
Using internet technologies (such as Skype) as a research medium: a research note

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Abstract

This article presents a brief account of research which embraced the notion of research participant choice by adopting a flexible approach to the medium through which the semi-structured interviews were conducted. The following short paper provides an insight into the ways in which using Skype as a research medium can allow the researcher to reap the well-documented benefits of traditional face-to-face interviews in qualitative research, while also benefiting from the aspects Holt suggests telephone interviews bring to such research.

Keywords

ecological concerns, internet interviews, participant choice, telephone interviews, Skype

This article presents a brief account of research which embraced the notion of research participant choice by adopting a flexible approach to the medium through which the semi-structured interviews were conducted. The following short paper provides an insight into the ways in which using Skype as a research medium can allow the researcher to reap the well documented benefits of traditional face-to-face interviews in qualitative research, while also benefiting from the aspects Holt (2010) suggests telephone interviews bring to such research.

One of the aims suggested in post-structuralist psychology is to offer the participants in each study a degree of control over the research process, encouraging a more equal relationship between the researcher and the researched (Rappaport and Stewart, 1997). In my doctoral research the choice of face-to-face, telephone or Skype interviews was given to all participants. This choice was deemed important to the research process due to the ethical nature of the research subject – sustainable tourism. For example, it was considered essential for the participants to have a choice in the research medium as conflict could have arisen between their ecological principles in relation to transport and

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climate change, and the researcher travelling vast distances to conduct the interview. This issue was made particularly salient as the recruitment process was conducted through the internet and a number of participants were situated many miles from the researcher's location in the south east of England. As a result of the choice in the research medium used for each interview, 10 of my participants chose face-to-face interviews, three chose telephone interviews, and three chose Skype interviews. All of the participants located outside the researcher's geographical area decided that they preferred telephone or Skype interviews as they did not want unnecessary travel to impact on the environment.

The option of telephone interviews was given to participants to avoid alienating individuals who did not feel comfortable with the researcher travelling to conduct interviews. It is acknowledged that telephone interviews are rarely suggested as a practical alternative to face-to-face interviews (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004). However, drawing on recent insights from Holt (2010) regarding the ideological, methodological and practical benefits of using telephone interviews it could be suggested that telephone interviews do offer a viable alternative to face-to-face interviews. For example, Holt suggests that although telephone interviews can lose some of the subtleties associated with physical interaction, this loss allows the researcher to 'stay at the level of text' and avoid imposing contextual information on the data. In addition, practical benefits of scheduling the interview and freedom to shift times at the last minute were also suggested as advantageous due to the often busy lives of research participants and the obligation felt if someone was travelling to meet them face-to-face (Holt, 2010). Therefore, telephone interviews were offered to the participants in this study to overcome issues surrounding travelling and ecological principles and as a method to enable the individual to make choices regarding the research process without impacting on the 'quality' of data produced. However, it was also envisaged that the internet could potentially enable the researcher to expand aspects of Holt's argument to an alternative research medium.

Use of the internet in general has rapidly expanded over the past decade. The world total of internet users was 1,668,870,408 in 2009 representing an increase of 362.3 per cent since 2000. The UK in 2009 has approximately 43.8 million users representing 70.9 per cent of the population, the second largest cohort in Europe, second to Germany with 55.2 million users (Miniwatts-Marketing-Group, 2009). Further, tourism-related services have emerged as one prominent product promoted through the internet (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Williams and Palmer, 1999). Internet booking across Europe has been rising since 1998 year on year with an increase of 24 per cent between 2006–7 reaching 49.4 billion Euros in 2007 (Marcussen, 2008). In the UK, 57 per cent of people booked their holiday through the internet in 2008 (Davies, 2008). Internet booking was by far the most common form of overseas holiday booking with little over a quarter (27%) booking face-to-face in travel agents and 19 per cent booking by telephone. It was also found that people between the ages of 25–44 were the most likely group to book their holiday online (68%) compared to the 16–24 year olds who were the most likely group to book their holiday face-to-face in their travel agent (45%) (Davies, 2008). Therefore, with the use of the internet increasing and the majority of UK tourists drawing on the internet to book their holiday it appeared essential to address it as a potential source of data collection.

Recent insights in the social sciences have suggested that the internet is, theoretically at least, a viable research medium for overcoming issues around access and distance (Evans et al., 2008). For example, Flick (2009) suggests that the use of internet chat-rooms come the closest to the interaction experienced in face-to-face interviews due to the synchronous nature of real-time interaction. Although this seems like a plausible argument it would appear that modern software's, such as Skype, further advance the internet as a medium to create the most feasible alternative to face-to-face interviews. This argument is put forward as software such as Skype provides not only synchronous interaction between the researcher and their participant, but the criticisms associated with losing visual and interpersonal aspects of the interaction (Evans et al., 2008) are, to some extent, overcome. Further, using technologies such as Skype, the researcher can easily record both the visual and audio interaction of the interview through simple software downloaded onto their workstation. This overcomes the often impractical use of battery powered Dictaphones through which recordings are often difficult to hear at the stage of transcription, and the researcher is constantly worried about battery life.

Of course, in practice this is a relatively new technology and there were some unfortunate 'technical hitches' experienced during the Skype interviews in my doctoral thesis. For example, a faulty webcam created a situation in which the researcher could be seen by the participant but the participant could not be seen by the researcher resulting in the suspension of the interview until a later date. However, the benefits of using internet technologies (e.g. Skype) such as, low costs, ease of access and minimization of ecological dilemmas, whilst the live video feed helps to partially surmount issues around spatiality and physical interaction. In addition, both the researcher and the researched are able to remain in a 'safe location' without imposing on each other's personal space. For example, the researched can remain in the comfortable location of their home while being interviewed without the sense the researcher is encroaching on their personal space, while the researcher avoids the feeling of imposing themselves physically within the participant's personal space. Thus, a neutral yet personal location is maintained for both parties throughout the process.

Here then, it is suggested that Holt's (2010) argument for the use of telephone interviews can be expanded to the use of Skype as a new research medium with the additional benefit of enabling the 'visual' in the interview setting. It is through this additional visual element offered by Skype (and alternative 'Webchat' software) that the interview can remain, to a certain extent at least, a 'face-to-face' experience while preserving the flexibility and 'private space' elements offered via telephone interviews. It is suggested here that further research should be conducted into the use of internet technologies such as Skype with a quantitative comparative analysis of the type of data collected across the three mediums.

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