

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:

Barratt, M. J. (2012). The efficacy of interviewing young drug users through online chat. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 31(4), 566-572.

which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3362.2011.00399.x>

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The efficacy of interviewing young drug users through online chat

Running title: Interviewing young drug users online

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Total word count: 3,393

Word count minus interview extracts: 2,930

Abstract

Introduction and Aims: Despite the fact that most young people who use ‘party drugs’ also use the internet, accounts of drugs research involving qualitative interviewing using real-time instant messaging (IM) or online chat are yet to be published. This paper assesses the efficacy of conducting qualitative research interviews with young party drug users through IM. **Design and Methods:** In 2007–08, 837 Australian residents who reported recent use of psychostimulants and/or hallucinogens and participated in online drug discussion completed a web survey and a subsample of 27 completed online interviews (median age 21, range 17–37, 59% male). **Results:** Experienced drug users were more likely to volunteer to be interviewed than novices. The time and space flexibility provided by the online interviews was convenient; however, interviews were more prone to interruption. Establishing legitimacy, personal disclosure, appropriate linguistic style and humour facilitated the development of rapport and enabled the production of more detailed and in-depth data. These strategies were not successful in all cases and when unsuccessful, interviewees were more easily able to exit the interview by choosing not to respond. **Discussion and Conclusions:** Young drug users already using the internet to chat about drugs find online interviewing an acceptable and convenient way to contribute to research. With adequate preparation to develop technical and cultural competencies, online interviewing offers an effective way of engaging with young people that is worthy of consideration by researchers in the alcohol and other drug field.

Keywords using MeSH: Internet, Designer Drugs, Qualitative Research, Feasibility

Studies, Youth

1. INTRODUCTION

Almost all young people, who are often the subject of ‘party drug’ research, use the internet to communicate. For example, over 90% of Australians aged 15 to 34 years reported internet use in 2008-09 (1) and this statistic is repeated across many other countries (2). While web surveys are commonly used to collect data from drug users by researchers located across the globe (3), accounts of drugs research involving qualitative interviewing using real-time instant messaging (IM) or online chat are yet to be published. This is despite the fact that many young people using IM both generally (4, 5) and specifically to discuss drugs (6, 7). In this paper, I evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of interviewing party drug users through IM to inform research using this methodology.

Types of conversational styles that can arise in the synchronous online interview context have been described as impoverished and limited, and thus better used as an adjunct to face-to-face interviews (8, 9). While it is undoubtedly the case that synchronous online interviews *can* be impoverished and difficult to interpret, others have concluded that this mode of interviewing generally provides a context for in-depth meaningful exchange (10-15). According to these researchers, the success of sustaining a meaningful interview depends upon both conversational partners’ comfort and familiarity with the communication medium and the successful building of rapport. While personal disclosure assists with establishing rapport (10, 14-17), a more interpretive and involved interview style is also suggested as necessary for the interview to develop into a rich meaningful interaction. The online interviewer cannot use eye contact, non-verbal cues or use non-words like um or ah to indicate their presence and empathy with the interviewee’s story.

Such empathy and encouragement can only be expressed through typed utterances that necessitate more interpretive style of interviewing (10, 14).

It is important to recognise the situatedness of interviewing (18, 19). Davis et al. (8), who described their online interview texts as lacking richness, also acknowledged that this outcome depended upon the historical, social and technological contexts within which the interviews were conducted. Consequently, Davis et al. did not discount the capacity for other online interview contexts to enable meaningful interaction. In contrast, Dunkels and Enochsson (12) interviewed teenagers online who participated in rich and meaningful online experiences during their interviews that produced texts that did not suffer from impoverished language or obvious gaps in understanding. The production of richer data was likely due to the everyday normalcy of online communication among the teenagers who formed their sample.

1.1 **Aim**

This paper introduces the use of synchronous online interviewing in the research field of illicit drug use. It aims to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of conducting qualitative research interviews with young party drug users through IM or online chat. This analysis provides a feasibility assessment for other researchers in this field that wish to engage drug users in this way.

2. METHODS

2.1 Data

Drawing from virtual ethnographic methods (20, 21), I spent the beginning of the fieldwork period observing interactions among drug users in public internet forums. I was already a member of some forums where I participated in various interaction, while in others, I ‘lurked’ (read without posting) to build a sense of how each forum operated and the common mannerisms of interaction. I constructed and launched an internet survey to explore the use of the internet and online forums by people who use ‘party drugs’, defined as ecstasy or MDMA/MDEA/MDA, meth/dex/amphetamines, cocaine, GHB, ketamine, LSD, mushrooms, other psychoactive plants (excluding cannabis), research chemicals, ‘legal’ highs/party pills, nitrous oxide and amyl nitrate. The sample consisted of 837 Australian residents reporting use of ‘party drugs’ in the last 12 months, aged 16 and over, who had also reported participation in online drug discussion in the last 6 months. Respondents were recruited through discussions hosted at online forums where drugs were discussed (22). Online recruitment resulted in a sample biased towards younger participants who were more likely to report the recent use of a larger range of drug types compared with matched samples of ecstasy users recruited from households (23).

At the end of the survey, participants indicated their interest in completing an online interview by providing their forum name or instant message account details. Participants were advised to use accounts that did not reveal their full name. I approached 68 potential interviewees resulting in 29 interviews started and 27 completed (response rate = 40%). The interviewee sample ($n = 27$) was 59% male with a median age of 21 years (range 17–

37). Interviewees lived across Australia and most (85%) reported residing in a capital city. Almost all ($n = 26$) reported currently being engaged in paid work or studies, and the remaining interviewee reported engaging in home duties.

2.2 Analysis

Descriptive statistics, univariate logistic regressions and median tests were conducted with the survey data using Stata 11 to determine differences in characteristics of survey respondents by interest in participating in an online interview. Qualitative data produced through online interviews were coded into categories and sub-categories using NVivo 8. An iterative process where I moved between reading interview transcripts in full and coding across categories resulted in four broad themes associated with the development of rapport during interviews. All interviewee names are pseudonyms and texts are reproduced verbatim, except for identifying information. This study was approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number 102/2006).

3. RESULTS

3.1 Interest in participation

One third of the web survey sample ($N = 837$) were definitely or maybe interested in completing an online interview (276; 114 definitely, 162 maybe), while the majority of the sample (493) stated they were not interested (missing = 68). Party drug users who were definitely interested in completing an interview were significantly more likely to report more frequent ecstasy use and lifetime use of more drug types compared with those who were not interested in completing an interview (see Table 1). Those who were definitely interested were significantly more likely to report spending 7 or more hours using forums

in a typical week. They were also more likely to have used drug forums and to have discussed drugs using online forum posts and IM or online chat in the past 6 months. No statistically significant differences were found by age or sex (analysis not shown).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

3.2 Burden and reward for participation

The 27 completed interviews ranged in length from 1:00 to 2:26 hr (mean 1:48). While negotiating the interview, some participants commented that 1 to 2 hours seemed ‘pretty long’, but they were not sufficiently deterred from participating. Despite the interview length, participants described the experience of being interviewed as ‘fun’ and ‘enjoyable’, and many expressed gratitude for being provided with an opportunity to contribute to research. The attractiveness of being interviewed online with no financial incentive or compensation may also be explained by the lower level of commitment required to participate in the online interview. Although participants could terminate or reschedule the interview easily, only two interviewees rescheduled their appointments, and two interviewees left the interview prematurely. Rather than request the interviewees give their full attention, I changed my status to ‘busy’ which prompted some of the interviewees to do the same while others continued to be available to interact with other people during the interview. For example, when negotiating an interview time with Finn, he wrote that he “should be able to do it sometime next week during the day provided i’m not super busy with work”. Then, during the interview, we had the following interruption which took less than 3 minutes:

- 3:12:15 Finn sure give me a sec, just have to do something quickly for work
- 3:13:11 Monica no worries
- 3:14:43 Finn yeh as far as pills go...

Half of the interviews included at least one manageable interruption (e.g., phone call, smoking break, work-related task, friends starting conversations online), but in one case, an interview was terminated due to a friend arriving unannounced at the interviewee's home. Half (14) of the interviews were conducted out-of-hours (weekends or weekdays after 6pm); with the remainder (13) conducted between 1pm and 6pm weekdays. Offering flexibility of both place and time enabled the participation of carers of young children and full-time workers. It also would have been difficult to arrange evening interviews face-to-face due to the lack of a suitable, safe, neutral venue. Conducting online interviews in the evenings provided me with a safe night-time environment (my home) to conduct the interview.

3.3 Technical issues

Technical problems were minimal. Two interviewees had problems that resulted in their disconnection from the IM program and I was disconnected from my internet service provider once as well. The use of real-time conversation logging meant that no data were lost. Interviewees were informed that messages could be intercepted and were therefore not technically secure unless encryption was used. IM encryption was then offered to all interviewees. Only one of the interviewees was interested in setting up encryption, but it was not implemented after we experienced technical difficulties. Participants believed there

was no need to use encryption, either because they felt they were ambiguous enough in their responses to not openly admit to illegal activity, they routinely used ‘fake email accounts’: free email registered in a fake name, and/or they assessed any risk to themselves as minimal (see 24).

3.4 Developing rapport

Developing rapport is a particularly important aspect of qualitative interviewing, especially with youth and/or with people who may have reason to distrust the motives of authorities. Discussing sensitive topics such as drug use involves a degree of trust on behalf of interviewees, therefore it is critical that interviewers present themselves as trustworthy and approachable. In this study, developing rapport involved successful relationship building which facilitated the production of more detailed and useful interview data. I developed rapport in four ways: demonstrating *legitimacy*, *disclosure* of personal information, adaption of *linguistic style* and the use of *humour*.

3.4.1 Legitimacy

I used the project website to demonstrate my legitimate identity as a researcher and I also used the same photograph from that website as the profile image that was visible throughout the online interviews. There was only one case when an interviewee said she distrusted my identity. Jen’s concern was alleviated by displaying the university home page and project pages:

8:04:42 Jen ive just been told by someone that this isnt what it seems

8:05:10 Monica oh ok, what do you mean, in terms of being a research interview?

- 8:05:15 Jen yes.
- 8:05:40 Monica hm well i am happy to answer any questions you have if that helps?
- 8:06:05 Monica can send an email from my curtin email? or show you the site for the project?
- 8:06:23 Jen the site would be good.
- 8:06:45 Monica *[project website]*
- 8:07:04 Monica i'd need you to have a read over this link first and see if you have any questions
- 8:07:05 Monica *[online participant information]*
- 8:07:56 Monica and i'm here: *[researcher university homepage]* - take your time having a look
- 8:09:59 Jen ok, cool thanks. that person just also told me they decided it would be funny to scare the life outta me, so sorry about that.

3.4.2 Disclosure

I disclosed personal demographic detail and my own experiences or views to encourage reciprocal disclosure and develop rapport. In Kat's interview, disclosure of meeting my husband through an online forum prompted further disclosure of Kat's experience of meeting romantic partners in this way:

- 4:25:38 Kat it *[rave forum]* was a massive part of our life like its unbelievable how much we relied on that and all the time spent

- on there so its kind of hard to let go lol you go back and have a peek every now and then
- 4:25:51 Monica for sure, i know what you mean
- 4:25:58 Kat And i still attend parties every now and again so i get my info from there
- 4:26:21 Monica i met the man who is now my husband in a forum in 2002, which is now pretty lame so hardly anyone goes back there these days
- 4:26:38 Monica: but is hard to let it go!
- 4:27:01 Kat haha thats adorable! Most of my old friends are from there and a lot of relationships were made on there
- 4:27:25 Kat the father of my children was on *[rave forum]*
- 4:27:29 Kat haha modern love :P

3.4.3 Linguistic style

Constructing full sentences and using capital letters and punctuation was unusual within IM conversations, and the use of internet- and forum-specific ‘speak’ and emoticons or ‘smileys’ was common. I used this linguistic style while adjusting my approach to mirror the interviewee’s preferred linguistic style as the interview progressed: conversational style differed between interviewees by sentence style, punctuation use, the size of chunks of text sent in one ‘turn’ and their use of net-speak and emoticons. Some of the conventions used by both interviewees and myself included: correcting typographical errors using a star (*), indicating actions using stars (e.g., *nod*, *sigh*), indicating emotions through ‘smiley’ images (e.g., smiles, winks, grins, uneasiness/confusion, poking out tongue, annoyed,

two cases, establishing rapport proved difficult. The associated data were impoverished and incomplete. In Nicole's case, I failed to capture her attention or interest in participation:

- 2:10:47 Monica overall have your experiences with ecstasy been positive, negative, both?
- 2:13:36 Nicole overall positive. the only negative is the coming down and depression afterwards
- 2:14:39 Monica in your survey responses, you mentioned you learnt how to avoid bad experiences with drugs, through online drug discussions
- 2:14:51 Monica can you think of any examples of that, and tell me about them?
- 2:18:01 Nicole dont take anything that doesn have a print on it. no logo.

As shown in this extract, often there were many minutes where questions/comments would remain unanswered with no indication that Nicole was typing a response. The interview contained none of the hallmarks of good rapport such as reciprocal disclosure, humour and linguistic style used to enhance the meaning of the text. These problems establishing rapport are not dissimilar to those encountered in face-to-face research interviewing; however, online interviewees can more easily terminate the interview if they would rather not participate.

4. DISCUSSION

This paper argues that meaningful data can be produced through synchronous online discussions with young people who use drugs and participate in online forums. In this

study, survey participants who were definitely interested in completing an online interview were more experienced drug and internet users compared with those who were not interested in completing an interview, indicating alternative strategies may be required to recruit novice participants. The flexibility provided by the online interviews was convenient both for the interviewees and the researcher; however, interviews were more prone to interruption. Establishing legitimacy, personal disclosure, appropriate linguistic style and humour facilitated the development of rapport and enabled the production of more detailed and in-depth data. These strategies were not successful in all cases and when unsuccessful, interviewees were more easily able to exit the interview by choosing not to respond.

The success of engaging young drug users through online interviews owed in large part to the everyday use of IM among this group. Most of those interviewed reported that they had used IM to discuss drugs recently, so using this communication medium to discuss drugs in a research context was generally acceptable. This finding supports the observations of other researchers (8, 12) that the quality of online interview data may diverge according to the social context of the interviewee.

Successful online interviewing also depended largely upon the textual performance of technical and cultural competence by the researcher (17, 25). Presenting oneself as engaged with, rather than separate from, the cultural milieus with which these interviewees identified involved personal disclosure, textual adaptation or ‘mirroring’ and use of linguistic conventions. Although researchers have identified themselves with their research participants (for example, through shared sexual orientation (26) or status as new mothers (14)), active and open empathy with a ‘drug user’ identity carries considerable risk to the

researcher (27). In this case, my active identification as an internet forum user and ‘clubber’ allowed me to present myself as a (partial) insider: aware of and engaged to some extent with the cultural contexts embraced by the young party drug users described here (see also 27, 28). This is not to say that identities of researcher / researched are static: rather, they are multiple, dynamic and fluid, and they connect and disconnect through cultural validation processes within the interview context (29).

It is also important to note that it is not necessarily the case that the interviewer needs to be an insider, but it is imperative that they spend time familiarising themselves with the cultural contexts and lived experiences of their research participants so they are able to perform the role competently, both technically and culturally (see 17). Observing and participating in public internet forums prior to approaching participants provides an ideal way for new researchers to build these capacities.

Even though information about the inherent insecurity of plain-text IM was provided to participants, only one of 27 interviewees was interested in installing free encryption software. Participants in this study were already comfortable talking about their drug use through standard IM (see 24). One reason why it was relatively easy to interview this group using IM was because they were able to choose their preferred IM client rather than use a client they were unfamiliar with and had to install. Ways around this problem for future studies include: (a) using an IM client with built-in encryption such as Skype, or (b) using web-based encrypted IM that requires no installation. There is an ethical trade-off here between offering a palatable option for interviewing that participants would be likely to accept versus restricting online interviewing to secure platforms to protect participants

against the potential for interception of their data and the potential linkage of their data and identities (i.e., dataveillance, see 30, 31).

The interviews reported upon in this paper were conducted in 2008. Much has changed in the internet landscape in the last 4 years. Social network websites, especially Facebook, have come to dominate social media interactions among young people. Both Facebook and Google offer chat functions (IM) from within the Facebook and Google websites: that is, without requiring the installation of software. Yet neither of these chat services are secure. Furthermore, the continued uptake of high-speed broadband may enable future studies in this area to employ online interviewing that goes beyond textual exchange, such as video interviewing. Ethnographic work as a prelude to conducting online interviewing is essential to determine which approach would work best for the specific contexts within which researchers who wish to interview through online chat are currently operating.

This paper has demonstrated that young drug users already using the internet to chat about drugs find online interviewing an acceptable and convenient way to contribute to research. With adequate preparation to develop technical and cultural competencies, online interviewing offers an effective way of engaging with young people that is worthy of consideration by researchers in the alcohol and other drug field.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a PhD scholarship awarded by the National Drug Research Institute at Curtin University of Technology and the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. I acknowledge the support and efforts of the online forum users, moderators and administrators who participated in this project, and thank my supervisors, Simon Lenton and Matthew Allen, for their encouragement and guidance. Thanks also to Alexia Maddox and Sue Malta for reviewing earlier drafts, and to the efforts of the anonymous referees who have helped me to improve this paper.

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Table 1: Characteristics of survey respondents by interest in completing an online interview

Variables	Not interested		Maybe interested		Definitely interested		Crude Odds Ratio ^a or Median Test ^b	95% CI
	<i>n</i> = 346		<i>n</i> = 132		<i>n</i> = 101			
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>OR</i>	
Frequency of ecstasy use								
Weekly or more often	34	10	19	14	21	21	2.22 *	1.19–4.17
Monthly to fortnightly	132	38	50	38	30	30	0.82	0.49–1.36
Less than monthly	180	52	63	48	50	50	1.00	
No. drug types ever used								
<i>Median</i> ^b	9		10		10		$\chi^2 = 4.19$	<i>p</i> = 0.041
7 or more hours per week								
Online forums	100	29	42	32	50	50	2.41 ***	1.53–3.80
Social network sites	105	30	35	27	40	40	1.51	0.95–2.38
Forum type used								
Drugs	160	46	48	36	63	63	1.93 **	1.22–3.04
Electronic dance music	192	55	81	61	49	49	0.76	0.48–1.18
Discussed drugs using								
Online forum post	140	40	58	44	59	58	2.07 **	1.32–3.24
Instant message or online chat	196	57	85	64	78	77	2.60 ***	1.56–4.33

*** *p* < 0.001; ** *p* < 0.01; * *p* < 0.05. Only cases with no missing values were included.

^a Logistic regressions tested the extent to which each variable predicted those who were definitely interested in completing an online interview from those who were not interested. ^b Median test using continuity corrected Pearson Chi square compared medians for those who were not interested with those who were definitely interested in completing an online interview.