Email Interviews: A Guide to Research Design and Implementation

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Abstract
As scholars in social sciences and humanities explore new methods for studying increasingly digitized societies, electronic research methods—such as email interviews—have moved from marginal complementary activities to, depending on the purpose of the study, potentially becoming primary methods. However, while there is no lack of discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of such methods, there is little guidance in the literature in terms of how electronic methods can be used effectively and productively in qualitative research. This article adds to the existing body of literature by outlining a strategy for email interviews. The argument of the article is that email interviewing can be fruitfully combined with explorative interviewing, offering the researcher a way to strategically work with the extended time frame that asynchronous interviewing brings with it. This gives the researcher an opportunity to work with open-ended introductory questions, follow-up questions, and cross-fertilization of multiple interviews carried out simultaneously. The article brings forward the argument that a methodological strategy that combines email interviews and explorative interviewing can help the researcher draw the moment of surprise closer together with the moment of analysis and thereby challenge existing theories and knowledge of the study object. The argument is illustrated through examples from an ethnographic study with no in-person elements. Additionally, the article acknowledges that email interviewing is necessary for some significant research tasks and in some cases even a more suitable option than traditional in-person methods due to the study’s objective and the nature of its participants.

Keywords
methods in qualitative inquiry, narrative, ethnography, ethnomethodology, case study

Introduction
For contemporary researchers, a range of different methodological options are available when developing their research design—including electronic research methods. Electronic research methods have become even more relevant for researchers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lobe et al., 2020; Teti et al., 2020) and of climate change. In the light of such conditions, some qualitative researchers are re-thinking research that includes in-person meetings or traveling, while others strive to conduct “sustainable science” (Santana et al., 2021) through a more resource-effective research design. Additionally, the societies that social sciences and humanities study are increasingly taking place in digital environments and, in such studies, in-person research methods might not always be ideal. These conditions point toward the need to further explore electronic research methods, not only as complementary to more traditional methods (e.g. Flick, 2020) but as methods that are valuable on their own merits.

In the literature on electronic research methods, there is little discussion of strategies for how to use such methods effectively and properly for certain research purposes (Airoldi, 2018; Caliandro, 2018). For example, it is rare to come across guidance for how to develop approaches for, and practically engage in, electronic research methods. Little is also known about how such methods might be applicable in relation to different purposes of qualitative studies. This is important since a study’s methodological choices and objectives are interdependent. To shed light on some of these raised concerns, there is a need for reflexive accounts of researchers’ experiences of using solely electronic research methods.

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This article adds to the existing body of literature on electronic research methods by zooming in on email interviewing, and outlining a strategy for how email interviews can be used to generate in-depth and rich qualitative data, specifically in explorative studies. The argument of the article is that email interviewing can fruitfully be combined with explorative interviewing, offering the researcher a way to strategically work with the extended timeline that comes with asynchronous interviewing. Outlining a strategy that utilizes open-ended introductory questions, follow-up questions and cross-fertilization of multiple interviews carried out simultaneously, the article argues that email interviewing can be a viable option for researchers seeking to generate qualitative in-depth data through electronic research methods. By challenging the idea that only in-person methods can meet a gold standard for in-depth and trustworthy data (Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Weller, 2016), this article entertains the argument that we need to start taking electronic research methods more seriously and further explore their potential for future studies.

Email Interviewing

Electronic research methods are becoming a more recognized way of generating qualitative data (O’Connor & Madge, 2017), and researchers with experience of electronic research methods have stressed such methods’ equivalence to traditional in-person methods (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014; Weller, 2016). It has also been argued that the quality of data generated by electronic research methods need not differ compared to data generated by more traditional methods (Denscombe, 2003), and that such methods can improve more traditional research methods (Archibald et al., 2019; Braun et al., 2017; O’Connor et al., 2008). In relation to email interviews, researchers have specifically pointed to the fact that they can be used when conducting in-depth interviews (Meho, 2006), and can generate rich qualitative data (Costello et al., 2017; Illingsworth, 2006; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

Taking a closer look at experiences of email interviewing, researchers have illustrated how email interviewing can capture the complexity of social practice on the internet (James, 2016) and how the responses from participants can result in well-written, rich and informative accounts (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004; Gibson, 2010; James, 2007; Mann, 2016) that are carefully formulated (Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014). In asynchronous interviewing, the timeline offers the participant both an opportunity to reflect over the questions asked and give them a better chance of owning their narratives (Pell et al., 2020). Another advantage is that email interviews are already transcribed (Ayling & Mewse, 2009). Moreover, email interviews can offer benefits in studies where the participants are technologically savvy and prefer, or are comfortable with, communicating in written text (Bampton & Cowton, 2002). Researchers have also noted that such participants may be technologically reachable in that they might respond to emails and other electronic communication quickly (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Ingley et al., 2020). In studies where the researcher and the participants are in different time zones, email interviews might be the only option to reach a particular group (Opdenakker, 2006). In such cases, email interviews can make research internationalized and cost-effective, because travel can be reduced. In certain cases, email interviews can also enable the inclusion of participants that would not otherwise be able to participate in the research for various reasons. Further, email interviews can offer a possibility to research communities that are otherwise hard to reach (Bjerke, 2010; Kaufmann & Tzanetakis, 2020). Consequently, email interviews can allow a more flexible choice of participants (Valdez & Gubrium, 2020).

Additionally, in terms of disadvantages, researchers have pointed to that email interviews can be more time consuming than in-person interviews (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017), and that the researcher cannot observe body languages cues (Burns, 2010). Email interviews would therefore not be a suitable option in studies where visual cues are significant (Santana et al., 2021). On the other hand, for some studies, email interviews might even be more suitable than traditional methods. This could include cases where the researcher does not want to show their reaction to things. Another identified disadvantage is the risk that participants give short and superficial responses, which is more common in writing than when speaking (Jemierniak, 2020). Researchers have experienced that participants responded shorter in email interviews when given all the questions at once (CohenMiller et al., 2020). With email interviews, it is also easier for participants to withdraw their participation at any time if communicating in text, by simply stopping to respond and dropping out (Kivits, 2005). Additionally, the verification of identities can potentially pose problems for some studies (Chen & Hint, 1999; Gibson, 2010).

Although email interviewing might be a well-known interview type, it has been overlooked as a method. It therefore remains to be discussed how email interviews can be developed (Hine, 2015, 2020). While the advantages and disadvantages of email interviewing are frequently discussed in the literature (e.g., Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Fritz & Vandermause, 2017; Hawkins, 2018; James, 2016), discussions on how email interviews can be rendered analytically productive for social research are still wanting. Additionally, much of the literature primarily covers researchers’ experiences of combining electronic research methods with more traditional research methods. In this aspect, email interviews as a sole research method need to be more thoroughly investigated. In what follows, I discuss how I have worked strategically to generate in-depth data using email interviewing.

The Strategy: Combining Email Interviewing With Explorative Interviewing

The decision to combine email interviewing with explorative interviewing was loosely inspired by the corpus of studies that have approached the interview as an interactive process
between the researcher and the participant (Gubrium & Holstein, 2004; Hester & Francis, 1994; Holstein & Gubrium, 2016; Roulston, 2011). Such approaches rely on insights from ethnomethodology, recognizing the interview as a social encounter through which knowledge is generated (Garfinkel, 1967). That is, the researcher and the participant are thought of as co-contributors in knowledge construction in interviews. Pushing such notions, researchers have developed interview techniques such as collaborative interviews (Ellis & Berger, 2003), analytical interviews (Kreiner & Mouritsen, 2005), and interactive interviews (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Such interview types are typically explorative in their style, stretching back to Spradley’s (1979) ethnographic interview. The suggested strategy in this article shares with such a body of scholarship a general view of the interview as a shared and situated accomplishment.

To illustrate this strategy, I will draw upon my experiences from an internet ethnography. The study example—outlined in further detail below—was explorative in that it sought to challenge existing theories and add new knowledge about the study object, pushing the state-of-the-art beyond already established information and taken-for-granted understandings. To practically achieve this in the interviews, I tried to resist, rather than accept, first impressions and general assumptions of the study object and thereby take seriously what might first appear as uninteresting or insignificant for the study. Additionally, by not getting too familiar with the practice (by not accepting first assumptions), a scepticism of how the studied practice or phenomenon works could be maintained.

This can be accomplished by methodologically trying to bring two key moments in the qualitative research process closer together throughout the data collection process, namely: (a) the moment of surprise, and (b) the moment of analysis (see Figure 1).

Here, email interviewing can inform explorative interviewing by offering an extended time frame, which creates an opportunity for the researcher to strategically work with maintaining moments of surprise and analytical reflexivity throughout the data collection process.

To put this strategy to practice, I began the interviews with (1) an open-ended introductory question that was descriptive in nature (Spradley, 1979). This put focus on the response from the participant, staying open to what the participant regarded as important, instead of re-directing the conversation back to a set of questions that the researcher has defined beforehand. I saw my role as providing guidance and creating space for the participants to bring up and describe what they consider significant. I wanted to let the participants “tell their story as they see it, feel it, experience it” (Corbin & Morse, 2003, p. 339) and focus on how they understood their practices (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003). I then worked extensively with (2) follow-up questions based on that first individual response from a participant. The aim here was to feed a tentative analysis, moving beyond what might—to the participants—appear as self-explanatory or routine. Due to the nature of asynchronous interviewing, I had time to consider how I wanted to take the interview forward. Here, I had time to go back to notes and observations. In the second round, I would again create follow-up questions based on the incoming response from the participants. The work with follow-up questions was followed by the work of (3) cross-fertilizing interviews. Cross-fertilization of interviews created an opportunity to connect and synthesize information from different interviews—making multiple interviews interact. Insights into the events that one participant described could thereby be fed into another, already ongoing interview, to extend the understanding of the played-out events. To benefit from the cross-fertilization of multiple interviews, it may not be feasible to take on too many interviews at one time. As other researchers have experienced, there are challenges when it comes to coordinating and organizing email interviews (Hershberger & Kavanaugh, 2017). Keeping more interviews ongoing at the same time could cause loss of participants attention and delay the researcher’s response time.

The strategy of combining email interviewing with explorative interviewing is designed to utilize an extended time frame, offering participants time to think and reflect before getting back to the researcher. Likewise, the researcher has time to analyze the data during the interview. Here, the researcher is given the opportunity to return to the literature and to plan ahead, which is more difficult, if not impossible, in an in-person interview.

This interviewing practice was not a strategy designed at the outset of my study, but an outcome of multiple methodological decisions made during the study as I gradually became aware of what seemed to work (and not), in order to generate in-depth qualitative data through email interviews. The suggested strategy is specifically suitable in situations where asynchronous interviewing matches (1) the nature of the study’s participants (for example, participants who are technologically savvy/reachable and comfortable with electronic communication) and, (2) the study’s objectives (for example, in explorative studies or in studies where the researcher wants to reach a group that is geographically spread out).
Main Lessons

The main lessons learned from this interviewing strategy were:

- **Working with descriptive open-ended introductory questions can generate in-depth responses**
- **Working with follow-up questions can encourage participant to go deeper into their analysis**
- **Working with cross-fertilization can make several interviews interact, and thereby new insights can be generated**

Taken together, the methodological strategy of combining email and explorative interviewing—by working with open-ended introductory question, follow-up questions, and cross-fertilization of interviews—can make it possible for the researcher to draw the moment of surprise closer together with the moment of analysis, and thereby challenge existing theories and knowledge of the study object.

About the Study Example

The study from which the examples used in this article are taken was an internet ethnography that took place between April 2014 and November 2017. The discussion forum was the Gallifrey Base—a forum where people can discuss the British television series Doctor Who. The study’s fieldwork consisted primarily of observations of the interactions on the forum and interviews with 70 of the forum’s members. The ethnography did not include any in-person interactions between the researcher and the study’s participants for two main reasons: (1) the study’s objectives, and (2) the characteristics of the study’s participants.

The study’s objectives were to explore an internet practice, rather than a culture or community, to better understand how the participants of the forum understood their practice. The focus of data collection was therefore aimed at the practice that was taking place online, through text. The discussed discussion forum in question was international, with members from the US, New Zealand, Australia, the UK and different parts of Europe. When attempting to research a population that is geographically dispersed across multiple time zones, it can be difficult to conduct in-person interviews (Gaiser, 2008; Karchmer, 2001; Meho, 2006; Robinson & Shulz, 2009). For my study, the selection of participants was primarily based on their engagement in certain practices on the forum. Given this condition, in-person interviews were not an ideal method.

Early in the study, I experienced that participants were hesitant to being interviewed in-person; they reported that they felt more secure and comfortable expressing their views and thoughts through text. They explained that this was one of the reasons why they had chosen to be active on an internet forum in the first place. Interviewing electronically and by email was initially seen as a complementary method to in-person interviews (in cases where this would have been possible). However, in the light of this insight, I switched to solely offering participants electronic interviews. As the participants were well-acquainted to electronic interaction—since that is the way that they communicate and interact on the forum—email interviewing made use of a means of communication that the participants were familiar and comfortable with. It was also noticeable in the interviews that the participants were skilled at expressing themselves in text. In some interviews, participants expressed that being interviewed via email had been a positive experience and that they appreciated having time to think and reflect before responding, something that researchers before me also have experienced (Fox et al., 2007; Hooley et al., 2012; James, 2007; Wilkerson et al., 2014). Having participants that were both geographically spread out, that favored electronic communication, and whose practice was exercised through text, made email interviews a suitable choice in my case.

The Strategy at Work

Since the interview strategy was a result of multiple methodological decisions and not designed at the outset of the study, I can compare my initial plan to the strategy developed later. Working with open-ended introductory questions, follow-up questions and cross-fertilization was consequently a result of the outcome of the initial interviews I conducted. In the following sections, I will describe the methodological decisions that led me to develop the strategy and demonstrate how I put the strategy to practice.

Open-Ended Introductory Questions

In the first interviews I conducted, I had created an interview guide which had several open-ended questions to encourage the
participants to describe their experiences and interactions on the forum in their own words. The results, however, were not satisfying. The participants politely answered each of the questions with a couple of sentences or even bullet lists. Here is an example of a typical response I received as a result of these initial interviews (text in quotes has not been copy-edited and is presented as written by the participants).

**Researcher:** What do you do on the forum?

**Participant 4:**
- Run a thread about the Bechdel Test: Discussing the representation of women in the programme
- Catch up on the latest spoilers, speculation and news about the show
- Keep up to date with the latest controversies
- Rate the episodes after airing

To the same question, another participant gave me this response:

**Participant 6:** I was a long time lurker, but I’ve steadily become more active over the years - in the New Series section, but also in the general TV and Movie section, as well as Crater Of Needles, as I’m interested in Politics.

The interview guide I had prepared beforehand did not, in this case, help move the conversation ahead. Rather the opposite. The questions that I had formulated, although I considered them open-ended, did not seem to inspire any lengthier or in-depth responses. The answers I got were short and superficial. This was an experience I seemed to share with other researchers engaged in asynchronous interviewing (CohenMiller et al., 2020; Jemielniak, 2020). I needed to not only re-phrase the questions asked, but also engage the participants more in the interviews. I wanted to create an environment where the participants could speak more freely and allow them some flexibility in the interview, rather than just having them answer a defined set of questions (Bernard, 2011; Brinkmann, 2014).

Going forward, I took on a different approach and started each interview by asking the participant one single question:

**Researcher:** Can you tell me, in as much detail as you can, what happens after you log in to the forum?

This open introductory question was a general question about the interactions on the forum that I was studying, descriptive in its nature (Spradley, 1979). Regardless of the participant’s response, the question should generate data on the participant’s activities. It was also a question that did not direct the participant in any particular direction, but that could generate different responses from different participants. I hoped that such a question would also engage participants in the interview since it was a question that could easily be individualized. Here is a short excerpt from a participant’s response to the open-ended introductory question (a participant who described both the activities they themselves engaged in, as well as in which order):

**Participant 44:** I mainly use the outer worlds section which contains a lot of political topics, but also enjoy the more joke threads. It’s hard to describe my step by step process because I use the tapatalk app on my cell phone. In a sense, I never really log out. I just subscribe and I am alerted to any thread in which I comment.

When continuing the conversation with follow-up questions, asking the participant to then navigate me through a common visit, I was further informed that participants could subscribe to discussion threads that they want updates on (that is, they get updates as soon as someone has posted a new message in that same discussion thread). Following this lead, I learned that participants are actively engaged in particular discussion threads (and that these can be ongoing for weeks or even months), rather than with the forum as a whole.

Another participant responded to the same introductory question as follows (excerpt of their response):

**Participant 35:** I go through phases where I post a lot and then fall back and just read posts for long stretches. I get tired of letting the debate colour and influence my enjoyment of the show. I get tired of subconsciously anticipating what others would say while I was watching. I get tired of framing arguments instead of just sitting back and enjoying it. I wanted the purity of it just being between me and my television again.

I continued this interview by asking more about what kind of experiences that had led to the decision not to post as frequently. Continuing the conversation, the participant described in detail their previous activities on the forum and told me a story about how their activities on the forum had decreased.

When I started with the open-ended introductory question, the participants would no longer give me the type of short answers I received in response to the more direct questions in my initial approach. With the new approach, the responses were more personal, lengthier, and reflexive. For the study to benefit from such individual responses, I now needed to develop a strategy for tailored follow-up questions that could continue the exploration (embracing surprises) while keeping the study focused (initiating analysis).

**Follow-Up Questions**

The purpose of the follow-up questions was to understand how participants understood the practice they engaged in. This does not mean that I left it to the participants to carry out the study’s analysis, but merely points to how an interview can be designed to study the participants’ reflections upon their own experiences. The next example is an excerpt from one participant’s response to the open-ended introductory question. The participant started to tell me about what they do on the forum and continued with a story about how they had experienced boundaries and social norms there. The excerpt comes from the end of the response to the introductory question.

**Researcher:** Can you tell me, in as much detail as you can, what happens after you log in to the forum?
Participant 11: There’s very much a sense of ‘this is what you’re allowed to like and talk about’ vs ‘this isn’t to be liked, so we forget about that’ […] Certainly, though, once I’d found the forum, I thought it was great—loads of like-minded people all discussing the show! I learnt a lot in those early days (including, as I’ve said above, which stories you’re allowed to like and not, though I’ve often torn up that ‘rule book!’), and it put me on to other aspects of the show that I’d not been aware of before.

In this example, the participant did not only offer a description of their experiences of the exercise of social norms on the forum. They also offered an analysis of their interactions on the forum. The example shows how the participant understood their interactions by telling me how they had “torn up that ‘rule book’” and how such interactions had led the participant to “other aspects of the show”. The participant’s response reminded me of Garfinkel’s (1967) ‘breaching experiment’ where ordinary and mundane routines were disrupted in order to explore social norms. As a follow-up question, I therefore invited the participant to further analyze their experiences.

Researcher: You mentioned that you learnt on the forum which stories you are allowed to like and not. How do you learn what is allowed to like and not? You also mentioned that you went against the ‘rule book’ and that it put you on to other aspects of the show that you’d not been aware of before. What do you mean?

Participant 11: Ooh, you’ve opened a can of worms here, because I could type for hours about the stories you’re allowed to like, but I’ll try and keep it sensible! […] I guess what I really mean when I say that you’re handed the list of stories that you’re ‘allowed’ to enjoy, is that you very quickly become aware of which stories the majority of people enjoy. In order to really explain the way that stories have gained their reputations, I need to first give a slightly long-winded history lesson!

The response to the follow-up question contained 3860 words and the participant elaborated on how they had experienced social norms on the forum, offering me several specific examples of situations where they had come across social norms. The participant also described how they had responded to such events, and how such experiences eventually led them to engage less with the forum. The response showed how the participant recognized how different events would (and did) play out on the forum. The follow-up questions were formulated to challenge the participant to continue to explore and analyze their experiences further. The follow-up questions made it possible to analyze, during the interview, the practice’s structure through the participant’s description of the practice boundaries.

In another example, a participant told me that discussion threads could be moved to other parts of the forum, or even be merged with other similar discussion threads. This led me to go back to the forum and search for such threads. When doing so, I noticed that people often stopped posting in threads that had been moved, and that the thread seemed to die quickly after being moved. As a follow-up question, I told the participant about my observation and asked if they recognized this. This is an excerpt from their response.

Participant 50: Threads are most often intentionally started in a section where they don’t belong […] users are prone to starting an off-topic thread in subforums with high site traffic so other users will see and respond to their posts […] The topic might be engaging enough to get a discussion going, but the big reason it got attention was because it was in a place where a lot of users frequent. When it is moved to a section a majority of the users don’t typically hang out, the discussion dwindles and eventually dies. The one that comes to mind most for me is the Spoiler section. People are always starting threads there that they know they shouldn’t because it is such an active part.

From this, I learned that there are more and less attractive places to post on the forum, which in turn said something about how participants navigate the forum. This was a significant insight into the studied practice which revealed important things about the practice structure. What made this insight possible was that I had time to go back to the forum and observe the events I and the participant had discussed, before returning to the participant with a follow-up question. The follow-up question was then based on the additional observation I had made about the seemingly dying threads.

The examples presented above illustrate how the researcher, by asking follow-up questions, can motivate participants to go deeper into analyzing their interactions. The follow-up questions were explorative in the sense that they connected concerns with how the practice was enacted and what it is to be audience, with curiosity and continuous exploration of what the participant brought up in the interviews. Such insights could not be generated by following an interview guide. The researcher instead carefully attends to moments of surprise and engages with analysis throughout the interview process. By asking questions that allow the participant to elaborate on their interactions in unforeseen ways, encouraging them to explore unexpected things, the researcher is presented with the possibility of generating new findings and thereby being able to challenge and develop existing theory and knowledge. However, when working with follow-up questions based on the participant’s response, it is important for the researcher to continuously keep the study’s research purpose in mind, in order to keep the research focused.

Taken together, the empirical examples presented above generated insights about how the practice was structured and what was at stake, which was a result of the extensive work with follow-up questions. By picking up and continuing the interviews based on what the participants brought up, the moment of surprise could also be maintained since the researcher continued to further explore the participants’ stories. Because I carried out multiple interviews at the same time, the process of formulating follow-up questions soon revealed another opportunity: the potential of cross-fertilizing multiple ongoing interviews.
Cross-Fertilization

Work with tailored follow-up questions can be combined with cross-fertilization of the interviews in order to stimulate the conversation further. Previously, there have been discussions in the literature on how interviews can be stimulated by using “real-life” vignettes (Sampson & Johanssenn, 2020) and other stimulus texts or images (Stacey & Vincent, 2011). To stimulate the interviews, I brought interpretations of my observations on the forum into the interviews, as shown in the previous section. I also conducted multiple interviews simultaneously and took information from one interview into another interview, and by doing so, cross-fertilized the interviews. All participants were anonymous to each other. It would not have been possible for the participants to recognize another participant through the examples from other interviews. I did not quote what a participant had told me in another interview and present that quote to the next participant; I described briefly what I learned in another interview. I was careful not to include any details that could have identified another participant.

This was a way to invite the participants to not only to reflect upon events that took place on the forum, but also to encourage them to describe other similar experiences. This allowed me to observe different reactions and thoughts about a particular event and thereby gain a more nuanced understanding of the practice. The cross-fertilization primarily served as a way to side-step pre-established narratives and thereby support the participants’ reflexivity about their practice.

The following example illustrates how I discussed with one participant what another participant had told me. The first participant had described to me that they thought a lot about the episode I’ll think, “I wonder what the people will think of that!” If there’s something in an episode that I have particularly liked or found interesting then I will go onto the forum to see if others liked it, and to discuss it.

To continue the analysis, I challenged the participant with a follow-up question based on the information they had just given me.

Researcher: From what you describe, it seems like you do not want to think about the forum while watching the show. How come?

Participant 59: I believe that if I didn’t engage with the forum or other related social media, and just watched the show on its own, I would enjoy it just as much - indeed, I watched the show for many years without being involved with forums or social media [...] visiting the forum is usually the next thing that I do after watching an episode on TV—maybe it enhances my enjoyment of the show? Like I don’t have to just move on and get on with normal life, I can stay in that world, or revisit that world, rather than just waiting for the next episode to come on TV. In terms of the forum coming into my head when I’m watching the show, I feel that this can be detrimental to my enjoyment of what’s on screen, which is why I try not to let that happen.

The participant describes how the forum practice both restricts and enriches their forum experience. While responding, the participant likewise analyzed their experiences. The data from the response was not something the participant knew before, but rather data that was produced there and then, in the particular interview situation. This generated a richer, more nuanced and complex idea of the practice on the forum.

In another case, illustrated in the following excerpt, I presented a participant with what another participant had told me about having the right and wrong opinions on the forum. The participant responded that they did recognize this, but more interestingly, they started to tell me about a different aspect of right and wrong opinions.

Participant 7: There was a recent discussion on the forum that made some of us re-watch Kill the Moon in light of the comments [...] we examined it through the lenses of both the pro-life abortion allegory many see it as in contrast to a vaster, idealistic outlook on optimism and embracing the unknown. The thread singlehandedly managed to change my opinion on it [...] There is something to be achieved from the discussion there, and for me (and several others I’ve seen) it achieved a complete reversal of opinion. Which is quite something, seeing as I clearly remember thinking to myself the exact words “I will never be able to like Kill the Moon” some time prior to the discussion that won me round.

The participant told me about a particular discussion on the forum that had made them rethink their opinion about an episode. More interestingly, however, the interview led the participant to analyze how the practice of being on the forum was closely connected to the viewing practice of the TV series. In relation to existing literature, this was a new finding that showed how closely entangled the two practices of watching the TV series and being on the forum were (Dahlin, 2018). Had I not cross-fertilized the interviews, this information would most likely not have been produced. By cross-fertilizing the interview with information from another interview, the participant was able to enter new terrain which in turn generated new insights. This shows that cross-fertilization goes beyond confirming or denying certain information.

I continued to explore this new insight in coming interviews and other participants developed this line of thought further. Here are two additional excerpts from interviews that further nuanced the insight.

Participant 20: I get sad when there’s a new series on and try to keep out of the discussion of new episodes [...] Then I look at the forums (like a fool) despairingly sad [...] It really does ruin the viewing experience for me [...] I don’t feel I can leave the forums behind - they’ll be present in my mind even if I ignore them in person.
Participant 21: Season 8 felt horrible under these circumstances — but then when I re-watched it 8 months later, I loved it, because I already knew what the forums had said (and what the media had said, and what the forums had said about the media), and I could enjoy it on its own merits, and I really enjoyed every episode so much more than I’d ever expected […] I don’t feel I can leave the forums behind - they’ll be present in my mind even if I ignore them in person […] A horrible part that damages the viewing experience. It’s a wonder anyone on there finds pleasure in the series under these circumstances.

Cross-fertilizing interviews can be a less suitable methodological decision in studies conducted on small groups, where participants are close-knit and therefore might recognize other participants’ ideas and experiences. It might also not be suitable in situations where the study’s topic is sensitive. In such situations, cross-fertilizing might compromise confidentiality.

Challenges of Email Interviews

Researchers have expressed difficulties with building rapport and maintaining access when using electronic research methods (O’Connor et al., 2008; Orgad, 2006; Seitz, 2016). One disadvantage of electronic interviewing is the increased risk of absenteeism (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Seitz, 2016). The researcher constantly risks losing participants at any time during the correspondence. This is especially true if the researcher and participant have never met (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010). Also, participants can forget to answer, drop out of the study, or just stop responding. Maintaining access is always an ongoing process (Riese, 2019) that requires active work throughout fieldwork (Czarniawska, 1997; Lancaster, 2017), and for researchers conducting electronic interviews it poses additional challenges (Hooley et al., 2012; Salmons, 2015; Wilkerson et al., 2014). When building rapport and maintaining access, I worked with multiple methods. Somewhat surprisingly, working with follow-up questions was one way to build rapport. Continuing the interview based on what the participant was telling me seemed not only to motivate the participant to engage in the interview but also to trust the researcher.

O’Connor and Madge (2017) suggest that one way to build rapport in online interviewing is to identify shared characteristics and experiences between the participant and the researcher. As it turns out, it can also be an asset to have little in common with the participants. For example, I indicated my newness to the forum practice and to the topic that was discussed on the forum. I found that because I was a novice the participants were very patient in explaining things to me. This sometimes also led the participants to describe things in detail that to them was most likely self-evident.

To avoid the risk of absenteeism, I responded to the participants within 48 hours. This gave me time both to reflect on the response I received from the participant and to decide how to take the interview forward. Out of the 70 participants, 2 stopped corresponding before we had agreed that the interview was ended.

Conclusions

I have in this article discussed a strategy for email interviews, specifically designed for explorative research projects. Working to methodologically draw moments of surprise and analytical reflexivity closer together during the data collection process, email interviewing has the capacity to work systematically with theoretically informed follow-up questions and cross-fertilization of multiple interviews. The purpose of this is to move beyond already established information or taken-for-granted understandings. With an attentiveness to elements of surprise and analytical reflexivity during the data collection process, the suggested strategy can make email interviews suitable for studies that seek to develop new ideas and challenge existing theories. Consequently, email interviewing has the capacity to create an understanding of the study object’s complexities in the light of new and unforeseen concerns.

The article suggests that email interviewing can produce data that is both necessary and sufficient for some significant research tasks and should therefore be part of the qualitative researcher’s methodological toolbox. Email interviewing can even, in some studies, be a preferable option to traditional in-person methods, considering the study’s objective, its participants and their communication. Considering the increasing significance of interactions in digital environments in contemporary society, it has never been more relevant for social sciences and humanities to explore different strategies for email interviews in qualitative research. The methodological potential for email interviews in the social sciences of a global age remains to be further explored.

Author’s Note

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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