1. COLLECTING DATA VIA INSTANT MESSAGING INTERVIEW AND FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW: THE TWO AUTHORS REFLECTIONS

A.R Aida1, H. Fairuz2, J. Woollard3

1Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (MALAYSIA)

2Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (MALAYSIA)

3University of Southampton (UNITED KINGDOM)

Abstract

The rise of digital communication has not only affected the way people in societies interact but also, it offers opportunities for researchers to interact with research participants. In previous years when telephone and email became the trending mode of communication, researchers started to employ telephone and email as the new tools for data collection. Nowadays, many people engage with instant messaging communication. Hence, this form of communication is an opportunity for researchers to explore as a mode for interview data collection. Nonetheless, instant messaging and face-to-face interactions are different in nature. Hence, it is worth understanding the affordances and the challenges of employing instant messaging interview (IMI) in comparison to face-to-face interview (FTFI) data collection mode.  This paper draws on two authors’ experiences of collecting qualitative data via IMI and FTFI. Findings of the study show that IMI and FTFI offer different affordances in the planning, executing and processing of data collection. The insights from the encounters inform other qualitative researchers in making decisions regarding the best methods available for their studies.

Keywords: Instant messaging interview (IMI), Face-to-face interview (FTFI), Data collection

# INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research seeks for in-depth information. It requires great commitment from both the participants and the researcher starting from the planning stage to the producing stage. In the following article, we will present two novice researchers’ reflections on their experiences in planning, executing and processing of data collection via instant messaging interview and face-to-face interview. The challenges and the effectiveness of both modes will be discussed in each data collection stage.

According to Rowley [1], there are a number of literatures devoted specifically to interviews which are very valuable but can be a little daunting for the novice interviewer who is seeking a relatively quick and pragmatic approach to conducting interviews and analysing interview data. Given the real-world context in which most qualitative research is carried out, according to Devers and Frankel [2], identifying participants and negotiating access to research sites are challenging processes. Another challenge is when researchers need to conduct several follow-up interactions. Not only does it affect the timeline especially when the research participants are thousands of miles away but also the financial budget. In order to seek for in-depth data, qualitative researchers commonly conducted several follow-up interviews. Especially when the participants and researchers live far away from each other, the data collection process may become more complicated: the travelling will incur more costs and times. MacDougall and Fudge [3] proposed strategies which involve the three stages of prepare, contact, and follow-up. The preparation and follow-up stages can require considerable time and resources. In previous years, researchers utilised combined tools such as face-to-face interviews with telephone interviews to ease the data collection process especially when it needs several follow-up interviews.

In the 21st century, FTFI still remains significant as a one of the data collection methods. Perhaps the major advantage of using FTFI is the social presence of the participants. Studies show that FTFI carries the advantage of the social presence. FTFI is able to overcome false information and suspicious informants during screening questions particularly regarding age, gender and race of the participants [4]. It also provides opportunities for the interviewer to capture social cues of the participants [5]. Furthermore, interviewer would be able to have control over the interviewee to keep them focus until the completion of the interview session [5]. However, the high exposure of the social presence of the interviewer could also cause participants’ discomfort. The interviewer’s presence is viewed as “intruders into people homes and schedules, while the respondents have to welcome strangers into their homes and they must be sufficiently prepared for social encounter” (p.292) [4]. The major disadvantages of FTFI includes the high travelling costs such as transportation fare, fuels and tolls. Hence, there is pressure to substitute the costly FTFI with the affordable interview methods that offer advantages similar to FTFI.

“Despite the longstanding common wisdom on FTF interviewing – that it leads to the best participation, data quality, and respondent satisfaction – recent changes in people’s use of new communication modes make it unclear where FTF interviewing now falls in comparison with other possible interviewing modes” (p.298) [4]

In current lifestyles, the use of personal, mobile, and digital technologies is frequent [6]. Contemporary society socialises via online more than they do offline [7]. Hence, researchers need to adapt to the changes in the way people are communicating now-a-days if they are to effectively engage in studying about society and interactions [7]. Kaplan and Haenlein [8] defined social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (p.61). It creates opportunities for constant connectivity and communication to be utilised as learning tool [9] [10] as well as a marketing tool [11]. Nevertheless, there is lack of empirical evidence that shows the effectiveness of using social media as a data collecting tool.

In this paper we reflect on our experiences in collecting data via instant messaging interview and face-to-face interview. The insights from the encounters inform other qualitative researchers in making decisions regarding the best methods available for their studies.

# METHODOLOGY

The reflections involved two researchers who met the criteria below:

1. Both researchers conducted a qualitative research.

2. The data were collected via interviews.

3. Both researchers’ respondents were from the same country.

4. Both researchers studied in the United Kingdom.

5. The data were collected from participants in Malaysia.

The respondents in both researchers’ studies are government servants from education sectors in Malaysia. Therefore, both researchers were subject to the same research data collection policy; and their respondents have similar working cultures.

WhatsApp was utilised as the affordance for IMI. This is because findings from a study on the level of digital maturity among 2124 Malaysian smart phone users by Azman *et al.* [12] revealed that Malaysians are above average in digital maturity in terms of intensity of usage of smart phone functions, facilities, and apps. More than 70% of the respondents use mobile apps and functions such as social media (Facebook/Twitter), instant messaging (WhatsApp/Viber/Skype), and mobile apps from ‘Play Store’ or ‘App Store’.

Both researchers reflected their data collection experiences in three important stages, namely: the planning, executing and processing of data collection.

# results and discussion

The reflections from the two authors are divided into three main sections: the planning, executing and processing stages. The reflections on the planning stage include the process of participants’ recruitment; the executing stage describe the implementation process of collecting the data; and the processing stage address the activities involved after the data were collected before they were generated as findings.

## The Data Collection Planning Stage

In this section, the authors reflected on how they recruit the participants. Participants’ recruitment involved the process of approaching the participants, getting the agreement for participation and the rapport building with the participants.

The author who collected the data via IMI reflected the planning experience as follows:

*“In this study, I hold a position of an outsider because the participants were primary school teachers, and I am an academic in a public university. An academic stepping into the primary school territory can raise the participants' curiosity and concern. Therefore, 2 moderators who are primary school teachers themselves were engaged to assist me in the beginning of the study. Because of the engagement of a mediator in data collection process, it was easier to get access and to approach the participants. The instant messaging environment facilitated the engagement of moderators. Seven teachers were contacted via WhatsApp. One teacher agreed to be the mediator, and one teacher recommended the second mediator. The second mediator’s contact was also sent to me via WhatsApp. 15 participants whom I was introduced to by the mediators as well as by others participants (snowball effect). The next stage is the challenge to build a rapport between the researcher and the participants. Not everyone enjoys virtual relationships. By using IMI to identify respondents, they will be an IMI fan and IMI savvy. Via literature reviews WhatsApp is a most popular social medium among Malaysians.*

*IMI allows the researcher to brief participants on the research project through a series of chatting events. The participants can ask several questions and clarifications before they agreed to participate in the study. One of them even asked me if I work for the ministry. I convinced them that I work independently and their identity will be kept confidential. After the participants have agreed to participate they need to receive an agreement/ethics form. That is done through a WhatsApp’s document attachment. The participants sign the agreements, scan and return via WhatsApp too.”*

The author who collected the data via FTFI reflected the planning experience as follows:

*“The process of getting approval from the agencies is relatively challenging. The bureaucratic procedures in the centralised system in Malaysia take a significant amount of time. First, in order to get the consent from the participants, I have to go through each agency to inform about the research that will be conducted. The process is as similar as to gain the approval from the gatekeeper in Malaysia. Obtaining the approval from the gatekeeper is not a guarantee to have access to all the government and private agencies’ preschools. Secondly, the email system is not used efficiently as a main medium of interaction in Malaysian schools. After sending emails to particular agencies to get the approval, it is necessary to follow up by phone calls to inform them about the email. Occasionally, emails are sent to the wrong person even though the person was suggested by an officer in the agency itself. Emails can be passed through several departments.*

*Upon gaining the approval from each agency, the participants can be approached providing them with the approvals from agency for which they worked, the participant information sheets created as part of the UK ethics process and consent forms required by the research protocol. The participants are usually given 2 weeks to decide and return the forms. All these documents were sent and returned through email. It is important to develop a rapport with the participants by getting their contact numbers and email addresses prior to interview. The importance and efficacy of having telephone conversations and email exchanges to allow them to be briefed about the research project is important”*

It is interesting to note the different interview time preferences between the participants interviewed via IMI and FTFI. The participants who agreed to participate in IMI preferred to be interviewed after their office hours. However, the participants preferred to be interviewed during office hours for the face-to-face interview sessions. One of the possible reasons could be the flexibility that social media have to allow people to remain connected as it is free and easy to use [9] and available through mobile device [13]. Besides, social media is structured as personal communication network [14] which not only connect between friends but also possibility between strangers [15]. Hence the participants involved in IMI via WhatsApp prefer to be interviewed after their designated working time. Another implication for the participants of FTFI’s interview time preference is that the researcher who conducted the FTFI interviews had to obtain permissions to enter the government premises where the participants work.

## The Data Collection Execution Stage

In this section, the researchers reflected on how they execute the data collection. The reflection includes the experience in setting of interview meeting; travelling time and expanses; the participants’ commitment and the follow-up interviews.

The researcher who collected the data via IMI reflected the data collection execution experience as follows:

*“There is a lot of flexibility in setting interview appointment with the participants. Participants and interviewers are not tied to fix a meeting schedule. Within the seven months of the data collection execution, some of the participants go for training, workshops etc. So those who have work commitments can still participate when they are free to participate. The participants are required to view three videos. The interviews are on the participants’ reflections of the videos viewed. Hence, prior to the interview sessions there is a wait for the participants to finish viewing the videos. The first week after all the participants received the links to videos, the respondents’ immediate engagement is variable but, as can be seen, the IMI process did not make this problematic. [T1 was involved in schools’ sports event for two weeks and T2 was involved in training for cricket umpire in different state at the same time. Only T3 responded that she had viewed the first video. After two weeks, T1 responded by saying that she is ready to view the videos that I have shared in the group. T1 return with her responses twelve days after that. When T1 and T2 took part in the research, T3 was away for schools’ sports event. T3 responded a week later after T1 responded but requested that I interview her personally.] The IMI accommodates the different levels and different times of engagement of respondents.*

*By allowing more time and flexibility for the participants to take part, the participants are happy that they are not ‘forced’ to participate. They can respond whenever they are ready to respond. By using WhatsApp as the interview platform, the participants who are not comfortable to answer the questions in groups may send me an answer in a private message. Hence, the communication with the participants is the way the participants prefer. The many respondents are mothers. Some of them did not respond to my question and come back a few minutes later. Some even replied the next day. It is possible to chat with the respondents after their office hours and during weekends. If there is an urgent question to ask or to follow-up, it is possible to just leave them a message and wait for them to reply whenever they are free to reply”*

The researcher who collected the data via FTFI reflected the collection execution experience as follows:

*“In my research, I explore the perception of school leaders’ leadership practice in preschool through face to face interview. In this investigation, by using purposive sampling, I selected 2 principals, 2 supervisors and 13 teachers from private and public preschools as my interviewees. The data collection is through semi-structured interviews of approximately 30-45 minutes, arranged by individual appointment letting them choose convenient places. The agreed date and time were set up through phone calls. Three out of four of the school leaders agreed to be interviewed in their school premises. Only one of the school leaders (preschool) chose a place nearby her office.*

*In the Malaysian context, entering preschool premises for the purpose of conducting research, merely needs the approval from the agency and school leaders without obtaining official government clearance such as a criminal records check as most developed countries do.*

*During the interview session, face to face contact allows me to get more in-depth information and provide a comprehensive understanding of the context and responses as I can probe for explanations. I am able to observe the voice, intonation, facial expression and body language of participants. I am also able to get spontaneous responses without extended reflection. I can react directly on what they say or do. Furthermore, I can request some related documents that are mentioned in the interviews.*

*Alongside with the benefits of the face to face interviews, there were also the drawbacks. Time is an important factor; I was only able to conduct 2 interviews in a day. This is due to the fixed preference of time given by most of the participants is between 1pm, after the preschool hours, to 5pm, before working hours end. Most of them were unwillingly to stay after working hours. Within the duration of four hours it is theoretically possible to conduct more than 2 interviews with the participants but not in practice because of participants’ time to have lunch, perform prayer and prepare for tomorrow’s lesson.*

*A challenge is the participants’ engagement or lack of engagement. One of the participants took interview session inappropriately by eating her lunch. I expected that she would focus on the interview. However, the interview became ineffective and as a result, the interview session was lost because of inadequate information due to the low response rate.*

*I experienced a different of quality information given in the interview between the superiors (school leaders) and the subordinates (teachers). Superiors respond with a lengthy answer and provide more information whilst the subordinates (teachers) appear reluctant to share their insight on their leaders’ practice. This reflects the respondents’ insecure feeling because (1) the principal is around the premises even though the interviews are conducted individually in a closed room and, (2) of being recorded, although they were informed beforehand. I am aware that when interviews end the recorder is off, the teachers started to give me rich information about their school leader’s practice. I have to keep on convincing them that the information given is anonymous and they will not be identified. After the FTFI, follow-ups are conducted through telephone interview.*

*Face to face interviewing is expensive. For example, flight tickets to travel from UK to Malaysia to conduct the interview and had to consider the time factor because of jetlag for about one week. Conducting the interviews in the city areas, because of traffic jams, require planning and allowing extra time to avoid being late for interviews. Other cost such as tolls, fuel, participant’s souvenirs are significant. It is appropriate to prepare a reasonable souvenir for the participants as in Malaysian culture the visitor’s courtesy is to bring some souvenir for the hosts; it is considered as a good manner.*

Because of its time flexibility, utilising IMI requires more times for the participants at their convenience. The researcher does not have the authority to demand an immediate answer from the participants, unlike the FTFI tool. The researcher who utilises FTFI receives the data on a fixed time schedule.

Despite its rich and diverse ecology, social media allows the users to be in-control of their identity disclosure [16]. Their images, real name and address will remain unknown unless they decide to reveal themselves. However, a cautious participant may seek a confirmation of their identity anonymity. Hence, the participants interviewed via IMI could feel more secure and freer to speak [10].

## The Data Collection Processing Stage

In this section, the researchers reflected on how they process the data which involves the data transcription and analysis.

The researcher who collected the data via IMI reflected the data processing experience as follows:

*Since the participants type their answer in the WhatsApp, I could just copy their answer and paste them into other documents. WhatsApp is available in desktop version so it is easier to copy the interview messages from WhatsApp in one window and paste them onto word document into another window. To make the participants anonymous, using the find-and-replace function to replace the participants’ real identity with the participants’ code is efficient. The transcription process has never been easier. It took around 2 weeks to transfer the data from WhatsApp chats with 15 respondents into research. During the analysis, it is sometimes necessary to clarify some information given by the participants or there is a need to make further interview to understand certain data better. It is possible to text participants at any time I need, and responses can be prompt. There are some occasions requiring reference to the participants answers several weeks or months later. The participants can forget their answers. However, with the copy and reply button available in WhatsApp, the particular response could be cited during the follow-up interview. I found that all of the respondents were able to recall their answers.”*

The researcher who collected the data via FTFI reflected the data processing experience as follows:

*“The transcribing process takes a long time. For 17 interviews, the process took nearly four months. All the audios from recording device are transferred into the written form considering the non-verbal dimension and expressions of the participants. It is important that the interviewer and the transcriber are the same person so that the expressions, intonations and body language of the participants can be recalled and remembered. This provides extra information of the context described by the participants. The transcriptions later are given to the participants to confirm the accuracy.*

*During analysis of the data, some of the ambiguous information, abbreviation and terms need to be clarified. When the transcriber is thousands of miles away from the participants, further face to face interviews are not possible. The researcher has to be pragmatic. The follow-up clarifications are done through phone calls, email and instant messaging. It is noted that: the follow-ups are easy and run smoothly; and a greater amount of information can be gained compared to face to face interview. Increased data occurs when the follow-up is among the teachers. There seems to be more comfort as there is no social presence involved during the conversations. In contrast, the follow up with the school leaders is relatively difficult because of a very low response rate to email and phone calls”.*

Transcribing is the first step in interview data processing. It involves five listening steps: warm-up, follow-up, close, repeated/selection and analytical listening [17]. The comparison of both authors’ reflections indicate that IMI could save the researchers’ time and reduce the transcribing challenges as the data is already presented in the written form. Meanwhile in FTFI, the transcribing process require a greater amount of time as the researcher have to listen carefully, repeatedly and attentively.

In circumstances where clarification of data is needed, IMI offers the facilities of ‘copy and reply button’ for the participant’s references. However, in the case of FTFI, the researcher needs to describe the situation to the participant for further clarification. The nature of face-to-face interviews offers an advantage of social cues such as voice, intonation, facial expression and body language would be an extra information for interviewer where interviewer can reflect the verbal answers given by the interviewee [5]. However, the social presence of interviewees during the interview session may cause discomfort as the interviewer may portrayed as intruder of their time and place [4].

Cost is the major disadvantage of face-to-face interviewer requires travelling cost. The interviewer needs to consider the allocation of budget and financial resources capacity [5]. In contrast, IMI offers very least cost with more affordable remote interviewing with less pressure to find the funds [4].

# CONCLUSIONS

This reflection paper demonstrates that IMI and FTFI interactions are different in nature. Findings of the study show that IMI and FTFI offer different affordances in the planning, executing and processing of data collection. Table 1 below summarizes the differences of IMI and FTFI affordances in the planning, executing and processing of data collection.

Table 1. Affordances of IMI and FTFI for data collection.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mode | Planning Stage | Execution Stage | Processing Stage |
| IMI | 1. Ease of sharing potential participants’ contacts. 2. More negotiation opportunities for recruitment. 3. Participants prefer the interviews to be conducted after office hours. 4. Allow documents sharing. | 1. Flexibility to conduct interview – time & place. 2. Reduce discomfort of being known. 3. Very minimal cost. 4. Facilitate para-linguistic data such as emoticons and stickers. 5. Interpretation of para-linguistic data could be deceiving. 6. Direct responses which allow participant to probe for further explanation in flexible time. | 1. Ease transcribing process 2. Reduce transcription mistakes 3. Convenient for follow-up interviews. |
| FFI | 1. Participants prefer the interviews to be conducted during office hours. 2. Require permission to enter premises. 3. Ethical approval needs to be obtained from different agencies | 1. Fixed preference time. 2. Travelling cost and time consumption 3. Affordability to observe voice, intonation and body language 4. Provide comprehensive understanding about the context 5. Direct responses which allow participant to probe for further explanation on time. 6. High commitment of participant in face to face interview may prolong the interviews. 7. Discomfort of being recorded and interviewed in working premises – lack of in-depth information. 8. Follow-up interviews need to be done through emails and phone calls. | 1. Take longer time for transcribing process. 2. Able to recall the participants’ intonation, body language whilst interpreting data. 3. Challenging in conducting follow up interviews. |

IMI and FTFI offer similar affordances as data collection tools during the planning process. The researchers who utilised IMI and FTFI faced the same challenges in approaching possible candidates to be the respondents for their studies. However, the researcher who utilised FTFI is subject to the rules and regulations for entering workplace premises if the participants prefer to be interviewed during working hours. During the data collection, IMI offers more flexibility for the researcher and the participants compared to FTFI. However, the researcher who utilised FTFI has the advantage to observe the participants’ body language, facial expression and voice intonation which provide social cues to the researcher when interpreting the interview data. The researcher received the participants’ responses at the dedicated interview time which enable the researcher to process the data according to her plan. Another significant difference between IMI and FTFI is the comfort that IMI offers to the participants who fear their identities or answers will be exposed. The reflections from both researchers indicate that IMI offers great benefits during the data processing stage. IMI reduces the researcher’s burden in transcribing interview scripts, increase the accuracy of the transcriptions and ease the follow-up process.

In conclusion, FTFI is still a relevant data collection mode. However, IMI offers several facilities that could overcome and equip qualitative researchers with challenges and difficulties during the planning data collection event; executing the data collection planned; and processing the data collected.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thanks to University of Southampton RTSG for funding the data collection and the authors for INTED 2019 conference.

REFERENCES

1. J. Rowley, “Conducting research interviews.” *Management Research Review*, *35*(3/4), pp.260-271. 2012.
2. K.J. Devers, and R.M. Frankel, “Study design in qualitative research--2: Sampling and data collection strategies.” *Education for health*, *13*(2), p.263. 2000.
3. C. MacDougall and E. Fudge, "Planning and recruiting the sample for focus groups and in-depth interviews." *Qualitative health research* 11, no. 1: 117-126. 2001.
4. M.F. Schober, "The future of face-to-face interviewing", Quality Assurance in Education, Vol. 26 Issue: 2, pp.290-302, 2018. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-06-2017-0033
5. R. Opdenakker, “Advantages and Disadvantages of Four Interview Techniques in Qualitative Research” Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 7(4), pp.1-12. 2006. Retrieved from <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0604118>.
6. D. Oblinger, J.L. Oblinger, and J.K. Lippincott, “Educating the Net Generation”. Brockport Bookshelf. 272. 2005. Retrieved from: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/bookshelf/272>
7. P. St. John Frisoli, “Internet/Virtual Ethnography” IN: *Marshall, C. and Rossman, G.B. (eds.)* *Designing qualitative research*. Sage publications. 2014.
8. A. Kaplan, and M. Haenlein, “Users of the world, unite! The challenge and opportunities of social media”. *Business Horizons*. 53, 59-68. doi:10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003. 2010.
9. J.E. Rodriguez, Social media use in higher education: Key areas to consider for educators.MERLOT *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* Vol. 7, No. 4, December 2011.
10. A. Henderson and R. Bowley, Authentic dialogue? The role of ‘friendship’ in a social media recruitment campaign. *Journal of Communication Management* 14(3) 2011.
11. A. Whiting, and D. Williams, “Why people use social media: a uses and gratifications approach.” *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 16(4), pp.362-369. 2013.
12. H. Azman, A. Salman, N.A. Razak, and S. Hussin, Determining Digital Maturity Among ICT Users In Malaysia *Malaysian Journal of Communication* 30(1), pp. 22-34. 2014.
13. J. Gikas, and M.M. Grant, “Mobile computing devices in higher education: Student perspectives on learning with cellphones, smartphones & social media.” *The Internet and Higher Education*, *19*, pp.18-26. 2013.
14. D.M. Boyd, & N.B. Ellison, (2007). “Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13(1), 2007. Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>
15. D. Beer, “Social network(ing) sites; revisiting the story so far: a response to Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison”, *Journal of Computer‐mediated Communication*, Vol. 13 No. 2, pp. 516‐29. 2008.
16. J.H. Kietzmann, K. Hermkens, I.P. McCarthy, and B.S. Silvestre, “Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media.” *Business Horizons*, *54*(3), pp. 241-251. 2011.
17. H.P, Widodo, "Methodological considerations in interview data transcription." *International Journal of Innovation in English Language Teaching and Research* 3(1) pp. 101-107. 2014.