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Using Skype as a Qualitative Interview Medium within the Context of Saudi Arabia

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Using Skype as a Qualitative Interview Medium within the Context of Saudi Arabia

Abstract

This research note reports the results of using Skype as a medium to conduct semi-structured interviews in qualitative studies within the context of Saudi Arabia. Skype audio-only interviews were used to explore the concept of privacy from the perspective of female users in the context of the spatial design of contemporary Saudi houses. The use of Skype audio-only, although accidental, turned out to be fortuitous. The researcher's study design called for all face-to-face interviews, but due to the location of the researcher and participants and study time frame, some of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and the others were audio only Skype calls. The researcher went through the experience of being on both sides of the audio-only-Skype-call, as the interviewer and as the participant. Then there was an opportunity for the researcher to experience being an interview participant in a research that encountered some similarities to the one she had conducted: medium and subject sensitivity. After going through different approaches in conducting interviews, the paper acknowledges the benefits provided when using Skype-audio-only-calls in qualitative research.

Keywords

Skype, Interviews, Qualitative Research, Cost, Face-To-Face Interviews, Distance

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Using Skype as a Qualitative Interview Medium within the Context of Saudi Arabia: A Research Note

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This research note reports the results of using Skype as a medium to conduct semi-structured interviews in qualitative studies within the context of Saudi Arabia. Skype audio-only interviews were used to explore the concept of privacy from the perspective of female users in the context of the spatial design of contemporary Saudi houses. The use of Skype audio-only, although accidental, turned out to be fortuitous. The researcher's study design called for all face-to-face interviews, but due to the location of the researcher and participants and study time frame, some of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and the others were audio only Skype calls. The researcher went through the experience of being on both sides of the audio-only-Skype-call, as the interviewer and as the participant. Then there was an opportunity for the researcher to experience being an interview participant in a research that encountered some similarities to the one she had conducted: medium and subject sensitivity. After going through different approaches in conducting interviews, the paper acknowledges the benefits provided when using Skype-audio-only-calls in qualitative research. Keywords: Skype, Interviews, Qualitative Research, Cost, Face-To-Face Interviews, Distance

In this paper, I discuss my dissertation work regarding the use of Skype as a medium to conduct semi-structured interviews in qualitative studies within the context of the Eastern region in Saudi Arabia that is known for its diversity: conservative yet exposed to newly emerging technological, social, political, or economic national and international inputs on the Saudi culture. This diversity presented an opportunity and an obstacle for me as a researcher when I used Skype as an interviewing medium and in some cases when I wanted to record the audio conversation during the face-to-face interviews. That challenge contributed to answering the research question (the concept of privacy in contemporary Saudi houses) and participants' attitudes towards the medium and interviews recording were considered while analyzing the collected data.

According to literature, face-to-face interviewing offers the advantages of rapport and visual cues which makes it highly recommended amongst other interviewing methods (King, 2004; Novick, 2008; Sturges, Hanrahan, Judith, & Kathleen, 2004). However, due to the nature of my research question, finding volunteer participants and arranging such interviews took longer to organize within the tight timeline I had. Therefore, I sought other interviewing means. I looked at email, chat, and telephone interviews within the scope of research in general and in relation to qualitative research in particular. It was argued in literature that telephone interviews were more useful in quantitative research than in qualitative research because the lack of visual cues and rapport, as well as the length of the call can affect the quality of the obtained data (Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 1998; Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013; Sturges et al., 2004). Yet, using telephone in conducting interviews within qualitative research overcomes the barriers of location, accessibility, and cost (Irvine et al., 2013; Novick, 2008). Furthermore, the use of telephone and other Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) application as mean of communication is becoming more acceptable by different residents in Saudi Arabia. Therefore,

using Skype audio calls to conduct interviews within the contextual aspects of my PhD research was more advantageous than face-to-face (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010; Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014).

The use of Skype as a qualitative research data collection medium is increasingly used by qualitative researchers, which is due to its advantages that suits a variety of situations and needs. From my experience, and the fact that I am a female from Saudi Arabia, participants expressed hesitation regarding the face-to-face Skype interviews because it would compromise their anonymity.

The focus of this paper is to highlight the advantages I have touched upon using VoIP within qualitative research, which was dealing with a sensitive research question in a private culture. I have noticed during my literature review phase that there were some concerns about using VoIP in qualitative research due to some ethical concerns. Therefore, in this paper I will present my reflections and experience of being on both sides of interviews conducted using Skype audio-only, that is, as a researcher and as a participant, both of which enriched my base knowledge of the possibilities and limitations while using (VoIP) technology in qualitative research interviewing. I conclude that the advantages encountered during my experiences overcame the limitations discussed in the literature. That conclusion highlights the importance of utilizing new technologies (data collection and analyzing tools) within qualitative research.

Using Skype as Method to Conduct Qualitative Interviews: Pilot Study

In this part I am going to briefly discuss the literature around using Skype as an interviewing medium within qualitative research. The use of VoIP, in the case of this paper is driven from my study and personal experience. I will focus on the Skype application as a means to conduct interviews for qualitative research which is relatively new. However, more and more researchers are using VoIP in their research for the advantages that these applications provide such as the video feature and real-time messaging (Janghorban et al., 2014; Preto & Pocknee, 2008; Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). Even though technical issues were barriers in some conducted research, the use of VoIP applications overcame other more pressing issues such as time, place, and accessibility (Hay-Gibson, 2011). In terms of ethical inquiry, researchers raised issues of bias and leading on the part of the researcher (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010) as well as consent and data security (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Sullivan, 2012).

Because writers such as Preto and Pocknee (2008) point out the importance of face-to-face communication in conducting the interviews for the added value and authenticity to the results, the use of Skype in qualitative interviews was recommended as a complementary interviewing tool to the face-to-face interviewing, (Iacono & Symonds, 2016; Oates, 2015; Seitz, 2016). As face-to-face interviews require time to be organized and can be expensive for the researcher and the participants in some cases, I chose to use Skype to overcome these two major limitations of the traditional form of interviews. Therefore, I had approached the pilot phase for participants to conduct video-audio interviews using the Skype application as an alternative for face-to-face interviews, which was to provide me with the advantages of visual communication and yet overcome the distance, time, and cost barriers. After that phase, I reflected upon the limitation that came along with implementing the video feature: technical and cultural factors. The technical issues were related to the internet bandwidth in some cases and to the strength of the Wi-Fi signal at both parties. Meanwhile, the cultural aspect related to the fear of privacy and security breach.

The study that I conducted and participated in involved Skype audio-only as an interviewing tool. In my study, I looked at the concept of privacy within in the context of contemporary Saudi houses. First, I tried utilizing both audio and video features of Skype while conducting the pilot study. From that pilot study I noticed some of the participants were hesitant

to switch on their cameras as they have stated that it made them feel vulnerable and breached. Also, some participants discussed the social perspective of online video communication; that the video feature was not accepted socially especially by their spouses. Furthermore, some participants that I reached expressed the unease they felt due to the use of VoIP in general. Within the investigation of the concept of privacy in the interior spaces of contemporary Saudi houses, I had touched upon the participants' cooperation, or the lack of it, and reflected on their personal representation of their own privacy boundaries. Furthermore, from the interviews I noticed that the use of Skype as a medium, with and without the video feature, was also another indicator of their representation of their personal privacy boundaries and their comfort zones. Therefore, I limited my data collection process to include only the audio feature within Skype to gain participants' greatest cooperation without breaching their comfort zone or interfering with their privacy.

My Experience in Using Skype

I have been on both sides of a VoIP interview via Skype (audio only): as an interviewer and also as a qualitative research interview participant. These experiences gave me deeper insight into my reflection upon the interviewer experience from both sides of the interview. In this section, I will go through my experience while using Skype from both of those positions. I will reflect upon those experiences and how they affected my PhD as a researcher and how it made me feel as a participant.

Experience as an Interviewer

When I approached participants for face-to-face interviews as part of collecting the primary data, their response rate was slow due to their hesitance and concerns related to their anonymity and they were not willing to agree to recording their interviews. Within the context of Saudi Arabia, it was difficult for me as a researcher to get access to face-to-face interviews with participants due to cultural rules and protocols. Even though anonymity was assured for participants, they still felt exposed and threatened, a point that was mentioned by other researchers (Akbar, 1998; AlNafea, 2006). Those points led me to seek other mediums to conduct the interviews. Therefore, I suggested the use of Skype as an interviewing medium after going through the literature. At first, participants felt reluctant, but then after explaining their rights and personal anonymity they agreed to go through with the Skype interviews.

Skype was amongst other VoIP applications that were popularly used at the time in Saudi Arabia; users used these applications to communicate with their family members who travelled abroad to study, which made these applications a useful familiar medium of communication. Furthermore, for me as a researcher, Skype was convenient because of the different plug-ins that it had that provided and auto record features for the calls, for which participants gave consent.

The advantages that Skype proposed encouraged me to utilize this tool in conducting my semi-structured interviews, which dealt with sensitive socio-cultural issues within the context of Saudi Arabia: the concept of privacy. There were some obstacles that faced the research: time limits, researcher location, and reaching participants all of which using Skype helped in overcoming. With the new technology, almost all participants were connected with new communication applications, yet some were not keen on the various provided features and limited their use to selective features within those applications, either due to the social conventions or technical issues with the Internet connection.

Literature, as mentioned earlier, has categorized Skype under video conferencing though there are both video and audio capacities, and users have the choice to use one or both

features together on their smart phones or desktops. Utilizing that aspect of Skype was what I had attempted to do in the pilot phase when I conducted video-audio interviews. But I was faced with Internet connection barriers such as sound/image delay, failed connections that necessitated having to call again, and software usability. In addition, in some cases participants were not familiar with the application and I had to guide them in how to use it. An issue that I faced was recording the interviews and keeping them organized as I was utilizing a third-party application, MP3 Skype Recorder. MP3 Skype Recorder provided me with auto-recording for each session I had with all the participants, which was convenient and insured that all the conversations were recorded and saved automatically with auto titling Skype usernames and the time the conversation took place.

Beyond technical complications, there was the problem of social acceptance of using the video feature, making it difficult to get participants to accept the audio-visual interview invitations. To avoid those technical issues and be able to get the necessary data for my researcher, I agreed upon using audio only interviews via Skype application. Using Skype audio-only is close to conducting telephone interviews but through the Internet. Even with such a suggestion, invited participants were hesitant still and the hoped-for number of interviews was obtained with difficulty.

Participants that I had tried to reach refused the use of Skype, though they did not mind participating in the study itself. These participants feared that their anonymity would be compromised because of the cyber fingerprint that would be left after using this medium in the interview. When participants were asked to elaborate their concerns, they referred to the cyber safety as a major concern, knowing there is a chance for a cyber breach that might lead to compromising their personal security. Even after suggesting the audio-only Skype interviews, some participants were reluctant to participate due to a worry about a breach of security. From my perspective as a researcher, that seemed relevant to my research topic: the concept of privacy. As the concept of privacy revolved around one's perception of the concept and the way one applies it, participants' reactions reflected the role this concept had in their lives and the way it had influenced their decisions. Furthermore, participants did not want to participate in cyber contact with me, the researcher, and that was derived from their sense of vulnerability and sense of safety. Those participants somehow were influenced by their husbands' perception of the cyber use and questioned their authenticity of the research.

On the other hand, the participants who agreed to participate were either familiar with the application and how to use it or were unfamiliar with it yet willing to try using it. In both cases, most participants felt confident and more secure when using Skype audio-only in comparison to audio-visual Skype use. This group dealt with the Skype interviews as normal telephone conversations, similar to the ones they might have with relatives who might be studying abroad. When they were asked about the possibility of turning on their webcam, for me to get visual cues that could enhance my interview analysis, participants were reluctant and preferred to keep it audio only. When I asked about the reason behind this reaction, they referred back to the cyber sense of safety, and that there was a possibility that the audio-visual conversation might not be that safe for them. Even though they were willing to participate, they were worried about their personal privacy, which is conceptually similar to the concern as participants who declined the interview expressed.

The interviews that I have conducted faced minimal technical problems. The conversations were recorded after seeking participants' permission. Also, the flow of the interviews was consistent. The questions were not interrupted, and the conversation presented itself as a casual conversation. The participants felt that they were in their comfort zone and not threatened, which was reflected in their ease when answering the questions and sharing the needed information even when they felt it was sensitive. The aspects that helped in the ease within audio-only interviews were the anonymity of participants, and the security they felt

because of it. Participants were more open and were sharing freely; that gave the depth and insight that helped in my research. Having the participants' cooperation due to the mentioned reasons helped me gather more details and explore some aspects of the concept that I did not consider at the beginning of my study.

In addition to considering the participants and their comfort, I was concerned with my own safety and comfort. As with the participants, I had some of the same concerns, especially the concern related to my personal safety in relation to cyber security. But with the flow of the interviews these concerns were diminished, and confidence rose. In order to gain participants' cooperation and personal preparedness, I prepared and rehearsed different conversational flow possibilities that would empower the interviewee and assist in collecting data from participants without raising their guard to this somehow sensitive topic: the concept of privacy.

During the interviews, I started with introducing myself and giving a brief explanation of my research to hint at the type of questions that might be upcoming. Also, I had mentioned to the participants that I would be recording the interview via a third-party application; one of the main points that encouraged me to use Skype was the ability to auto-record the conversation via third-party application as mentioned earlier. Furthermore, during the interview I tried to explain the questions with some examples to overcome any missing visual cues that might affect the quality of participants' answers, while being aware of the amount of involvement or influence such examples might have on the resulting answers. Due to the lack of visual cues, I tried to be aware of the non-verbal gestures from their auditory signs such as pauses, tone, and confidence. These signs assisted me in identifying participants' misunderstandings in some cases and tackling technical issues that I was not immediately aware of because participants were not comfortable letting me know about them. These points had helped in acquiring the needed in-depth insight into the researched socio-cultural issue.

The speed of speech and rhythm of the participants' talk during the interviews was an indicator to me of their comfort. It seemed to me that their responses to my questions indicated that the participants felt the same ease and comfort they would experience when talking on their smartphones, an action they are accustomed to do as means of day-to-day communication. Participants felt ease talking about the things that influenced their decisions and actions inside their homes and discussed the influencing factors. Society, culture, and family members were some of the points that were mentioned by participants that strengthened the research outcomes.

The way in which Skype interviews helped me in my research was by providing a comfortable environment for participants, physical and cyber, in which they were able to express their concerns and discuss them with ease. On the other hand, audio only Skype provided me with flexibility, accessibility, and awareness of participants' subconscious and overt audible cues that might be lost by simply viewing physical actions. Though I had to listen to the interviews over and over, some of the audible cues were clear and were part of my interpretation of their answers. These audible cues were a reflection of their physical cues. I was not able to see the participants' reactions of their facial expressions, but through their voice tone and speech speed I was able to detect their comfort (or lack of it) towards the given question. Their willingness was also presented the same way. It was not enough to rely on their statements word-by-word, I had to search out the meanings of their answers and the ways in which meanings supported or contradicted their statements. I interpreted slow answering as overthinking their answer or trying to make it sound like the culturally accepted answer, and in other cases I interpreted rapidness in answering as a way to avoid the question itself elaborating on a point. Therefore, the audio-only presented the depth needed to understand and be able to analyze the interviews with the expected depth within qualitative research.

Experience as a Participant

After I was done with my research and started working in the field of interior design, I was contacted, amongst other participants, to be a qualitative research participant. The criteria and topic sensitivity were similar to my own research. I agreed to participate within the interview, knowing it was going to be conducted via Skype audio-only, and I was familiar with the medium. The research, which I was invited to participate in, looked at Saudi women who are involved in unconventional jobs; the field of interior design is relatively new in Saudi Arabia with the age of about 10 years.

The researcher organized a time that suited both of us, overcoming a time difference between us. The researcher contacted me through Skype and started with introducing herself followed by a brief explanation of her research. After that, she started to explain briefly the upcoming questions and encouraged me to share my thoughts, as it was as semi-structured interview.

Though I was in a comfortable space and time I had selected, I could feel some anxiety and uncertainty as participant; would I be helpful, or would the absence of the visual cues affect the interviews, or would there be some technical issues that would affect and influence the flow of the interview? Those concerns were thought of even though I was a participant and not the researcher. As the interview progressed I answered the questions as they came, but in time I started to feel uneasy about the interview and the questions, as evidenced by the speed and tone of my speech. When I started feeling that unease, I started thinking like a researcher and tried to elaborate my answers even more in order to give more depth and to overcome the lack of the visual cues. Part of that reaction was because I was not sure if I had understood the objectives behind some of the questions, therefore I sometimes sought explanations and at other times I just elaborated and justified my answers. Furthermore, I sensed the uncertainty in the interviewer's tone, which was a sign I interpreted during my experience as an interviewer as miscommunication or as the person on the other side of the conversation feeling lost; when I was the interviewer this became a communicative sign that directed me to re-questioning my participants or to change the question form by breaking some questions into multiple questions. Even with me trying to elaborate in my answers and trying to keep it as an informal and relaxed interview, I sensed that the interviewer was either unprepared or my contribution was not helpful.

My experience as a participant in a Skype audio-only interview gave me insight into the questions and worries that my own participants might have had. It also raised some worries as a researcher: was I and my questions clear or did I sound uncertain with less confidence during the interview due to the lack of visual cues? Being a participant made me feel like I was under the spotlight and I feared that I was unhelpful or holding back some information that might actually be useful for the researcher.

Conclusion

Even with the limitations some researchers have noted on the use of VoIP, the use of such technology is growing within qualitative research because of the advantages researchers describe. My experiences as a researcher and a participant with the aid of the reviewed literature supported the evaluation of Skype as a qualitative interviewing medium with and without the visual cues provided by the camera feature. Also, the quality of the collected data is valid and passes the evolving ethical codes under the VoIP tools. Having experienced myself the use of Skype audio-only medium in qualitative interviews as interviewer and as a participant shed some insight into different parameters regarding the advantages and disadvantages of this method within the context of Saudi Arabia. From those experiences I have noted some points

that assisted me in favoring the use of Skype in qualitative research. The primary advantage of using audio-only Skype interviews was to overcome the reluctance of participants about being visually exposed via cyber mediums to someone they do not know and the cyber fingerprint that can be traced back to them. Other advantages that Skype audio-only interviews provided me in my qualitative research were affordability, overcoming location difference, and its convenience for me and my participants.

The use of the phone is a contemporary acceptable method of communication in Saudi Arabia. It provides a comfortable environment which aided in participants' involvement during the interviews while perceiving their boundaries. Also, focusing on participants' spoken participation presented an opportunity to focus on the non-verbal cues such as the tone, pauses, speed, and speech style. I was able to differentiate between different levels of openness that participants provided while answering; some were more open than others and that was apparent in the way they responded. This was an issue that aided my analysis process and results, adding depth.

More VoIP applications are being developed and are becoming trendy within the community, this trendiness assists in the familiarity of the applications and ease in their usability within research interviewing and data collection. Those applications, new and old, are developing encryption codes to meet users' updated need for security, which makes them more reliable. Therefore, I recommend the use of Skype and other accessible VoIP applications in qualitative research within the cultural context of Saudi Arabia to benefit from its advantages: cost effectiveness, participants' anonymity, and convenience in participants' accessibility. I recommend that the issue of utilizing this type of medium in research is touched upon in research methodology courses to introduce it to new researchers, so they may learn how it can benefit their research data collection process.

Finally, I would recommend further experiment in using this medium in qualitative research within other cultures that have similar social and cultural parameters to generalize the findings through multiple locations. Furthermore, these applications can be developed to address qualitative research needs to include some other features such as recording and transcribing conversations, two features that would assist qualitative researchers in their analysis process.

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