

The candidate experience of virtual interviews in a South African company



Authors:

Sashnavi Naidu¹ 
Musawenkosi D. Saurombe¹ 
Dikeledi V. Mogoai¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Musawenkosi Saurombe,
mdsaurombe@uj.ac.za

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Orientation: Technological advancement and the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic substantially affected organisations' overall recruitment function, causing a substantial shift towards a virtual way of recruiting talent.

Research purpose: The aim of this research was to explore the candidate experience of virtual interviews to ascertain how this experience can be enhanced because organisations are globally increasingly adopting the virtual approach.

Motivation for the study: It is important for human resource departments and recruiters to understand whether it is sustainable to utilise technologically based means of recruitment such as asynchronous video and synchronous online interviews in the workplace, particularly beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research approach/design and method: The research followed a qualitative case-study approach. Purposive sampling techniques were employed to select the 14 participants who were interviewed one-on-one. Thematic analysis was then used to generate the themes and subthemes outlined in this article.

Main findings: The findings suggest that virtual interviews are quite useful in today's digital age and will also be advantageous in the future. Nonetheless, there are some disadvantages to utilising virtual interviews. The prevailing advantages were convenience and fairness, while the prevailing disadvantages were one-way communication and a lack of the technology required to seamlessly participate in virtual interviewing. Participants believed virtual interviews would be favourable in future, because of their time and cost efficiency and convenience. Participants further agreed that the current virtual interviewing software used would require upgrading to enhance the overall candidate experience.

Practical/managerial implications: The research provides best practices for improving the candidate experience of virtual interviews.

Contribution/value-add: The research revealed aspects that should be carefully considered when using virtual interviewing methods, to ensure that the virtual interviewing experience for candidates is as efficient as possible as face-to-face interviewing.

Keywords: virtual interviews; asynchronous video interviews; synchronous online interviews; technology; e-recruitment; human resources; the candidate experience.

Introduction

Orientation

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic impacted organisations' overall recruitment function and hampered their ability to recruit talent and interview potential employees face to face. Human resource (HR) professionals and recruiters were therefore forced to look for different methods to address these challenges. Hence, they introduced and updated various recruitment technologies in the workplace, such as the use of Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Hangouts (Maurer, 2020; Vallejo et al., 2022). The pandemic forced many number companies to allow their employees to work from home (Saurombe et al., 2022; Savić, 2020; Nyanhongo et al., 2023) and a considerable number of organisations have continued with this approach (Smite et al., 2023). Organisations also introduced a hybrid way of working, that is, working from home and coming into the office on selected days (Bollisani et al., 2020). Therefore, employees are increasingly utilising technology to perform work, as organisations are having to utilise technology to keep in touch with employees who work remotely. Human resource professionals have also been compelled to adapt and make use of alternative ways of engaging with their talent pools (Ngobeni et al., 2022).

Traditional recruitment consists of face-to-face interaction and has until recently been the most common approach for selecting employees whereby the candidate is invited for a physical interview (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). Traditional interviews are seen to be more conversational in nature and are considered to give rise to richer information than interviews conducted online (Johnson et al., 2021). Recruitment trends, however, show the increasing use of technology and video interaction in recruitment processes (Brian et al., 2023). A relatively recent, pre-pandemic and popular combination of recruitment technology is the virtual interview comprising asynchronous video interviews and synchronous online interviews (Brenner et al., 2016). An asynchronous video interview, also referred to as an on-demand interview, is a procedure by which a candidate goes through an interview process consisting of pre-determined interview questions, with the answers to the interview recorded, submitted and reviewed at a later stage (Torres & Gregory, 2018). This differs from synchronous online interviews, which are virtual interviews conducted live but not face-to-face – the interviewers and the candidate communicate online through applications such as Skype, Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Asynchronous tools are not particularly new, as companies have been making use of them for screening purposes in the past (Brenner et al., 2016). The candidate experience remains relevant in organisations, as they continuously look to position themselves as employers of choice to attract the best candidates (Eskenazi, 2019). De Wet (2024) advocates for the specific use of South African software for conducting asynchronous video interviews, stating that this software considers local nuances such as the *Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act*, ensuring the relevant adherence regarding data privacy and security, compared to global counterpart software.

Research purpose and objectives

This research sought to explore the candidate experience of virtual interviews in a South African company.

The specific research objectives were:

1. To explore the perceived advantages and disadvantages of virtual interviews (both asynchronous video and synchronous online ones).
2. To explore the perceived likely future role of virtual interviews in the workplace.
3. To provide recommendations for improving the virtual interviewing experience of candidates.

Literature review

The job market is constantly changing, becoming more and more competitive, and recruiters are advancing their skills and adopting new technology, which exacerbates the existing race for talent (Ngobeni et al., 2022; Zojceska, 2019). Some of the issues around acquiring quality talent include limited time to hire, not enough time to screen all candidates,

candidates who are not always a good fit for the workplace culturally and lack knowledge and expertise, and the expense incurred to train employees who lack the desired knowledge and skills (Adeosun & Ohiani, 2020; Shingenge & Saurombe, 2022). This, in turn, impacts the company's productivity, which directly impacts its employees (Adeosun & Ohiani, 2020). Attempts have been made to look at alternate means of recruiting to solve these matters. A considerable number of companies have resorted to using technology to carry out some of their recruitment processes, such as making use of virtual interview solutions (OliFFE et al., 2021; Sołek-Borowska & Wilczewska, 2018). However, the adoption of technology is currently slower in the South African context because of socio-economic challenges (Khumalo & Saurombe, 2023) such as crime (making technological infrastructure prone to theft), load-shedding – 'loadshedding' is a South African term used to describe the nationwide rationing of electricity by the state because of a demand that exceeds the available supply (Goldberg, 2015) – and digital incompetence among some employees (Ebrahim & Van Den Berg, 2024). Such challenges make organisations reluctant to radically adopt technology (Ebrahim & Van Den Berg, 2024). Thus, this research focussed on the candidate experience of virtual interviews to provide insights promoting confidence in the user adoption of technology for improved recruitment outcomes.

Human resources in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is described as the process of digitalisation and the way in which technology is evolving (Dhanpat et al., 2020; Puhovichova & Jankelova, 2020). To address the empirical gaps between different modes of recruitment, it is essential to understand the following: Human Resources (HR) in the context of the 4IR; how the environment is evolving and the current needs for new technology in recruitment. It is also important to clarify the definitions of virtual interviewing, the differences between asynchronous and synchronous approaches and the existing research on these forms of e-recruitment, which is currently limited. Human resource professionals are seeking ways to improve their hiring processes and create efficiencies. For this reason, organisations have shifted from traditional recruitment methods to virtual recruitment, which aligns with the 4IR (Sołek-Borowska & Wilczewska, 2018). Harver Team (2021) argues that digitising the recruitment process involves making manual tasks of recruitment – which typically cost more time and money – into automated ones. With the digitalisation of the recruitment process, several ways are offered for the revamping of the hiring system. Instead of manually sourcing candidates, companies are turning to applicant tracking systems that automatically identify the right candidates based on the filters they set, including qualifications, experience, location and salary expectations (Sengupta et al., 2021).

The rise in technology facilitates online assessments so that candidates do not have to be physically present for an assessment. In the South African context, a skills shortage

exists among HR practitioners when it comes to the 4IR (Nesindande et al., 2024). Research has shown that enhanced technological skills are essential for the country to remain relevant in the constantly evolving world of work (Nesindande et al., 2024). Therefore, HR departments must accelerate their digital transformation to enhance their capabilities in creating efficiency, simplifying processes and providing their organisations with a competitive advantage (Rykun et al., 2020).

Asynchronous video interviews

Asynchronous video interviews are known as pre-recorded video interviews. This means that the interviewee and the interviewer are not present at the same time, unlike the case of a face-to-face interview where the interviewer and interviewee are both present in the same environment, in-person (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). The asynchronous video interview, which is recorded by the interviewee, is later viewed by the interviewer (Pavlou, 2022). Pavlou (2022) explains that this gives rise to flexibility, as the interviewee can complete the interview at their convenience, and they do not need to find time in their working schedule to attend the interview but can instead use their spare time for this (Greyling, 2023). Whereas for a face-to-face interview, candidates would likely need to book out time in their diaries and move meetings around to accommodate the travel time to the interview location. The asynchronous interviewing strategy also resolves issues associated with synchronous online interviews such as different time zones and possibly irreconcilable schedules.

Pavlou (2022) argues that asynchronous video interviews facilitate enhanced candidate experiences, as recruiters can customise these interviews and allow candidates to practice for either live virtual interviews or face-to-face interviews. On the other hand, the one-way communication that asynchronous video interviews provide means that candidates will not be able to ask questions, because the interviewer would be automated, unlike face-to-face interviews where the interviewer is human (Torres & Mejia, 2017). Furthermore, the automated 'interviewer' in the asynchronous video interviewing method would minimise the opportunity to connect with candidates and build rapport (Torres & Gregory, 2018).

Synchronous online interviews

Synchronous technology allows people to communicate through technology virtually in real time (Clark et al., 2015; Themelis & Sime, 2020); it includes software such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Skype and Zoom. There are several benefits to be derived from online synchronous interviews when compared to face-to-face interviews. Firstly, the barrier of location is eliminated, as synchronous online interviews allow people to connect in different locations more easily and in real time, unlike face-to-face interviews (Clark et al., 2015). This makes interviews convenient, especially if a candidate lives in a dangerous

area or a location that is not within travelling distance. Cost is also reduced by online synchronous interviews, as candidates do not incur the cost of travelling or taking time off from their current job to attend the interview (O'Connor & Madge, 2017). Secondly, synchronous online interviews allow flexibility: the interview can be scheduled at a more convenient time that works for all parties without having to be physically present, such as during the candidate's lunch break (Lee et al., 2008).

On the other hand, synchronous online interviews do not always fare better than face-to-face interviews when it comes to recruitment. For example, the former requires technological aptitude and an Internet connection, meaning those who do not have the facilities to utilise the technology or know the way in which to go about it will be at a disadvantage, especially those who live in remote areas (Quang & Tri, 2021). There is also the issue of Internet connection, which is not applicable to the face-to-face context (Quang & Tri, 2021). In times of load shedding, candidates may struggle to connect and may miss their interview opportunity. Additionally, people may feel that they are not easily able to build rapport with their interviewer during the synchronous online interviewing process, in contrast with the face-to-face situation (Miller et al., 2021). Whereas with face-to-face interviews, candidates do not require technology, nor do they have to incur the cost of data or Wi-Fi to access the Internet. They also do not need to worry about load shedding as the in-person interview is not dependent on technology. It is also arguably easier to build rapport during a face-to-face interview as it affords the advantage of physical social presence (Johnson et al., 2021).

Theoretical framework

The social information processing theory (SIPT) and media-richness theory (MRT) are crucial for understanding the differences between asynchronous and synchronous online interviews in comparison with face-to-face interviews. These two theories are delineated in this article.

The social information processing theory

The SIPT is based on the idea that computer-mediated communication (CMC) is used to form interpersonal impressions, assist in the formation of interpersonal relationships and assist with communication over time (Walther, 2015). Walther (2015) states that the SIPT explains the way in which a stranger – be it the person who is interviewing or rating the virtual interview – makes judgements, that is, forms interpersonal impressions, according to a candidate's physical appearance and the interviewer's initial impression of the person. This is performed during asynchronous video interviews (recorded and reviewed later) and synchronous online interviews (conducted in the present moment). The SIPT explains the lack of non-verbal cues when it comes to CMC. During a face-to-face interview,

facial expressions, body language and tone of voice are present. However, interviews through CMC would require interviewers to adapt their language or ways of communicating to create a stronger relationship with the candidate (Hajjat & Miller, 2017). Interviews conducted in-person would give rise to richer social cues, as we would have more information present that facilitates a more dynamic interpretation of the candidate, their personality and whether they would be a good job fit (Miller et al., 2018). It is therefore essential that CMC-based interviews are continually reviewed to enhance their value and performance in contrast with face-to-face interviews. The SIPT was, thus, used in this study to review the current effectiveness of virtual interviews, given the inherent shortcomings of such interviews compared to physical interviews.

The media-richness theory

The MRT is based on the idea that media has the capability to transfer or reproduce information (Shams et al., 2022). The theory argues that performance increases when a richer source of media provides one with more cues such as tone of voice and gestures (Miller et al., 2018). When we argue about the richness of media, the argument focusses on whether the media can influence a person's understanding within a specific period by using certain aspects such as verbal or non-verbal cues (Daft et al., 1987). There are four areas to media richness: *immediate feedback*, in which two-directional communication occurs and rapid responses are received; *multiple cues*, involving information channels during communication; *personal focus*, in which a user can convey their personal feelings in a way that suits the preferences of their receiver and *language variety*, in which a user can convey multiple meanings in language (Daft et al., 1987).

According to Daft et al. (1987), the richness of media can vary, being either high or low. For example, face-to-face interactions, such as interviews, represent the richest forms of media, facilitating immediate feedback and providing multiple cues, including tone of voice and body language. Post-COVID-19, people globally have continued to utilise virtual communication, such as virtual interviews, to connect with one another (Brian et al., 2023). Virtual recruitment in South Africa would not be possible without technology such as video conferencing, virtual meetings and instant messaging (Tseng et al., 2019), and yet, not all South African companies are sufficiently digitalised and prepared to ensure a seamless virtual interviewing experience. Therefore, the choice of communication or the richness of the media can be affected by the characteristics of the particular context or environment (Tseng et al., 2019). The MRT was, thus, used in this study to make recommendations for further enhancing the richness of the media used in virtual interviews, given the inherent shortcomings of such interviews compared to physical interviews.

Research design

Research approach

The research utilised a qualitative case-study research approach. This method was seen to be appropriate for understanding the candidate experience in a selected South African company because of the novelty of the research within the particular context, as no similar research has previously been conducted on the company nor within its industry in South Africa.

Research strategy

This research's constructionist ontological approach was to explore and comprehend the candidate experience phenomenon from the perspective of candidates to ascertain their reality in terms of the phenomenon. The research also employed an interpretivist epistemology to acknowledge the role that narratives and personal interpretations play regarding the candidate experience of virtual interviews.

Research method

Research setting

This research took place in the South African HR recruitment context, dwelling on participant perspectives regarding virtual interviewing as a form of e-recruitment. The research data were collected from a single company, using a combination of online and physical interviews.

Research participants and sampling methods

The participants in this research consisted of candidates from a South African organisation who had previously taken part in any form of virtual interview, either at their current organisation at the time of the study or at other organisations prior. Participants were recruited through the selected organisation, which, after granting permission to conduct the research, sent out an internal circular inviting those interested in participating (and meeting the participation criteria) to contact the researchers. The circular included information regarding the study to help prospective participants make an informed decision about whether to participate. A total of 21 prospective participants indicated interest; however, only 14 participants were included in the research through the application of purposive sampling. There are limitations to purposive sampling, such as the lack of non-random sampling of participants that can give rise to bias and make the researcher seem subjective in choosing the participants (Etikan, 2016). This limitation was mitigated by using multiple criteria to select participants such as age, race, gender and occupational level. The participants provided information about the experiences of virtual interviews during the HR recruitment process from a candidate perspective.

The inclusion criteria limited participation to English-speaking candidates who went through asynchronous video or synchronous online interviews (whether

successfully or not) between 2020 and 2022, that is, during the prevalence of virtual interviews because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They also had to have prior experience in face-to-face interviews. As supported by Guest et al. (2006), the 14 interviews conducted were sufficient to garner profound insights, especially for a case study. Table 1 outlines the description of participants based on their age, gender, race and occupational level.

Data collection methods

The data were obtained by means of semi-structured interviews, and the language used to obtain the information was English. The interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis. The researchers prepared an interview guide including questions to be addressed during each interview, encouraging deeper conversation. The interviews were mostly conducted using synchronous online platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and Zoom, while fewer face-to-face interviews took place in Johannesburg at the offices of the specific participants. The participants were asked about their candidate experience with virtual interview systems. A pilot interview was initially conducted to ensure that the questions were understandable and suitable to obtain the pertinent data. Although data saturation became evident by the sixth interview, the authors continued with data collection, motivated by their quest to obtain an authentic and substantive representation of the candidates' experiences rather than the mere observance of data saturation, as supported by Braun and Clarke (2019). No incentives were offered for participation.

Data recording

Both the in-person and virtual interviews were recorded on an external device to provide a backup in case of any glitches in the built-in recording systems of the virtual interviewing platforms. Additionally, notes were taken to ensure that participants' perspectives were recorded accurately.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

According to Forero et al. (2018), ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research relies on credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. The transferability of the

research was achieved through thick description, which strove to make the context relating to the behaviours and experiences encountered during the research more meaningful to an outsider (i.e. the readers of this research) (Clark & Chevrette, 2017). Credibility and dependability were promoted by conducting a pilot interview and then involving a qualitative data analyst during the coding process, which further helped triangulate the data, thus ensuring the validity of the findings (Mabope, 2018). Investigator triangulation was specifically used in this research, with the data analyst and the researchers independently analysing the data and then 'comparing notes' to ensure comprehensive and credible findings. While several overlaps were noted between the analyses of the different analysts, additional 'individual' insights were found, which gave further depth to the research findings. Finally, conformability was achieved by reporting participants' reality in an objective, impartial and unbiased way (Makapela & Mtshelwane, 2021), as well as by reporting the steps that the researcher followed in conducting this research (Clark & Chevrette, 2017).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used in this research. Subsequently, the data were summarised and organised and then studied to identify the different themes and subthemes. The research employed a manual thematic analysis with the help of a data analyst by using an initial coding process in which main codes were identified and highlighted in the transcripts before finally grouping them into main themes and subthemes. The NDA signed by the data analyst committed them to refrain from divulging any of the participant information and interview responses. A deductive approach to coding was employed to develop the themes in this research. This ensured the objectives of this research were sufficiently met (see Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Clarke and Braun's (2016) six steps in thematic analysis were employed in this research as follows:

1. Familiarisation: this was done by reading through the transcripts and repeatedly listening to the recordings to make notes that were important for the research, including any interesting facts that came up.

TABLE 1: Demographics of the research sample.

Participant number	Age (years)	Gender	Race	Occupational level
1	23–40	Female	White person	Middle management
2	23–40	Male	White person	Senior management
3	40–55	Male	White person	Senior management
4	23–40	Female	White person	Middle management
5	23–40	Female	Mixed race person	Internship or entry level
6	23–40	Female	White person	Middle management
7	23–40	Female	Black African person	Internship or entry level
8	23–40	Female	White person	Middle management
9	23–40	Female	White person	Senior management
10	40–55	Female	White person	Middle management
11	23–40	Female	Black African person	Internship or entry level
12	23–40	Female	Black African person	Internship or entry level
13	23–40	Male	Black African person	Internship or entry level
14	23–40	Male	Black African person	Internship or entry level

2. Coding: this was carried out by going through the data to identify key features and phrases relevant to the research.
3. Searching for themes: this involved grouping together the codes that were similar or centred on the same topic.
4. Reviewing themes: the data analyst had to identify and organise themes in consultation with the authors.
5. Naming themes: this helped the authors create code descriptions related to the themes while providing guidance for writing up the findings.
6. Report writing: the authors used the data analyst's report to collate the research findings according to the identified themes and subthemes.

Reporting style

The themes and subthemes identified in this research were delineated and substantiated using verbatim quotes emanating from the transcripts of each interview. Where participants' expressions were viewed as possibly unclear, the authors inserted clarifying words or statements within square brackets.

Ethical considerations

After obtaining permission from the selected organisation, ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management (IPPM) Research Ethics Committee (reference no.: IPPM-2022-697[M]), before the commencement of data collection. Participation in the research was voluntary; if any selected participant refused to take part or later decided to withdraw, there would be no consequences. However, participants were informed that once the data had been analysed, they would no longer be able to withdraw. A written informed consent form was provided to each participant, who was required to sign it and confirm their consent on record at the start of their interview. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and that their personal information and identity would not be disclosed to third parties, except for the data analyst, who was obligated to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) before handling the data.

Results

The main themes that emerged from the data analysis were the advantages and disadvantages of live and pre-recorded virtual interviews, the likely future role of virtual interviews in the workplace and recommendations for improving the virtual interviewing process, as depicted in Table 2.

Research objective 1: *To explore the perceived advantages and disadvantages of virtual interviews.*

Theme 1: Advantages of live and pre-recorded virtual interviews

The subthemes that emerged as advantages of virtual interviews were convenience and branding.

TABLE 2: Themes and subthemes that emerged from the data.

Main theme	Subtheme	Description
1. Advantages of live and pre-recorded virtual interviews	1.1 Convenience	Saving time and cost for the interviewer and interviewee Providing everyone with equal opportunity Ways of enhancing consumer choices through virtual interviewing Communication on a worldwide scale
	1.2 Branding	
2. Disadvantages of live and pre-recorded virtual interviews	2.1 One-way communication for pre-recorded interviews	Information being sent along a fixed channel and not being received on the same channel The means to effectively participate in virtual interviews
	2.2 Technology	
3. The likely future role of virtual interviews in the workplace	3.1 Saving time	Efficiency gained by both candidates and employers during virtual interviewing Financial benefits derived from eliminating certain costs associated with face-to-face interviews Anticipated efficiency for the interviewer and interviewee in the future
	3.2 Cost-effectiveness	
	3.3 Future convenience	
4. Recommendations for improving virtual interviewing	4.1 Software	Improvements from a technological perspective Considering the suitable scheduling of virtual interviews as possibly cumbersome Considering devices that allow for effective virtual interviews
	4.2 Timing	
	4.3 Compatibility of devices	

Subtheme 1.1: Convenience

Participants posited that an advantage of virtual interviews (both live and pre-recorded ones) is that you do not have to take time off to travel for these or take time off from your current job to attend them, nor incur the cost to do so. The following quotes support these findings:

'You also don't [*have to*] take off time to do an interview, so I will say it's beneficial for time and travel and everything.' (Participant 1, female, white person, middle management)

'I wouldn't have to travel to the place, I can just have a time set up for us so I can just join whenever, and then [*the interview*] just takes place at any time that they set out for us. I will be saving on travelling [*expenses and time*] basically.' (Participant 5, female, mixed race person, internship or entry level)

'I'd say the advantage is cost effectiveness for both the interviewee and the interviewer, and also time management.' (Participant 6, female, white person, middle management)

Another perceived convenience of virtual interviews was global communication allowing connection with any candidate around the world at any time because of the advancement of technology. Thus, candidates could work from a different province or country yet still attend an interview from any location. These were the perspectives of participants:

'Now, you can sit anywhere in the world, and for companies who still offer, or are [*still*] doing a working from home policy [*post-COVID-19*], because that makes sense in terms of cost of renting buildings, etc., you can actually [*increase*] your network, or your candidate pool, to the world [*rather than only locally*].' (Participant 10, female, white person, middle management)

'I think again, like I said, it is basically about the time factor. We are not limited to working just in South Africa's time zone now, we deal globally, and if you're looking at talent on a global level or moving a person, even if you look into companies or global companies [*that have geographically dispersed offices*], now you have a candidate that can do the interview at a time that's convenient for them.' (Participant 3, male, white person, senior management)

Subtheme 1.2: Branding

According to participants, the virtual interview system and its facilitation by an avatar give rise to a great candidate experience. They further believed this system enhanced the company brand by showing their alignment with the digital age. This is what participants had to say in this respect:

'For me, it was a very good indication of a company culture that I prefer, in that the company was moving more towards technology. Aligning with that, it was a very exciting experience with the avatar [*as it was my*] first time working with that as well.' (Participant 4, female, white person, middle management)

'I think since the current workforce is made up of millennials and more recently, Gen-Z, it is important for more companies to leverage technology adoption as part of their branding, since I believe this is attractive to these younger generations.' (Participant 13, male, black African person, internship or entry level)

Theme 2: Disadvantages of live and pre-recorded virtual interviews

The subthemes that emerged as disadvantages of virtual interviews were one-way communication as well as technology, as briefly discussed in this section.

Subtheme 2.1: One-way communication for pre-recorded interviews

Because pre-recorded virtual interviews only facilitate one-way communication, the interviewee is not able to build rapport with the interviewer or ask them questions if they perhaps do not understand the question. The following quotes support these findings:

'With the not-live [*pre-recorded*] video you don't know the interaction with someone.' (Participant 1, female, white person, middle management)

'I would say the differences would be a time aspect in terms of the not-live [*pre-recorded*] interview, because you're very limited in terms of answering each question. So sometimes you don't get enough time to answer all [*questions*], also overthinking can come into play. So, it's more of you ... it's a one-way thing, instead of engaging with a person.' (Participant 7, female, black African person, internship or entry level)

Subtheme 2.2: Technology

Another emergent disadvantage of live and pre-recorded virtual interviews was their technological nature. Candidates must have access to technology and the Internet to undertake virtual interviews. An unreliable Internet connection or load-shedding in the candidate's area were barriers considered to prevent a smooth interview process. The following quotes support these findings:

'... [V]ideo interviews can be limiting in a sense of, if you do not have the proper equipment, [*or*] if you do not have the facilities or the internet to actually conduct the interview itself, it can be a disadvantage, as opposed to having a face-to-face interview.' (Participant 7, female, black African person, internship or entry level)

'... [A]n Internet connection can make a huge impact on whether it will be successful or not. Whenever there's a lag or something, and the answers don't get through, then that can cause a problem for the candidate.' (Participant 8, female, white person, middle management)

'Disadvantages are Internet connection issues, response time limitations, background noise or distractions, and lack of IT [*information and technology*] savviness; and when I say lack of IT savviness, I mean, tech related problems might unintentionally screen out candidates who aren't tech savvy, but [*are*] otherwise well qualified.' (Participant 12, female, black African person, internship or entry level)

Research objective 2: *To explore the perceived likely future role of virtual interviews in the workplace.*

Theme 3: The likely future role of virtual interviews in the workplace

According to participants, and in line with the earlier identified and discussed advantages of virtual interviewing, the likely future role of virtual interviews includes saving time, cost-effectiveness and future convenience. Virtual interviews allow people to connect from different parts of the world on a global scale and can therefore be used in future to interview more candidates from faraway locations. Virtual interviews could also be increasingly used in future than it currently is, as a screening tool to reduce admin and create efficiency when it comes to the initial screening of candidates.

Subtheme 3.1: Saving time

Participants felt the fact that virtual interviews could be conducted at any suitable time, regardless of time zones, made them likely to be increasingly used in future. Virtual interviews also save candidates travel time and costs in cases of geographical dispersion. They require technology to be able to work remotely, and this is a trend that will continue in the future workplace. The participants said the following:

'I think it [*virtual interviewing*] would become common practice. I think, people are more attuned to save money and to save time. Also, we live in a world where you can literally interview someone from Ireland to come work in South Africa, it is not that they have to travel here anymore, in order to look for work, so they can have work as soon as they get here. So, I think it would, basically replace in-person interviews, because it's a lot more effective [*convenient*], even though it's less personal.' (Participant 6, female, white person, middle management)

'I think not having to spend time travelling to an interview, especially if it's in another town, province, or country, can be appealing to candidates.' (Participant 14, male, black African person, internship or entry level)

Subtheme 3.2: Cost-effectiveness

The cost-effectiveness of virtual interviewing is an important and advantageous factor to take into consideration for the future, as candidates do not have to incur the expense of travelling to a different location for an interview. Participants said the following:

'...For me, it [*increasingly adopting virtual interviewing in the future*] also saves [*the*] cost of transport.' (Participant 11, female, black African person, internship or entry level)

'Well, definitely I think the first thing is a financial implication. It's a very cost-effective way both for candidate and business as well. So, I think that would be the number one thing [*that encourages the future increasing adoption of virtual interviewing*].' (Participant 4, female, white person, middle management)

Subtheme 3.3: Future convenience

The participants shared their views on the way in which the future workplace would rely on virtual interviews because of their likely future convenience:

'I think the future role of video interviewing is probably to be able to meet people that were far away, in other words, if you have to drive or fly a far distance to meet, I think it is more of a convenience thing.' (Participant 9, female, white person, senior management)

'Going forward, we will actually be doing more live and not-live [*pre-recorded*] interviews, rather than people coming in and making an effort to travel from afar, or possibly being late.' (Participant 5, female, mixed race person, internship or entry level)

'Some people have now said, either I'm working from home, or I'm working in a hybrid situation, or I'm going to find an employer who's willing to let me work that way. And definitely, if you now look at interviews, companies will also have to adapt to this way of working.' (Participant 3, male, senior management)

Research objective 3: *To provide recommendations for improving the virtual interviewing experience of candidates.*

Theme 4: Recommendations for improving virtual interviewing

The participants suggested improvements around their unique candidate experience of virtual interviews. The matter of improvements engendered three subthemes: software, timing and the compatibility of devices. One participant suggested that organisations should improve the facilitation of the pre-recorded virtual interview system as it uses an avatar to facilitate the process. It was also suggested that recruiters should make the avatar more realistic to ensure that it seems like a human who is interviewing them. Participants also alluded to the timer in the background of the system that allocates a certain duration per question, seeming to create a negative experience and cause stress or anxiety. Participants also touched on the compatibility of devices: if someone needed to undertake a pre-recorded virtual interview, their cell phones were sometimes old, or they did not have compatible laptops that would allow them to go through the process, all of which hindered their participation.

Subtheme 4.1: Software

The participants mentioned that software needed to be improved to create a better candidate experience. The avatar did not seem realistic, and it made them even more aware that they were not speaking to a human, which made for a very impersonal virtual interview experience. This is what one of the participants said:

'I think where we are at the moment and [*in terms of*] the software and so on that we have at the moment, you have an avatar, but if one can improve on what the avatar looks like, make it a little bit more lifelike and less, you know... basically if I can say, the graphics need to improve.' (Participant 2, male, white person, senior management)

Alternatively, some participants felt that the avatar was lifelike and made them feel as if a real person was interviewing them. These people found the pre-recorded virtual interview a pleasurable experience in terms of the avatar facilitating the process, as evidenced by the following views:

'And because the avatar is so realistic, like I said [*in*] the beginning, it gives you that comfort, it gives you that feeling, [*that*] I'm talking to a real person.' (Participant 3, male, white person, senior management)

'So, this obviously will be my personal opinion. I enjoy the avatar a lot, the virtual screening assistant. In that sense, I'd say that was my preference.' (Participant 4, female, white person, middle management)

Subtheme 4.2: Timing

Several participants said that the timing of the pre-recorded video interviews could be improved. There is an automatic timer that goes off and, if the candidate does not press continue to answer the question within a certain period, it will automatically start recording. Thus, the limited time in a pre-recorded interview sometimes creates stress, anxiety and pressure, as indicated here:

'... [*M*]aybe more time given on answering the questions [*could be considered*], because there'd be like a two minute or a three-minute [*limit*] where the video is cut off.' (Participant 5, female, mixed race person, internship or entry level)

'That's one thing that I found a little bit problematic that I wish I could change. I felt like some of my answers were a bit silly, because I was pressed for time with the three-minute timer, especially when they asked questions that involved more technical knowledge.' (Participant 8, female, white person, middle management)

Subtheme 4.3: Compatibility of devices

The participants indicated that device compatibility can be an issue when it comes to these interviews. It is essential to ensure that the systems used for pre-recorded virtual interviews are compatible with mobile devices so that candidates can complete their screening interviews on their phones, as some of them may not have laptops:

'I think that they [*recruiters*] have to improve when it comes to [*the*] quality of videos and every device has to be able to work [*be compatible with the relevant software*] and not select specific devices.' (Participant 12, female, black African person, internship or entry level)

Discussion

Outline of the findings

The discussion section of this article follows the outline of the objectives of the research. It interrogates the various themes developed from the data, against extant literature, while specifically highlighting both the similarities and differences found between this research and other scholarly material. Suzuki and Yamamoto (2021) describe how while confirmatory findings are good, unregulated confirmation bias prompts people to gravitate towards information that supports their findings or perceptions, which in turn reduces the authenticity of the research. The differences found between this research and extant literature, specifically position the research to challenge the 'status quo' regarding what has been found in aspects similar to what was revealed in this research. Such differences further highlight the research's unique contribution to the body of knowledge.

Advantages and disadvantages of virtual interviews

Convenience

Convenience as an advantage of virtual interviews comes down to the way in which these save time, save money and create efficiency in the recruitment space. In line with Pourmand (2018), participants explained that they enjoyed that they did not have to travel for an interview. If the interview location was far away, they saved money, as has also been found by Gupta (2023). From the perspective of recruitment, some of the participants who had utilised virtual interviews felt that this created efficiency, especially when it came to scheduling interviews, dovetailing with the findings of Davis et al. (2020). Opposing views are, however, present: though pre-recorded virtual interviews were convenient for bulk screening, participants believed candidates felt undervalued when they had to convince a machine of their worth, especially when it came to managerial positions and climbing the career ladder, in line with Robbins (2019).

According to Zuofa and Ochieng (2017), global communication is considered an advantage of virtual interviews because you can connect with and interview anyone anywhere in the world. People have increasingly begun working in virtual workspaces after the COVID-19 pandemic; thus virtual ways of working have gained traction (Franken et al., 2021). The participants of this research viewed the fact that recruiters could interview candidates from all over the world as an advantage. This ties in with the findings of Donaghy et al. (2019), who found that virtual interviews have elicited positive experiences among candidates and were particularly helpful in terms of mobility. However, opposing views, as suggested by Davis (2021), are, among others, that the absence of a stable Internet connection is a disadvantage.

Branding

Extant literature suggests that organisational branding is key to both attracting and retaining talent (Eskenazi, 2019;

Saurombe et al., 2017a, 2017b). With organisations increasingly moving towards digitisation, if companies want to stay relevant, they must adapt to the times (Verhoef et al., 2021). In this research, participants found it to be advantageous to the company's brand for candidates to see that the company align itself with the digital age and focusses on its digital image, as supported by Steele et al. (2022). On the other hand, candidates want to be able to interact with a human or have a human element in their interview process, which is not possible with pre-recorded virtual interviews, as suggested by Maurer (2021). This opposing view dovetails with some of this research's participants who felt that pre-recorded virtual interviews lacked interaction and were insufficiently engaging.

The disadvantages of virtual interviews were further broken down into the subthemes: one-way communication and technology, as outlined in this section.

One-way communication

One-way communication, as mentioned, only allows one form or channel of communication; information can only be sent or only be received and not both (Hassell & Cotton, 2017). This is the nature of pre-recorded virtual interviews. According to the findings of this research, not having human presence in pre-recorded virtual interviews was considered a disadvantage by the participants because they felt they could not build rapport or connection with the interviewer nor get a sense of the way in which the interview was developing, which corroborated Kim et al.'s (2016) similar views. However, some of this research's findings did not support Kim et al.'s (2016) views as some candidates explained that not speaking to a person in a live interview took away some of the stress and pressure, as they had more time to think about their answers and felt more comfortable.

This dovetails with Siddiqui and Aslanian (2020), who explain that pre-recorded virtual interviews are less intimidating for candidates, as opposed to in-person interviews. Nonetheless, the opposing view is also valid: candidates who are less tech-savvy and who may not be as extroverted or confident online would find the virtual interview more intimidating, which can create stress and anxiety (Gray et al., 2020). The differences in perspective between such extant literature and this research's findings can be attributed to the reality that access to technology differs from person to person, typically depending on their socio-economic status or background (Khumalo & Saurombe, 2023). Thus, the less a person has access to or knowledge of the relevant technology, the more intimidating they are likely to find the various types of virtual interviewing (i.e. live and pre-recorded) (Ramachandran & Dulloo, 2023). Meanwhile, the participants in this research were all considered tech-savvy; hence virtual interviewing did not cause them much discomfort or intimidation.

Technology

Technology is a considerable component of virtual interviews. According to existing literature, one cannot complete or participate in a virtual interview without the use of technology such as a laptop, cell phone or Internet connection (Davis, 2021; Donaghy et al., 2019). The participants in this research explained that those who were not tech savvy or who did not have the right equipment to take part in interviews would be inhibited in their chances of securing a given job. Others may experience area Internet connection issues or load shedding, which may hinder the virtual interview process, whether it be live or pre-recorded. Therefore, overreliance on technology is a disadvantage, as indicated by Marbin et al. (2019), who explain further that communication delays because of a lack of technology may negatively affect interview ratings. Therefore, a lack of technology or people who are experiencing poor Internet connections paint virtual interviewing as a disadvantage.

The likely future role of virtual interviews in the workplace

Saving time

Olivia's (2021) research states that virtual interviews save time from both a recruiter's and the candidate's perspective as they prevent the need for taking off time from work because the interviewer does not always have to be present, particularly when interviews are pre-recorded and only later reviewed when convenient (Joshi et al., 2020). Participants mentioned the benefit of not needing to take off time from work to travel to a different location for an interview, further aligning with the study by Gupta (2023). Despite the travel time saved, candidates may miss their interview opportunity when the Internet connection is unstable or lost, which could have been avoided by attending the interview in person (Gupta, 2023). Likewise, some of this research's participants mentioned that saving time was not advantageous to the candidate when suffering Internet connection issues, confirming what was found by Oliffe et al. (2021).

Cost-effectiveness

According to existing literature, candidates find the necessity of travelling to a location for a job interview to be a disadvantage (Strumpf et al., 2021). It is quite heavy on the pocket in cases where the prospective employer does not cover the cost of travel to interviews, especially if the location is far and unbudgeted for (Pourmand et al., 2018). This research's findings support this view. Several participants mentioned that they do not always have the money to travel for an interview, and, if that interview is not guaranteed, they never get the money back. For those who do not have a car, transportation is a problem.

Likely future convenience

In terms of greater convenience in the future, as people are working from home (Robinson et al., 2021), the action of

attending the interview in person at a set time is inconvenient for a considerable number of people because of their employment arrangements (Maurer, 2021). This also emerged in the present findings. Participants explained that it was easier for them to attend the interview virtually at a time that was convenient for them, without having to request time off from work. As noted, more people are working remotely, and the anticipated future benefits of virtual interviews include saving time, reducing costs and eliminating travel. The three subthemes discussed in this article highlight the potential future role of virtual interviews as informed by the participants.

Recommendations for improving the candidate experience of virtual interviews

Timing

According to Palazon (2023), during pre-recorded or not-live virtual interviews, you are given a short period of time to answer each question. A timer on the screen indicates the time a candidate has left to answer the interview questions, which may make one anxious and nervous (Palazon, 2023). This research's findings dovetail with this work, as candidates explained that it was a bit nerve-wracking for them to answer questions with a timer, and it caused a lot of stress. If improvements were to be made, it would be to make more time available to answer questions, as a considerable number of candidates found the time allocated to be too little.

Software

When it comes to software, the pre-recorded virtual interviews make use of an avatar for facilitation throughout the interview process. This is especially common in computer-mediated forms such as virtual interviews (Greyling, 2023). The participants explained that they would prefer to have the avatar be made more realistic to improve the virtual interview experience and make it akin to a face-to-face interview experience.

Compatibility of devices

Lastly, participants advocated for improvements regarding the compatibility of devices for virtual interviews (Chen, 2023), specifically in terms of the interviewing software that should be compatible with most mobile devices in case candidates did not have laptops. Pre-recorded virtual interviews typically allow you to either use a laptop or a mobile device: if the latest technology or access to technology is not available, the virtual interview process becomes difficult (Chen, 2023). This research's findings similarly indicate that these improvements can make virtual interviews as effective and seamless as face-to-face ones.

Practical implications

The following recommendations are offered for practice in current and future e-recruitment, based on the research findings:

1. Prior to conducting a virtual interview, recruiters must confirm that the candidate has the necessary software to take part in this process. If not, where possible, candidates could be offered an alternative venue to undertake the interview or an in-person interview in special cases where there is completely no access to technology.
2. Use pre-recorded interviews as initial methods of bulk screening then have a live virtual interview to ensure that the real-time element is present in the recruitment process.
3. For pre-recorded interviews, recruiters can create an introductory video for the candidate from themselves or the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to establish some kind of connection with them and add a human element to the process.
4. Provide candidates with more time to answer pre-recorded interview questions and ensure the timer is not in the foreground of the interview, as it may cause stress and anxiety.
5. Regarding the use of pre-recorded virtual interview systems, compatibility with most mobile devices must be ensured as candidates do not always have a laptop at hand.

Limitations and recommendations

Some limitations were encountered in this research. Although the exploratory qualitative approach was the most appropriate because of the novelty of this research, the benefits of the quantitative and mixed method approaches, for instance, were forfeited. Further, the sample consisted of 14 participants (10 females and 4 males); therefore, males were substantially underrepresented. Furthermore, the research included both previously successful and unsuccessful participants in their job applications. Thus, candidates who were unsuccessful may have been biased because of a possibly frustrating experience of virtual interviews.

Consequently, the authors recommend some points for consideration for similar future research. The use of quantitative or mixed method methodologies to reap their unique benefits is particularly recommended. Additionally, the authors believe including a more balanced sample representation in terms of gender would be beneficial to future research. Also, adopting a more intricate selection of the research sample to mitigate any potential or foreseen biases would benefit future research.

Conclusion

Research on candidates' experiences with virtual interviewing has been quite limited so far. Thus, this article contributes to bridging this research gap. The findings significantly enhance our understanding of the candidate experience during virtual interviews. The research elucidates the new technologies that organisations are utilising for recruitment and explores these experiences from the candidates' perspectives. This research may inform HR professionals and organisations about preferred interviewing methods. From a digital standpoint, the research highlights how to adapt virtual interviews to facilitate positive candidate experiences.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

S.N. executed and wrote up the study, while M.D.S. and D.V.M. served as the study leaders, providing supervision, conceptualisation guidelines, methodology refinement and editorial input.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author, M.D.S., upon reasonable request.

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