

social research Update

In-depth interviewing by Instant Messaging

Thiago O. Fontes

and

Michelle O'Mahony

Thiago.Fontes@rdsiresearch.co.uk

Michelle O'Mahony recently completed an MSc in Crime and Criminal Justice at the University of Surrey. She holds a BA (Hons) in Sociology and Economics from University College Cork. Her main interests include the social construction of gender, penology and diversionary tactics for 'at risk' youths.

Thiago O. Fontes is a qualitative market researcher with rdsi London. He holds a BSc (Hons) in Sociology and an MSc (Merit) in Social Research Methods from the University of Surrey. His main interests include Internet surveillance, social network websites, computer-mediated communication, and youth culture.

- **Instant Messaging is a cost and time effective method for in-depth interviewing**
- **Inability to use the software or have access to the internet may limit the sample, especially in developing countries**
- **Interviewing through Instant Messaging requires an understanding of the users' communication etiquette**

This *Update* was inspired by our experiences of using instant messaging as a research instrument in a study of online social network websites. In our research, we sought to challenge the assumption that social networking sites are mainly used to create new online friendships. We also wanted to determine the effects the technology had on users' existing offline relationships.

We studied five of the most popular social networking sites: Myspace, Bebo, Orkut, Cyworld and Facebook and found that these sites assist group cohesion and the maintenance of a wider social network. From the point of view of users, they can be regarded as an extremely interactive address book. This is achieved through a combination of direct (emails, in-built messaging, comments) and indirect (reading blogs, viewing pictures, videos) communication. Users do not use these sites to replace other means of communication. Instead, they

add to the user's repertoire of communication media, serving a specific purpose that is unavailable in other media, such as commenting on photos. Users can present a comprehensive account of their day to day lives via their blogs, photos and videos, all within one site. Social networking websites provide a range of tools that allow users to 'keep in touch' with friends and acquaintances of various degrees of intimacy in an unprecedented way. These sites also enable users to locate and connect with former friends and acquaintances.

In our project, we found an inverse relationship between the degree of friendship between users (from acquaintance to close friend) and the variety of ways in which they maintained contact with one another. Users tended to communicate with close friends via phone calls and text messaging as well as through networking sites, while they were most likely to use these sites almost exclusively to communicate with

The screenshot shows the Orkut profile of Thiago Fontes. The profile is set to 'myself' and displays various statistics: 20 scraps, 43 photos, 26 videos, 27 fans, and several status icons (trustworthy, cool, sexy). The profile is categorized into social, professional, and personal tabs. The 'personal' tab is active, showing fields for relationship status, birthday (June 8), age (25), languages spoken, and where he is from (friends). The 'about me' section contains the text: 'It is not new ideas that I'm afraid of. It's the old ones'. Other fields include children, ethnicity (other), religion, political view, humor (dry/sarcastic, clever/quick witted, obscure), sexual orientation (straight), fashion (casual, contemporary, minimal), smoking, drinking, pets, living situation (with roommate(s), friends visit often), hometown (Niteroi, Cambridge, Guildford, London, ???), and webpage (http://web.mac.com/thiago.fontes). To the right, there are sections for 'my friends (141)' and 'my communities (139)', each displaying a grid of profile pictures and names with their respective friend or member counts.

casual acquaintances, even though other methods were at their disposal. Our analysis revealed that users perceived phone calls and text messages to be more intimate than sending messages via these sites. Because the weaker the relationship between individuals, the less likely they are to communicate via 'intrusive' or 'personal' means, they relied on the networking sites to connect with casual friends and acquaintances.

In summary, we found that social networking sites enabled users to collate and maintain a wider network of friends and acquaintances than would otherwise be possible.

Using Instant Messaging as a research tool

As there is little existing research on the use of social networking sites, we decided to carry out an exploratory qualitative study, conducting 60 in-depth semi-structured interviews using instant messaging. The structure of the interviews was based on exploratory online ethnography carried out prior to the start of the project and was reviewed following a pilot study.

Participants were drawn from

England, Ireland, France, Italy, South Korea, Iceland and Brazil, all of whom were users of at least one of the social networking sites mentioned earlier. Instant messaging is a form of synchronous computer-mediated communication between two or more people using client programs such as MSN Messenger, ICQ, AOL and Yahoo! Messenger, as well as multi-protocol clients such as Trillian, Pidgin, Miranda and Adium. The origins of this technology can be found as far back as the 1970s, although widespread use for personal communication did not begin until the late 1990s. Today, instant messaging (hereafter, IM) clients such as the ones mentioned above are widely used for communication online, especially among younger users.

We chose IM for a variety of reasons. At a practical level, there were none of the costs that would have been the case had we chosen to conduct face-to-face interviews. In addition, our interviews would be automatically transcribed, which is something of great benefit to a group without funding or a great amount of time. Most importantly IM enabled us to conduct interviews

with participants from diverse geographical locations. This was key to our project, as it allowed us to research globally, without having to rely on a budget.

Email interviewing also has these benefits but also some significant disadvantages. Although repetitive email exchanges can "make interviewing a personal and thoughtful form of communication" (Kivitis, 2005:35), and enable participants to send rich responses to questions at their leisure, they may also decline or forget to answer. More importantly, IM interviews are dynamic, engaging the respondent to a greater extent than email (Mann and Stewart, 2000).

The choice of client

IM protocols such as the ones described above are among the most popular means of communication online today. However, they do not allow users to connect across platforms (e.g. an MSN Messenger user cannot contact an AOL user). Selection of a client is largely dependent on one's peer group and their choice, because of the inability to connect across platforms. Because our study was global in scope and would potentially sample

respondents who were users of different clients, we anticipated a problem with having to access different IM protocols. The way around this problem was to use multi-protocol clients. These allow one to connect with users from different IM clients. Although there is a large variety of multi-protocol clients available for free download, we have found that Trillian, Pidgin, Miranda and Adium were the most user friendly and were able to connect to a wider variety of popular IM clients.

Sampling

One of the main problems with conducting online research is the lack of a known universe from which samples can be acquired. We recruited our participants by posting requests on popular forums and community boards and by sending them private messages on the social networking sites we were studying. On average, over 60 per cent of those we sent direct messages to agreed to take part. It was assumed that those we were interested in interviewing were users of IM and this turned out to be the case. However when seeking out older respondents in particular, it would be wise to bear in mind that they make far less use of this medium than younger internet users.

Conducting the interviews

In practice we found great benefits

in using I.M, mostly inherent in the technology itself. Firstly, the lack of visual and auditory cues creates a level of detachment between the interviewers and the interviewees, which is particularly useful when conducting research on sensitive areas such as health, sexuality and so on. Although our topic was not of a sensitive nature, interviewees reported being at ease during the interview process and were generally happy to answer questions with a high level of detail. Another benefit of IM relates to the researcher's relationship with the data. Whereas in face-to-face or telephone interviewing the data must be manually recorded (in which case the researcher's attention is split between writing and conducting the interview), IM allows the researcher to concentrate on the interviewing process, while at the same time being able to review the transcript, something which is particularly useful for the development of probes and for the clarification of previous statements in the light of new ones. Because it is part of the IM etiquette to accept a delay between receiving a message and replying to it, we had time to consider our next questions carefully while waiting for responses, as well as the freedom to probe the interviewees when they gave unclear or interesting answers.

In IM, because posted messages can be lengthy, it is both acceptable

and necessary to take a minute after text has been posted to read and ... reflect upon what was said; a response is not expected to be immediate. (Mynett, E. et al. 2004: p 1346)

This, however, is also a negative aspect of IM While reflection is useful for the researcher, it may generate problems when spontaneous responses are essential, since interviewees are more likely to reflect upon their own responses prior to posting them, often leading to the editing of parts of or even the whole response. Mynett et al. (2004) deals with this issue in greater detail.

From the perspective of the respondents, IM exerts less pressure than face-to-face interviews, as interviewees can interrupt the session whenever they want to, and participate from a comfortable environment such as their home or work place. Participation requires little effort for the interviewee in comparison with other forms of interviewing and this helps to achieve a higher recruitment rate. From the researcher's point of view there are no costs incurred in conducting the interviews and time can be better managed, as interviews can be conducted more quickly. However, it is important to become familiar with the software before starting.

Our group was aware of the linguistic conventions available in text-based computer-mediated

communication, such as repetitions, abbreviations, verbal descriptions of feelings, sounds, emoticons and graphics, but if other researchers are not *au fait* with these aspects, they may not find the use of IM to be as rewarding. Emoticons are icon-sized graphic displays of facial expressions, actions and, in fact, anything which compensates for the lack of visual cues available in text-based IM communication. They can either be selected and inserted into the conversation from a menu, or automatically converted by the software when the user types the emoticon's code, if this is enabled in the software's setting. For example, if the user types :) the software will automatically convert it into ☺. Another convention in IM is the use of abbreviations. Like text messages sent through mobile phones, these abbreviations can be difficult to understand for someone who is not used to IM. Examples include TBH = to be honest, or LOL = laughing out loud. However, from our own experience, interviewees rarely respond with so many abbreviations that the whole text is incomprehensible, and are open to explaining what they mean.

Most IM clients (certainly the most widely used ones) have features that enable the automatic saving of conversations. This is perhaps the most important issue the researcher has to be aware of in terms of setting up the software, as those who will have accidentally closed windows containing hours worth of interviews and lost all the material will tell you. Auto-saving features allow the researcher to maintain a copy of the whole interview up to the point where it has been closed, thus making it easier to continue in case something goes wrong. However, auto-saving features have further benefits to research. When a conversation is automatically saved

by the IM client the transcription will be more elaborate than if the researcher had just copied and pasted the interview into a word processor. Auto-saved transcripts usually have the date at which the conversation took place, the exact time (including the seconds) at which a message was posted, and the codes for emoticons.

As with email interviews, it is useful (although not necessary) to create an IM account specifically for the research being carried out. This will allow the researcher to terminate the account at the end of the project, deleting the list of contacts and, thus, help to preserve confidentiality by making later identification of interviewees much more difficult.

Summary

We have seen how IM can be used as quite a sophisticated tool for qualitative research. The number of users is growing and the range of users is expanding, which will continue to broaden the opportunities for using this instrument. However, one should be aware of the risks and implications of carrying out research through IM, especially in regards to the representativeness of the sample, and the depth and the quality of the data acquired.

We found IM to be indispensable to our research and strongly encourage its wider use as a valuable research instrument.

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