

# Qualitative Research in a Technological Age: Friend or Foe

## Introduction

- Familiarity with information technology is increasingly widespread. COVID-19 has **increased the use of video conferencing and social media** within the UK population, including by **older people** (1). This evolving scene has the potential to change how research is conducted (2).
- Social media has been employed for **recruitment** to qualitative research (3,4), but mostly in a young cohort. Recruitment through interfaces such as **Twitter** has the potential to access a larger number of participants, but may not reach all groups, such as older people.
- Video conferencing** (VC) is increasingly used for qualitative interviewing (5). It simulates in-person communication while avoiding the need to travel and risk of Covid contacts but requires access to costly equipment and confidence in engaging with the technology.
- The ongoing **ESCALation of the eLderly (Age>65years) to criTical carE with covid 19** (ESCALATE) study seeks to understand the **experience** of patients and NoK where the patient was  $\geq 65$  years when admitted to intensive care in the UK with a primary diagnosis of confirmed or suspected COVID-19 respiratory failure. *The study has received REC and HRA approval, ref. 20/PR/0779.*
- ESCALATE is a qualitative study using **semi-structured interviews** and **framework analysis** (6).

## Objective

To explore the experience of using technology in a critical care-based qualitative research study.

## Methods

### Social media in recruitment

- Recruitment took place using two routes: UK-wide **social media advertising** and postal invitations via local databases with telephone follow up.
- For social media advertising, the study was advertised directly via the social media platform Twitter using a specifically created study account (**@covidescalate**), showing a brief advert and link to a questionnaire and contact form (figure 1). Relevant charities were invited to disseminate the advertisement.

### Video conferencing and telephone interviews

- In-person interviews were avoided to maximise participant and interviewer safety in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Participant preference for mode of interview (**VC or telephone**) was established. If participants stated in advance that they were not familiar with video technology or found during the interview that they were unable to manage a VC, interviews were conducted by telephone.

### Pinned Tweet



**Escalate** @covidescalate · 15/02/2021 ...  
 Were you or your loved one admitted to **#intensivecare** in the UK with **#COVID19**? Was the person admitted aged  $\geq 65$  years? Help us to understand your experience and improve the care of critically unwell people for the future by completing this questionnaire:  
[imperial.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_77...](https://imperial.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_77...)



Figure 1

## Results

### Social media

- There was partial uptake by charities and limited 'retweeting' overall.
- Only one responder meeting eligibility criteria responded via social media advertising, compared with 47/115 from local postal/telephone recruitment. This 1 participant was a Next of Kin of deceased.

### Video conferencing and telephone interviews

- 11 interviews were conducted via VC and 14 via telephone (figure 2)
- In one case, several participants from one family joined the VC from different locations.
- There was no difference between choice of VC vs. telephone according to participant ethnicity (BAME vs Caucasian) or sex.
- There was no difference in interview duration with VC lasting around 45 minutes and telephone calls lasting around 42 minutes.
- The researchers found that it was more difficult to pick up on social and non-verbal cues without visual contact but all questions in the topic guide were covered using both media.

	Participant	Patient	Patient & NoK	NoK of Survivor	NoK of Deceased
Figure 2	<b>Video Conference</b>	2	3	0	6
	<b>Telephone</b>	7	0	4	3

## Conclusion

- Information technology has the potential to increase engagement with research but our experience demonstrates that it must be used flexibly and with consideration.
- Social media has potential for recruitment of a wide audience but is dependent on the social group being studied and the experience of the research team with the platform.
- Video conferencing and telephone interviews were both valuable interviewing methods.

## References

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