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The Development of Synchronous Text-based Instant Messaging as an Online Interviewing Tool

Abstract

The article reports the development of a synchronous text-based online interviewing tool with a continuity of private discussion that is not achieved in open-ended questionnaires, email interviews and online discussion boards. The participants were women who had undergone a surgical or natural menopause, who in a pilot interview highlighted the potential sensitivity of this subject and inspired the implementation of this method. The overall feedback was positive with the main advantages centred on feelings of anonymity, convenience and a more comfortable interview environment. Disadvantages included lack of body language and technical issues with computers. This technique ensures a degree of confidentiality while still obtaining depth of enquiry, where other qualitative methods potentially risk invading a participant's privacy. It can be offered both alongside other interviewing techniques to allow participant choice, and on its own when exploring sensitive and personal topics or when extra participant anonymity is appropriate.

Keywords: data collection; internet research; synchronous interviews, electronic; menopause; hysterectomy; instant messenger; online technologies; qualitative; psychology.

Introduction

The quality of research is completely dependent on the quality of the data gathered. In the 1920s, Edward Thorndike provided the first evidence that people adopt personality traits based on another person's appearance and presence; the halo effect. Ever since, a person's self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Jones, 1964; Leary, 1996) and their complementarity (Bohr, 1998) with research methods have been two very important considerations in scientific research. Self-presentation is not usually a conscious act and reflects an on-going concern with the impressions individuals portray to other people in the hope that they will be judged positively. Self-presentation is a complex topic based around how we judge ourselves and how we manage the image we project to others emotionally, physically, financially, cognitively and behaviourally (Leary, 1996).

In relation to science, researchers need to consider how participants' self-presentation concerns might impact on the findings and therefore possibly change the accuracy of the results. This social desirability bias is more commonly reflected upon by critical realists in social science research, especially in qualitative studies where the interviewer effect is more pertinent (Stacey & Vincent, 2011). Participants may give answers to interviewers that make them appear like a 'good' interviewee, seem an expert on the topic, or provide more socially acceptable responses (Smith, 1995). Further, the researcher can be viewed as an authority figure, and the participant may wish to give a pleasing impression, or feel uncomfortable about opening up when they perceive an unequal power relationship. In an attempt to reduce these concerns, researchers can carry out the research in a neutral or familiar setting to the participant, pose open, non-leading questions, and build rapport by starting with more general questions and then funnel down to specific queries (Smith, 1995). Participants may be distracted by their interest in the researcher and start asking questions of them or be

influenced by the researcher's personal factors, such as gender, age and clothing, in addition to the actual questions asked and their phrasing (Lewis, 1995). The researcher, therefore, needs to disentangle how their active participation influences the results of the study (Dockrill et al., 2000).

In science, complementarity (Bohr, 1998) is referred to as the impossibility of separating the behaviour of a system and the interaction with its measuring instruments. The idea is more commonly used in quantum mechanics, but is highly relevant to any research with living organisms, especially work conducted within the social sciences. In fact, the assumed existence of complementarity is one of the key arguments for the use of mixed methods to investigate topics in social sciences (Tashakkori & Teddie, 2010). It is therefore important to reflect upon the research design used in each study and the resulting influence on the participants and researchers involved in this process. In recent times, there has been an increase in the use of technology to support research studies. It is therefore important to consider how the technologies enhance or detract from our inquiries.

Over recent years, researchers have been exploring a range of data collection methods using computer technology and the internet. This has enabled ease of access to larger populations and increased response rates for survey-based studies. As online questionnaires became more accessible and reliable, researchers explored the use of open-ended questions more frequently within these surveys (Dillman et al., 2009, Reardon & Grogan, 2011), and through other internet-based means, such as email interviews (James, 2007, Meho, 2006, Murray, 2005, Murray & Sixsmith, 2002) and online discussion boards (Im, Liu, Dormire & Chee, 2008; Moloney et al., 2004, Seymour, 2001). Instant Messaging (IM) services, such as MSN Messenger and Skype, have been recommended as online interviewing tools, as both enable a synchronous method of exchange between the interviewer and the participant

(Kazmer & Xie, 2008, Opdenakker, 2006). This potentially solves the problems with discontinuous communication in previous online interview techniques (James & Busher, 2006). Compared to discontinuous tools such as email interviewing, IM is a conversational form of dialogue, which increases the validity of the method (Brewer, 2000).

There are three main methods of communication through a private forum when using IM services such as MSN Messenger and Skype. These include microphones (aural-IM), web cameras (visual-IM) and an area on which to type on the screen in a conversational style (text-IM). MSN Messenger was originally developed as a synchronous text-IM service, and Skype was a video-chat service predominating in aural and visual forms of IM. Both of these IM services have now developed and provide the user with the ability to choose from a combination of synchronous text, visual and aural-IM services. Overall, IM is better suited for research when interview times can be organised in advance, as opposed to random cold calling. Aural-IM using a microphone is equivalent to an organised telephone interview (Drew and Sainsbury, 2010, Feveile et al., 2007) and can be combined with visual-IM using a webcam in order to add communication through facial expression and body language (Hanna, 2012). Although research has been investigating the use of text-only interviews through a range of methods, the unique feature of using an Instant Messaging service to carry out interviews is the ability to carry out a synchronous discussion with the participant (Brewer, 2000).

Conferencing software has been explored as text-based interviews by O'Connor and Madge (2001) with the claim that they are synchronous. However, in this research the interviews were not truly synchronous as they were not carried out with an interviewer and a respondent online at the same time. The interviewer posted a question and the participant responded anytime convenient to them. Although these interviews eliminated the need to set

up a mutually convenient interview time, it reduced the continuity of interaction with the interviewer and the immediacy with the topic. Thus far, the existing text-based interviewing tools lack the continuity in discussion that is achieved through face-to-face, telephone and online visual/audio interviews (James & Busher, 2006).

This article presents the development of a synchronous text-IM tool implemented as part of the first author's Doctoral research (Author(s), 2010, Author(s), 2011). The tool was used within a qualitative study that aimed to investigate the experiences of women who had either undergone a hysterectomy resulting in a surgical menopause, or a natural menopausal transition. Prior to this qualitative study, a pilot focus group interview had been carried out with women experiencing the menopausal transition who were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling.

It became clear through talking with the women that the menopause was seen as a taboo or sensitive subject to discuss, especially if discussing the topic with those who were not or had not experienced the menopause themselves. The participants highlighted during discussion that some women may be less likely to disclose personal information to somebody younger than themselves who has not yet experienced the menopause. For example, women experiencing the menopausal transition may experience symptoms that may cause embarrassment during discussion, such as changes in sex drive, dyspareunia (pain during sex), and heavy menstrual bleeding. Additionally the menopausal transition is associated with bodily change and concerns, which is considered a sensitive topic in the extant literature where computer-based interviews are considered appropriate (Lee & Lee, 2012).

The researcher conducting the interviews was a premenopausal 27 year old female at the time the research took place. As we wanted the interviewee to feel comfortable to open up and discuss their experiences, we considered alternative techniques to the common face-

to-face interview. A range of potential methods of data collection were discussed with the focus group interviewees. A consensus was reached that a method where the participant felt anonymous, yet was still engaged in a conversational style of dialogue was considered most suitable. We felt it was important to use a method that encouraged the participants to discuss personal matters with the interviewer to increase the credibility and depth of the research. We therefore judged the synchronous text-IM interviewing method to be the most appropriate to the topic and population of our research. The aim of this piece of research was to develop and evaluate the synchronous text-IM method. This occurred concurrently with the qualitative study examining the women's experiences of the menopause; however the results from that study are discussed in a separate article (see Author(s), in press).

Since the initial implementation of this method within this Doctoral work, the synchronous text-IM tool has been successfully applied to research examining the experiences of nonheterosexual people living with chronic illness. The authors use the implementation of this tool to further reflect on the use of synchronous text-based online interviews in psychology (Jowett et al., 2011). Compared to email interviews this synchronous method takes on a style closer to that of a conversation, while also allowing the participants to see and potentially reflect upon the dialogue so far via visual written 'record'. Unlike using the visual/aural –IM during interviews, this method reduces the amount of personal contact, such as communication through body language, voice and facial expression. Although this is possibly a disadvantage compared to a face-to-face interview, this technique has the benefit of an increased level of anonymity between the participant and the researcher.

Importantly, the use of this tool has the potential to dehumanise the interviewer and disperse any perceived unequal power relationship between the researcher and the participant, distorting any social desirability bias and reducing inhibition of the interviewee (Stacey &

Vincent, 2011). This, in turn, potentially results in a richer and more honest interview. Consequently, the synchronous text-IM method should be especially beneficial when interviewing hard-to-reach populations or when the interview topic is of a personal, illegal or sensitive nature. Due to the complementarity between the participant, researcher and the research measure being used, we believe that this extra guard of anonymity will reduce the possible biases involved between the researcher and the participant, therefore increasing the validity of the interview.

Using this technique could encourage participants to feel more at ease and comfortable to discuss the topic in more depth compared to a face-to-face interview, while keeping more verbal and affective intimacy than in an email interview (Hu et al., 2004). However, the details of the logistics and utility of this synchronous text-IM tool are still missing from published research. Additionally, as the synchronous text-IM tool has so far been applied in ideographic phenomenological research, we felt it was important to gather feedback from the participants of this innovative online method. This paper therefore empirically examined how the synchronous text-IM method can be operationalised while gathering feedback from participants to aid critical reflection and future development of this method.

Methods

Participants

We recruited twenty female participants, aged 46-59, through community advertisements. The advertisements were distributed as posters with pull off tags detailing the first author's contact details. These were placed on bulletin boards and, most successfully, on the inside door of individual toilet stalls in places such as petrol stations, shopping and leisure centres.

The posters in women's toilets enabled women to take a tag in privacy, thus increasing confidentiality and allowing them to control any self-presentation concerns. The text-IM method not only facilitated participant anonymity, but also provided more recruitment choice, while reducing effort in terms of location, travel and associated logistical challenges (Moloney et al., 2004). Consequently, participants were recruited from all over England.

This research recruited women who had either undergone a surgically-induced menopause (n=8) or were experiencing a natural menopause (n=12). The former had all undergone the minimum of a total hysterectomy because of a medical condition and were pre-menopausal prior to the operation. The latter discussed their experience of a natural menopausal transition ranging from the perimenopause to the early postmenopause stages. All of the participants described themselves as white, living in the UK and having children.

Procedure

An information sheet was provided to participants, along with the opportunity to discuss any queries with the researcher throughout all stages of the research process. As recommended by Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) contact details of menopause associations for professional advice and support were provided to participants as part of their information sheet.

Participants completed a consent form before participating in the one-to-one online interview with the first author. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were ensured and the study was approved by the research ethics committee of a large University in the UK. Participants were informed that they did not have to answer a question they were uncomfortable with, and of their right to withdraw from the study. All consent forms were separately stored from the interview data and participants were assigned ID codes and pseudonyms from the beginning of the research to protect participant identity.

The interviews took place at the participants' convenience. Therefore, the time it took to recruit the participants and their availability determined their interview order. After the first ten (half) were interviewed, their feedback on the synchronous text-IM was analysed in order to incorporate any feedback into the use of the tool for the remaining ten interviews. The interviews were conducted using MSN Messenger as the online interviewing tool. An account was set up and participants were provided with a unique username and a log in password to ensure anonymity. The interviewer informed the participants that she would be available on email and signed on to MSN in the hour prior to the scheduled interview to offer assistance or answer any questions. We felt this was very useful as sometimes participants came on early to double check they understood the software and ask the interviewer questions about MSN or the research. Participants were asked to confirm their ID code before the interview begun.

The interview schedule was semi-structured, developed and refined during and following pilot interviews. The final interview comprised open-ended questions relating to each woman's experiences of either their hysterectomy or natural menopause. The interview schedule outlined the areas of interest, but was not prescriptive, which therefore permitted iterative exploration of the topics that emerged. The initial question asked participants to tell the researcher about their experience of the menopausal transition, and then prompts were used to explore emergent topics, such as 'How did that make you feel?' and 'How did you deal with that?' No specific personal or sensitive questions were asked but if these topics emerged then they were discussed with the participant. Interviews lasted between 90 minutes and two hours and the data were transcribed automatically by the MSN Messenger software. At the end of the interview, participants were informed that if they wished to discuss any further thoughts regarding the interview, they were welcome to send them via email or to organise another time to discuss them in MSN. These were then added to their transcript.

At the end of the interview, participants were also asked permission if they were happy to receive some short-response questions to evaluate the online interviewing method. All participants agreed to this. Within a day of their interview, participants were emailed a copy of their interview transcript for their reference and further comment, along with five questions to evaluate the synchronous text-IM tool. These asked for their opinion on (i) their experience using the text-IM interview method, the respective (ii) advantages and (iii) disadvantages of the online interview, (iv) their preferred method of interview, and (v) if they had any additional comments. This procedure facilitates participant-researcher collaboration and increases credibility by enhancing the contribution of participants to (i) understand their individual contributions and (ii) represent their contributions in the final narrative (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Questions could be asked by the participant regarding the research at any stage.

Based upon the feedback from the first half of the participants interviewed, we made two logistical changes that we felt would improve the synchronous text-IM interview procedure for the remaining ten interviewees. Firstly, some participants had mentioned that they were more familiar with Skype as an IM service than MSN, so we also set up a neutral Skype account with a unique username and password for participants to use anonymously. The last ten participants interviewed were then given a choice of using either MSN or Skype for their synchronous text-IM interviews.

The second change was based on the issues with technology that were reported by some of the initial participants. Initially, participants were required to download the MSN software in order to take part in the interview. This was fairly simple to complete; instructions were provided and it did not take long. However, some of the participants who did not use MSN felt negatively about having an additional task to carry out prior to the

interview, and as they did not have a use for MSN afterwards, they wanted to remove it from their computer. As a result, we found a version of MSN available to use directly through the MSN website, and so the remaining ten participants were not required to spend time downloading the software and removing it afterwards.

The results of the first ten interviews were presented at a conference (Author(s), 2010) providing an opportunity for further reflection upon the use of the online interview process with fellow researchers. Some of the initial participants had used emoticons during their interviews to represent their emotions and express themselves. All interviewees have the facility to use emoticons during the synchronous text-IM interview, but not all interviewees may be aware or know how to use these. In order to inform and enable all participants with the choice of using these emoticons, instructions on how to use them were developed and given to participants at the beginning of the interview with an opportunity to practice if they wished.

Analysis

A qualitative conventional content analysis (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002) was used as a means to understand the phenomenon under study (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992) by identifying patterns within the participants' feedback to interpret the content of the text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). As the first author, I read the data repeatedly to immerse myself in it and gain an overall sense of the findings. I then sought codes in the data by highlighting keywords and making notes of emerging patterns, collating these into meaningful categories in relation to the research (Patton, 2002).

Results

Overall, 17 out of the 20 participants gave feedback on the synchronous text-IM method with many answers overlapping, and therefore saturation was achieved. Overall, the interviewees' perceptions of the interview experience were positive and they liked the idea of online interviewing "clever idea" (Anne). Some participants expressed enjoyment of the general interview experience, 'It was interesting and fun to chat to you. It was good to know that my experiences could be helpful in supporting other people' (Trudy). When asked for respective advantages and disadvantages, all of the participants mentioned perceived benefits of the text-IM method, and all but one noted drawbacks. It is important to note that the provided pros and cons were not always personal to the participant, but sometimes also discussed in relation to empathy for others being interviewed or the interviewer. For example, some participants preferred the method, noted the advantages for themselves and then discussed why other people may not feel the same as them.

Advantages

The participants' reported perceived positive attributes of the text-IM method centred on feelings of anonymity, 'makes you feel a bit more anonymous and less vulnerable' (Trudy); openness, 'it is easier to answer personal questions' (Sophie); and convenience, 'I think the process is more relaxing, convenient and less intrusive' (Zoe). Participants reported preferring the anonymity of the interview and feeling more comfortable to discuss personal or sensitive topics, 'I also think that this form of interview benefits those participants who feel embarrassed or intimidated by face-to-face methods or difficult subject matter' (Betty). They commented on the sensitivity of the subject and the suitability of this method: 'Good for more embarrassing subjects' (Nina); 'makes it all less formal and for some people I imagine that would make it easier to open up' (Zoe) and 'say what you think/feel over MSN' (Helen).

The logistics of the method were also an important positive factor as it helped the participant to feel more autonomous over their interview environment, 'It seemed more flexible and I felt comfortable and relaxed i.e. my own interview was carried out in the evening when I got home from work' (Sophie). They reported the convenience and choice of interview place and time as 'hassle free' (Val) and more guided to suit the participants' needs. 'It was a more relaxed atmosphere, as I was in my own home' (Jill). Participants felt in control of the interview while it was being carried out due its flexibility, 'it was possible to interrupt the interview' (Claire). Some participants' felt that as they were in their own environment and did not have the visual cues of the interviewer, they were more focused on answering the interview questions and reflecting upon their experiences than they would have been in a face-to-face interview. Roz felt she was 'more focused on the questions asked, not distracted by assessing a different environment, who the interviewer is, who she reminds you of etc'.

The action of typing was perceived as beneficial because it enabled participants to give 'more coherent answers' (Claire) and 'I found it allowed me to think about my answer' (Yvonne). The text-IM method enabled the participants to engage in a reflexive process, 'It was interesting and useful to reflect on the subject' (Roz), and potentially resulted in a richer interview. Anne said 'it did help me come to terms with some things. Also a virtue that the interviewee can review the transcript immediately and recall the conversation, and gain some more sense from it'. They also felt that not only could they be more coherent through the process of typing, but they also felt the interviewer was more coherent and understandable, for example Sophie said 'there is no chance of mishearing a question'.

Disadvantages

The two main perceived negative attributes of the MSN method revolved around the absence of personal communication and issues with technology. Participants discussed that a drawback of online text communication was the lack of cues from not being able to see the interviewer's body language or hear their tone of voice, 'communication is generally compromised by the mediation of a machine' (Betty).

'The disadvantages are that there is no body language or eye contact so you can only go on the flat value of the words written, with no visual clues as to the real meaning behind them. Because of this you do not build up the same rapport with people' (Trudy).

Although participants felt that the maintenance of their own anonymity was a benefit, some felt that the interviewer's anonymity was a disadvantage. 'The person you are "speaking" with is still anonymous as you don't have a visual picture of what they look like - this could be a disadvantage for some' (Lily). One also reported the distraction caused by the anonymity of the researcher, 'I was wondering what you looked like all the time' (Nina).

Although most participants felt this method was logistically beneficial, some participants reported issues regarding typing instead of talking to express their answers 'it required a little more effort to phrase answers written in English as succinctly as possible' (Claire). 'It perhaps didn't flow as well' (Val) and 'occasionally the line of questioning gets a little confused if both the participant and interviewer type at the same time. It is intense. I might have said more if talking as it is easier to do' (Roz).

Many of the participants talked about the benefits and problems from three different points of view: their own; another person participating in the interview and from the researcher's point of view. For example, Yvonne commented on suitability of the text-IM method for others, 'MSN may also be an issue for some people with poor literacy or IT

skills”. Sophie felt the text-IM method was the most suitable for her but also commented from a researcher’s point of view,

‘I can't think of any disadvantages for me as an interviewee. There is a chance that answers are given in a less spontaneous manner than in a face to face interview, so this might be a disadvantage for the interviewer’.

Preference

When asked which method of interview they preferred, thirteen participants preferred the text-IM method, two participants said they would have preferred a face-to-face or webcam interview and two participants had no preference regarding which interview method was used and were happy using any. Additionally, five of the women who preferred the text-IM method stated that different methods were beneficial for different purposes and a variety could be offered to allow the participant choice, “I personally prefer the online method from pure convenience, but I do enjoy meeting people so you could always offer a face-to-face as an alternative” (Trudy).

Interviewer’s perspective

This section aims to summarise the experience of the researcher with the synchronous text-IM method in order to provide future researchers with some insight on the utilisation of this tool.

As researchers, we were concerned that participant’s would react negatively or be less likely to discuss their experiences openly when being interviewed by a 27 year old premenopausal woman based on findings from the pilot focus group interviews. The ensured anonymity from the interviewee never meeting the interviewer helped to reduce the concerns

of social desirability bias and investigator effect. Although we do acknowledge that this depends on the individual being interviewed, and there is always an element of subjectivity to interview research.

The lack of body language of voice tone meant that sentences may have been interpreted more at face value by both the interviewer and interviewee. However, as with face-to-face interviews, the interviewer could use reflexive prompts to double check they had interpreted the sentence correctly to how the interviewee intended it, and encourage the interviewee to go in to more detail. Often the women used metaphors and similes and/or used the emoticons to help them express themselves, which often provided the researchers with rich, unique and interesting quotations about their individual experiences. Clearly, emoticons do not replace what is lost from no body language, but the benefit from the additional cloak of invisibility provided by the tool may enable the participants to be themselves more and provide a rich interview in a different way. It is important for researchers using these techniques in the future to take these benefits and limitations into account and aim to use the most suitable method for the topic and participants being interviewed, or provide a choice of multiple interview methods if appropriate.

During the actual process of the interview, interviewees needed more time to type their answers to the questions compared to a face-to-face interview. This enabled the interviewer more time to ensure they were asking all intended questions in the interview schedule. It also allowed the researcher to double check that all relevant or unclear issues had been examined in depth. For example, sometimes an interviewee will answer a question with multiple interesting sentences and the interviewer is spoilt for choice as to which sentence they explore first, which in turn can lead to more interesting topics. The online interview allowed the interviewer to double check that when each of these came to a natural end, that

other unexplored sentences could then be examined further. This was considered an advantage from the researcher's perspective, giving the feeling that the interviews were of rich quality.

Logistically, the fact that the interview could be carried out from any computer with the internet allowed the interview times to be much more flexible. The interviews could be carried out by the researcher from home or work and were offered to participants at their convenience any time of the day, any day of the week.

Participants were told that if they wanted to go for a toilet break or to go and get a drink during the interview then they could, they just had to say they would 'be right back' or 'brb' for short. Many participants said that they liked the flexibility of this. As researchers, we viewed this as an advantage of the method as participants were able to feel more in control of the interview.

The interview transcript is produced as a result of the synchronous text-IM interview and therefore this saves manually typing up the transcription afterwards. Although this is positive as it can save time and money, it can also be considered a disadvantage as through the process of transcription a researcher can familiarise themselves with the data during a stage of their analysis. However, as some research teams pay assistants to transcribe their interviews for them, this replaces that need. Additionally, this enabled the transcript to be sent to the participant soon after the interview while it is still fresh in their mind, providing them with an opportunity to add anything they felt they had forgotten to say in the actual interview.

Discussion

This study investigates the usefulness of synchronous text-based IM for interviewing women about sensitive health topics, specifically women who have undergone a hysterectomy leading to a surgical menopause, or a natural menopausal transition, and positives and negatives surrounding bodily change and symptoms. The synchronous text-IM method was used because of its utility, innovative nature and the fact that it is complementary to the aims of the research. This method enabled the recruitment of a wide but homogenous sample from across the nation. Due to the sensitive and personal topics within the chosen area of inquiry, an innovative synchronous online interview method (text-IM) was adopted and developed. This paper develops the existing literature by examining the utility of this method and providing feedback from participants who have been interviewed using this method. The method is reflected upon as an additional tool for the researcher to choose from their methodological toolkit when appropriate.

Our findings were concordant with the assertion that this methodological tool facilitates participant anonymity alongside the provision of more choice and convenience in terms of location and travel (Moloney et al., 2004). The majority of participants found the synchronous text-IM interview a convenient, flexible and encouraging method. They said it allowed them to feel comfortable and relaxed so that they could open up and discuss personal matters knowing that they were not only anonymous in the research report, but to the researcher as well. The possible impact on participant responses to the researcher's questions as a result of the different interview methods highlights how the complementarity (Bohr, 1998) of this research method can help to reduce participants' self-presentational concerns, distorting the social desirability bias and reducing the participants' inhibitions (Stacey & Vincent, 2011). However, it should also be acknowledged that there is the risk of embodied dislocation if participants seize the internet mediated interaction as an opportunity to deliberately misrepresent themselves. The veil of opaqueness the text-IM method provides

can enable the participants with the freedom to manage the image (Goffman, 1959; Jones, 1964; Leary, 1996) they project to the interviewer without the accountability of identification. We feel that this was unlikely in this research though as participants were approached as the experts of their own experience and it was made clear that their real-life experiences could help to aid our understanding of the transition. Many women explicitly stated that they were glad that research was being carried out on this topic and were happy to be able to help. Participants understanding the importance of honesty and openness about their experiences in the research helps to reduce the risk of social desirability bias and increases validity (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007).

We felt that the three methodological developments incorporated between the first and second ten participants were beneficial. The change that made the most difference was changing from using the MSN software that needed to be downloaded by participants before the interview, to conducting the interviews directly through the MSN website. This reduced the amount of interview preparation time required of the participants and was much simpler to use. It also solved the problem that participants encountered of having to remove the software from their computer afterwards. This completely removed one of the reported obstacles of the IM service for participants.

The change that made the least impact was adding a Skype account to increase participant choice in what IM services they used. Skype was not chosen by any of the participants to use as an interview medium, however this is less relevant for the future utility of synchronous text-IM interviews as Microsoft bought Skype in 2011 and these technologies will be merged by March 2013. The third and final change was providing the participants with information and guidance on how to use emoticons and therefore showing them a method of expression. We acknowledge that this does not replace 'the input of aural, verbal,

physical and emotional content' (Betty) in face-to-face conversation. However, it is a great improvement on open-ended questions in surveys and email interviews due to the increase in conversational fluency and the ability to express oneself. Additionally, research that has assessed emoticon use, social interaction and online message interpretation has concluded that emoticons can reduce misinterpretation of messages by emphasising or clarifying the implied tone in a similar manner to facial expressions in face-to-face communication (Derks, Bos & von Grumbkow, 2007; 2008a; 2008b; Derks, Fischer & Bos, 2008).

The question of how researchers should interpret these emoticons still remains, and this will largely depend on the epistemology of the research, for example conversation analysis is not possible. Emoticons do not compare to the complexity of facial expression, but they do provide the researcher with further clues as to how the participant feels about the comments made, allows the researcher to adjust their reply as a result and aid rapport building. For example, if the participant tells a joke and puts a smiley face ☺, then the researcher can smile as well helping the participant to feel more at ease. Alternatively, if the participant shows a sad face ☹, then the researcher can take more caution and react empathetically.

The inability to interpret each other's body language, tone of voice and face-to-face facial expressions with text-IM interviewing was seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage by the researchers and participants. In future, researchers wishing to include these physical, aural and verbal cues, a web camera and microphone can be added to enable teleconference interviews to be conducted via the internet. This reduces restrictions of both face-to-face and text-IM interviews allowing them to include extra modes of communication, such as the visual cues of participant distress, while still being completed at a distance and at the convenience of the individual participant. Individual preference is important to consider

as some participants may feel that typing out their experiences is a more permanent and final version of their experiences, and instead prefer to discuss the topic in what is perceived to be a more fleeting face-to-face interaction. We felt it was important that the participant could double check their transcript and send emails with additional information after the interview to reduce the impression that the opinions they gave in the interview were rigid.

Alternatively, the synchronous text-IM interview provides a feature with a unique strength; the veil of opaqueness it provides to participants is usually impossible in qualitative methods. The synchronous text-IM tool ensures a degree of confidentiality and anonymity while still gaining depth of enquiry, where other qualitative methods potentially risk invading a participant's privacy. While body language and other non-verbal cues are useful in developing rapport with the interviewee, it may also ruin it by undermining their sense of a non-judgemental confidante and provides the risk of the interviewee being more conservative because of their biases towards the interviewer. The potential of online disinhibition (Suler, 2004) should therefore be reflected upon during the interview analysis of future studies using this technique.

A limitation we found whilst using online methodologies is that some women chose not to participate in the research due to unfamiliarity with technology. Although we purposively sampled women experiencing the menopausal transition, we also need to acknowledge the resulting sampling bias of only being able to recruit women who felt sufficiently confident to participate in a piece of online research. This can be overcome in future by offering a range of interview methods to the participants.

It was clear in the feedback that some found the synchronous text-IM method preferable due to the sensitive and personal nature of the topic and welcomed the extra level of anonymity and comforting interview environment. Some participants mainly preferred the

synchronous text-IM method due to the convenience, while others felt they would have preferred to have the interview in person. We recommend that when offering a range of methods to participants, that a brief summary of advantages and disadvantages of each interview method be explained so that participants can make an informed choice. However, the synchronous text-IM interviewing tool alone may be the most suitable tool when exploring some sensitive and personal topics, when aiming to reduce researcher bias or when extra participant anonymity is appropriate. Another benefit of text-IM is the ability for participants to review the transcript as it is written. This enables a level of reflexivity not previously available during a synchronous interview. Participants can reflect critically on their narratives and interact in an interpretative interview developing a greater understanding of their experiences (James & Busher, 2006). The present research was exploratory in nature, and therefore further inquiry is now needed to more extensively evaluate this tool.

It is important to consider how specific research with different populations and subject matter may or may not benefit from using this tool. As suggested by participants in this article, it may not be beneficial for people with poor literacy and Internet Technology (IT) skills, such as some older adults or less educated groups. However, it may be useful in creating a more informal atmosphere; when the subject matter is associated with embarrassment or shyness; when research budgets are limited; when questions are centered around topics of legality and crime (such as substance use and violence); and for interviews with those with hearing difficulties or that may prefer non-verbal communication (Benford & Standen, 2011; Ison, 2009). The use of IM services was also considered a novelty by the participants and the use of technology for the interview may provide a participation incentive when research is conducted with younger populations. Research with children can threaten validity due to the perceived unequal power relationship between the adult and the child, especially if the child views the adult as in a teaching or parental status, as they might give

answers they think the adult wishes to hear (Clark & Moss, 2005a, Clark & Moss, 2005b).

The synchronous text-IM method can provide a non-confrontational interviewer-interviewee relationship and potentially encourage the child to express their thoughts more honestly.

Future research would not only benefit from examining a range of IM communication tools for interviewing, but also investigating these with a range of age, SES and ethnic groups. There is the potential for a reduction of biases between participant and researcher on some topics, such as genital mutilation or other sensitive cultural topics. Also as this article focuses on women's experiences, it would be useful to explore this method with men. It is additionally useful to carefully consider the importance of the gender of the researcher in affecting the participants' responses. In this instance, the women knew they were talking to a female researcher but the method allows for the 'masking' of various interviewer characteristics, such as the interviewer's age in the case of this study. The first author had been using these IM services for personal use for 15 years prior to conducting these interviews and so we were very confident and felt well equipped to advise participants with any questions they had about its use. We recommend that when this tool is used in future research, the interviewee be experienced or receive training in IM services.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, the use of technology as a research tool has begun to develop. So far a limitation to text-only interview tools has been its asynchronicity. This is the first paper that evaluates the utilisation and logistics, and provides participant feedback for the online synchronous text-based tool using IM services. MSN Messenger and Skype are promising methodological tools to use in a variety of communication styles for interviews conducted globally with a variety of populations and subject matters. There is much scope for further research to examine these media and allow researchers to offer more choice and comfort to

their participants regarding the interview environment and level of anonymity. The text-IM method where the researcher and the participant can type to each other in a private synchronous conversational style is recommended, especially for interviews investigating sensitive and personal topics where an extra guard of anonymity could enable the participants to feel relaxed and more openly express their feelings and experiences. It is important for researchers to consider the potential self-presentation and complementarity with the research tools and group of participants being researched before designing their studies.

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