

# The Effects of Individual Competencies on the Qualitative Research Interview Process for Business Insights

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**Abstract:** *The study examines the impact of individual competencies on the qualitative research interview process, particularly in the context of internet-mediated data collection, which has become increasingly prevalent post-pandemic. The decline in traditional interviewing skills among recent graduates poses significant challenges for businesses relying on qualitative insights for strategic decisions. This research identifies critical gaps in the preparation and execution of qualitative interviews by business students, emphasizing the need for effective training programs. Utilizing Social Cognitive Theory, Communication Accommodation Theory, and Situated Learning Theory, the study investigates the role of self-efficacy, environmental factors, and social interactions in enhancing interviewing skills. A mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and case studies, provides a comprehensive analysis of current competencies and the effectiveness of intervention programs. The findings aim to improve the interviewing skills of future business researchers, ensuring more reliable and insightful data collection in an increasingly digital research environment.*

## 1. Introduction

Many businesses are facing challenges accessing qualified candidates due to the declining interviewing skills of students graduating into the business marketplace (Wilkie, 2019; Wall Street Journal, 2013). Interviewing skills are essential for businesses to access insights for future strategies and decision-making, especially in a fast-paced business environment (Trull, 2014). However, some graduating business students lack the necessary preparation, communication and etiquette skills to collect data from customers and other stakeholders critical in business decision-making (Al-Musalli, 2019). As much as 87% of new graduates believe they need new skills to compete and be effective at work (Rainie and Anderson, 2017). This can result in missed opportunities, wasted resources and lower productivity for businesses.

Interviewing is a fundamental method of data collection in social research with businesses being key beneficiaries. It enables business researchers to elicit rich and detailed information from the market and to gain insights into their views, experiences, and feelings on a variety of business topics (Barrot et al., 2021). Interviewing can also foster rapport and trust between business researchers and targeted sample populations in the market, and facilitate ethical and respectful research practices.

However, interviewing is not an easy or intuitive skill. It requires a range of competencies that need to be learned and practiced, such as designing appropriate questions, active listening, effective probing, interaction managing and recording and analyzing the data. These competencies may be lacking or underdeveloped among current students who conduct social research for their academic projects. Several factors may contribute to this situation, such as the widespread use of online surveys as a substitute for interviewing, the reduced opportunities for face-to-face communication in the digital age, and the insufficient training and feedback provided by instructors and supervisors.

According to a study conducted by the National Science Foundation, only 12% of social science students are trained in qualitative research methods (Barrot et al., 2021). Another study found that 66% of students reported feeling unprepared for conducting interviews for their research projects (Archibald et al., 2019). Additionally, a survey of social science instructors revealed that only 42% thought their students were adequately trained in interviewing skills. These statistics suggest that there may be a significant gap in the interviewing skills of current students in the social sciences. This may have negative consequences for the quality and validity of their research outcomes, as well as for their academic and professional growth.

Further, the shift to online surveys as a substitute for interviewing may be contributing to this trend of the skills gap in student interviewing skills, as it reduces opportunities for face-to-face communication and the development of necessary competencies. Notably, the prevalence of online mediated data collection instead of face-to-face interactions has increased significantly in the past decade. According to a report by the Pew Research Center, the share of U.S. adults who say they use the internet, social media, or a smartphone has risen from 78% in 2010 to 93% in 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2021). This statistic is significant because it indicates the presence of an infrastructure that supports online data collection. Similarly, a survey by the World Association of Opinion and Marketing Research Professionals (ESOMAR) found that online surveys accounted for 57% of global market research revenue in 2019, up from 34% in 2010 (ESOMAR B.V, 2021). These trends indicate that online-mediated data collection has become a dominant mode of gathering information from various populations and contexts.

Therefore, this research proposal aims to address this gap in the literature and practice by investigating the current state of research interviewing skills among business students. The expected outcomes of this research are to improve the graduating student's ability to conduct rigorous and ethical interviews for their research projects but more relevant to social science is to increase their awareness of the benefits and challenges of interviewing as a research method in the real

world business environment.

The significance of interviewing skills in the business world cannot be overstated. Businesses rely heavily on social research to inform their decision-making processes, such as developing new products, understanding customer needs, and identifying market trends (Hair et al., 2019). Interviews are a critical tool in conducting social research, and the lack of interviewing skills among social science students can have negative consequences for the quality and validity of their business research outcomes in their future jobs (Posthuma et al., 2002).

Moreover, the shift to online surveys as a substitute for interviewing is also significant in the business world. The widespread use of online-mediated data collection has become a dominant mode of gathering information from various populations and contexts (Hewson, 2008). Businesses that rely on online surveys as a primary mode of data collection may be missing out on the rich and detailed information that can be obtained through interviews (Nyumba et al., 2018).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The qualitative research interview is a widely used method in qualitative research that allows researchers to explore people's experiences, feelings and perspectives on a topic. However, conducting a qualitative research interview is not a simple task that can be done without proper preparation and skills. In this chapter, the aim is to conduct a detailed literature review that critically discusses the effects of individual competencies on the qualitative research interview process, particularly in a current research environment setting that is dominated by internet-mediated data collection.

### 2.2 Characterizing Research Interviews

Several definitions exist for an interview, with Nunkoosing (2005) and Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) describing it as a conversation between a research interviewer and interviewee with a specific research purpose. Gubrium (2003) describe it as a guided conversation. The focus is on asking questions and receiving answers which may mimic a conversation, but the purpose and design of the interview make it different from a normal conversation. In qualitative research, an interview is a way to enter the interviewee's world and understand their perspective on reality (Roulston and Choi, 2018). There are various approaches to interviewing, and no single approach fits all situations or questions, wording that always works. While there is no fixed guide for effective interviewing, Brown and Lamb (2015) offer useful approaches and guidelines, and Bell (1999) provides a refined checklist that includes research study issues of access, location, timing, communication, recording, and exit.

### 2.3 Issues Created and Exacerbated by the Post-Pandemic Research

Traditionally, research interviews have yielded challenges such as ethics, unequal relationships, interviewer influence,

research piloting, establishing good relationships, time management, active listening, data collection, handling and analysis processes and session closure (De Jong and Berg, 2012). However, there is more concern that mediated interviewing poses heightened challenges in establishing good relationships and active listening especially in a post pandemic business environment.

#### 2.3.1 Establishing Good Relationships

Interviews are a valuable investigative technique due to their unique advantages, namely probes and rapport. Probes can be used to deepen responses and provide cues to the interviewee about the level of detail required, allowing the interviewer to obtain additional information. However, in mediated interviews, these cues may be absent or diminished. For instance, since most of the interviews during the height of the pandemic were mediated via the Internet or telephones, interviews failed to benefit from the full range of in-person interaction cues such as facial expressions that previous scholars allege dictate the flow and direction of questioning. For instance, Krähenbühl and Blades (2006) noted that when interviewing children, the physical presence of the researcher yielded more emphatically tuned questions than through telephones. Therefore, there may be a concern that the increasing use of mediated interviews reduces interviewers' skills such as empathy.

However, probes can also introduce bias if they are overused or too standardized (Korkman et al., 2008). To avoid this, interviewers must be trained in the flexible use of probes which is challenging for novice researchers and more practice is required. The establishment of rapport, empathy, and understanding between the interviewer and interviewee is also crucial, according to qualitative researchers (Kelly et al., 2010). Interviewers must develop a rapport with their respondents, rather than create distance, by engaging their interest and attention and asking clarifying/clear questions (Brewer, 2002). However, rapport is an "elusive quality" that must be balanced, as too much or too little rapport can be undesirable (Korkman et al., 2008). Overall, interviews require skilled interviewers who can strike a balance between using probes effectively and establishing rapport with the interviewee.

#### 2.3.2 Active Listening

According to Pole and Lampard (2002), interviewers should assume the role and position of a "preferential listener" implying they should talk lesser. All the while, interviewers should actively listen to interviewees during the interpersonal interview process. Gray (2004) describes active listening as attentive listening on the part of the interviewer. King (1996) adds affective attending as yet another feature of active listening. The affective attending technique can improve the data collection process by demonstrating that the interviewer is actively engaging with the interviewee. It remains unclear how a transition to mediated interviewing accelerated by the pandemic that denies novice business researchers in the market place the opportunity to access the full repertoire of active listening cues affects their interviewing competencies and yield effective business insights.

### 3. Purpose Statements

#### 3.1 Research Gaps

From the literature review, it is unclear how individual competencies impact the qualitative research interview process, specifically in an internet-mediated data collection setting that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Further, there is minimal research on the effectiveness of intervention programs aimed at enhancing the interviewing competence and confidence of social science students in various business disciplines post-pandemic. Bearing these in mind, the proposal suggests the following research objectives and questions.

#### 3.2 Research Objectives

(1) To investigate the effects of individual competencies on the qualitative research interview process in an internet-mediated data collection setting.

(2) To evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs in enhancing the interviewing competence and confidence of students in various business disciplines.

#### 3.3 Research Questions

(1) What are the effects of individual competencies on the quality of qualitative research interviews conducted in an internet-mediated data collection setting?

(2) To what extent does an intervention program that combines theoretical instruction, practical exercises, peer feedback, and self-reflection enhance the interviewing competence and confidence of students in various business disciplines?

### 4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research proposal focuses on exploring the current state of interviewing skills among students in different disciplines and levels of study and evaluating the effectiveness of intervention programs in enhancing their interviewing competence and confidence. The framework integrates several theories and concepts that align with the research objectives and aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) will guide the investigation of the individual-level factors that influence students' interviewing skills (Torre and Durning, 2015). SCT posits that learning occurs through the interaction between personal factors, environmental factors, and behaviour (Bandura, 2011). In this context, the study considers personal factors such as self-efficacy and outcome expectations will be explored, as they are crucial to business researchers' ability to conduct effective interviews; particularly in-person interviews that are becoming increasingly rare. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform a particular behaviour successfully (Stajkovic and Sergent, 2019). Outcome expectations imply anticipated outcomes of engaging in a particular behaviour. Researchers with high self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations are likely to

have better interviewing skills, as they are more confident in their ability to conduct interviews successfully and believe that doing so will lead to positive outcomes such as better market insights and business opportunities.

The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) will be used to explore the impact of environmental factors on business researchers' interviewing skills (Watson and Soliz, 2018). CAT posits that people adjust their communication style to accommodate others, especially in intercultural interactions (Watson and Soliz, 2018). In this study, environmental factors such as the student's cultural background, the nature of the interviewees' culture, and the social context of the interview will be examined. The study will leverage this theory to predict that researchers who can accommodate their communication style to their interviewees' culture and social context are likely to have better interviewing skills (Buzzanell et al., 1996). It is anticipated that given the increasing use of mediated interviews as exacerbated by the pandemic, novice business researchers have lesser opportunity to learn, practice, experience and improve their face-to-face interviewing skills potentially translating to poor access to business insights.

The Situated Learning Theory (SLT) will guide the evaluation of the intervention programs' effectiveness in enhancing business researchers' interviewing competence and confidence (Zakrajsek and Schuster, 2018). SLT posits that learning occurs through social interactions within a particular context or environment (Zakrajsek and Schuster, 2018). The theory predicts that researchers who participate in an intervention program that provides opportunities for practice, feedback, and reflection within a context similar to real-life interviews are likely to have better interviewing skills than those who do not. The program will also focus on developing students' self-efficacy and outcome expectations.

The framework's justification lies in its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence students' interviewing skills and how intervention programs can enhance them. The integration of SCT, CAT, and SLT provides a holistic approach that recognizes the complex interplay between personal, environmental, and contextual factors in learning and behavior change. The framework aligns with the research objectives of exploring the current state of interviewing skills among students, evaluating the effectiveness of intervention programs, and contributing to the advancement of knowledge and practice in social research. It also aligns with the significance of the research problem in addressing the skills gap in student interviewing and its impact on the business world. Overall, the framework provides a useful guide for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and will contribute to the development of evidence-based recommendations for improving students' interviewing skills.

### 5. Research Methodology

Given the above research objectives, questions and theoretical framework, a mixed-approach research design is proposed. Since mixed-method research combines elements of quantitative and qualitative research to answer a research question, it can help gain a more complete picture of the

competencies of novice researchers than a standalone quantitative or qualitative study (Shan, 2022). One philosophical foundation for mixed methods research is pragmatism, which allows for the integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods/data/designs.

The mixed approach design chosen for this study is a convergent parallel design, which involves collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data separately and then comparing and integrating the results. This design is appropriate for the study objectives, which are to explore the effect of individual competencies on qualitative research interview processes (Shan, 2022).

The quantitative component of the study will use a survey method to collect data from a sample of 100 recently graduate students from UK universities who have recently been employed and selected through simple random sampling. The survey will consist of closed-ended questions that measure students' attitudes towards individual competencies in interview processes using a Likert scale. The data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to describe the distribution of these attitudes and to test the hypotheses regarding the effects of demographic variables, such as gender, age, experience, and qualification, on teachers' attitudes.

One of the possible limitations of using a survey method to collect data from this sample is that it may not capture the complexity and diversity of their attitudes towards individual competencies in interview processes. Surveys are standardized instruments that often use closed-ended questions to measure respondents' opinions or behaviours on a Likert scale. However, this approach may not allow for exploring the reasons behind their attitudes, the context in which they formed them, or the nuances and variations that may exist among different groups of students. Moreover, surveys may suffer from validity issues if the questions are not clear, relevant, or unbiased, or if the respondents are not honest, motivated, or representative of the population of interest. Therefore, using a survey method may limit the depth and validity of the data collected from the students.

The qualitative component of the study will use a case study method to collect data from a subset of 10 lecturers selected via purposive sampling (Saunders et al., 2019). The case study will involve semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions and experiences of interviewing competencies of their students (Byrne, 2004). The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns across the cases.

Some of the disadvantages and limitations of this method are that it may not be representative of the larger population of lecturers, as purposive sampling is prone to selection bias and generalization issues. Further, its challenging to capture the complexity and diversity of interviewing competencies, as semi-structured interviews may limit the scope and depth of the data collected (Saunders et al., 2019).

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data will be done at the interpretation stage, by comparing and contrasting the findings from both components and discussing how they

complement or contradict each other. The integration will also show how the qualitative data can provide context and explanation for the quantitative data, and how the quantitative data can provide generalizability and validity for the qualitative data (Byrne, 2004). The integration will also highlight the inter-discursiveness of theories and concepts of mixed-approach research, such as pragmatism, triangulation, complementarity, and convergence.

## 6. Conclusion

This research proposal aims to investigate the impact of individual competencies on qualitative research interviews, especially in an internet-mediated data collection setting that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. The proposal suggests two research objectives, namely investigating the effects of individual competencies on qualitative research interviews in an internet-mediated data collection setting and evaluating the effectiveness of intervention programs aimed at enhancing the interviewing competence and confidence of students in various business disciplines. A theoretical framework integrating the Social Cognitive Theory, Communication Accommodation Theory, and Situated Learning Theory is proposed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. A mixed-approach research design, namely the convergent parallel design, is proposed to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data separately and then compare and integrate the results.

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