

Application of Interview Methods in Chinese Library and Information Science: A Bibliometric and Content Analysis Based on 534 Documents (Postprint)

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Abstract

[目的/意义] The interview method is the most widely applied qualitative data collection approach in library and information science research. Analyzing its application in China's LIS research field can provide references for optimizing its utilization. [方法/过程] This study conducts bibliometric and content analysis on 534 papers published in 18 core journals within China's LIS domain, providing an in-depth examination of the current status, characteristics, and existing problems in the application of interview methods. [结果/结论] Strategies for optimizing the application of interview methods in the LIS field are proposed from five dimensions: design, standardization, validation, depth, and reflection.

Full Text

Preamble

Title: Discussion on the Application of Interview Methods in China's Library and Information Science Field—Based on Bibliometric and Content Analysis of 534 Papers

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Abstract: [Purpose/Significance] The interview method is the most widely used qualitative data acquisition approach in library and information science research. Analyzing its application in China's LIS field can provide references for optimizing its utilization. [Method/Process] This study conducted bibliometric and content analysis of 534 papers published in 18 core LIS journals in China, examining the current status, characteristics, and existing problems of interview

method application. [Result/Conclusion] The paper proposes strategies for optimizing interview method application in the LIS field from five dimensions: design, standardization, validation, depth, and reflection.

Keywords: interview method; research methods; library and information science; bibliometrics; content analysis

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Introduction

An “interview” is a research activity where investigators “seek out” and “visit” participants to engage in “conversation” and “inquiry.” As a form of research-oriented dialogue, it is a method for collecting (or “constructing”) first-hand data through oral communication [1]. Due to its strong operability, low cost, and focus on meaning beyond language while respecting participants’ individual experiences, the interview method has become one of the commonly used data collection approaches in library and information science (LIS) research. Huang Xiaobin et al. found that interviews were the most frequently applied qualitative research method in the international LIS journal *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* [2]. Additionally, Liu Jing et al.’s investigation of research methods used in European and American library science doctoral dissertations revealed that interview usage frequency increased across four historical development stages, with scientific rigor and academic seriousness gradually improving. Against this backdrop, exploring the application status, characteristics, and problems of interview methods in China’s LIS field over the past decade can help reveal application patterns, promote reflection on scientific and standardized usage, and provide references for rigorous application through proposed strategies, thereby enhancing research scientificity, standardization, and quality.

1. Application Status of Interview Methods in China’s LIS Field

1.1 Publication Quantity Analysis

To systematically reflect interview method usage in China’s LIS research, this study selected 18 core journals from the Peking University Chinese Core Journal Directory (8th edition), including *Journal of Library Science in China*, *Library and Information Knowledge*, and *Journal of the China Society for Scientific and Technical Information*. Using CNKI’s “Library and Information Science” category, we searched for papers with “interview” in titles, abstracts, or keywords from 2011-2020 (search date: January 23, 2021). After excluding irrelevant publications, review articles, scholar interviews, and methodology papers, we obtained 534 relevant papers as our data source. The annual distribution of

interview method usage is shown in [Figure 1: see original paper], showing an overall upward trend with a sharp increase after 2016.

1.2 Journal Distribution Analysis

From 2011-2020, interview method papers were unevenly distributed across journals. As shown in [Figure 2: see original paper], the top three journals were: *Library and Information Service* (134 papers, 25.1%), *Library Tribune* (61 papers, 11.4%), and *Information Theory and Practice* (53 papers, 9.9%). The bottom three were: *Data Analysis and Knowledge Discovery* (4 papers, 0.7%), *Journal of Intelligence* (6 papers, 1.1%), and *Library and Information* (8 papers, 1.5%). Apart from overall journal publication volume differences, this distribution partially reflects journal positioning, scope, and preferences for interview-based research. Notably, among the top three journals, library science papers totaled 142 while information science papers totaled 106, indicating that library science research tends to prefer interview methods over information science. This difference stems from both research content and the stronger interdisciplinary characteristics of information science, which is more influenced by computer science research methods.

1.3 Research Theme Analysis

Among the 534 papers, 215 used interviews as the sole method while 319 combined interviews with other methods to compensate for limitations (see). The 534 papers were categorized into nine first-level themes (see), with library services research being most common (30.2%), followed by information and information behavior (22.8%) and user studies (18%). These three themes accounted for 71% of all papers. Intelligence research, library education, and government information studies used interviews less frequently (8.4% combined), representing potential growth areas. Theme analysis revealed that 2011-2015 papers focused on library services, library construction, and information behavior, while 2016-2020 expanded to include user studies, government information research, and intelligence studies, emphasizing user experience, information openness/sharing, and deep smart services based on data and knowledge. This shows interview usage deepening from traditional library research toward user studies while actively contributing to intelligence research. However, the diversity of themes and contexts necessitates standardized selection, design, and application of interview methods.

1.4 Method Usage Analysis

Regarding the degree of structural control, interviews can be classified as closed, open, or semi-open types, also called “structured,” “unstructured,” and “semi-structured” [1]. Structured interviews use questionnaires, unstructured interviews have only topics without specific questions, and semi-structured interviews use a “rough outline” expanded during the interview. Among the 534 papers, 190 explicitly used semi-structured interviews, 10 used structured, and

6 used unstructured; the remainder did not specify. Semi-structured interviews are most popular as they avoid structured interviews' rigidity while mitigating unstructured interviews' poor comparability and high interviewer demands. However, these three types are not mutually exclusive—some studies used structured questionnaires for demographic data, unstructured questions for “warm-up,” and semi-structured interviews for the main portion.

1.5 Depth of Method Application

Research can be divided into descriptive and explanatory studies. Descriptive research focuses on describing events, phenomena, and behaviors (answering “what”), while explanatory research builds theoretical frameworks to explain them (answering “why”). Among the 534 papers, 167 (31.3%) were explanatory, including 103 using grounded theory to build frameworks through deep interviews and inductive logic. For grounded theory studies, data depth directly affects theoretical explanatory power, and deep interviews better meet these requirements. The remaining 367 (68.7%) were descriptive. Although explanatory studies have increased, interviews generally serve as auxiliary data collection tools with insufficient depth, not fully leveraging their advantages.

2. Application Characteristics of Interview Methods in China's LIS Field

2.1 Increasing Application Frequency

Literature searches show interviews gradually became important data collection methods in LIS research from 2001, with only 47 relevant papers before 2010. After 2011, especially post-2016, interview usage grew rapidly. Reasons include: (1) Growing methodological awareness—method selection directly affects research scientificity, and interviews' unique advantages in collecting implicit information about cognition, motivation, and attitude make them increasingly attractive; (2) Enhanced methodological integration—after 2011, mixed-methods research combining interviews with questionnaires and experiments increased, providing more opportunities for interview usage.

2.2 Diversification Trends

(1) Diversified research themes. As LIS research expands, interview methods are applied more broadly. Beyond emerging areas like user studies and government information research, traditional fields show deepening “human” and “technology” orientations (e.g., user profiling, special group services, maker spaces, digital humanities). Interview methods play important roles in deepening theoretical contributions and promoting thematic diversification.

(2) Diversified data collection methods. Among surveyed papers, 59.7% used two or more methods, with 35.6% combining interviews and questionnaires

to achieve “strengthening” (enhancing findings), “completeness” (more comprehensive explanations), and “triangulation” (mutual validation) [7]. Studies increasingly combine “new” methods like critical incident analysis, ethnographic decision tree modeling, think-aloud protocols, structured logs, and contextual experiments. While interdisciplinary integration diversifies methods, overall research design becomes crucial.

(3) Diversified roles of interview methods. Interviews play primary or secondary roles with different functions (see). As primary methods, they support explanatory studies using grounded theory or descriptive studies of phenomena. As secondary methods, they complement questionnaires, experiments, and field investigations at different stages. In descriptive studies, they supplement other methods to ensure data completeness and validity.

2.3 Heterogeneity Between Library and Information Science

Due to disciplinary differences, library science and information science show heterogeneity in research methods and depth. Library science tends to combine interviews with field investigations and network surveys following inductive logic for library management, reading promotion, and user needs research, maintaining qualitative approaches. Information science prefers combining interviews with questionnaires, experiments, and think-aloud protocols following inductive or deductive logic for competitive intelligence, data mining, and knowledge management, leaning toward quantitative research. In terms of depth, explanatory studies accounted for 24.9% of library science papers versus 37.7% of information science papers. Among 103 grounded theory papers, 43 were in library science and 60 in information science, indicating slightly greater research depth in information science.

3. Problems in Interview Method Application in China’s LIS Field

3.1 Insufficient Methodological-Level Design

As a front-end data collection method, interview design directly affects research quality. Among the 534 papers, only 96 had relatively complete design sections covering participant selection, interview outlines/themes, processes, and data utilization. When combined with other methods, many papers failed to explain how methods were integrated or what each method’s data collection focus was. Regarding standardization, 100 papers only mentioned “interview” in abstracts or text without explaining usage; over half of papers explicitly using semi-structured interviews didn’t provide outlines; 61.6% lacked participant information and 18% had incomplete information; 68.4% had no data collection process description, showing obvious standardization deficiencies.

3.2 Abuse and Misuse of Interview Methods

Various interview types have specific 适用范围 (applicable scopes), but some papers don't discuss suitability, leading to nominal abuse and misapplication. First, some articles use "interview" as a methodological label without actual implementation. Second, misuse is evident: (1) Some claim to use open/unstructured interviews but actually use semi-structured outlines; (2) Regarding deep interviews, T. Wengraf emphasized "getting inside the facts" to obtain detailed knowledge and meaningful connections [8], while Dolbeare and Schuman's three-round sequence requires about 90 minutes [9]. However, some so-called "deep interviews" lasted only 20 minutes, failing to meet depth requirements. Additionally, email, online, and questionnaire interviews are used without explanation or limitations, compromising data quality.

3.3 Widespread Lack of Reliability and Validity Testing

Reliability and validity are crucial indicators of data quality and measurement tool scientificity. Qualitative research requires multi-dimensional considerations to enhance reliability and validity. Among the 534 papers, only 14 (2.6%) conducted reliability or validity testing, with 12 published after 2016. Although recent years show improvement, this reflects insufficient scientific and standardized awareness. Compared to quantitative research, qualitative studies need to consider multiple dimensions to ensure scientific rigor.

3.4 Lack of Methodological Reflection

Unlike international LIS research, domestic papers often lack methodological reflection. Most don't discuss limitations, interference, or propose better solutions, constraining method optimization. Ethical issues are also neglected. 欧美 (European and American) researchers emphasize ethics throughout the interview process, discussing "informed consent," "data confidentiality," "reporting results," and "researcher role positioning" [10]. Among surveyed papers, 极少数 (very few) mentioned informed consent or confidentiality, showing overall neglect of ethical issues.

4. Recommendations for Interview Method Application in China's LIS Field

4.1 Design—Enhancing Methodological Integrity

Qualitative research using interviews typically explores questions lacking theoretical frameworks, requiring theory building or refinement. This necessitates design from epistemological and methodological perspectives.

(1) **Emphasize epistemological influence on research design.** Kvale et al. metaphorically describe interviewers as "miners" versus "travelers," representing two epistemological concepts: knowledge collection (knowledge as given) versus knowledge construction (knowledge as created) [10]. Researchers must

initially consider what knowledge is and how to obtain it—whether viewing interviews as tools to “transport” existing knowledge or as methods to construct knowledge within certain standards and perspectives.

(2) Emphasize methodological reflection on specific interview methods. As the most common, diverse, and complex qualitative data collection method, interviews require methodological reflection and 溯源式 (source-tracing) learning to avoid “second-hand method” selection errors. For example, Glaser and Strauss’s original grounded theory emphasizes “no pre-research literature review” and “avoiding pre-set specific research questions” [11], using unstructured deep interviews; Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory “advocates collecting rich details and sufficient data within relevant contexts,” allowing “loosely guided inquiry or semi-structured focused questions” [13]. Most grounded theory papers in our sample lacked methodological explanation.

4.2 Standardization—Enhancing Scientific Rigor

J. Elster noted that “method is a set of rules” [10]. Interview standardization involves design and implementation.

(1) Design aspects: Select interview methods according to their applicable scope, framework, and procedures to prevent abuse and misuse. Reduce interviewer influence to improve “objectivity,” such as using multiple interviewers and ensuring question neutrality.

(2) Implementation aspects: Emphasize interview techniques. The interview process involves co-constructing knowledge with participants, inevitably affected by interviewer subjectivity and conditions. Mature techniques like Critical Incident Technique for studying human behavior and psychological patterns [14] or DCPT interview outlines for data management needs [15] can improve quality. “High-quality qualitative interviews require interviewers to possess relevant skills, knowledge, and judgment developed through extensive training” [10]. Emphasize experiential learning. Tacit knowledge about question insertion, wording, pacing, tone, listening, and atmosphere mediation requires “apprenticeship” knowledge transfer with experienced researchers through continuous practice.

4.3 Validation—Improving Reliability and Validity

Enhancing interview reliability and validity requires attention to the entire process, not just single stages. integrates validation strategies found in surveyed papers. Beyond triangulation, feedback and participant validation are common methods. Feedback involves “exchanging preliminary conclusions widely with peers, colleagues, friends, and family to hear their opinions”; participant validation involves “returning results to participants to see their reactions” [1]. Both occur after preliminary results to validate and refine findings.

4.4 Depth—Enhancing Research Value

In-depth interviews facilitate value discovery. Interview depth is influenced by research themes, design, process, transcription, and analysis, requiring systematic thinking.

(1) During theme selection: Focus on theoretically contributory explanatory research rather than merely descriptive studies.

(2) In research design: Methodology determines interview method selection, which determines depth. Among 103 grounded theory papers in our sample, theoretical contributions exceeded descriptive analysis. Deep interviews provide better depth than structured interviews, and face-to-face interviews surpass phone, QQ, or WeChat interviews.

(3) During interviews: Continuously reflect based on outlines, respect participants' knowledge construction, and use emotional focusing, embodiment, contextual comparison, and flexible questioning to obtain depth.

(4) In transcription: Preserve non-verbal information to reduce “decontextualization” losses and improve data quality.

(5) In analysis: Select methods based on research purpose, content, and material characteristics. “Analysis methods guide interview outline preparation, interview process, and transcription” [10], so they should be chosen early. Methods like grounded theory's three-stage coding or phenomenology's seven-step analysis [22] provide depth when matched with theory.

4.5 Reflection—Enhancing Methodological Rigor

All methods have imperfections, limitations, and applicability issues, making reflection essential. International research emphasizes limitations reflection, demonstrating objective evaluation and providing experience for others. Reflection on interviews should 贯穿 (run through) the entire process, documenting usage, problems, reflections, and experiences for knowledge management. Strengthening methodology learning and practice enhances epistemological and methodological reflection capabilities. Regarding ethics, beyond improving procedural ethics, researchers can develop ethical capacity through: (1) skill models—mastering rules, gaining experience, and refining intuition; and (2) learning from contextualized background stories, cases, and community practices [10].

While social sciences increasingly emphasize new technologies and methods, sometimes prioritizing technique over method and method over theory, this trend also appears in our sample. New technologies revitalize “traditional” interviews but require systematic epistemological and methodological learning, holistic design, and avoidance of simplification and misuse.

This study only examined core journal papers from the past decade, not covering all publication types, so it cannot fully represent the complete applica-

tion status. Future research could explore dissertations and other literature for comprehensive understanding, and analyze international papers for reference. Regular tracking of interview method application should identify weak links to continuously improve theoretical and practical outcomes with scientific rigor.

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Author Contributions

Bao Xin: Research design, paper writing and revision;

Ke Ping: Research direction determination, research guidance, revision suggestions.

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Abstract: [Purpose/significance] The interview method is the most widely used qualitative research data acquisition method in the field of library and information science. The analysis of the application of interview method in the field of library and information science in China can provide reference for optimizing the application of interview method. [Method/process] This paper conducted bibliometric and content analysis on 534 papers published in 18 core journals in the field of library and information science in China, and made an in-depth analysis of the application status, application characteristics and existing problems of interview method. [Result/conclusion] The paper puts forward the strategy of optimizing the application of interview method in the field of library and information science from five dimensions: design, standard, inspection, depth and reflection.

Keywords: interview method; research methods; library and information science; bibliometrics; content analysis

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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