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Social and Virtual Networks: Evaluating Synchronous Online Interviewing Using Instant Messenger

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This paper describes an evaluation of the quality and utility of synchronous online interviewing for data collection in social network research. Synchronous online interviews facilitated by Instant Messenger as the communication medium, were undertaken with ten final year university students. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis of respondent and researcher evaluation of the quality and utility of IM indicated that IM was an integral part of student university life and also an excellent and innovative communication platform; a potential advancement for research interviewing. IM was subsequently compared with face-to-face communication in terms of gains and losses for research interviewing. The efficacy of the method of online interviewing using IM in this context is discussed. Key Words: Synchronous Online Interviewing, Instant Messenger, Social Support Networks, Virtual Networks, and Content Analysis

Introduction

Transition to Higher Education (HE) within the United Kingdom (UK) environment can present students with personal challenges that are, for some, resolvable and yet for others, insurmountable. Well established social support provided by family and friends is disrupted by this transition, leaving some students struggling to adjust (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Typically, students construct for themselves new social support networks that provide formal support - practical help with academic tasks, appreciation of opinions (Hobfoll, 1998) and informal emotional support and social companionship (Walker, Wasserman, & Wellman, 1994). Those who provide social support are vital in this transition, and beyond (Agneessens, Waeye, & Lievens, 2006). Individuals' personal contact with others constitutes their social network, which is:

...composed of all others with whom a person has a certain relationship. An important part of this personal network consists of those others who provide social support. (Agneessens, Waeye, & Lievens, p. 427)

Social support networks allow an individual to feel cared about and understood (McKinney, 2002). This, in turn, can have a positive impact upon students' self-identity, self-esteem and thus membership of the learning community (Antia, Stinson, & Gaustad, 2002). The positive contribution of social support networks goes beyond the personal; affecting academic performance. Korinek, Walther-Thomas, McLaughlin, and Williams (1999), as well as Peat, Dalziel, and Grant (2000) have begun to explore the links between social support networks and academic performance. Their work suggests that

strong social support networks are central to retention and progression because of their potential to impact upon both formal and informal aspects of student academic experience. Students engaged in strong social support networks clearly benefit academically and socially from their experiences.

The New Labour government in the UK (1997 - present) currently asserts that social justice will be achieved by reducing exclusion through education and subsequent employment (Armitage et al., 2003). Thus, UK policy instituted a system of evidence-based accountability for the formal academic needs of students. Much research and resource has been dedicated to the formal academic needs of university students, in pursuit of improvements in achievement (McLean, 2001), retention and progression (Christie, 2004; Raab & Adam, 2005). This has created a climate in which the focus is almost exclusively on formal academic need, yet consideration of purely formal academic need alone may be insufficient to ensure that students fully benefit from their education. For example, the deep rooted and intractable problems of the UK HE system may be indicative of a system in danger of becoming increasingly unresponsive to real student need.

A small but growing body of research (see for example, Putnam, 2000; Elias, 2006) indicates that students' personal and social issues feature significantly in student experience and their progression and retention. Osterman (2000) suggests that educational institutions may implement organisational practices that neglect and thus undermine student experience of a supportive community, representing a threat to their physical (Degenne & Forse, 1999; Granello, 1999) and psychological welfare (DiFilippo & Overholser, 2000).

Student formal academic support is clearly important. However, informal student support networks are at least equally important and to date, given little emphasis in HE research. The central aim of the principal study was thus to explore student experience of both formal and informal social support networks, to allow for beneficial outcomes that influence student overall wellbeing, retention and progression. The data collection method employed for the principal study was Internet based qualitative interviews using Instant Messenger. This is a very uncommon practice in the UK and in an era where pragmatic values place weight on policy and practice being evidence-based rather than ideologically determined (Davies, Nutley, & Smith, 2000; Giddens, 2000), evaluation was essential, to demonstrate the quality and utility of the method by establishing, "...what works, for whom and in what contexts" (Kazi 2003, p. 160). Immediately following each online interview respondents evaluated the quality and utility of this 'novel' interview method.

This current paper presents an account of that evaluation. The rationale for choosing this 'novel' data collection method in the principal study of HE student social support networks is contextualised below in a literature review of data collection methods in this area.

Literature Review

Within the area of the principal study, research has been predominantly quantitative, based on standardised self-report inventories (Lev-Wiesel, Nuttman-Shwartz, & Sternberg, 2006) that measure perceived positive social support from closed

questions, fixed-choice answers and Likert-type scales (see Procidano & Heller, 1983). Such highly-structured quantitative designs leave little scope for unexpected issues that may arise, obscuring vital aspects of subjective understanding (Potter, 2000). Quantitative self-report measures can be restrictive, as the categories under investigation are defined and structured by a subsequently 'absent' researcher. Knox, Savage, and Harvey (2006) criticise the quantitative analysis of social support networks for their focus on individualistic attributes, that appear to "erase all social connection" (p. 116) and reduce social support networks to nothing more than mere representational tropes, rather than recognising their embeddedness in particular social, cultural, temporal and spatial contexts.

The literature shows that qualitative methods, notably semi-structured interviews in the area of student social support networks are particularly applied to nursing studies, for example Stanley (2003), Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2007). In contrast to quantitative studies, qualitative work in this area revealed strong social support networks were based on wider concerns imbued with personal meaning, such as establishing reciprocal trust and sharing, making compatible friends and having living arrangements, meeting spaces and campus locality conducive to their establishment and maintenance (Steele, Lauder, Caperchione & Anastasi, 2005; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). These important new understandings indicated that a qualitative approach to the principal study may enhance understandings. This however brought into focus two related issues. Firstly, the researcher is hearing impaired. This had previously raised concerns for the researcher in earlier research interviews. Frequent requests for clarification due to mishearing responses had disrupted the conversational flow and subsequent audio-transcription proved laborious due to the extra effort and time consumed to ensure accuracy. Secondly, a proportion of the sample also had some form of social communication difficulties, such as Deafness/hearing impairment or autistic spectrum disorder. A qualitative approach here could prove difficult because verbalisation may not be the primary or preferred means of communication.

Conventional face-to-face and telephone interviews can be argued to reduce opportunities for access to broader samples and compromise data accuracy. For example, conventional interviews have been found to be problematic for the hearing impaired; both for the researcher and participant (see Bowker & Tuffin, 2003). Translation of sign language (see Temple & Young, 2004) raises issues of correctness of interpretation and anonymity when interviews are conducted using a translator. Respondents who are difficult to include by conventional, verbal means of communication are under-represented in academic research (for a review of widening participation research in HE, see Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Adnett, & Slack, 2006). A text-based means of communication may offer advantages more generally for both the researcher and respondents, Garrison and Anderson (2003) assert:

...there is sufficient evidence to suggest that writing has some inherent and demonstrable advantages over speech when engaged in critical discourse and reflection (p. 26).

Boulos and Wheelert (2007) stress advancement in sociable interactive technologies such as 'the social Web' has provided opportunities for people to connect

and communicate in a text-based environment through the online medium, in real time. Through the Internet, connections can be made with a broad range of people otherwise difficult to access. It cuts across time, space and barriers to interaction meaning that communication is no longer geographically bound; the Internet can reduce social isolation and engender connectedness with society. Crichton and Kinash (2003) argue “as such, they are embodied, sense dependent, and not fictive” (n.p.). Respondents in virtual spaces can:

...escape their own embodied identities and accordingly escape any social inequalities and attitudes relating to various forms of embodiment. Race, gender and physical disability is indiscernible over the Internet. Any basis for enacting embodiment discrimination is removed; freeing access to participation and granting each participant equal status. (Wilson, 1997, p. 149)

Although Wilson (1997) advises caution whilst using the Internet because separation from embodied identity may incur disconnection from “physical action and a sense of social responsibility to others” (p. 153), Boulos and Wheelert (2007) assert that “the social Web” (p. 2) enables the collection, sharing and transferring of information and ideas for specific purposes, thus facilitating the development of stronger, reflective communities. Clarke (2000) claims that the Internet increases perceived anonymity, which can engender enhanced confidence, facilitate active participation, engagement, reflection and honesty because “there are no nods, frowns, or yawns to discourage or distract, and misread non-verbal cues that result in second-guessing the expectation of the other” (Clarke, n.p.).

Ruch (2005) suggests contemporary research should assume an approach that embraces and combines technology and the ‘social’. The opportunity for HE research practice to take advantage of technological advancements should be exploited. Berg (2007) argues:

As technology advances, methods used in qualitative research must strive to keep up - or at least seek ways to take advantage of these technological advancements because such environments provide the researcher and respondent an experience similar to face-to-face interaction insofar as they provide a mechanism for a back-and-forth exchange of questions and answers in what is almost real time. (p. 112)

Therefore, due to the advantages set out below, the principal study used Instant Messenger (IM) as the communication medium for online interviewing. IM is an electronic online communication system that combines the facilities of a telephone - synchronous conversations, and ‘turbo charged’ email, producing a written record of the conversation; rapid “real-time chat...at lightning speed” (Flynn, 2004, p. 8). IM has additional benefits, it is a faster, more conversational way of communicating than email, and has archiving capabilities that save and store conversations (Flynn). IM is inexpensive (free to download in most cases), convenient and attractive for those who dislike or find opinion expression difficult during face-to-face interviews (Gunter, 2002)

and discussions (Ho & McLeod, 2008). IM can dispel respondent apprehension, there is no need for time consuming transcription, the time and place can be organised to suit respondents (Davis, 2004) and IM can generate reflective and descriptive data (James, 2006). Areas of uncertainty can be picked up on and raised in the response, generating richer data (Morgan & Symon, 2004). IM enables easy entry into a computer assisted qualitative data analysis program (Bryman, 2004) and in some cases:

...“vid-cams” (computer linked video cameras) can be used to allow the researcher and respondent to actually see one another. (Berg, 2007, p. 112)

Using synchronous online interviewing with IM as the communication platform may enable more accurate data and access to fuller exploration of student positive social support networks. In contemporary society, technology has become embedded in most aspects of human life (Parton, 2006) yet the extent to which research practice may benefit from that remains equivocal and the evaluation set out in this paper seeks to address this point.

Research Aims

The aim of this current paper is to present an evaluation of synchronous online interviewing, using the communication medium Instant Messenger (IM), for its quality and utility as an innovative research interviewing technique.

1. What are respondent opinions of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM?
2. What are researcher opinions of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM?

The study was approved by the University Research Ethics Panel.

The Researcher

In addition to academic qualifications (BSc. [Hons] Social Psychology, Post-Graduate Certificate of Education [Learning Difficulties and Disabilities], MSc. Social Research and Evaluation [Social Work]), the researcher has gained insight through being severely hearing impaired, twenty years experience as a parent-carer of a now young adult with severe learning and physical difficulties, an experienced educational support worker, and qualified HE teacher. This academic and empathetic experience would support the collection of rich, qualitative data to gain deep meaningful insight (see Flick, von Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004) into the experiences of HE students. Interest in alternative and innovative research methods resulted from intention to access and collect accurate data for a PhD research study with a sample of HE students with social communication difficulties, namely deafness/hearing impairments and/or autistic spectrum disorder. The outcome of this current evaluation and analysis of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM will facilitate decisions of whether or not to use

this particular method to collect data in the future PhD study funded by the UK's leading research agency, the Economic and Social Research Council.

The Sample

Access to the sample was negotiated in conjunction with university staff who recruited final year Human and Health Science students to take part in, and evaluate an online interview. The sample comprised 10 (5 men, 5 women) final year university undergraduates, all of whom had access to the Internet via on and/or off-campus computers, making this a purposive sample (see Silverman, 2005; Patton, 1990), meeting the pre-determined criterion: computer literate final year HE students with access to the Internet. The sample comprised a good cross-section of age (21-45), ability, sex, race, ethnicity and social class (heterogeneous sample, Robson, 2002).

Method

To evaluate respondent and researcher opinions of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM, a mixed-method approach was used. The integration of two or more research methods (triangulation; Brewer & Hunter, 2006) can provide a compatible mixed-methods alternative to using only quantitative or qualitative methods. The use of an eclectic approach can minimise limitations by revealing the different dimensions of a phenomenon, which can “enrich understandings of the multi-faceted, complex nature of the social world” (Moran-Ellis, Alexander, Cronin, Dickinson, Fielding, Sleney, & Thomas, 2006, p. 47). Looking at phenomena from different viewpoints and reaching the same or similar conclusions by analysing two or more different types of data can also serve to strengthen credibility of research findings (Marsh, 2000).

A set of nine structured questions (see Appendix A) were designed to address the research aim; ‘what are respondent opinions of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM?’. Answers to these nine questions provided quantitative data in frequency format for subsequent evaluation analysis. People more readily accept and understand value and worth of phenomena through quantitative methods that focus on measuring competency and quality to establish utility (Kazi, 2003). Evidence-based results, using descriptive statistical formats that place weight on methodological utility (Giddens, 2000), have a strong emphasis on reliability (addressed here through inter-coder reliability) and validity (addressed through respondent validation). Robson (2002) argues:

In an age of accountability, the quest is for ‘evidence-based’ everything: medicine, health care, social services, education...While the motivation may be financial, there is an ethical dimension. It is difficult to justify doing things with, to or for people if we do not know what their effects are...evidence in numerical form gives clear messages...generating highly trustworthy data. (p. 116)

The research aim; ‘what are researcher opinions of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM’, was achieved by utilising extracts taken from a reflective account

written during the actual interviews. This reflective account detailed the researcher and first author's contextually embedded experience of the quality and utility of IM whilst carrying out the interviews and provided the qualitative data for the evaluation analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

For online interviewing, two separate accounts were set up with Yahoo, one for the researcher and one for respondents. The researcher's account was accessible only by the researcher and was accessed directly through Yahoo; this enabled the researcher to have full control over archiving and privacy settings during the online interviews.

The separate respondent account was accessed through the 'free' server Meebo.com (see www.meebo.com), primarily to avoid respondents having to download and install Yahoo IM and because this account had no archiving facilities, preventing data storage by respondents, which enhanced security. In addition, accessing the respondent account through Meebo.com rather than directly through Yahoo enabled the researcher to organise the respondent account so that it only allowed access to the researcher's account, when activated it was "invisible" to other Internet users. A 'user friendly' IM accessibility manual was developed to facilitate respondent access and usage. This accessibility manual included visual screen shots at each of the relevant stages i.e., how to access Meebo.com, enter user names and passwords to access the Yahoo IM account, and specific usage of IM for online interviewing.

Respondents expressing an interest contacted the researcher via email to set up an initial face-to-face meeting. The researcher met with each respondent individually to affirm the legitimacy of the study, establish rapport and acknowledge respondents' commitment to the study. Before commencement of the individual online interviews, respondents were provided with written information regarding the purpose of the interview (with the aims being "as open as possible") (Burman, 1994, p. 54), informed that privacy could not be totally guaranteed over a public network and of the need to guard their own privacy and that of significant others. At this time, respondents were also provided with a consent form to sign that covered all necessary ethical issues in accordance with the Economic and Social Research Council guidelines (2006, sect. 3.2.1). Ethical issues that underlie veracity, non-malevolence, non-coercion, confidentiality and impartiality were covered (see Appendix B). Following respondent written consent, a mutually convenient time and date was set for each online interview to take place using IM. At this time, respondents were also provided the opportunity to practice accessing and using IM through the Meebo.com server utilising the specifically devised IM accessibility manual.

Respondents were interviewed individually; these semi-structured interviews lasted approximately one hour 30 minutes. Content of these interviews were based on final year student experience of formal and informal social support networks, the continuity of these networks from one academic year to another and how this impacted on their entire university experience. Whilst online, each respondent answered the series of nine structured questions concerning their evaluation of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM.

When respondents exited the respondent account, all data in this account was deleted automatically. On completion of each individual interview the researcher

immediately changed the password of the respondent account. This prevented respondents' re-entering the respondent account and provided a secure setting for subsequent interviews through the provision of previously unused passwords.

Immediately following each interview, data were copied, saved into a Microsoft Word document and deleted from the researcher's account. Due to the textual nature of the online interviewing technique, transcription was unnecessary; however the 10 interviews were proofed using Microsoft Word to ensure correct spelling and edited if necessary. For analysis purposes respondents' corresponding transcripts were assigned labels A-J.

Evaluation Analysis

To analyse respondent evaluations of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM, quantitative content analysis was employed. Quantitative content analysis "seeks to quantify content in terms of pre-determined categories" (Bryman, 2004, p. 538). In this case, only positive and negative opinions relating to respondent experience of online interviewing using IM, generated from the nine structured questions, were considered. The ten respondent interview transcripts were read several times to enhance understanding and grounding in the text (Willig, 2001). Manifest words/phrases that related to responses to the nine structured questions were colour highlighted in the text for a sub-sample of three transcripts. Coding instructions were developed that provided detailed explication of all the 'key' words and phrases (see Bryman, 2004, pp. 190-191) that coders subsequently highlighted in the text for the entire sample (see Appendix C). Instances of highlighted 'key' words and phrases for the entire sample were then quantified into 2 sub-sets; positive and negative opinions of online interviewing using IM. An inter-coder reliability check indicated a strong level of agreement, Spearman's $\rho = 0.85$ (see Langdrige, 2004).

To analyse the researcher's evaluative account of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM a qualitative content analysis was carried out. Qualitative content analysis was used because it summarises the underlying themes in the first author's reflective account that emerged regarding the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM during the interview process. Qualitative content analysis is compatible with this type of reflective data because "there is an emphasis on allowing categories to emerge out of the data and on recognising the significance for understanding the meaning of the context in which an item being analysed (and the categories derived from it) appeared" (Bryman, 2004, p. 183). Summaries from notes made during the actual interviews are presented below using a progressive type trajectory (initial, second and third, and subsequent interviews) of the primary author's reflective experience of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM as she became increasingly accustomed with the technique. Qualitative research has its indicators of 'quality' that constitute 'trustworthiness'. This relies on four distinct criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The qualitative approach utilised in this study facilitated the embodiment of all four criteria for trustworthiness:

1. Credibility refers to establishing the 'truth value' or accuracy of the research findings; this was addressed by respondent validation.

Inferences from the data were authenticated by giving respondents the opportunity to review the extracts and comment on the content; thus also strengthening dependability through supporting evidence (see Miller & Dingwall, 1997; Seale, 1999)

2. Transferability recommends describing the context of the research, referring specifically to the content and process of the research. The interviews took on a friendly and relaxed conversation flow, due to a good level of rapport effectively established during the face-to-face meetings prior to commencement. Furthermore, the researcher had noted the words chosen by respondents in their accounts, their enthusiasm, anxiety and disinterest at different points in the interview, assisted subsequent analysis by enhancing insight into respondent opinions of online interviewing using IM. It is acknowledged that extensive academic reading of online interviewing literature and valuable experience gained during preliminary data analysis following piloting of the interview schedule (not discussed here) inevitably informed analysis
3. Dependability entails using various techniques such as triangulation of methods (see Marsh, 2000), and/or the recording of detailed notes on the research process at every stage, to maintain consistency. This was achieved through both triangulation of method and the aforementioned procedure section
4. Confirmability was achieved by crosschecking and confirming the dependability of the findings

Findings from the quantitative content analysis of respondent evaluation are presented first, followed by findings from the qualitative content analysis of researcher's evaluation. Comparison of online interviewing using IM with face-to-face interviewing is presented, before an overall discussion of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM.

Findings

Respondent Positive and Negative Opinions Concerning Quality and Utility of IM

Table 1 shows respondents viewed IM much more positively than negatively. IM was considered a convenient and easy to use communication medium that lessened interview apprehension by allowing respondents to feel comfortable and relaxed. This created an enjoyable experience, which raised respondent confidence and coupled with perceived anonymity, fostered active engagement with the research process. IM formed an excellent platform for research interviewing by enabling meaningful communication. Respondents enthusiastically discussed future use of IM for interviewing purposes and existing use of IM to contact friends on a regular basis. A crucial point here is that respondents unfamiliar with IM (three out of 10) all discussed future use of IM both personally and professionally; finding IM, convenient, fast, easy to use and an overall comfortable and enjoyable experience.

Absence of non-verbal signals was the most frequently discussed problem, along with loss of meaning. Although not experienced by respondents in this study, computer related problems, and typing/spelling ability was considered, albeit on a much lesser basis, as potentially problematic.

Table 1

Frequency of Respondent Positive or Negative Opinions of the Quality and Utility of Online Interviewing using IM

| Quality and Utility of Online Interviews using IM | | | |
|--|------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Positive opinions</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Negative opinions</i> | <i>Frequency</i> |
| Convenient | 20 | Absence of non-verbal signals | 6 |
| Easy | 15 | Computer related problems | 5 |
| Comfortable | 15 | Loss of meaning | 3 |
| Would use it again | 12 | Typing/spelling ability | 3 |
| Enjoyable | 11 | None | 2 |
| Confident | 11 | Distractions | 1 |
| Enables meaning | 10 | | |
| Familiarity/personally use it | 10 | | |
| Perceived anonymity/widened participation | 8 | | |
| Increases cognition | 3 | | |
| No transcription | 2 | | |
| Limitations not unusual | 1 | | |
| Total | 117 | Total | 20 |

Summary Notes of Initial Interview

- The internet connection failed at the first attempt. This sent me into a massive panic as I cannot interview online without access to the Internet but it connected the second time around to a great big sigh of relief!
- The whole experience felt unusually quiet due to having no audio/verbal facilities however, this prevented me from being impatient and interrupting the conversation
- The experience also felt quite isolating, in the sense that I was distanced both in time and space from the respondents
- Due to having no visuals the emotions and non-verbal signals were absent
- The interview took longer, approximately one hour 30 minutes, compared with previously undertaken face-to-face interviews, which took approximately one hour
- Responses were more succinct compared with previously undertaken face-to-face interviews
- It only took me 30 minutes to correct a few spelling mistakes, ensure anonymity, and print a transcript ready for analysis

Summary Notes of Second and Third Interviews

On completion of a further two interviews my feelings were that ‘the silence is deafening’ quite ironic to say I have severe hearing impairment! Also, I had been desperate for total silence whilst transcribing the pilot face-to-face interviews. I could utilise the audio tools available in IM but they appear somewhat childish for a professional interview. However, this is merely a quibble compared to the benefits listed below:

- Both the respondent and I have access to our previous responses, so do not have to commit information to memory. This has enabled me to follow-up on unexpected avenues of thought that may have been otherwise missed in face-to-face interviews
- A message appears when someone is typing. This led to no interruptions in the conversation, so far!
- I can copy and paste most of the questions into IM, which has freed up time for me to write notes concerning interesting points to follow-up and also record my thoughts and feelings regarding using IM, whilst immersed in it
- To compensate for the absence of non-verbal signals I am using more probes to confirm responses, gain respondents confidence and relax them by thanking them and using phrases such as ‘that’s very interesting’ ‘that’s very insightful’
- Formatting the transcripts (spelling, ensuring anonymity) afterwards provides the added benefit of allowing immersion in the data, ready for analysis

Summary Notes of Subsequent Interviews

I am thrilled at the quality and utility of IM for online interviewing purposes. It is fast, secure, the transcripts are visibly (content wise) different from previous face-to-face interviews that I have conducted, there is no ‘waffle’ only succinct questions and answers. Asking respondents to reveal their feelings and emotions on matters regarding their university friendships has proved very successful.

Advantages:

- A more accurate, deliberate and thoughtful process is promoted because the person thinks, types, reads what they have written, confirms then sends the correspondence
- Enhances confidence in those whom may not readily partake in interviews either online or otherwise (inclusive). This was achieved with one particular respondent who had a specific learning disability; I assured this person that it was the content that I was interested in not the spelling,

- grammar or punctuation. I advised them throughout the interview to take their time
- People with, for example physical disabilities and disfigurements may be more comfortable with online rather than face-to-face interviews because the ‘superficial’ aspects of people’s physical appearance are absent

Disadvantages:

- Respondents could get distracted if they are situated in their home environment
- I waited an hour for a respondent to enter the IM environment to commence the interview (respondent forgot the time). However, it should be noted that distractions and lateness could equally arise in face-to-face interviewing.

As with findings from respondent evaluation, there are much more positive than negative opinions of online interviewing using IM (see Table 2). Online interviewing using IM is convenient (fast, no travelling, choice of location, time efficient, inexpensive, no interruptions or transcription), easy to use, perceived anonymity increases participation and enhances confidence, all of which positively contributed to active engagement with the research process producing a more thoughtful and accurate account. In this study, using IM as an innovative communication medium was highly beneficial.

Table 2

Summary of Researcher Positive and Negative Opinions of the Quality and Utility of Online Interviewing using IM

| Quality and Utility of Online Interviews using IM | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| <i>Positives</i> | <i>Negatives</i> |
| Convenient | Absence of non-verbal signals |
| Easy | Technical problems |
| Would use it again/widened participation | Silence |
| Enhances confidence | |
| Access to previous responses enhances meaning and accuracy | |
| Perceived anonymity/widened participation | |
| Increased cognition/succinct account | |
| No transcription | |
| Limitations not unusual | |

Findings from respondent and researcher evaluation of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM were remarkably similar, therefore they were combined before being re-categorised as losses and gains. Re-categorisation was carried out to provide a clearer concept of what this study gained and lost by using IM as a communication medium for interviewing, compared with face-to-face interviews (see Tables 3 and 4).

As can be seen from Tables 3 and 4, absence of non-verbal signals was found in this study to be a primary concern discussed equally by respondents and researcher following participation in online interviewing using IM. Nevertheless, compared with face-to-face interviewing (see Bryman, 2004), online interviewing using IM as the communicative medium provided an excellent platform for conducting research interviews. In this study respondents and researcher alike considered this innovative interviewing technique to be at the very least, the first step in facilitating widened research participation. At the very best, online interviewing using IM was considered more convenient than face-to-face interviews. Perceived anonymity allowed increased confidence and cognition, and by using textual rather than verbal communication, data collection was more accurate.

Tables 3 and 4

Combined Respondent/Researcher Losses and Gains of Online Interviewing using IM Compared with Face-to-Face Interviews

| Online Interviews using IM | | Face-to-Face Interviews | |
|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>Losses</i> | Non-verbal signals | <i>Gains</i> | Presence of non-verbal signals |
| | Technical problems | <i>Losses</i> | Technical problems |
| <i>Gains</i> | Convenient/easy | | Time consuming, can be costly |
| | Access to previous responses | | Commit previous responses to memory |
| | Enhances confidence | | Lessens confidence - apprehension |
| | No transcription | | Long, arduous, inaccurate transcription |
| | Increased cognition | | Loss of cognition - apprehension |
| | Accurate | | Inaccurate - mishearing/not hearing |
| | Succinct accounts | | Long winded accounts |
| | No interruptions | | Frequent interruptions |
| | Perceived anonymity - widened participation | | Self-consciousness, apprehension. Barriers to participation - psychological, physical, emotional, sensory difficulties, spatial distance |

Discussion

The results from this evaluation analysis have valuable and useful implications for research practice. Respondents, during the online interviews using IM, ‘opened up’ in a different and more productive way to discuss issues concerning their experience of social

support networks throughout their undergraduate education, which were not present in the existing literature. For example, rather than non-verbal communication respondents used words to convey immediate emotional responses. Non-verbal communication, even if recorded during the interviews, is difficult to re-situate in its context and have due significance ascribed to it after the interview.

Findings mentioned above support a similar view held by Crichton & Kinash (2003) who found that by using online interviewing they:

...were able to sustain conversations beyond the scope of many traditional face-to-face interview sessions, noting that the participants enjoyed the process and often found it hard to quit their interactions with us. Hence our position that even though the technology is still emerging and improving, the potential is clearly rich, inviting, and worth continued study. (n.p.)

Similarly, it is important to recognise that respondents in this study valued perceived anonymity over embodied experience during the interviews. For example, respondents reflected that they felt they could be more honest because they were not in the presence of another person. This mirrors Clarke's (2000) arguments that increased perceived anonymity through online communication can encourage enhanced confidence, which can facilitate active participation, engagement, reflection, honesty and opinion expression (Ho & McLeod, 2008).

The principal study therefore not only gained quality data through online interviewing using IM but also enhanced active and competent participation through widening research capacity. This is extremely valuable in the 'real' world of research (Robson, 1993) because through increased active participation the findings here have great potential to facilitate improvements for students by influencing HE course development.

Regular usage of IM is consistent with the findings from the principal study that final year students use mediated technology as their preferred choice of communication to bridge time-space separations. IM is an integral part of university life; this raises the ecological validity of this study (a natural group in a natural setting; see Langdrige, 2004).

It is notable that 70% of respondents were already using IM on a regular basis for its quality and utility in bridging time-separation, with the other 30% enjoying the experience so much that they were more than prepared to use it again. This constitutes a further argument in support of using IM as the communicative platform for interviewing. Offering IM as a feasible option for interview respondents offers the advantage for research practice to widen opportunity for respondents to take part in research who may otherwise be difficult to interview using conventional means. For example, people in remote areas (Boulos & Wheelert, 2007) and those who experience interview apprehension or shyness (Gunter, 2002).

Absence of non-verbal signals was only problematic for four out of ten respondents. Clarke (2000) suggests "lack of visual cues requires a fine balance be struck between non-intrusive facilitation and enough structure to limit uncertainty and confusion" (n.p.). However, respondents in this study were confident enough to seek confirmation of uncertainty and confusion; asking for clarification as they thought

necessary. Moreover, having access to visual cues may not necessarily provide accurate data. Clarke further argues that online interviewing is more accurate than face-to-face interviewing because there are no non-verbal cues to misread. The researcher supports this view; the absence of non-verbal signals during the online interviews using IM was compensated for by using more follow-up probes to confirm responses and complimentary phrases to motivate and encourage respondent active participation. The technique of probing to confirm responses can be argued to have evoked more accurate data. Therefore, the losses of non-verbal signals discussed by respondents in this study seem a “small price to pay” compared with the large amount of gains.

Computer related problems varied, from one respondent having initial logging in difficulties, which were quickly overcome through instructions provided by the researcher via email and one other respondent having Internet security and privacy concerns, which were addressed in the interview brief and ethical considerations. In relation to technical problems these can be evident whenever technology is utilised as a communication medium, such as audio/video equipment failure (Berg, 2007). Typing/spelling ability was a worry discussed on three occasions by one particular respondent whom had disclosed the condition of dyslexia (the effects create neurological anomalies, which cause varying degrees of learning difficulties when using words and symbols; Brooks, 1997) in the face-to-face meeting during the IM briefing. However, following the online interview, this respondent discussed future use of IM because the experience had raised their confidence in its usability due to it being fast, easy and comfortable to use.

Study Limitations

The sample size was relatively small and largely comprised of Social Science undergraduates. The majority had just completed their final year empirical research projects collecting data using conventional face-to-face interviews and most disclosed aversion of the time consuming transcription process (sampling bias; see Bryman, 2004). Whilst findings from this study indicate that online interviewing using IM provides great potential as an innovative technique for more accurate data collection and subsequent advancement in knowledge, to enhance in this case HE educational practice, it is important to use online technology for its quality and utility rather than merely to replace face-to-face interviewing. Ethical concerns regarding the impact of using this technique to collect highly sensitive data are unknown. The synthesis of the data collection technique with the communication medium should endeavor to ‘fit in’ with the central research aims as it did in this study and be sensitive both to the target group and context. Thereafter, innovative research can be organised to exploit the quality and utility of the chosen communication medium and minimise its limitation (Clarke, 2000).

This innovative online interviewing technique is still in its infancy, yet it already has established benefits. However, benefits need to be established specifically for people with social communication and physical interaction difficulties. Further exploration is needed to establish *how* inclusive online interviewing using IM as a communication medium is for those individuals who face barriers to social interaction through perceived psychological, physical, emotional and sensory difficulties, rather than merely geographical spatial distance. A follow-up study could then compare the impact of

disembodiment which may occur during online interaction (see Wilson, 1997) with the subsequent impact of re-embodiment (for a critical appraisal; see Williams, 1998).

Furthermore, researchers' aspiring to utilise online interviewing as a communication medium for data collection should seek to ascertain if initial face-to-face meetings are necessary for gaining rapport with respondents and training in the usage of the communication medium. In addition, the quality and the utility of accessibility manuals for using communication media should be ascertained.

Conclusion

Synchronous online interviewing, facilitated by IM, was employed to advance knowledge of student social support networks. IM was chosen as the communication platform for online interviewing because it facilitated opportunity for more accurate data collection (Garrison & Anderson, 2003) and subsequent advancement of knowledge concerning HE student social support networks.

IM was confirmed as a very high quality communication medium frequently used by the majority of respondents in this study – an integral part of contemporary university life. This raised the ecological validity (see Gavin, 2008) of this study. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis of respondent and researcher evaluation of IM positively enhanced knowledge concerning the quality and utility of using IM as a novel communication platform for research interviewing.

The collection of data from structured questions proved advantageous in the evaluation of respondent opinions of the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM. Quantitative content analysis provided a sense of the 'extent' to which respondent positive and negative opinions were held concerning the quality and utility of online interviewing using IM. "Simple counting conveys a clear sense of their relative prevalence" (Bryman, 2004, p. 449). Data elicited from an in-depth reflective account was testament to the context in which online interviewing using IM was experienced by the researcher. Numerical data obtained from respondent evaluation allowed for cross comparison with researcher evaluation. Due to high similarity, respondent and researcher opinions in this study were subsequently combined to reveal minimal losses and substantial gains of online interviewing using IM as a data collection technique, compared with face-to-face interviews.

Absence of non-verbal signals was found in this study to be the primary concern of using IM as the communication medium for online interviewing, compared to conventional interviews. However, mutual confirmation of meaning and understanding through textual communication encouraged more accurate data, compared to reliance on confirmation through visual cues in face-to-face communication that can evoke discouragement, interruptions, distractions and misreading of non-verbal cues (Clarke, 2000).

For both respondent and researcher, the substantial gains of online interviewing using IM outweighed the losses. IM is more than just a novel research tool to be exploited, it is a 'cutting edge' communication medium used frequently by students as part of everyday university life. Consequently, IM was considered by respondents and researchers alike as being convenient, easy, a comfortable and very enjoyable experience for innovative online interviewing. IM was an excellent communication platform that

lessened interview apprehension (Davis, 2004), 'levelled the research playing field' for those individuals with shyness, the hearing impaired (Eminovic, Wyatt, Tarpey, Murray, & Ingrams, 2004), and possibly specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia (Pietra, Makam, & Tran, 2005).

By using IM, important advancements in knowledge concerning student social support networks were achieved, particularly through perceived anonymity, which enabled more reflective, descriptive (James, 2006) and accurate data (Clarke, 2000). This, in turn, revealed valuable insights in the area of student social support networks and their impact on undergraduate education.

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Appendix A - The Nine Highly-Structured Interview Questions

Instant Messenger has been used here as a revolutionary interviewing technique, please can you provide comments on the following:

1. From your perspective what are the advantages of using Instant Messenger for interviewing?
2. From your perspective what are the disadvantages of using Instant Messenger for interviewing?
3. Did you find Instant Messenger easy to use?
4. Did Instant Messenger enable you to say what you wanted to say?
5. Where you confident in using Instant Messenger?
6. Where you comfortable in using Instant Messenger?
7. Was Instant Messenger fast enough?8. Did you enjoy using Instant Messenger?
8. Would you use Instant Messenger again?

Appendix B - Ethical Considerations

All necessary ethical issues that underlie each of the following principles, veracity, non-malevolence, non-coercion, confidentiality and impartiality will be covered according to the Economic and Social Research Council guidelines (2006: Section 3.2.1):

- Fully informed, written consent will be obtained from all interview participants through face-to-face briefing sessions (Section 3.2.2)
- Participants will be provided with verbal and written assurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity. In particular, participants will not be asked to reveal their names or to identify themselves in any way and any potentially identifying information provided will be deleted from the transcripts. Participants will be made aware that privacy can not be totally guaranteed over a public network and the need to guard their own privacy and that of significant others. Identification letters will be utilised for analysis purposes, all data and code books will be retained in separate, secure storage and deleted upon completion of the study (Section 3.2.3)
- Written and verbal briefing will assure participants of the right to withdraw at any time and the right not to answer questions they may feel uncomfortable with (Section 3.2.4)
- Debriefing will be provided to ensure any questions raised by participants are addressed and any issues that may subsequently arise are dealt with through provision of contacts for University of Huddersfield counselling service, where appropriate. To ensure personal safety, all face-to-face briefing and training sessions will be undertaken on university premises, in rooms booked for that purpose, with the time and locations noted in advance with a supervisor (Section 3.2.5)
- The research will be conducted to ensure the professional integrity of its design, collection and analysis of data, publication of results, the direct

and indirect contributions of colleagues, collaborators and others will be acknowledged. Declarations of conflict of interest (personal, academic or commercial) in the proposed work will be made clear and the relation between the sources of funding and ownership, publication and subsequent use of research data will be explicit (Section 3.2.6).

Appendix C - Coding Manual

Positive Opinions Concerning Quality and Utility of IM

- Easy (usability of IM)
- Convenient (fast communication, no travelling, choice of location, time efficient, inexpensive, multi-tasking)
- Enables meaning (allows meaningful communication)
- Perceived anonymity (dispels apprehension, easier than speaking face-to-face, more honest, open answers, disembodiment - physical appearance, active participation, engagement)
- Confident (using IM, in communicating, enhanced self-confidence)
- Would use it again (interviewing purposes)
- Comfortable (relaxed, surroundings)
- Enjoyable (usability of IM)
- Familiarity/personally use it (already use it frequently, would use it again personally)
- No transcription (no need to transcribe from verbal/audio data)

Negative Opinions Concerning Quality and Utility of IM

- Absence of non-verbal signals (body language, gestures, tone of voice, truthfulness)
- Computer related problems (internet connections, signing in, privacy/security)
- Loss of meaning (understanding, emotions)
- Distractions (contextual factors – email, household chores, visitors, emergencies)
- Typing/spelling ability (find verbal communication easier, worried about incorrect spelling, grammar, speed of typing)
- Limitations not unusual (not dissimilar from face-to-face interview limitations)
- Increases cognition (more thoughtful process – reading, thinking, writing)
- None (no negative opinions)

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