

FAQ 29: What do I need to know to do research with children online?

What's the issue?

Online methods have become increasingly popular, challenging and complementing traditional data collection methods and raising new methodological issues in media research and other social sciences. In part, online methods may be used to compensate for the difficulties of offline methods, capitalizing on the infrastructure provided by the internet (e.g. in recruiting internet users). In part, online methods are used specifically to research online phenomena (e.g. what do people do on social networking sites?). Online methods raise some new challenges regarding access, consent, and ethics, especially but not only when researching children. They also permit research on emerging phenomena (e.g. new forms of social interaction online).

Common practice

- Online quantitative methods are generally used for researching the demographics and attitudes of internet users (e.g. via an online survey). Online qualitative methods are more suitable for in-depth study of online cultural and social contexts (e.g. virtual ethnography).
- Beyond the role of the facilitator of traditional methods, online applications have offered space for the development of new methods for automated data collection, such as logging and metrics of online visits/usage statistics.
- Online (as offline) research questions should be addressed differently in diverse modalities of communication (chat rooms, forums, blogs, etc.), taking into account the different features and practicalities of each. For example, you can browse through a guest book from a blog without leaving any trace of your presence, but the same cannot be said when you enter a chat room. Real-time communication makes it awkward to observe without interacting, while asynchronous communication makes it possible.
- It is not easy to ensure that all ethical imperatives (e.g. participants' informed consent and confidentiality) are met and, at the same time, manage to carry out fieldwork.
- Online interviews save time and money, but they have to be prepared properly. Furthermore, online methods require a lot of extra skills and effort from researchers. They have to know how to use appropriate software, how to conduct the interview online (how to ask questions, etc.), and be able to follow (written) cues left by interviewees (which means being able to read between the lines, understand specific abbreviations and emoticons, etc.).
- MSN and other instant messaging programmes can be used as tools for research. Keeping a record of MSN conversations, with the interviewee's permission for this, is a good way of using the internet as a research tool and information resource.
- There are no easy answers to the question of authenticity – whether your interviewees online really are who they say they are.
- Considerable value may be drawn from online content itself. As well as specific content produced by online users (such as web pages or blogs), most online use leaves visible traces (messages in guest books, forums, etc.). Content analysis provides many opportunities for researchers but poses some practical problems, as this abundant material can be hard to manage. One commonly used option is to draw a sample (e.g. sampling messages posted in a specific time period or in particular forums).

Questions to consider

Are you using online methods to compensate for the limits of offline methods, or as a matter of convenience? Or because the internet is specifically of interest to the research question? How can you define the population from which you draw your sample? Are you studying individuals' activities online, or online practices or representations (whose relation to offline individuals is less relevant)? Is it important to know, in your research, that the respondents are of the age or gender that they claim? How will you relate what people do offline and online? Are the ethical issues, specific to online research, taken into account?

Pitfalls to avoid

- Although online methods provide advantages with regard to access to remote populations and automated data collection, which reduce research time, cost, and effort, think carefully about the disadvantages that may affect the quality of the data collected, such as inaccurate sampling frames, irregular response rates, response duplication, and participant deception.
- For researchers aiming to conduct an online survey, there are clear difficulties in drawing a random representative sample online. In online surveys, the respondents are usually self-selected and there is a lack of a central registry of web users that would allow the researcher to follow consistent sampling procedures.
- When conducting real-time online qualitative interviews or online focus groups, ask respondents to use the typing progress indicator (a small pen, keyboard, or a small icon to indicate which person in a conversation is typing) in order to limit the typing to one person at a time.

A researcher's experience

In my online interviews with teenagers (aged 15–18), I noticed that it is of particular importance to find a strategy to reduce the ongoing possibility of distractions and interruptions that might prevent an interviewee from being fully engaged in the interview. I practised three tactics to deal with interruptions and disturbance issues. First, it is crucial to provide participants with flexibility in choosing the time suitable for an interview. Second, we have to inform them in advance about the approximate length of the interviews and ask them to suggest the time, which suited them best. Next, it is useful to ask the participants to acknowledge the importance of not suspending the interview once started. When the interviewee requests an interruption (break), it is particularly recommended when the interviewee asks for a shorter break (up to 20 minutes). However, if the interviewee decides to take a longer break, there is a high possibility that the interview would remain uncompleted, so it is best to try to keep them in the interview. There were also cases when interviewees did not announce their breaks but just disappeared. In such instances, I would recommend being patient and tactical, trying to see the positive side of breaks. I looked at breaks as an opportunity to read the transcription in order to check what had been discussed, what still needed to be examined, and how to continue the interview. It also gave space for reflection by either party. To sum up, being a good online interviewer means being patient. (Bojana Lobe, Slovenia)

In my research on privacy strategies that 13- to 16-year-old teens implement on social media I decided to conduct written interviews via MSN Messenger because the internet was the natural environment of online socialization. The target group consisted of MSN Messenger users and online interviews helped in reaching out to a larger group of teens concerned about their confidentiality. The respondents would not have agreed to face-to-face conversations on such delicate topics. My experience showed that it is vital to thoroughly prepare the young respondents for the interview, explaining how important it is to be fully engaged throughout the conversation, and not dealing with other activities at the time of the interview. The researcher also has to take into account that written interviews take much more time than oral ones, and the respondents might be tired towards the end. To deal with the time pressure, the researcher should carefully choose, formulate, and line up the questions. When analysing the transcripts later, the researcher has to consider the emoticons and other cues to decode whether the respondent was serious, made fun of something, or used irony. My respondents really opened up via the communication channel that was familiar and safe for them, and gave me a lot of sincere and high-quality research material. Furthermore, they could quote and copy messages or posts they had previously made on social media that gave me a lot more information. (Egle Oolo, Estonia)

References and further resources

- Fielding, N.G., Lee, R.M., & Blank, G. (eds) (2008). *The SAGE handbook of online research methods*. London: Sage Publications.
- Hine, C. (ed.) (2005). *Virtual methods: Issues in social research on the internet*, Oxford: Berg.
- Salmons, J. (2010). *Online interviews in real time*. London: Sage Publications.