

The Use of Objects to Enhance Online Social Research Interviews

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Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 health emergency, and the restrictions that it has placed on research, led many researchers to the re-evaluation of how social research interviews need to go online and how these can be enhanced. The online space presents a platform that brings participants and researchers together in an environment owned by both regardless of who hosts the online session. Online methods are likely to continue through emergencies and crises in general and beyond, and this calls for innovative ways to enhance online research interviews.

This chapter discusses a study of a series of online interviews where interviewees were invited to bring an object of personal value with the aim to facilitate a discussion on 'happiness in lockdown.' The selected topic served as a vehicle to explore this approach to online interviews while contextualising it in a crisis situation. It also helped to anchor the discussion around a positive theme in the middle of a global crisis. The study aimed at exploring the dynamics observed and the type of thematic materials gathered in this research context. The focus is to investigate the research technique and explore the benefits and challenges of using objects in social research interviews online.

As participants select objects related to the research, they are given some control to steer the discussion. Hennigar (1997) discussed the shift in thinking when artefacts are placed at the center of the conversation, and the participant's own values, beliefs and views about the world could be explored in more depth resulting in what Rubin and Rubin (2012: 95) call an 'extended conversation.' The purpose of such a conversation is to explore in depth some themes of relevance to the interviewee through their choice of objects. Using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), we explored the richness, depth and genuineness of the materials gathered in object-based online research interviews.

The chapter details the research process, discussing the benefits and challenges of using objects as enhancing tools in social research interviews conducted online. It considers how participants chose their items, how the tool compares with other enhancing tools, and some methodological implications. The chapter concludes with our reflection as interviewers offering advice to researchers who may choose to use this enhancing technique in their online interviews.

Online Interviews and Social Research

Online interviews have been widely used in social research as the medium of choice over face-to-face interviews when the latter were practically and/or ethically difficult to conduct. With the restrictions on movement in most parts of the world as a result of COVID-19, working from home has meant that many face-to-face meetings have shifted to online platforms that have been improving massively with more enhanced functionalities: options to record, share the screen, use breakout groups among many other features.

This advancement in online meetings has spilled over to social research interviews which may have been considered, by some, as second-best when face-to-face interviews were the standard. Others

were calling for the use of online interviews to benefit from some features available in online platforms (Hanna, 2012). Now that more people use online media to connect with others due to this current crisis, regular conversations using these platforms have become more familiar not only in professional settings, in formal meetings and job interviews, but also for informal, family and friends connections. This may have led to online meetings including interviews becoming more standard, or at least no longer second best or as an option only for the tech-savvy participants.

Online platforms may have lost the novelty they once had since this crisis has, in a way, forced many to use such media. The familiarity with the media used, the ease and the multiple contexts they are used in, may have led to them being the first medium of choice to meet with someone in almost all capacities, including research interviews. Conducting the interviews online provides an opportunity for interviewers and interviewees each to be comfortable in a familiar environment, cutting down on the travel costs, and allowing for recording of the video interaction (Hanna, 2012). This has made online interviews relatively easier to conduct and record without the invasiveness of a physical video- or audio-recorder. It is, however, argued that such familiarity may raise the need for tools to enhance online research interviews so they can become more engaging and interviewee-focused.

Enhanced Interviews

Using Zakher's (2018: 212) definition, '[a]n enhanced interview aims at a flowing conversation that can produce rich and varied data, and, therefore, can be defined as an interview that starts as an interviewee-centred, interviewee-empowering dialogue contextualised in interviewee-relevant themes and progresses to include an equally interested and fully engaged interviewer.' While conventional, semi-structured in-depth interviews including online interviews can produce rich, genuine and deep data, an enhanced interview uses an enhancing tool with the aim to anchor the dialogue in a contextualised and conversation-like environment. Examples of interview-enhancing techniques include: photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002; Smith et al, 2012), diaries (Alaszewski, 2006), using proverbs (Weber et al, 1998), the use of videos taken by participants (Cherrington and Watson, 2010), maps, life stories, among other tools (Kara, 2015). Moreover, key to the definition is the element of contextualisation in interviewee-relevant themes which requires a rethink of the tool used to enhance the interview.

This chapter reports on a set of qualitative interviews where we invited each participant to bring an item of personal relevance to them; the item needed to be linked to their idea of happiness during lockdown. The aim was to explore the dynamics of using objects chosen by participants in the online interview setting and to assess the benefits and challenges of the technique.

Method

Following ethical approval and an email invitation, 13 participants agreed to take part in this study. We invited participants to bring to the online interview an item that represented happiness in lockdown. The Information Sheet included some examples of possible objects such as mobile phones, charms, photos, plants, prayer mats, baking trays, exercise equipment, musical instruments, and so on.

The online interviews were conducted and video-recorded on Microsoft Teams resulting in more than nine hours of data (an average of 42 minutes per interview). Participants were two males and 11

females who lived in the UK during lockdown, and interviews were conducted one-on-one by the two authors. Each participant was asked to show the item(s) he/she brought and to talk about how the item(s) related to their happiness during lockdown. Some participants brought more than one item while others talked about some items they would have brought along with the one they chose for the interview.

The conversations started with a focus on the item where the participants explained what the item was and how it related to their happiness. The conversation then naturally continued based on the themes the participants mentioned (for example, their time with family, gardening, online shopping, work and the online interview itself). Each participant was designated **P** (1 to 13).

Findings and Discussion

Choice of Object

The range of items brought included a LEGO model (P9), lap tray (P10), white board (P12), smart phone (P3, P5 and P13), remote control (P11), art projects (P6 and P7), gardening tools (P2 and P10), film projector (P1), children books (P8) and a sewing machine (P4).

“How did you select this item for our interview?” was part of the initial conversation with each participant with the following observations:

The ease with which each of the 13 participants chose their item differed. For example, P12 had forgotten to bring the item to the screen at the start of the interview, and when reminded of the research participation invite, she apologised for forgetting but ran without hesitation to bring an item. She said that she knew exactly what she would discuss (a white board she used with her children to establish some routine and to bond over a range of activities during lockdown). This is an example of someone who found it very easy to bring an item of personal relevance at a few-seconds notice. On the other hand, P5 reported on having taken some time to decide on what to bring to the interview. She discussed it with her daughter and decided to bring her mobile phone.

Participants shared their ideas and their elimination process for selecting their items, judging their own selection;

“We did a lot of cooking, I thought about bringing a recipe book, but I thought that will be fake, because I looked up everything online.” (P5)

Others wanted to choose something worthy to reflect “using my time wisely.” (P7)

Some participants reported trying to guess what others may bring to the interviews;

“I thought people may bring iPads” (P7)

In all cases, it was noticed that participants were not put on the spot to answer a series of interview questions as could be the case in some research. They had the chance to explore what to bring to the interview, and this, in turn, meant that they had the opportunity to reflect on the theme of the research.

It may have been more challenging to other interviewees who decided to bring more than one item to the interview (P7 and P10, for example). In all 13 interviews, no one opined that they could not

think of an item or that they could not bring at least one item to the interview. It is argued that no matter how long it takes for participants to select an object to talk about, it is almost always guaranteed that each participant will have something in their environment that they can talk about.

When participants articulated their thought process behind their choices, they mentioned thinking about how the interviewer would perceive them in view of their selected object;

“I toyed with the idea of a bottle of wine [as my item] but [it] will make me look like I have an alcohol problem [laughter].” (P5)

“I have my idea about how I am perceiving this [the object], but this may not come across to the other person, what does it say about me, does a projector mean that I am a lazy person staying in bed watching TV or does it mean that I was creative?” (P1)

Such comments were explored, and participants were asked to elaborate on them, which, again, added an element of honesty and genuineness to the discussion. After all, many interviewees could be giving socially desirable answers; the fact that they are bringing a real item that they have can, to a certain extent, facilitate an honest discussion. In all cases, such comments reflect the expectation that cherished items can tell something about people. This may highlight the credibility of using such a tool in comparison with some other tools that may be seen by some participants to be used randomly to trigger a conversation.

It was clear that some *pre-interview investment* took place with reflection and consideration;

“I looked around and then thought what did we actually do [during lockdown] we did a lot of reading.” (P8)

Participants referred to how the selected object reminded them of their time in lockdown which some remembered with some sadness (P7 with art work) and others how their chosen object helped them cope with their anxiety (P6), increase their productivity (P12), stay connected with the family (P12 and P13) or practise a hobby (P10 and P11). Even with participants who ended up with an object different to what they had planned first, there was an opportunity to get to know them more through their talk about their thought process;

“I immediately went to the dogs and I had a debate because they are not objects....my mind goes straight to the dogs as they bring me joy but they are not objects ... so moved on to choose an object.” (P4)

Participants came to the interview with some preparation and demonstrating excitement in anticipation of sharing their selected items. We had some similar sense of looking forward to what each would bring to the interview, which we reflect upon in a later section in this chapter.

Such pre-interview investment on the part of the interviewee also meant that they had some *control over the conversation*. It was their item that would be the focus of the dialogue, and it was they that could tell us what the item meant to them and how it was connected to their happiness in lockdown. This interviewee control is recommended in the interview literature; after all, interviewers conduct individual interviews because they are interested in each interviewee’s beliefs, values, and attitudes. It is, however, believed that some interview settings lend themselves more to interviewee-centred conversations than others. While some may argue that sending the interview schedule to the participants prior to the interview allows them to know what to expect, it does not compare to giving

them the opportunity to steer the conversation through an item that only they know about prior to the interview.

This pre-interview investment and the perceived control over the conversation can *relieve some of the interviewee's uncertainty before the interview*. Being invited to an interview on 'happiness in lockdown' in the abstract may cause some unnecessary ambiguity that can be mitigated through this technique. Hurdley (2006) argues that discussing objects is unique in terms of the opportunities it gives for narratives, which can be a challenge in other methods. Participants bringing items to an interview already have much to say by nature of owning the item.

Using this enhancing tool compared with others

More Affordable: Qualitative interviewers have a range of options to enhance their interviews. They can bring photos and/or items to the interview to anchor the discussion around them. They can also ask participants to build or create an artefact (such as a LEGO model, a playdough figure, a photo or a drawing). Whether it is the interviewer or the interviewee who (co-)creates, builds or selects the anchoring point of the discussion depends on the research question. Qualitative interviewers, however, acknowledge that not all enhancing tools can in fact enhance social research interviews (whether online or otherwise) because the tool needs to be interviewee-relevant if it is to lend itself to richer, deeper and genuine conversations. For example, being invited to build LEGO models may be stressful for some who do not enjoy this type of activity while others may prefer to write a song or express themselves in drawings.

The pressure that some interviewees may be under to draw, build a model, take a photo, produce a figure, and so on may not enhance but hinder the interviewing process. Although researchers using LEGO, drawings and photo-elicitation usually highlight the fact that it is the conversation rather than the product itself that is the focus, participants still need to go through the product phase, and that in itself may cause unnecessary feelings of inadequacy. This could be a barrier if the participant's confidence in their own creativity is low (Rainford, 2020). Asking participants to simply bring an item can be perceived to be less demanding.

Moreover, the pressure of having to talk about whatever LEGO model was built or the simple art produced, does in fact affect the discussion. It could be argued that asking participants to bring an item of their choice is easier to do than asking them to build, create or draw something. It is also less limiting in terms of the discussions triggered in comparison to having to justify and talk about a drawing, a LEGO model, a photo for example.

More Possibilities in an Online Format: Adding to this flexibility is the endless possibilities of the range of items that can be shown on the screen in online interviews. While a participant in a face-to-face conversation may be able to bring a token item, they may not be able to bring larger objects such as a sewing machine, gardening tools or pets! The online platform allows for almost all items to be shown on the screen (regardless of the size of the item) and possibly in their home environment. In a study on work-life boundaries by Whiting (2016), participants used video cameras to capture during their days any events that may trigger a conversation on work-life balance. One participant captured his first few moments right after waking up, and it was interesting to see a participant, still in bed, reflecting on his day ahead. This flexibility of a video camera at home, and the same is mirrored in an online interview, adds to the genuineness of interviews done in the participants' home environment.

Asking participants to bring items of relevance to them may trigger genuine conversations that go beyond what would be expected in a non-enhanced online interview.

More Interviewee Control Over the Conversation: Asking participants to bring something of their choice allows them more freedom compared with some other approaches that have been outlined above. It also allows for more naturally-occurring discussions around their choices, in comparison to what could be a forced conversation around something that is introduced by the interviewer.

Our Reflection as Interviewers

Qualitative research literature, especially within the interpretative paradigm, acknowledges the role of interviewer as someone who works together with an interviewee to co-create the knowledge (Finlay, 2002; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002; Webster et al, 2014). This means that the 'conversation with a purpose' (Kara, 2018) that is the qualitative interview works better when both sides are engaging in and contributing to the conversation with the aim of co-constructing knowledge that in turn helps answer the research question(s). Here are some of our reflection and observations as interviewers in this research.

We were always looking forward to the next interview, with *a sense of anticipation* of what each interviewee would bring, and this sense of anticipation kept the research interesting. There was always a new angle, idea or observation in each interview, even though they all discussed the same theme of happiness in lockdown.

Preparation for each interview was relatively easy; the only thing we needed was to ensure that the platform was working well and that recording was taking place. Kara (2015: 83) maintains that 'once the system is set up, electronic interviews take much less time to administer than face-to-face interviews and remove the need for travel or transcription.' This was made even easier with the onus on each participant to bring something to discuss. In comparison with the need to prepare photos, proverbs or other prompts, this technique meant that minimal preparation was needed for each online interview.

During the interview setting itself, it was almost always *easy to build rapport*; this is due to the fact that there was always something to talk about, namely the selected item. Whatever the item was, an interviewer is almost always ready with a "Wow! Tell me about this, please!" The expectation of a not-seen-before item and how it links to the participant's life taps into the curiosity of qualitative researchers and provides for a safe setting where there will always be a point of discussion. The qualitative interview literature highlights the ease with which participants can respond to specific questions in comparison to abstract notions (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Asking questions about the item, how it works, when the participant uses it, how he/she selected it, and so on, can all be safe questions to at least start off the conversation in preparation to get to deeper and richer ideas around happiness, satisfaction, struggles, and other more abstract concepts. Rapport may have been enhanced by the fact that we knew most of the interviewees before embarking on this research; however, having a specific item on the screen made it easy to start the conversation asking about the details of the chosen item. Rapport may have also been easy to build through good interviewing techniques, active listening and being genuinely interested in the participants' input; however, we believe that having an item as the focus (at least at the start of the interview) gave easy access to more engagement and smooth conversations.

As interviewers, it was also *easy to recall the interviews by linking the items to the participants*. In co-writing this chapter, it was rather easy to remember who brought what to the interview, triggering a chain reaction of also remembering the thrust of the conversations and how each reflected on their happiness during lockdown. In other non-enhanced interviews, this could be a challenge, especially after some interviews where one could find it difficult to recall who said what. Some studies have reported on the observation that memories and items can be linked (for example, Beckstead et al, 2011), and it is believed that this observation adds to the genuineness of this enhancing tool which means parts of the interviews mimic real-life conversations around items (such as gifts, memorabilia, and so on.) We acknowledge that such an advantage could be lost once the number of interviews exceeds a certain point where, perhaps, the most exciting items are remembered while the mundane ones may be forgotten. However, we believe that we are more likely to remember conversations that are anchored around objects than ones based on a dialogue alone.

Methodological Advantages and Limitations

Based on the object-based online interviews conducted for this study, we believe that this enhancing technique has some advantages over non-enhanced online interviews and over some other enhancing techniques too. Advantages include the *flexibility* it offers; this flexibility is in terms of the wide range of objects that participants can choose from, which also include a range of sizes that can only be available in online interviews. It also provides an opportunity for almost every participant to take part in the research without the need to be artistically inclined.

Additionally, having an item in the conversation can *release participants of the pressure of being in the spotlight* while still keeping them at the centre. While qualitative research is after the participant's experience, priorities and interests, and all efforts should be made to have an interviewee-centred conversation, sometimes the spotlight being on the participant can cause much pressure, especially if participants are already in a challenging crisis situation. Having an item that both interviewer and interviewee focus on can help participants to feel freer to discuss the item rather than discuss the participant. This can be even more useful in sensitive topics where participants may need to distance themselves somehow from the focus of the interview. While talking about something tangible can lead to discussions about the item owner, being able to hold an item, show it on the screen, discuss it, laugh about some of its features, and so on can allow for this space for a less self-conscious conversation, not putting participants under unnecessary pressure. As objects and artefacts could also mean different things to different people, objects almost gave permission to participants to talk about their families (P1, P4, P5, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12 and P13), their work environment (P2, P5, P6, P7, P8 and P12), and their struggles with ill health and/or anxiety (P3, P4 and P7) among other things.

The observations discussed above point to the enhancement abilities of using objects in online interviews in mainly three areas of qualitative interviewing: depth, richness and genuineness. *Depth* was witnessed as the discussions went beyond superficial answers that can generally be socially desirable, reaching some more complex issues. The detailed conversations around the items brought a range of layers to the dialogues with real-life stories around the items. It echoes what Rowsell (2011: 341) said about artefacts that 'brought family narratives and attachments to life.'

Richness is related to the wide range of topics and themes that could be co-constructed in interview settings (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). While the theme, happiness in lockdown, was investigated, the range of ideas, interests, and values gathered in the data demonstrated such richness linked to the

variety of the items brought in to the interviews. We argue that this is due to the flexibility and endless possibilities provided by our invitation to take part in this research where participants could bring any items that they felt relevant, which can lead to different types of conversations around the research topic. It will be interesting for future research to explore the difference in perceived richness of data with and without the use of objects.

Genuineness is demonstrated through the use of real objects that carried some relevance to each participant. Instead of giving idealistic answers to hypothetical questions, participants literally brought to the interviews items of their own lives. While some selectivity is expected, which is typical of almost any conversation, the fact that each interviewee was discussing something authentic that was purchased/obtained not for research purposes can, in a way, push the conversation towards a real dialogue, akin to that in an informal conversation.

On the other hand, there are some challenges with this methodological approach. The technique would work better with researchers who are more comfortable with *uncertainty*. Not knowing what each participant would bring to the interview may cause some inexperienced interviewers some worry. Interviewers who prefer to prepare well for their interviews may find themselves taking a backseat waiting for each participant to steer the conversation in a direction they prefer, based on the item they bring to the interview. This could be especially challenging if the research is about a sensitive topic.

The depth achieved in the conversation as a result of discussing one object can also result in *missing other topic-related themes that could otherwise be triggered by other objects*. Commenting on the interview, P12 mentioned that she may have covered her ideas about the white board in detail, but she may have missed mentioning other themes that the board did not naturally trigger. Experienced interviewers will need to be alert and wisely guide the conversation back to the main topic if the item of choice seems to prompt less useful details.

Another challenge is the fact that *items that are exciting to a participant may be irrelevant and/or uninteresting to the interviewer*. Participants who demonstrate their excitement about a certain painting or gardening tools or musical instruments need responders who are keen to hear about them. However, this could provide for an 'information gap' (Abell and Myers, 2008) that gives participants the licence to explain in detail what the item does and/or how exciting it is. While the research is rarely ultimately interested in the very items, it is through the discussion of the items that researchers can explore the thought processes, priorities and attitudes of the interviewees. It could, therefore, be argued that the less the interviewer knows about an item, the more the interviewee has to say about it – the richer and more detailed the conversation can be.

We acknowledge that one should be mindful of the challenges attached to access to the resources that facilitate online interviews in general, as there are still some people who do not have reliable Internet access for many reasons. Such divide could play a part in the choice of method that caters to the individual participants' circumstances.

Advice to researchers using the tool

Interview researchers interested in using objects to enhance their online research interviews need to make sure that their pre-interview *instructions are clear*. Providing potential research participants

with what the nature and size of item, the topic and the expected nature of the conversation can help many participants choose their objects and can decrease any anxiety that some may face.

Researchers using this tool need to be able to *tolerate ambiguity* and be ready for the interviewee to lead the discussion based on the item they choose. Gaining experience in interviewing allows interviewers to deal favourably with uncertainty while *maintaining the needed focus* on the theme under discussion. Interviewers may also be presented with items that they may deem irrelevant, and as in natural conversations, the more an interviewer shows their interest in the conversation, the interviewee (and the item in this case), the more favourable the conversation will be.

Getting the conversation moving is key to richer data, as participants are more likely to share honestly and in detail their opinions, perceptions, and so on. This calls for inquisitive interviewers who are *open to knowing about hobbies, ideas and artefacts of interest to their participants*. This, however, may mean that certain items brought to the interview may challenge the interviewer's typical view of the item, its relevance, use or value. Whether the item is interesting in and of itself, the onus is on the experienced interviewer to make sure that the dialogue captures what is important to the participant in relation to the research topic.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we reported on a set of qualitative interviews conducted online, at the time of the COVID-19-pandemic-related lockdown. We conducted the online interviews with the use of objects as an interview-enhancing tool. The benefits and challenges of using objects as enhancing tools were discussed, and we also explored issues around how participants chose their items, how the tool compares with other enhancing tools, and some methodological implications. The chapter also presented our reflection as interviewers and provided some advice to researchers who may choose to use this enhancing technique in their online interviews. We have found that using objects of personal value to participants can enhance social research interviews conducted online, giving participants control, adding an element of newness, and anchoring the conversation around interviewee-relevant themes.

Although this research was conducted during a time of crisis, the transferability of the enhancing technique can be of value to online interviews conducted at any time. We believe that adding objects to online interviews can now be part of the toolbox available to qualitative researchers.

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