Chapter

The use of instant messaging in sensitive research

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Abstract

There are various means of communicating available to researchers interested in sensitive subjects. Amongst these means are contemporary tools such as Instant Messaging (IM), which enable remote communication between parties using internet-enabled devices. By reflecting on the authors experiences of using IM in performing interviews on potentially sensitive subjects, this chapter considers its use in sensitive subject research more broadly. The chapter considers the impact that including IM as a means of interviewing may have on initial participant engagement, the conversation(s) between researcher and participant, and on the outputs of said conversations. In these various stages, IM provides a means through which participants may be enabled to engage with research processes in ways which they may otherwise be reluctant to, and includes tools through which elements of in-person communication may be replicated. These discussions, amongst others held within, suggest that whilst there are some important considerations which must be made by researchers adopting this method, IM can be a useful tool within sensitive subject research.

Key words:

Sex work; Child Sexual Abuse; Instant messaging; Sensitive subjects; Hidden and hard-to-reach groups; Qualitative research; Sexual abuse; Violence; Sexual violence; Interview

Introduction

Sensitive subject research 'comprises studies that examine potentially delicate issues, since they focus on experiences that are painful or emotional for participants' (Cornejo, Rubilar & Zapata-Sepúlveda, 2019; see also Chapters 1 in this volume). Given that the subject matter of this type of research may be difficult for participants to recount, there are a number of methodological challenges which a potential researcher must consider. These challenges relate, amongst other things, to the initial access to participants, ensuring participant wellbeing during

the research process, and providing the research environment necessary to enable participants to speak openly about their experiences (see Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2007 for further challenges related discussion). These challenges inform the ways in which potential researchers design the methodologies of their studies in various ways, including the design and implementation of the chosen data collection methods, and the means through which to engage with participants.

With the mass public adoption of chat-based services such as Whatsapp, and the recent corporate adoption of 'live chat' functionality (Rajaobelina, Brun, Kilani & Ricard, 2021), it is likely that contemporary social research will increasingly turn to this means of communicating with participants. Instant Messaging (IM) is the use of internet software to send primarily text-based messages between users, and has a variety of uses for social sciences researchers (Kaufmann & Peil, 2019). Whilst the use of computer-based IM services has made way to more asynchronous forms of communication held through mobile messaging applications in recent times, the nature of this communication has remained relatively constant. As a platform, IM and application-based chat typically sees users engage in concise conversation, in ongoing back and forth communication. As well as the ability to send text, users have a variety of means of expressing themselves within a given chat application, including photo and video messages, voice notes, GIFs and emoji, which present various tools of communication and may be drawn on throughout an ongoing conversation.

This chapter will, therefore, reflect on the use of IM for collecting data in sensitive subject research, and also for navigating some of the challenges highlighted above. It will do this by discussing the experiences of both authors, who utilised this medium within research interactions for their respective PhD studies. The chapter considers the impact of utilising IM in the initial stages of research in terms of facilitating participation, within the interaction itself and on the output of said interactions. The chapter concludes by suggesting that whilst this means of communicating with research participants may not be a universal solution to the challenges related to research engagement on sensitive subjects, it is a tool with various uses to researchers. These uses include its ability to facilitate the participation of individuals who may otherwise be reluctant to disclose their experiences to a researcher, its various functions which both mimic and expand on what is available during more 'traditional' forms of communication, and its potential for producing considered and deliberate narratives related to some of the least understood social issues.

Sensitive research projects: Researching with the 'hidden', 'hard-to-reach'

As well as seeking to explore potentially sensitive subjects, the studies being considered within this chapter were also concerned with the experiences of groups who may be considered as 'hidden' or 'hard-to-reach'. The terms 'hidden' and 'hard-to-reach' are often used to describe groups of people sought for research engagement who may face particular barriers to becoming involved with research processes (Ellard-Gray, Jeffrey, Choubak & Crann, 2015; see Chapter 1). The reasons for this are often complex, with groups that are considered to be 'hidden' and 'hard-to-reach' often possessing stigmatised characteristics and life experiences, cultural and language barriers, and complex relationships with systems of social control such as policing (Jones & Newburn, 2001). Whilst a colloquial labelling of particular groups as 'hidden' or 'hard-to-reach' is undesirable, given the heterogeneity within populations who share characteristics, experiences and circumstances and the potentially stigmatising nature of the label, some groups may indeed be considered harder to reach or more hidden than others. For example, Flanagan and Hancock (2010) suggest that amongst those identified as hard to reach groups are 'sex workers, drug users, people living with HIV and people from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex communities', as well as later identifying other groups who may be hard-to-reach based on migration status, ethnicity, disability and age. Although caution should indeed be applied in labelling all of the above groups as inherently 'hidden' and 'hard-to-reach', understanding the potential difficulties in accessing populations such as these is integral to the development of appropriate methodologies for research which is focused on their experiences (Dawson, Einion-Waller and Jones, 2021).

Dawson's (2021) research focused on male sex workers experiences of violence and otherwise harmful behaviour, and their subsequent engagement with, and reporting to, systems and bodies of social control, such as the police. Sex workers are identified as 'hard to reach' by Flanagan and Hancock (2010), and indeed in England and Wales this understanding may be underpinned by the partial criminalisation of sex work through legislation related to soliciting, loitering and brothel keeping (Matolsci, 2022). Sex work is also a highly stigmatised occupation, which is reproduced within the legislation related to it, and which may in itself render some sex workers reluctant to discuss their experiences with researchers (Shaver, 2005). For male sex workers, this stigma is compounded by the idea that their participation within this form of work is somehow in contrast with their gender identity, with sex work typically presented as work undertaken by women (Dawson, 2021; see Chapter (Lorena…) in this volume). This is also coupled with the assumption that male sex workers engage in sex with other men and the homophobia attached to that (Minichiello, Scott & Callander, 2013), as well as the perceived threat of HIV which has fuelled the stigmatisation of gay men since the 1980's

(Fitzgerald-Husek, Van Wert, Ewing, Grosso, Holland, Katterl, Rosman, Agarwal & Baral, 2017).

Fan's research (ongoing) focuses on Chinese men's experiences of child sexual abuse, their subsequent reporting of said abuse and its impact(s) on them. Although not specifically designated as a 'hard-to-reach' group by Flanagan and Hancock (2010), numerous researchers have identified survivors of sexual abuse as a 'hidden' and/or 'hard-to-reach' population (Arata 1998; Bolen & Scannapieco 1999; Smith, Letourneau, Saunders, Kilpatrick, Resnick & Best, 2000). Similar to Dawson's research, Fan's focus on male survivors of child sexual abuse may pose particular challenges given their reduced disclosure rates in comparison to female survivors (Easton, 2013; Mohler-Kuo, Landolt, Maier, Meidert, Schönbucher & Schnyder, 2014) and the socio-legal environment faced by male Chinese victims of sexual abuse, with female victims generally receiving more protection against crimes of a sexual nature (Zhang, 2012; Li, Zhou, Cao & Tang, 2022), which perhaps signal the gendered social expectations of who might face sexual victimisation. In navigating sensitive discussions of victimisation, as well as cultural ideas of gender expectations and intersections of law, policy and practice, providing a favourable research space for participants to present their lived realities was of paramount importance to the conception of both studies. Given the barriers to engaging in research potentially faced by these groups, both Dawson and Fan employed flexible research methodologies which encouraged participants to engage in the ways in which they felt most comfortable. The primary data collection method utilised for both studies was semi-structured interviewing, and participants were offered a variety of means through which they could engage in this process. Dawson, for example, had offered participants the opportunity to discuss their experiences in-person, over video call, through telephone call or by using IM. For Fan, and as the discussion within the next section will elucidate, in-person communications were often not possible, but video and telephone calls were options for participants, alongside IM. For several participants across both studies, IM was the preferred method of engagement.

Influence of IM on research studies

The following sections of this chapter consider the influence of IM on the studies at three different stages; before the research interaction, during the research interaction and on the outcome(s) of the research interaction.

Before the research interaction:

As alluded to in the previous section, one of the greatest challenges in sensitive subject research is gaining access to those with the relevant experiences of the subject being explored. Whilst

many of the ways in which potential researchers may navigate this particular challenge relate to sampling and engagement, the use of IM may in itself influence an individual's decision to share their experiences of and perspectives on the issue under consideration. This section discusses the influence that IM may have on the research process before the actual research interaction itself takes place, exploring how the technology facilitates a degree of space between researcher and participant, which is favoured by some, and how this space, along with the tools available within the software, can help build trust and rapport with participants.

Widening access and engagement:

Within some research concerned with sensitive subjects, it is likely that those who have the relevant lived experience of the issue under consideration make up a small proportion of the overall population within the jurisdiction being studied. For example, the population of the UK is estimated to stand around 67 million, with estimates of sex work involvement suggesting that there are around 72,800 sex workers in the UK, with the majority of this figure believed to be women (Brooks-Gordon, Mai, Perry & Sanders, 2015). The population of male sex workers in England and Wales is likely to be less than half of the above figure, though accurate estimates of male involvement are not available. As well as this, the nature of sensitive subject research may also mean that even those with experiences relevant to the respective research projects are not open about them, meaning that the potential pool of participants is reduced again. Fan's research on male experiences of child sexual abuse is a good example here, with male victimisation believed to be less prevalent than female victimisation (Pereda, Guilera, Forns & Gómez-Benito, 2009; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Alink & van IJzendoorn, 2015), and male survivors also less likely to disclose their abuse (Easton, 2013; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2014), as discussed previously.

It was important to both studies, therefore, that the ways in which the respective research projects were designed enabled as many potential participants with the relevant life experiences to engage with the research as possible. This is where the issues of distance and space become significant considerations, both in the sense of overcoming the physical distance between researcher and participant in some cases, as well as maintaining the emotional space between the parties in others.

For Fan, the main challenge was the potential distance between parties. Acknowledging the potential difficulty in achieving a sample, and in order to engage with as many male survivors of child sexual abuse in China as possible, Fan did not impose any geographic constraints on who could participate in the study. This meant that participants could be based anywhere in China's expansive 9.6 million square kilometre territory, or may even have left

China since their experiences. Indeed, amongst the sample of 25 men involved in the research, 5 were from eastern China, 4 from the north, 4 from the west, 5 from the south, and 7 from central regions. The distances between these regions can exceed 1500 to 2000 kilometres, meaning that travelling to facilitate in-person interviews would not have been possible in all cases, given the significant pressure on time and resources this would have had on one of, or both, parties. In order to address this potential challenge, Fan offered various mediums of remotely facilitated participation, namely through video and telephone call, as well as through IM. This meant that Fan could connect with potential participants across the whole of China, and complete the interview despite the physical distance between parties.

Fan's experience above is not something especially unique to IM as a means of facilitating research of course, with telephone and video call interviews serving a very similar purpose (Irani, 2018). However, using IM did not just facilitate participation by overcoming the physical distance between researcher and participant, but it also did so whilst maintaining a degree of space between them. For Dawson and the context of researching in the much smaller footprint of England and Wales, participant concerns were centred on the separation between parties which can be offered by engaging in IM conversation. Traditional methods of interviewing, such as those taking place in-person, of course involve both parties being physically in the same space. Similarly, those which take place via video or telephone calls connect the parties which are physically remote from each other, though still include the appearance of both parties within the space of the other, albeit digitally or through audio (see Krouwel, Jolly & Greenfield, 2019). In arranging one particular interview, the potential participant had been communicating with Dawson by using an anonymised Twitter (since rebranded to X) account, which was designed to represent their sex work persona and contained no information which revealed their identity outside of this working alias. Creating an alias is common amongst sex workers, with many hiding what they do from friends, family and others, which may be considered a consequence of social stigma and the partial criminalisation of sex work in England and Wales (Sanders, 2004). It was understandable, therefore, that this participant held concerns related to meeting in-person, or in another format which would reveal identifying information, such as their likeness, phone number or email address. Administering the interview through the already open IM communication stream meant that space could be maintained between participant and researcher, which helped to preserve the separation of the participants working self and their self which is known to those outside of their sex work involvement.

Accessing the research interaction via IM meant that this participant was able to comfortably engage in the project with the perceived potential risk to their anonymity minimised. This potentially facilitated their engagement which may otherwise have not been forthcoming, even with the guarantees of anonymity offered within the informed consent process. Anonymity was also a concern navigated using IM in Fan's study, with the content of the interviews relating to sexual abuse, and concerns related to identity exposure being contextualised by potential experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation (Easton, 2013) similar to that faced by male sex workers. Like the participant in Dawson's research above, some of Fan's participants held concerns of meeting in-person or via video call as this would identify them to the researcher, and raise the risk of exposure. One participant, for example, asked whether their appearance could be pixelated and voice altered during a video call, before indicating that they preferred to participate via text-based discussion using IM when the option was explored with them.

As well as concerns around anonymity, participants in Fan's study also indicated that participating via IM would help them speak more freely about their experiences. For example, one participant suggested that they 'feel quite shy and embarrassed hearing myself verbalise (experiences of victimisation)' and another indicated preference for IM based communication by saying 'it's very difficult for me to speak it out'. Previous research has highlighted the promise of text-based communication in allowing participants to speak more freely, with Schober and colleagues (2015) in particular suggesting that typed communication may lead to increased disclosure of sensitive information during interviews. Given the content of both research projects the use of IM as an option for participants, and the space that this creates between the researcher and participant, may have meant favourable conditions for participation which yielded both involvement in the research in the first instance, and more open dialogue within the interactions once participation had been agreed.

Whilst none of the above is unique to IM-based interviewing, indeed email interviews can also both connect those distanced and maintain space between those connected, they remain factors which highlight some of the potential of IM's use in sensitive subject research. Both projects were able to utilise IM to navigate challenges, whether these be logistical or related to barriers to engagement, perhaps enabling wider participation and the involvement of those who may otherwise have decided not to.

Building trust and rapport:

The initial stages of a research interaction often include a process of building trust in the research process and researcher themselves, as well as the development of rapport between

participant and researcher. Where the topic of the research is of a sensitive nature, this phase perhaps becomes particularly significant, with participants often being asked to discuss content of a potentially upsetting nature and discuss experiences which they may not wish to be revealed to those outside of the research environment. Kawulich (2011: 61) describes establishing rapport as involving 'putting people at ease', and indeed the research topics of both Dawson and Fan's studies both required participants to feel at ease in discussing their experiences.

The process of building trust and rapport often begins in advance of the actual research interaction itself, through the communications between researcher and participant which precede engagement in the chosen data collection activity. For some, this may come in the form of communications facilitated by various means, such as through emails or telephone conversations, before meeting in-person or otherwise engaging in the formal research interaction. This process of building trust and rapport may then continue in the time immediately preceding the formal research interaction, where the parties may engage in gentle conversation in order to continue developing a relationship. In this initial interaction, the researcher is able to reiterate the reasons for their interest in the participants specific experience(s) and perspective(s), as well as what may be expected during the research process, which may support the sense of transparency integral to trust and rapport (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2018).

Where the researcher and participant remain separated by technology throughout this initial interaction, and within the research interaction itself, questions may be raised as to how this above process would play out. For both authors, this was a point of consideration when initially communicating with potential participants, and measures were put in place to optimise transparency in an effort to develop rapport and trust. For example, Dawson's interaction took place through Twitter, and an account which was set up specifically as a 'professional' account. The account included Dawson's full name, a picture of them as the display photo, information of their student status within the bio and a link to an academic profile published through the Wales Doctoral Training Centre. Notably, some IM platforms also enable users to send other forms of communication besides that which is typed. For example, Dawson utilised features which enabled them to share the research information and informed consent forms with the participant, to supplement initial discussions of the research and further explain what would be expected.

For Fan, sending proof of identity, such as a photograph of their student identification card, was integral to building trust in the research and themselves as researcher. According to

Easton, Saltzman and Willis (2014), many survivors of sexual abuse refrain from disclosing their experiences due to the absence of a trustworthy confidant, and Fan's status as a PhD student within a recognised institution may have demonstrated their trustworthiness. Indeed, one participant remarked that receiving Fan's identification was pivotal to their engagement in the research process, suggesting that they 'tend to trust universities and researchers more, as you should be more responsible in protecting my privacy'.

Rather than being limited within IM then, building trust and rapport is arguably something very much achievable with the correct steps taken by the researcher. Indeed, what must be recognised is that the disconnection between participant and researcher using IM which may limit some of the rapport and trust building process is intentional and preferred by those choosing to engage in research in this way, in order to facilitate their favoured participation circumstances. Therefore, whilst researchers must consider how the trust and rapport building process is impacted by engaging within an IM format, the ability to make initial introductions remains, and there are ways and means provided by the technology through which positive research relationships may be built.

During the research interaction:

Following on from the processes of finding, recruiting, and building trust and rapport with, those who hold the relevant experiences and perspectives to the research in question, the next point of consideration relates to the actual research interaction itself. This section of the chapter considers how using IM to perform semi-structured interviews impacted on the research by discussing the issues of flexibility and non-verbal (or non-typed in this case) communication. By discussing these elements, the section will demonstrate the potential of using IM in sensitive subject research, and will raise key considerations that must be made by researchers seeking to adopt this method.

Maintaining flexibility:

Early forms of IM technology would involve the users engaged in conversation being 'logged in' to the specific software. This meant that, for the most part, both parties were active on the software at the same time whilst engaging in conversation. What must be noted at this point, is that more contemporary forms of IM can be used both synchronously and asynchronously, with users typically accessing IM applications with internet-enabled mobile devices which notify them of new messages (Jhala & Menon, 2021). Users of these applications then, are not necessarily 'logged in' to these services in the sense that they are actively using them, but they are in the sense that they are reachable via these services as they go about their daily lives. The style of conversation also remains broadly similar, with typically short messages sent back and

forth between users, though the capacity for more detailed messages is there if and when required. The ability to communicate synchronously also remains, should both users be active at the same time.

Given that communications between researcher and participant may take either of these forms then, it is important that there is some discussion as to how the participant may expect the conversation to play out at the beginning of the research interaction. For example, in Dawson's case, it was agreed that the conversation would be rather sporadic, with both parties replying when they had chance over a period of a couple of days. For Fan, conversations with participants were more synchronous in nature, with participants often responding to the recruitment post wanting to begin the interview immediately and complete it in one sitting. Using IM for these interviews meant that either format was possible, and whilst both come with their own challenges and considerations, a key benefit was identified within both researchers' experiences. This related to the space between participant and researcher, discussed within the first section as enabling participation for some, which meant that both parties had the benefit of time. With the other party not immediately present, time could be taken to think carefully about the prompt or response, before continuing the conversation. This may in itself impact on the quality of data gained from the process (Schiek & Ullrich, 2017) (discussed in more detail later in this chapter), but more importantly may also be something which helps facilitate an ethical approach to exploring sensitive subjects.

With time and space to consider the direction of the conversation, participants may be more comfortable engaging and also in disengaging if they should wish to. Without the immediate presence of the researcher, the participant may be more comfortable in taking a break from the conversation and coming back to respond at a later time, or even perhaps withdrawing from the conversation altogether should it become overwhelming. Sim and Waterfield (2019) discuss the latter point in the context of focus groups, suggesting withdrawal is a potentially 'disruptive' act which some may find difficult to perform in the presence of others. Within an IM setting, this act becomes as simple as not replying to a message or perhaps sending a message which outlines withdrawal from the study, meaning that participants are perhaps more likely withdraw if they no longer wish to continue. Similar to agreeing the means of conversing, researchers using this method should also ensure that participants understand what will happen with their data should they choose to withdraw in this way, and also that they know what to expect from the researcher if they were to stop replying to messages (such as whether follow-up messages will be sent, for example).

Communicating emotion:

Although participants may well be better enabled to take a break or disengage from a research interaction which has this benefit of space, there may be some question as to how well researchers themselves are able to ensure that participants are comfortable with continuing the discussions being held. This, of course, is a particular concern in research such as that being considered here, which inherently focuses on issues which are sensitive (Whitney & Evered, 2022). In order to assess whether a participant is comfortable continuing, a researcher may periodically check in directly with the participant. Much of what may prompt these check ins, or a more significant concern for the emotional wellbeing of a participant, may not be directly verbalised, however. Indeed, much of how human beings' express emotion is non-verbal, and relates to facial expressions, body language and tone of voice (Hall, Horgan & Murphy, 2018). Where research interactions are performed in person, or to an extent through video or telephone call, this of course may be recognised by the researcher who may act decisively by suggesting a break or the termination of the interview. Where researcher and participant are distanced by technology, such as within IM-based research, these non-verbal cues cannot be communicated in the same way. This means that researchers adopting this means of communicating with participants must consider how well they can ensure that participants are comfortable within discussions, and also how they may interpret the meaning of particular discussions, when so much of the meanings attached to interactions are tied to non-verbal cues.

On the first point around participant comfort and wellbeing, it may well be true that researchers are less able to recognise signs of participant distress within an IM interaction in comparison to those performed in-person, or perhaps by video or telephone call. It should be pointed out, however, that non-verbal cues signalling participant discomfort may be missed even during research interactions of these types, therefore, it is important that researchers implement a protocol for ensuring participant wellbeing regardless of the means through which the research is performed. A feature of any such protocol may involve maintaining regular check ins with participants. The purpose of which should be communicated with participants prior to the research taking place, along with discussions as to how participants may withdraw and what would happen with any data collected up until that point. Maintaining these periodic check ins with participants in the absence of non-verbal cues which may prompt concern may help researchers ensure participant wellbeing, though this is not fail proof of course, as it is reliant on participants being truthful about how the research is impacting them. The ability to not answer particular questions, and take breaks when required, may also form part of any protocol. In this regard, attention may be drawn to the point made in the previous section, relating to just how 'instant' conversation is expected to be when using contemporary IM

forums. Indeed, there is a level of flexibility offered to both participant and researcher here, in a conversation naturally spaced by pauses which allow for typing time. A participant taking a break within this context is not necessarily something which is always solicited by the researcher, but rather something which can be done on the participants initiative and which the researcher may not even know about. Here, utilising IM to communicate with participants may even be considered as something which navigates ethical challenges around participant wellbeing in comparison to in-person, video call or telephone methods, with participants empowered to engage with the research on their terms.

With regards to the point around interpreting meaning, there are again ways and means through which meaning beyond words may be expressed within IM interactions, which may be utilised by both participant and researcher (see Dawson, Einion-Waller & Jones, 2020 for further discussion). For example, within both projects, emoji or emoticons were drawn on to help contextualise elements of the discussion. Emoji are available to users of many users of smart technology, and often be found within smartphone or tablet keypads when composing a message. Whilst the icons available are numerous, including those representing shapes, flags, animals and vehicles, the main Emoji of interest here are those which represent facial expressions, gestures and body language.

The ways in which Emoji were utilised across both projects varied, and were very much dependent on the content of discussion. For example, a participant within Dawson's research had utilised the 'man shrugging' Emoji (🤷‍♂️) when placing their work amongst the broader sex work industry, perhaps signalling uncertainty. In another extract, the use of both the 'tears of joy' (😂) and 'man facepalming' (🤦‍♂️) Emoji when outlining the development of their selfie skills perhaps indicated both humour and disbelief. In Fan's work, Emoji were often employed during more serious areas of discussion, such as his own use of the 'face exhaling' (😮‍💨) Emoji to express empathy, and participants use of the 'loudly crying face' (😭) Emoji to convey upsetting details of their experiences.

Despite being separated by the technology then, both researchers were able to communicate and have communicated to them a layer of meaning which is traditionally the reserve of face-to-face (including via video call), and to some extent telephone, conversations. The use of Emoji within these conversations were of course subject to interpretation, though non-verbal communication (and indeed verbal communication) in the traditional sense itself, also is. Being able to express emotion and sentiment within IM using Emoji and other means, such as GIF, is important to contextualising the conversation and providing meaning, however

it must be acknowledged that this method only conveys intended meaning. That is, the user selects the Emoji which they feel fits, or at times the one they see as fitting how they want to come across. This brings the discussion back to the beginning of this section, where the issue of recognising participant discomfort was raised. The Emoji deployed into a conversation may not always represent true emotion, but rather a performance of emotion which intends to provoke a specific response or which masks true feeling. Whilst again this can be true of non-verbal communication more broadly, it is more difficult to access underlying cues within the disconnected context of IM. Therefore, whilst emotion can be conveyed using IM when performing research, it must be recognised that expressed emotion and felt emotion within the interaction may differ considerably. Researchers interested in sensitive subjects should be mindful of this when exploring the use of IM, and consider carefully how participant wellbeing can be monitored throughout the process, and how demonstrations of emotion using tools such as Emoji are interpreted within analysis.

After the research interaction:

Up until this point, this chapter has considered how IM may facilitate engagement in research on sensitive topics, and how these sensitive topics may be navigated within conversations using the technology. This section shifts the focus onto what comes after the research interaction utilising IM takes place, or indeed what comes out of the interaction. The section is split into two sections which consider issues of transcription and data quality, and makes a case for IM as a means which has strength in both areas, though which may not be instantly recognisable in the case of data quality.

Transcription:

Where interviews are the data collection method of choice transcription is typically the next step of the research undertaken. In the case of the research projects under consideration here, the use of IM meant that transcribing the data was a considerably different task to what an in-person and audio recorded interview may have been. Conducting the interviews using IM meant that transcription was being done as the interviews took place, with a log of the conversation recorded to the respective software being used. Whilst a simple point may be made here, around the convenience of this in comparison to the in-person example given above, a researcher undertaking this method cannot take their role in transcription for granted when undertaking research using IM. The reality is that this process becomes less labour intensive and perhaps quicker, but there is a risk that merely copying and pasting the conversation into a word processor would distance a researcher from the data. It has been suggested that data analysis begins at the point of transcription, with the researcher reviewing the discussions held

within the research interaction and recognising emergent themes whilst undertaking this process (Point & Baruch, 2023). Where this data is already in typed form, such as within an IM interview, there may, therefore, be some question as to whether a researcher can remain engaged with the data at this point. Similar questions may, however, be asked about research which utilises professional transcription services, where although not involved directly in the transcription, the researcher retains responsibility for ensuring that the transcript accurately reflections the discussion. This is also true of researchers utilising IM, who must ensure that the data is accurately extrapolated from the software of choice. At this point, the researcher may spend some time (re)familiarising themselves with the data, and acknowledging the potential themes emergent from the discussion.

Indeed, this familiarisation process is something which may begin during the research interaction itself, with the transcript available to the researcher at the time of engaging in discussion with the participant. Whilst this may be advantageous for thinking about what is to come from the interaction, it may equally be so for directing the discussion itself. Should the structure of the research interaction not be rigid, such as the semi-structured interviewing method adopted by both researchers, the transcript may provide useful opportunities for follow-up questions and for covering areas which may not yet have been covered, or had perhaps passed in the conversation before any follow-up question or prompt was thought of. The space afforded to participants discussed earlier in this chapter may facilitate the researcher themselves the space to consider the conversation carefully, and tease out discussions of sensitive topics by referring to areas of responses which may have been of interest.

Data quality and depth:

Another point of consideration here is the depth and quality of the subsequent data captured during the research process utilising IM. As referred to earlier on in the chapter, the nature of IM conversation involves typically short messages which mimic many real-life, and perhaps informal, interactions. This may raise questions about just how in-depth responses to prompts may be, if the conversation were to follow this tradition. Of course, not all research designs are geared towards an in-depth response from participants, but for those which are, IM perhaps should not be dismissed. In the experience of Dawson, there was a material difference in the transcript of IM interviews in comparison to those done in-person, or through telephone call, in that the raw transcripts were longer when using the latter means (see Dawson, Einion-Waller & Jones, 2020). It may be questioned whether this equates to depth, however, or whether other factors are at play here. For example, when typing a message through IM, participants have the space to carefully consider their responses. This space may be used to take some time to think,

as well as to review and edit a response before sending. This space is less afforded to those who are communicating through more traditional means, and this may impact the depth and quality of responses in other ways. For example, participants may begin answering a question, before pausing and changing direction. This is something that Dawson also experienced within the data collection phase of his research, with participants beginning to answer almost immediately after a prompt was delivered, but seemingly thinking about their response whilst verbalising their initial thoughts, and changing the direction of discussion. This often meant that the seemingly deeper response was not necessarily so.

It is not just the depth of participant responses of interest here, but also the content which participants felt comfortable to share within the research environment. With both projects focused on sensitive subjects, interviewing using IM and the space afforded to participants for considering, expressing, reviewing and editing their responses may have meant that they felt more able to open up about the issues raised. Should there be particular elements or details of an experience which participants may not be comfortable revealing, utilising IM their answers could be more carefully considered because of the conditions facilitated by the space between researcher and participant, and participants are perhaps less likely to avoid a subject altogether through fear of saying more than intended. There is perhaps a concern of self-censorship here (see Voida, Mynatt, Erickson & Kellogg, 2004), though any social interaction may contain an element of self-censorship where the individuals involved negotiate the impression of themselves that they are giving in order to match with their own internalised perception of self, or the self they wish to project. Being able to censor responses by reviewing and editing may mean more comfortable participants, in that case, who are able to take their time and choose their words carefully when confronting potentially upsetting discussions. Opdenakker (2006) provides discussion on this point, suggesting that asynchronous conversation and this ability to self-censor what is communicated may lead to more open accounts of the topic being discussed. This is particularly advantageous within discussions of a sensitive nature, and may therefore be considered as a strength of the method within research of this type.

This section has been primarily concerned with what may come out of a research interaction facilitated by IM, and the responsibilities held by the researcher once this interaction is complete. The key messages here relate to the data that may be captured and how it stands up to that generated by other means of facilitating a research interaction, and the ways in which the processes of IM facilitated research may mean that researchers must adapt their practices in order to maintain similar interactions with the data. Whilst some of the discussion held here

may present some obvious potential within IM facilitated research, such as the impact on the process of transcription and the presence of a rolling transcript to facilitate follow-up questions, some of the subjects raised may be debated as either strengths or limitations. The more concise responses from participants may be read by some as lacking enough depth, and the self-censorship presented as facilitating a comfortable research environment may be interpreted as questioning of the reliability of the data generated. Concise data must not be conflated with that which does not address the key issues however, and it must be acknowledged that self-censorship is not limited to research facilitated by an IM environment nor is it necessarily prescriptive of an unreliable narrative. Utilising IM within sensitive subject research may indeed mean that participants are able to self-censor more effectively, and provide more concise responses to prompts which reveal only that which is intended. However, for some, this may be the threshold between discussing their experiences with a researcher and avoiding speaking of their experiences altogether, raising questions as to whether these are limitations or rather considerations which must be made by researchers when seeking to explore sensitive subjects in this way.

Conclusion and future directions

This chapter has set out to consider the use of Instant Messaging in sensitive subject research by reflecting on the experiences of both authors in having used the technology to perform semi-structured interviews within their respective research studies. Focusing on male sex workers experiences of violence and otherwise harmful behaviours in England and Wales, and Chinese men's experiences of child sexual abuse, both studies addressed potentially upsetting themes and socially taboo issues. Whilst the purpose of the chapter was not to make a case for IM's use necessarily, there are several issues raised within the collective experiences of the authors which highlight its strength within certain circumstances.

The key issues here relate to the ways in which IM may facilitate participant engagement in the research process, how researchers and participants may express themselves using the technology, and how this expression may look in terms of the data generated by using this method. The authors experiences suggest that, as a platform, IM provides various tools which mimic other means of conversing and make various layers of communicating possible, whilst also maintaining a sense of space between the two parties who are in other ways connected. In terms of its utility for research, therefore, IM may be able to facilitate engagement for those who face complex barriers to discussing their experiences, as well as providing the space through which considered narratives can be produced, and communication beyond the typed form conveyed.

Instant messaging as a means through which to engage in research interactions is not without its limitations, nor is it likely to be appropriate for all studies and all potential participants. However, it is a tool which holds great potential. In research which seeks to expand social knowledge and understanding of issues which typically go unspoken, IM's inclusion may, for some potential participants, be the difference between engagement and non-engagement, or between discussing a particular issue or avoiding it entirely. Researchers developing methodological frameworks for projects which seek to explore sensitive subject matter, and which are required to navigate these complex barriers to participation faced by some, should therefore consider whether the inclusion of IM in some form may be appropriate for their study.

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