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Using Email Interviews to Research Popular Music and the Life Course

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Realities Toolkit #09

Using Email Interviews

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Introduction

This toolkit draws on my experiences of using email interviews in a qualitative, mixed method study of older (30+) music fans in three popular music 'scenes': Northern and rare soul, Rock, and Electronic Dance Music (EDM). I used participant observation and interviews, with one traditional and one online approach for each. Participant observation was done at music events and on virtual music discussion forums. Interviews took place either face-to-face or via email. This toolkit concentrates on my experiences of using email interviews, reflecting on how this method affected data collection and analysis, and discussing how the method works in practice.

Are email interviews appropriate for my study?

Email interviews were particularly well-suited to my study, as they were a good way of producing rich written accounts of participants' music experiences and memories that recollect long-term involvement in music scenes. If you are thinking of using email interviews, there are a few points to consider before you start. Some of these are methodological e.g. will the method produce the kind of data that is appropriate for your research questions? And, some are practical e.g. have you got sufficient time to collect data this way?

Some may believe that email interviewing is more suited to research with young participants though I found email interviews to be popular with my participants, who ranged in age from 30 to 62. Email interviews do rely on participants having access to, and feeling confident using computers, which may mean that it is not appropriate for some research. Participants also need to feel comfortable writing their own accounts of their experiences: interviewees in my study enjoyed this process, but it will not suit all projects. Taking part in email interviews can take a lot of time for participants, so you will need to decide whether this is appropriate for your topic and sample. One commonly-quoted potential problem with online research is the difficulty of knowing if your participants are who they say they are. In my case, it would have been hard to fake convincing accounts of being a long-term and thereby committed music fan.

Out of 55 email interviews, 49 were conducted with male fans. This is noteworthy because usually if there is a gender bias in response rates it is in favour of women. It is possible that men are happier with the idea of email interviewing than women. Another possibility is that they are more content in constructing written accounts of their experiences. However, I would suggest that the more likely explanation of the higher number of male participants in my project is that the topic made men more likely to participate than women. (There are more older male fans than older female fans in the music scenes studied, and men are also more likely to classify themselves as dedicated fans and therefore feel comfortable taking part in the study. Email interviewing does not necessarily mean that there will be a gender bias.) Using email as an interviewing method raises some concerns regarding a potential gender and social class imbalance in the study. However, Hewson et al. state that '...overall the evidence suggests that the Internet-user population represents a vast and diverse section of the general population that is rapidly moving beyond the select group of technologically proficient professionals who were once largely predominant' (2003: 26). Thus, I would argue that the research topic led to the gender bias in my study rather than the use of email interviews.

Most of the comparisons made between email interviews and other qualitative research methods use face-to-face interviewing as the benchmark, pointing out that email interview data lacks the spontaneity and richness of face-to-face interview data. It is true that email interviews are not as spontaneous as face-to-face interviews, and the researcher gets less extra-linguistic data such as facial expressions and body language, but in my case I found that the email interview data was particularly rich, and helpful for analysis. I discuss this in more detail below, but mention it here to show that the weight you give to the advantages and disadvantages of each research method will vary depending on your research questions.

Perhaps the main distinction to draw between email and face-to-face interviews is that the first produces a written account and the second produces an oral account. Again, neither of these is, in itself, better than the other, but you will need to decide whether this suits your research questions. Potentially, it would be more fruitful to compare email interviews to methodological approaches such as diary methods, mass observation directives, or other research methods that generate written accounts.

Of course, practical as well as methodological considerations are important when you are planning your research. Email interviews have some significant advantages here: they reduce your travel time and costs to zero; the interview transcript is a natural by-product of data collection; and email interviews give you more time to reflect before you ask your next question. I discuss these issues in relation to my research in more detail below.

Timing and pace

The process of creating interview data via email is quite different to face-to-face interviews. The pace is slower; face-to-face interviews usually happen on one day and email interviews could stretch over months, with long gaps between questions and responses.

Face-to-face interviews produce varying amounts of data, depending on how chatty your interviewee is, but the amount of data produced from email interviews could vary from a page or two of short answers to many pages of hugely detailed descriptions.

One of the advantages of using email interviews is that participants can choose when to respond to questions. Many people clearly spend time and effort writing, reviewing and editing their response before they send it. Just as email interviews allow *participants* flexibility in when they respond to questions, I also had the chance to reflect on their responses, read through our previous email conversations and then choose how to continue the interview.

Tip

Allow enough time for each conversation to develop at the participant's pace: some people will reply to your questions on the same day, but others might mull their responses over for a month or more.

Types of data produced

Though participants in face-to-face interviews will often correct or clarify their responses as they speak, there is more opportunity for email interviewees to do this. Inevitably, this affects the kind of data produced. Time for reflection and editing can allow participants to create rich and complex accounts of their experiences, in their own words, as shown in this quotation:

I had time out of the scene from about 1970 to about 1995 – I know it sounds a long time but in 1970 I was getting worn out from the all-nighters and the pills – I happened to start playing rugby union and also got married and bought a house which meant I couldn't pursue the 'scene' ... Music and events that I have been involved with in my youth have certainly stuck with me through the years, but interestingly most of us whether it be northern soul or Ibiza sound or punk or whatever, seem to take some sort of break from it at some point. Whether or not this is to recovered as we have feasted on it and need a break or maybe other things appear like buying houses, getting married, having children getting more responsibility in the jobs I don't know. Although we go along the path of different relationships, different social scenes and different music I don't think anybody forgets their 'roots' and as I have found, once the children are grown up (and you have paid for the little sods to go through university – sorry Lucy) and the mortgage is small or paid for and you retire or control your job easily you find you have a little more time to do what you want...
(Male, 59, engineer)

Despite the conversational tone and occasional slang words, this is clearly a carefully structured, written account where the respondent reflects on the part that music has played in his life over several decades.

If I compare the data produced from my email interviews with my face-to-face interviews, the email interviews did tend to produce less spontaneous and more carefully crafted data. Some email interviewees used a more informal, spontaneous style, and some used emoticons ("smileys" 😊) or abbreviations (e.g. LOL to indicate humour) to add non-verbal information to their responses and to reduce the risk of miscommunication.

The process of email interviews allowed participants to construct complex stories about their lives and experiences with music; so, in my view, the data had more in common with diaries than face-to-face interview data. This type of data suited my purpose

because I was especially interested in the salience, meaning and long-term social uses of music throughout people's lives.

Authenticity and confidentiality

Some online research raises problems of authenticity – are your participants who you think they are, and how reliable are their accounts? In my case, the risk of this was quite low, as it would have been difficult for participants to create convincing “fake” accounts, given the amount of detail about venues, events, and musicians that were included. Even though we communicated online I felt as though I knew the participants well, especially those who got really involved in the interview process.

I used an email address which contained my real name but set up a separate email account from my usual everyday one. I also used online discussion forums to recruit research participants. I set up an account and created a username that differed to my real name in this instance (this is common practice when using message boards) but revealed my real name once people had expressed an interest in taking part in the study.

Email communication made participants more likely to disclose unlawful or less socially-acceptable behaviour, even though the method would allow them to edit this behaviour out of their accounts before they sent it to me. Several email interviewees wrote frankly about recreational drug use at music events. Though face-to-face interviewees also sometimes mentioned taking drugs, they only did this after the digital recorder had been switched off.

Planning and doing email interviews

Using a different email account for my data collection kept my data separate from personal and work emails which made it easier to manage.

I designed the same interview schedule for both face-to-face and email interviews and then offered participants a choice of which method they preferred. 15 chose a face-to-face interview and 55 chose an email interview.

Tip

I initially started my email interviews by sending a full list of questions to participants, but I found that sending one or two questions at a time allowed for a more conversational style and produced richer data.

Each time I got a response from a participant, I replied with questions:

- a. clarifying their responses;
- b. asking for more information on something they had mentioned; and/or
- c. asking new questions.

Here is an extract from email correspondence with a rock music fan:

Hi James,

Thank you very much for replying to my post. I've attached my questions to this email for you to answer in your own time. There's no need to rush and please write as much as you can -

your experiences will be of huge interest to my study. I look forward to hearing from you again.

Best wishes,
Lucy

Hi Lucy

I'll attempt to be as thorough as possible. You must remember that I have been a fan for coming on 40 years and have been a musician for nie [sic] on 35 years. So, some details may be a little sketchy. But, I'll give it a good ole go and see what we come up with.

If you have any questions after, please ask away.

Hi Jimi,

Thanks very much for sending this back to me so quickly. Sounds like you've had a very interesting life so far and your opinions and story are very useful for my research. I just need a little more information - could you please let me know how old you are, where you currently live and if your occupation is now a full-time musician.

If you have the time and wouldn't mind could you tell me more about moving to the UK i.e. when and how this impacted upon your music tastes and experiences as a fan and musician. What you said about gender and rock music is interesting - have you ever had female band members/been in a band with female musicians? Why/why not. Hope that's ok and don't worry if you haven't got the time to reply. Once again, thank you!

Best wishes,
Lucy

Hi Lucy

Sorry for the delay. Been a bit sidetracked with other things. Most importantly the gig the night you sent this! It was incredible. About 200 people in The Brickmakers Live Music Venue in Norwich, which about 1/3 of the crowd was there to see the magic that is Super Sexy Animal. We won a lot of new fans that night as well!

We were supporting Wilko Johnson (ex Dr Feelgood, ex Ian Dury), who was great as well. Hope this all helps. I'd quite happily answer any more questions you have and please let me know if I might have missed any of your questions.

Take care

Jimi
x

PS Good luck on your thesis. If you don't mind, I wouldn't mind seeing it when it's done. Sounds like very interesting reading.

Hey Jimi,

Thanks for your mail and don't worry about the delay, I didn't have to wait too long. I'm really interested in your opinions and you seem to have a wealth of experience in the music business from all the bands you've been in and the work in radio that you've done. Once again, thanks for sharing your story with me. I might have more questions sometime in the near future and will be in touch if I think of anything else to ask. Feel free to drop me an email anytime if you think of anything else you'd like to tell me.

Best wishes,
Lucy

Because I could do the email interviews from my home or office I did not need to spend time or money travelling to interviews. This meant that I could interview people from a geographically wider area than would have been possible if I was only collecting face-to-face interview data. Email interviews even allowed me to include a few people who were living outside the UK.

The fact that email interviews produce 'ready-made' interview transcripts was extremely useful. While there may be methodological advantages in not having to 'translate' an interviewee's spoken account into a written account by transcribing it, there are certainly practical advantages for the researcher! It saved me a lot of time transcribing audio recordings and gave me more time to analyse my data.

Tip

Using an email programme such as Gmail, which saves each email sent or received in a thread, makes it easier read each conversation between you and each of your participants.

Feedback from participants

Participants seemed to enjoy taking part in email interviews and 'authoring' their life experiences: one especially enthusiastic and prolific respondent described how he looked forward to spending an hour or two every Friday writing his responses while listening to the radio and having a glass of wine. Some interviewees commented favourably on the way that the interviews encouraged them to document their experiences and opinions. One participant enjoyed the process so much he suggested I could write his biography, using the email interview data as a starting point!

Further reading

More resources on email interviews

Bampton and Cowton (2002) 'The E-Interview' [27 paragraphs], *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 3(2), Art 9, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs020295> – A good evaluation of email interviews, particularly useful for disadvantages of the method.

Crichton, S. and Kinash, S. (2003) 'Virtual ethnography: Interactive interviewing online as method' in *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, Vol. 29 (2) Spring/printemps - Assesses online interviewing and argues that that the participants can enjoy the process and often find it hard to quit their interactions with researchers.

Hine, C. (ed) (2005) *Virtual Methods Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers - An essential guide to anyone wanting to use the internet in research. The book draws on case studies to evaluate a range of research methods using the internet.

Mann, C. and Stewart, F. (2000) *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: A Handbook for Researching Online*, London: Sage – Another essential guide for researchers that are thinking of the using the internet in research.

Walther, J. B. (1996) 'Computer-Mediated Communication, Impersonal, Interpersonal and Hyperpersonal Interaction' in *Communication Research*, 23 (1): 3-43 - Explores the effects of computer-mediated communication in terms of whether they help or hinder researchers.

More publications from this study

Gibson, L. (forthcoming) 'Popular Music and the Life Course: Ageing, Music Taste and Participation in 'Scenes'', in a special issue of *Popular Music*

Gibson, L. (forthcoming) 'Becoming More 'Civilised': Rock Fans' Experiences of the Ageing Body' in *Ageing and Youth Cultures: Music, Style and Identity*. Prof. Andy Bennett and Dr. Paul Hodgkinson, Berg Publishers

Feedback welcome! If you have any comments on this toolkit or if you can tell us how you have used it in your research or teaching please do drop us a line at realities@manchester.ac.uk and let us know.



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