



Online versus in-person interviews with adolescents: An exploration of data equivalence



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ABSTRACT

This study compared data quantity and quality of interviews conducted with adolescents in a face-to-face setting versus online. Thirty participants in grades 10 through 12 participated in semi-structured interviews either through instant messaging or in-person. Results indicated that interviews conducted online produced fewer words and took longer to complete, and involved more rapport-building, however, there were no mean differences in the level of self-disclosure and the formality of the interviews, nor in the number and kind of themes that emerged or in the depth to which the themes were discussed. The findings suggest that despite taking longer and producing fewer words, data quality is unaffected by the mode of data collection (online versus face-to-face).

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In the last decade, it has become common practice for researchers to use online data collection for both quantitative (Sue & Ritter, 2012) and qualitative data (Jowett, Peel, & Shaw, 2011). Indeed, several researchers have highlighted the benefits of web-based data collection, citing cost and time savings, ease of transcription/data entry, and access to participants in geographically remote areas (e.g., Campos, Zucoloto, Bonafé, Jordani, & Maroco, 2011; James & Busher, 2009; Mathy, Schillace, Coleman, & Berquist, 2002). In addition to convenience, recent work suggests that online data collection might be more ecologically valid for some demographics than face-to-face data collection. For example, recent studies show that adolescents feel more comfortable sharing information online than in face-to-face settings (e.g., Lee, 2007; Oprea & Stan, 2012), which means that online data collection might be the most effective for this age group (e.g., Barratt, 2012). The question arises, however, about the validity and reliability of online data collection. Although a growing body of literature suggests equivalency of quantitative data collected online and offline (Davidov & Depner, 2011; Weigold, Weigold, & Russell, 2013), no work has yet examined the equivalency of qualitative data collected in online versus offline modes. The current study empirically examined the quantity and quality of semi-structured interview data collected either online via instant messaging or in face-to-face

setting, with an adolescent population.

We know that adolescents, more than any other age group, have embraced online communication technologies (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014; Mason & Ide, 2014), with estimates suggesting that 83% of youth use social networking sites (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). It has been argued that adolescents' seemingly universal attraction to online communication is a consequence of being born into a 'Digital Age' (Livingstone & Smith, 2014); however, capitalizing on online socialization as a venue for fostering friendships and peer groups is also compatible with the psychosocial needs of this age group (Best et al., 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). In addition to affording 24/7 connection to their friends, online communication is arguably attractive to adolescents because it provides a sense of control over adolescents' self-presentation (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), which allows them to be more forthcoming in their social interactions (Oprea & Stan, 2012), and to feel more freedom in exploring different ways of being (e.g., identity exploration; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

Adolescents' comfort with text-based online communication (Cleary & Walter, 2011), as well as the increased self-disclosure associated with it (Frye & Dornisch, 2010; Mason & Ide, 2014), has led researchers to recommend online data collection strategies for qualitative inquiries within this age group (Cleary & Walter, 2011; Mason & Ide, 2014). To this end, it has been argued that conducting interviews in an adolescent's "natural communication environment" (Mason & Ide, 2014, p. 41) reduces power differentials that often exist between adults and youth (making rapport

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easier to build; Horsfall, Cleary, & Hunt, 2010) and increases participant disclosure (Cleary & Walter, 2011). Moreover, online interviewing removes geographical barriers, which allows access to the voices and experiences of otherwise hard-to-reach adolescents (Cleary & Walter, 2011; Turney & Pocknee, 2005). In fact, Turney and Pocknee (2005) posit that online methods may be the only way to obtain sufficient study participants for certain populations that are very rare (e.g., adolescents with schizoaffective disorder; adolescents with particular mixes of ethnic origins, such as Mexican-Chinese Canadians). Finally, online interviewing's text-based approach provides adolescent participants with more time for reflection and control over their responses (Mason & Ide, 2014).

Although more evidence is needed to confirm equivalence of interview data collected online versus face-to-face, existing research shows that adolescents prefer online methods for many of the same benefits cited above by researchers (Mason & Ide, 2014). More specifically, Mason and Ide's study on adolescents' experience of conducting interviews over email (2014) demonstrate that adolescent participants indicated a strong preference for electronic data collection, noting that it was much more convenient in terms of fitting it in with all of their other activities. Moreover, participants appreciated the control afforded by emailing in terms of drafting a response on their own time. They also noted that they enjoyed the process and learned something about themselves. Given the benefits of qualitative data collection online for both researchers and participants, it is important to determine the quality of data collected online to guide its application and interpretation. The current study will be the first to provide empirical evidence regarding the equivalence of semi-structured interview data collected online versus face-to-face.

1. Online data collection

In the social sciences, online data collection has primarily been utilized to collect survey data (Ayling & Mewse, 2009; Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004; Jowett et al., 2011), and extant work has been undertaken to explore the equivalency of questionnaire data collected online versus via pencil-and-paper (e.g., Weigold et al., 2013). Although results of early research on this question were mixed (Granello & Wheaton, 2004), Weigold et al. (2013) argue that much of this work was compromised due to statistical and/or methodological problems. More recent work that incorporates equivalent samples and procedures has found consistency between online and pencil-and-paper surveys (e.g., Russell, Boggs, Palmer, & Rosenberg, 2010), including for adolescents (Lygidakis et al., 2010; Vosylis, Malinauskienė, & Zukauskienė, 2012). Not surprisingly, it is often the younger participants (under 30) who tend to prefer/choose to complete a web-based questionnaire if given the option (Hunter, Corcoran, Leeder, & Phelps, 2013; Russell et al., 2010). In addition to participant preference and being cost effective, data collected using an online option appears to yield higher response rates (Russell et al., 2010) and more completed answers on the surveys (e.g., less missing data, Lygidakis et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2010).

As noted above regarding online qualitative data collection, there has been no systematic assessment of its comparison to face-to-face interview techniques in terms of data quality despite the fact that it is increasingly being used with adolescent populations (Barratt, 2012; Benford & Standen, 2011; Nicholas, Lach, King, Scott, Boydell, Sawatzky, et al., 2010) and there is ample literature on best practices, (e.g., Fontes & O'Mahony, 2008; Jowett et al., 2011; Voida, Mynatt, Erickson, & Kellogg, 2004). Although not empirical, two published articles have compared different interview techniques in an attempt to comprehensively assess the advantages and disadvantages of each method. Opdenakker (2006) compared four

methods of interviewing: face-to-face, telephone, email, and instant messaging. He cites advantages of the non-face-to-face methods similar to those mentioned above (e.g., time and cost efficiency, removal of geographical barriers, etc.), but postulates that the lack of social and non-verbal cues make rapport-building difficult and potentially detrimental to the overall quality of the interview. In contrast, a similar review article by Kazmer and Xie (2008) also comparing these 4 methods of interviewing (based on a thematic analysis of the literature and contextualized within their own experience of conducting research using the four methods) argued that rapport can be effectively developed in an online setting given more time, and effective and flexible social skills employed by the interviewers (Kazmer & Xie, 2008). These authors also suggest that incorporating affective information into interview data might be more accurate and systematic in an online setting. For example, in an online interview, the participant expresses emotional content explicitly as part of the interview through emoticons and acronyms (e.g., LOL), whereas in a face-to-face setting, affective inclusions into the interview transcriptions tend to be at the interviewers' discretion and, at best, are interpretive.

Related to this, one concern that has been raised in the literature is about the veracity of the data that is generated (Riva, 2002). There is often no way to confirm the identity of the person involved in a text-based online interview, so it is possible for the person being interviewed to use a false identity and share false information about themselves (Stieger & Göritz, 2006). This risk is hypothesized to be exacerbated for adolescents, who often use the internet to 'try on' unique identities (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Stieger & Göritz, 2006, however, provides evidence against this in a unique study, where he longitudinally validated self-report data with actual behaviour and external data, and concluded that the risk of receiving false data from online interviews is exceedingly small.

In sum, we have an increasingly incorporated, but as yet, untested method of qualitative data collection. Hypotheses and extrapolations abound, but we have no empirical evidence that shows that qualitative interview data collected online is equivalent to similar data collected in-person. This means that we don't know how the two methods compare in terms of concrete outcomes, such as how long interviews take, how much data is collected, how likely all the interview questions and probes are to be asked, nor in terms of more subjective outcomes, such as rapport building, depth of responses, and the number and quality of themes that emerge. These are gaps in the literature that the current study fills.

2. The current study

The purpose of this study was to empirically compare and determine any differences in the quantity and quality of semi-structured interview data obtained from an adolescent population under online and face-to-face conditions. Given the prevalence of online information sharing among adolescents and research supporting online environments as ecologically valid social contexts for adolescents (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), the study hypothesized that interview data obtained online and face-to-face would likely differ in terms of the number of words produced, or how long it might take, but would not differ significantly for aspects of the interview relevant to the data's integrity, such as self-disclosure and the number and complexity of themes that emerge.

The online semi-structured interviews were conducted using a text-based, synchronous instant messaging software. We used a synchronous method, which allowed for real-time interactions between the researcher and the participant, to emulate a face-to-face setting as closely as possible. For example, synchronous interviews allow for a back-and-forth conversation where the

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