemic, including that on topics related to COVID-19.

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CONTRIBUTIONS
Beatriz Schmidt and **Ambra Palazzi** contributed to the conception of the study, data collection and analysis, writing and revision. **Cesar Augusto Piccinini** participated in the conception of the study, writing and revision.

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