



Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



Digital/ Online Social Research Methods

Today's lecture...

1. Summary of what we understand by qualitative research
2. Discuss online research
3. Focus on social media
4. Talk to you about my current research (examples)
5. Ethics in online research

Key (complex) questions

1. What do we mean by the term 'digital'?
2. What constitutes the 'digital'?
3. How do we access the 'digital'?
4. How might we think methodologically about the 'digital'?
5. In the current 'zoom' culture we are living through, is the 'online' reality here to stay?
6. Is digital communication replacing the 'face to face' form?
7. Is the digital an object to research? Or a setting to research in? Or an instrument of research?
8. What constitutes the 'field' within digital research?
9. How do we factor in power, insider/ outsider, subjectivity, reflexivity, researcher positionality in online research?
10. What are some of the specific ethical issues when dealing with online research?

Qualitative research

- Understanding human action, behaviour, phenomena
- Looking for meanings, understandings, insights and explanations **as opposed to** solutions or answers
- Small-scale, focused, in-depth, lengthy
- Usually grapples with words, text, images as opposed 'big' data and statistics/ numbers
- An **attempt** to view the world through the perspective of the participant/ respondent
- An acknowledgement that there is no correct answer. That **multiple** realities exist
- An acknowledgement that knowledge and meaning is **co-produced** and is **socially constructed**
- A suspension of common-sense beliefs. The researcher allows the participants to inform and guide. Provide 'their' account of reality, 'their' 'truth'

Tricky methodological factors to consider...

Subjectivity. Reflexivity. **Insider/ Outsider considerations (race, gender, age, language, geography, religion, social class etc).**

Interpretation. **Ethical considerations.** Power dynamics. **Bias, evasion and selective memory.**

Positionality. **Analysing data.**

Negotiating access. **Does research ever end? When do we stop?**

‘online’? A useful definition

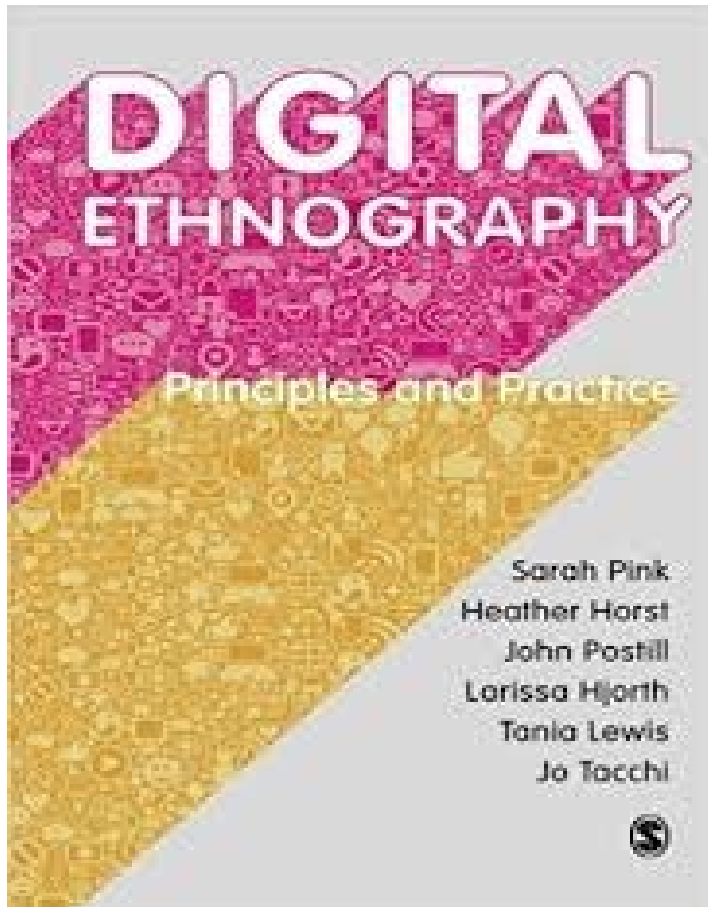
Fernback (1997/2002) quoted in Gatson (2011: 518)

Jan Fernback argues that online space is “socially constructed and re-constructed . . . [and] is a repository for collective cultural memory—it is popular culture, it is narratives created by its inhabitants that remind us who we are, it is life as lived and reproduced in pixels and virtual texts. . . . Cyberspace is essentially a reconceived public sphere for social, political, economic, and cultural interaction. . . . [its] users are . . . authors, public rhetoricians, statesmen, pundits” (1997/2002, p. 37). Thus, does

Online research – a new and increasingly popular branch of social and cultural research



A 'new' branch of social and cultural research



Online research

‘New phenomena invite us to rethink our ways of knowing about the world and about ourselves – as researchers and participants in an increasingly-digitally-mediated world’
(Sonia Livingstone)

Global electronic communication makes possible a new kind of relationship between language, society and technology
(Odih, 2004: 280)



‘we are often in mediated contact with participants rather than in direct presence... we might be in conversation with people throughout their everyday lives. We might be watching what people do by digitally tracking them, or asking them to invite us into their social media practices. **Listening may involve reading, or it may involve sensing or communicating in other ways...** writing may be replaced by video, photography or blogging’ (Pink et al, 2016: 3)

The 'virtual'

In digital online qualitative research:

- We are often in mediated contact with participants rather than in direct presence
- We might be in conversation with people throughout their everyday lives
- We might be watching what they do everyday by digitally tracking them
- We might be an active member of an online social media forum or chatroom
- Listening may involve reading
- The text may be replaced by video, photography and art (emoji's!!)
- We may interpret without ever asking



- And we do all of this without often/ ever physically meeting the participants...

Advantages

- Convenience. Data can be collected and collated very quickly
- Access to groups you couldn't research otherwise
- Access to particular online phenomena, e.g. blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube etc
- Particular interest in online interaction
- Access to greater range of data/different kinds of population – distance not an issue (if you have internet connection?)
- Reacting to an increasingly digital world
- Online research methodology may be relevant to the actual research question
- Many people respond and open up and 'talk' much more behind a computer screen/ phone/ tablet... 'online persona'/ 'pseudonyms'
- In many cases, no need to transcribe data

Limitations

- Issues of authenticity:

how do you know who you are researching, and does it matter?

- Potential/ temptation for covert research – raising ethical issues
- You could be inundated with data. When does it end?
- Is it possible to build a relationship, a rapport and trust with someone virtually? With someone you have never met?
- Is it possible to understand a viewpoint, immerse yourself in another cultural world, to put yourselves in ‘their’ shoes – *virtually*?
- Do participants sometimes develop an ‘online’ persona and an ‘offline’ reality?
- Access to internet is not universal, so still excludes certain individuals and communities **#DigitalPoverty**
#SocialJustice

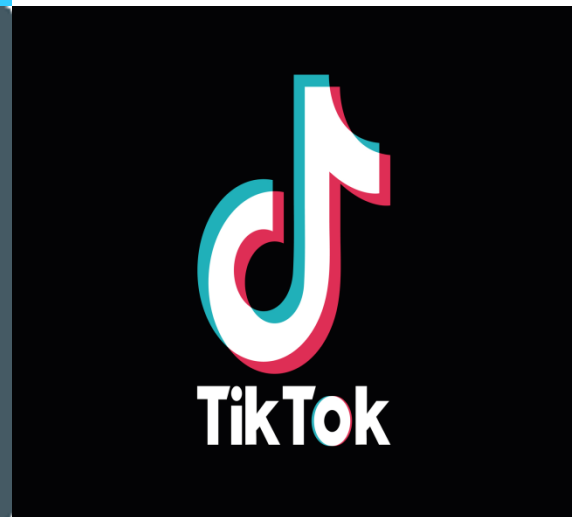
Paechter (2012)

- Retrospective partially insider study (1 year) of a divorce support website (wikivorce)
- Focus of research as on ‘how’ this online community developed and grew in the early stages of creation
- She was an active member of an online community, and then decided to ‘study/ research’ the narrative/ text/ experiences within this community retrospectively
- She was an ‘insider’ (a ‘live’ member) but also a university based researcher and this posed many ‘methodological challenges’:
 1. Retrospective nature of text – how can she analyse historical text without taking her present ‘live’ relationship with members into account?
 2. Switching in/ out of member/ researcher – blurring the lines between ‘public/ private’
 3. The challenge of analysing HUGE sets of data
 4. How do you negotiate ‘access’ and the researcher ‘positionality’?
 5. She explores the role of the ‘lurker’ in an online community – someone who follows online interaction without overtly participating in it, either remaining silent, or reading messages as a guest. Lurkers often think of themselves as genuine ‘community members’
 6. She was able to gain access, consent (from management), entry as an insider however, she also explores the complexities and ethical challenges that emerges when her positionality changed to ‘insider researcher’ (dual role)

Many different types of online research

- Email
- Skype
- Online forums (ie; mumsnet, wikivorce)
- Blogging
- Online gaming communities
- Social media forums (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram)

Social Media



Example 1

Topic

Plus sized modelling.

Research Question

How are black women constructed and represented in the plus-sized modelling industry? A discourse analysis of race and representation of the black female body within the plus-sized modelling industry.

Research Methods

Discourse Analysis. Specifically analysing the twitter feed from two known PSM (Ashley Graham and Black China) after the immediate month of publication of Sports Illustrated.

Example 2

Topic

Immigration during the EU Referendum 2016

Research Question

A visual analysis of how immigrants were constructed by UKIP on social media during the Brexit campaign 2016

Research Methods

A visual methods and semiotic analysis of the images used by UKIP on Twitter during May and June 2016

Example 3

Topic

Rape and sexual violence in Indian society

Research question

What does it mean to be an Indian woman post 2012?
Views, insights and understanding of Indian femininity and masculinity from a group of urban middle-class university students from Bangalore.

Research methods

Initial group interview with six people, followed by in-depth one-to-one email interviews and a group WhatsApp forum

Example 4

Topic

Virtual learning community by a group of parents

Research Question

How do a group of professional working parents construct a ‘virtual learning community’ for their children?

Research Methods

Student was part of this forum. Had to grapple with insider/outsider complexities. Established WhatsApp forum, sharing ideas, images, articles, websites – all related to their children’s SAT’s and 11 plus exams. Student engaged in a discourse analysis as well as a visual/ semiotic analysis of images examining the pressures parents put themselves under in order for their children to excel and ‘succeed’. Only examined the posts for 1 month (random).

My own 'cry for help' using social media...

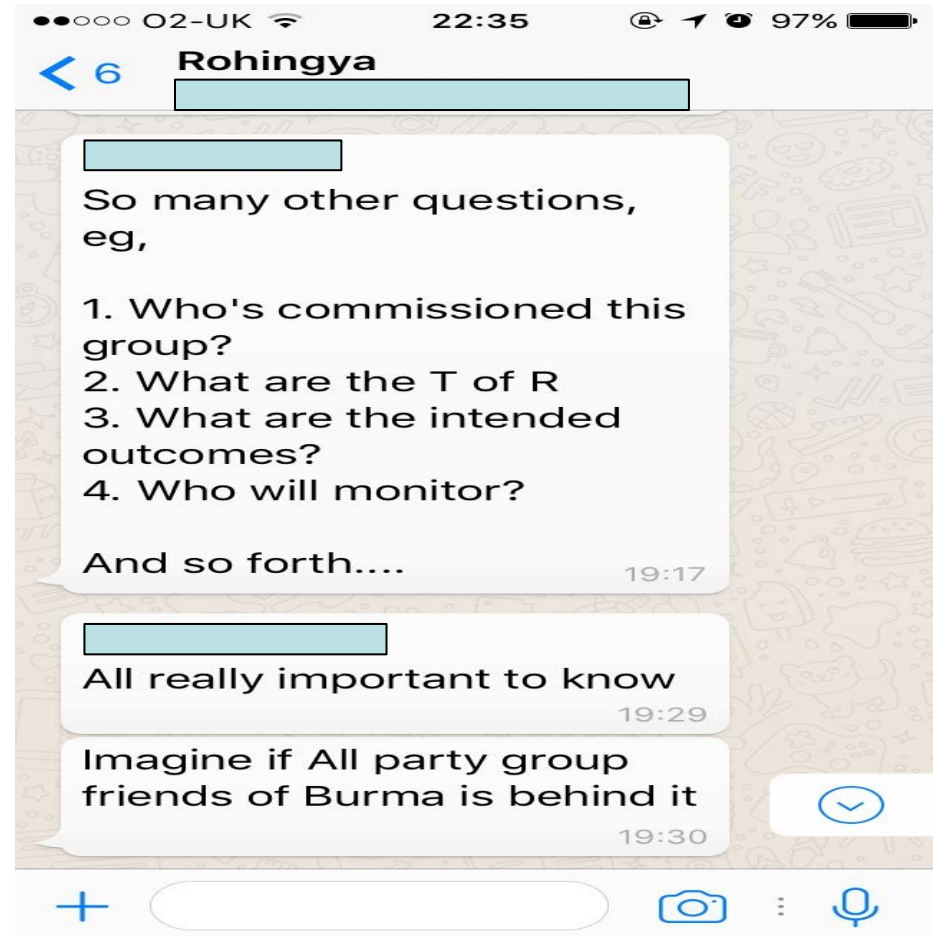
The image displays three sequential screenshots of a Facebook post and its comment thread. The first screenshot shows the original post by Aminul Hoque, dated 3 March at 13:12. The post text reads: "A question to all fellow parents... as much as I want to encourage and praise my children for all their amazing art work that they do at school... what do I do with the absolute mountain-full of artwork that they bring back home? Without affecting their creative appetite and confidence, how do discard the work? There is just way way too much ... All suggestions welcome ...". Below the text is a photograph of several children's drawings, including a colorful fox and a black cat. The second screenshot shows a comment from a user (redacted) at 13:16: "We're having a washing line with pegs, allowing art work to be displayed while limiting space. Any new artwork requires the removal of an old one. Old ones are then photographed (and binned) so we can still look at them which the kids enjoy doing now and then". The third screenshot shows a reply from Aminul Hoque at 13:27: "This is exactly the type of pragmatic advice I was looking for... thanks". Below this is another comment from a user (redacted) at 18:07: "Aminul remember this from your little onesxxx" followed by a photo of a child's drawing that says "Dear Grandma and Grandpa We Love You very much". The final screenshot shows Aminul Hoque's reply at 18:07: "Wow, amazing you kept this [redacted]". Below that is a comment from a user (redacted) at 18:07: "Lots of love Xxx". The bottom of the screenshots shows the Facebook interface with a "Write a comment..." input field and a "Post" button.



If my cry for help became a piece of social and cultural research...?

How do a group of parents utilise and understand their children's artwork?

The Rohingya



How do a group of 'community leaders' engage in a political campaign using social media?
The case of the Rohingya People of Burma.

My current research

Topic

Race, football, community, East London.

Research Question

How did a group of Bangladeshi men use the game of football as a vehicle of resistance against localised racism in east London during the 1980s?

What is the wider social and political ('educational') relevance of my research?

It is important to capture and hear these hidden and under-researched voices and experiences. How a game of sport can be much more than just a game – lifeskills, safety, community, resistance and entangled within the politics of race and working-class masculinities.

My current research cont...

Research Methods

Life-history interviews with a group of ten men via WhatsApp. Using photo elicitation on WhatsApp as a basis for online group interviews. An online ethnography over a period of 2 years.

Research process

Negotiating access: I knew the participants therefore trust and rapport was easily established. I have to grapple with insider/ outsider subjectivities as I am a member of the footballing community. Many of these men are reserved and shy but very prolific on WhatsApp. Will code and then thematically analyse the data.

Some key ethical questions to consider ... (Gatson, 2011: 516-518)

essarily interacted with by adding the reader's own post. But is it always participant observation for which one needs IRB permission to perform? When does reading become thinking become data gathering become data analysis? When is one a community member, a citizen, or a scholar? Does one need permission to read, or only to post or talk to others online? If, on the Internet, experience is already inscribed, already performed, and not in need of an ethnographer to validate it through scholarly revelation, we are again exposed as decision makers who arbitrate the definitions of the boundaries of appropriate interactions.

lowed. Is quoting from a blog the same thing as quoting from a newspaper, or a letter found in a historical archive? Is quoting from or reconstructing a face-to-face or overheard in-person conversation the same as quoting from or reconstructing a conversation or group discussion held through instant messaging or a bulletin/ posting board? All self-identified online ethnogra-

Ethical issues

- Tempting to carry out covert research without disclosing your research interests **but** we would always encourage you to seek permission and get informed consent especially if it is a synchronous live research
- Concerns over **confidentiality** of replies among research participants
- As a researcher, we need to be reflexive of the ‘power’ we have. As Gatson (2016: 513) argues, ‘you get to choose the questions and the boundaries of the field, and you write the narrative’.
- Data that has been deliberately and voluntarily made available in the public internet domain can be used by researchers without the need for **informed consent**, provided the **anonymity** of individuals is protected (Hewson et al, 2003).
- ‘Reading is its own form of interaction, and posting, submitting, and publishing one’s text online invites readership and an audience, if not a community’. You need to be mindful of the ‘loss of control’ the everyday online writer has once he/ she presses post/ submit/ publish (Gatson, 2011: 516)
- Always check the welcoming messages of the internet domain in regards to how they would like you to use their material (private or public)

Ethics continued...

- Society grants us (the researchers) the privilege of conducting research. The granting of that privilege is based on the public's trust that **'research will be conducted responsibly'** (Gatson, 2011: 516)
- Researchers also have rights – the ethics will differ according to context, culture, geography, and researchers have to **'remake'** the guidelines while also abiding to professional and socio-legal ethics (Gatson, 2011: 516)

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**Have an
awesome
week....**