Pixilated partnerships, overcoming obstacles in qualitative interviews via Skype: a research note

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Abstract
This research note discusses the effectiveness of using video internet technologies, like Skype, for qualitative interviews. Skype may present some challenges for interviewing, including dropped calls and pauses, inaudible segments, inability to read body language and nonverbal cues, and loss of intimacy compared to traditional in-person interviews. Based on reflections from 45 university student researchers, the following short paper details how to overcome such obstacles and to create a successful research partnership between the researcher and participant. Strategies include confirming a stable internet connection, finding a quiet room without distractions, slowing down and clarifying talk, being open to repeating answers and questions, and paying close attention to facial expressions.

Qualitative interviews create detailed pictures of people's lives. Through open-ended interview questions, qualitative researchers can capture participants' experiences in their own words and reveal the context and meaning of their actions (Esterberg, 2002; Yilmaz, 2013). Establishing a good research partnership between the researcher and participant is crucial to achieving a successful, detailed qualitative interview. Through a partnership of trust and rapport, qualitative researchers can help the participant share feelings, thoughts, and specific stories of experiences (Weiss, 1994). In-person interviews are particularly strong in this area. Sitting down with someone face-to-face can create a personal connection and allow the researcher to read important nonverbal cues.

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The rise of video-based software applications, like Skype, offers some exciting possibilities for qualitative interviewing. Unlike telephone interviews, both the interviewer and participant can see each other during the interview while being in a different location. This has the obvious benefits of convenience, allowing the researcher to interview anyone anywhere, and to do so in the comfort of one's own space (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Hanna, 2012).

The question becomes to what extent can researchers achieve successful, in-depth qualitative interviews by using such video-based technologies? What obstacles may arise during Skype interviews, and how can qualitative researchers overcome these? This research note details the reflections of 45 university students comparing their experiences conducting in-person and Skype interviews in spring 2014.[1]

Founded in 2003, Skype is a free software application that enables communication by video using a webcam on a computer or a smart phone. Skype appears to have a number of significant advantages for qualitative interviewing.[2] First, Skype saves travel time and money, opens up more possibilities in terms of geographic access to participants, and is less disruptive in terms of scheduling and carrying out the interviews. Further, Skype interviews can feel more comfortable because they occur in one's own private spaces. Hanna confirms this Skype benefit of being able to 'remain in a "safe location" without imposing on each other's personal space' (Hanna, 2012: 241). This can have the effect of the researcher and participant feeling 'less nervous' and 'less pressured' compared to being in person. Deakin and Wakefield (2014) also underscore the health and safety benefits of Skype for both interviewers and interviewees, and found that Skype interviewees were more responsive than in a number of their face-to-face interviews. Practical benefits have also been documented for telephone interviews (Holt, 2010). Still, telephone interviews do not have the visual advantage that Skype interviews have by establishing a synchronous visual interaction between the researcher and participant.

Despite such advantages, there are some notable disadvantages for Skype qualitative interviews that need to be mitigated. These include dropped calls and pauses, inaudible segments, inability to read body language and nonverbal cues, and loss of intimacy compared to traditional in-person interviews. This research note details some strategies to overcome such obstacles and create a good research partnership between the researcher and participant throughout the qualitative interview.

Dropped calls and pauses

Skype calls can disconnect unexpectedly or experience pauses due to poor internet connection. This has a negative impact on establishing rapport and maintaining good interview flow, and therefore negatively affects the research partnership itself. An important strategy to mitigate this issue is to make sure a stable internet connection is available ahead of time. A practice run can ensure the signal is as strong as possible for both the researcher and participant.

'Testing out Skype ahead of time with a friend' was one strategy that Leslie,[3] a student interviewer, used. It is also important to include the participant in this process. Both the researcher and participant should have the latest version of the Skype program, and both computers (or smart phones) should be fully charged to avoid any delays or connection

loss. These suggestions involve establishing a partnership with the participant before sitting down to do the interview. Participants must be willing to do some technological preparation in order to ensure a successful Skype interviewing experience.

Inaudible segments

Even if the internet connection does not drop, often times there can be issues hearing the participant's words correctly and clearly. This is an obvious problem, considering that qualitative interviewers want to capture the participant's experiences 'in their own words' and to show 'how they make sense of the world' (Yilmaz, 2013: 313). The audio problems can be due to various issues: turning away from the microphone, having unexpected background noise, or experiencing glitches in the video feed. Ensuring a stable internet connection can mitigate audio issues by minimizing glitches and lags. Further, the setting of the interview must be carefully chosen beforehand. Interviewers in traditional in-person interviews need to consider the setting in which the interview is conducted (Scott and Garner, 2013). The same is true of Skype interviews. A quiet room without noise and distraction is most optimal for audible clarity (Winzenburg, 2012). Researchers should also consider the visual background in which they conduct the Skype interview. For example, for setting a more formal tone, it would be more beneficial to be in a quiet office-like setting, perhaps at a desk surrounded by shelves and books, as opposed to in a kitchen with pots and pans clanging from dinner being made.

The participants themselves should also choose a suitable location. Deakin and Wakefield (2014) most often conducted their Skype interviews when the participant was at work or at home. They found that such environments have distractions that interfere with the interview flow and audibility. It is preferable that participants find the quietest space possible. They should also remain in one stationary location, as opposed to walking around with a hand-held device where they could possibly encounter others within earshot, distractions, and connection lags.

Skype audio problems can also be overcome by requesting the participant to 'slow things down,' and to speak clearly and deliberately in their answers. This can help prevent the awkwardness of having to ask participants to repeat themselves, which can take away from the professional quality of an interview. Reassuring the participant that their voice is being heard and understood can help with rapport too. As Lisa notes: 'When I could hear, I found myself reassuring my interviewee that I was still there and listening because our video was lagging.' Echoing what the respondent says, using nonverbal cues like nodding one's head, and asking follow up questions that include the participant's own words are all possible ways to demonstrate the researcher's presence and understanding.

Inability to read body language and nonverbal cues

A significant difference between traditional in-person and Skype interviews is that interviews over the internet do not allow the researcher and participant to be in each other's physical presence, and to see each other entirely. Even when using the full screen video format, it is not typical to see more than the person's face or upper body via Skype.

Further, the video image can be blurry or delayed at times. This makes it quite difficult to read emotion and body language, as the screen doesn't provide the rich, nonverbal cues that you feel in a traditional face-to-face interview. These cues help us know how much more to ask or what to ask. For example, the action of turning away from the computer screen could be interpreted in several ways; one could assume there's a distraction in the room or view the gesture as a sign of nervousness. Brian notes, 'Things can be misinterpreted over video.' Further, 'it is easy to hide over video what you can't hide in person.' Feelings of unease can be masked due to the lack of visual body gestures.

This makes it even more vital to listen to the tone of the participant's voice and be very conscious of their facial expressions. Researchers should use their own facial expressions deliberately to convey understanding and emotion too. Gia reflects, 'I tried to frequently smile when she seemed hesitant about whether her response was answering my question. This was especially important in Skype because they can't read anything else but my face.' Making eye contact with the participant is another difficult issue over Skype because looking at the person on the screen is not the same thing as looking at the camera.

Loss of intimacy

Prior research suggests that while rapport might be different between online and face-to-face interviews, it does not affect the quality of the conversations (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). However, we found that the quality of a Skype interview is indeed affected by the research topic, aim, and interview questions. More personal questions may pose more difficulty over Skype due to the loss of personal connection and intimacy compared to in-person interviews. Lack of direct contact with the participant can make it harder to elicit detailed answers from sensitive questions. Skype may be characterized as 'presenting an emotional barrier.' As Kristin notes, 'Someone is telling a personal story and right in the middle, the call gets dropped, and you have to call back, and start again.' This creates an abrupt feeling in the interview that is hard to move forward from. For example, some students felt that interviewing single parents, some of whom became very emotional during the interviews, proved to be a more emotionally awkward experience via Skype. Some of their interview questions included: 'Can you explain how you became a single parent? What do you tell your child(ren) about the other parent, if anything? What are your hopes or future goals for your children?' It is preferred to 'be present' and 'face-to-face' with the participant when asking such personal questions. When participants become sad or angry, there is a feeling that the researcher would like to be there in person to empathize. Shelley echoes the feelings of a number of student researchers when she states, 'I believe that more sensitive topics should be handled in person.'

A 'genuine connection' like people have in person can be hard to establish via Skype. Heather furthers this thought: 'I dislike how disconnected you are. Sometimes people are more honest online because they feel safer or more comfortable expressing their opinions, but I like to connect with my interviewee; at least make eye contact and see their expressions.' Skype might be more beneficial to participants who are shy or introverted, allowing them to feel more comfortable opening up in front of a screen. Research confirms that introverts are more likely to be drawn to online communication and prefer

socializing online. This is because interacting face-to-face may make introverts feel less comfortable, less able to communicate their ideas, and less fully able to express their 'real me' to others (Orchard and Fullwood, 2010).

Still, overall, it appears to be more difficult to obtain in-depth responses to sensitive questions via Skype. This is also the result of suspicions related to the video element of Skype. Such suspicions can impact the participant's willingness to open up in an interview or even agree to be interviewed at all. Amelia tried to conduct a Skype interview with young women regarding their online dating experiences. She encountered reservations due to the personal subject matter. Even though the Skype interviews were audio-recorded only, some participants feared that their discussion could still be listened to by others within earshot or shared via video or pictures that would violate their privacy. Some declined to be interviewed.

Less sensitive topics, like exploring the benefits of studying abroad, seemed less affected by such suspicions and emotional awkwardness. These interview questions included: 'Walk me through your first day at your new location. What were the biggest cultural differences that you noticed? How did traveling abroad change any of your perspectives, if at all?' These study abroad participants also used computer technologies, such as Skype, to keep in touch with family and friends at home. It felt even more familiar to them interacting in this manner. They were more relaxed and open in their communication.

Moving forward

Technological advances are offering qualitative researchers incredible opportunities for interviewing. Certainly, advancements will only make internet connections stronger, images clearer, and access to computers and smart phones wider. While Skype offers the possibility of interviewing anyone in the world from the researcher's own personal space, sampling is still limited in the sense that participants themselves must have access to Skype. My qualitative research methods class primarily conducted interviews with people in their 20s in the United States. These young adults have grown up with computer technology and smart phones and feel quite comfortable with their use. This is obviously not the case for many people in the world. Mary argues that it can be 'easier to find people to do the interview [via Skype] unless they are of a generation with limited knowledge about computers or smart phones, or people with limited resources that don't have a computer or cell phone.' Other literature also emphasizes how the technological competence of participants impacts researchers' access to them (O'Connor et al., 2008).

The research experiences discussed here demonstrate that it is possible to create a good research partnership via Skype. The strategies in this note offer suggestions for this to occur. It is recommended that in order to have a successful qualitative Skype interview, an interview preparation checklist for the researcher and participant should be created and discussed ahead of time. The Skype interview checklist should include tasks for both researchers and participants, including: confirming a stable internet connection, finding a quiet room without distractions, slowing down and clarifying talk, being open to repeating answers and questions, and paying close attention to facial expressions. Emailing several times before Skyping might also strengthen rapport and possibly

mitigate the issue of participants not 'showing up' at the agreed time (Deakin and Wakefiled, 2014).

Further, it is important to evaluate the matching level of Skype interviews to one's research and decide whether or not to utilize this method (Janghorban et al., 2014). It appears that the lack of intimacy created via Skype can cause problems for more sensitive qualitative questions. More personal topics might be most appropriate for traditional, in-person interviews, as there is no substitute for direct personal connection. Future work should involve comparing rapport and quality of information obtained during Skype versus in-person interviews, particularly as it concerns types of research topics and questions. It could also be valuable to ask how participants feel after being interviewed via Skype to gain their perspective on this technological research partnership.

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Notes

1.	Much appreciation to my qualitative research methods class, spring 2014, at San Diego State University as this research note would not have been possible without their efforts and willingness to share their experiences.
2.	Several student researchers also used FaceTime on a smart phone as an interviewing option instead of Skype, and still had similar experiences to those using Skype.
3.	All student researcher names are pseudonyms.

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Author biography

Sally Seitz earned her PhD from University of California Irvine in 1998. Seitz has been a lecturer in sociology at San Diego State University since 2001, and has taught qualitative research methods for over a decade. Her research interests have included stratification, workplace inequality, and the use of the latest technology in qualitative data collection.