Chapter 6

The Story of Ethnochat:
Designing an Instant Messaging Program to Conduct Semi-Structured or Unstructured Interviews

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ABSTRACT

Instant Messaging (IM) programs are powerful and unique tools for conducting semi-structured or unstructured online interviews. However, many unanswered questions exist surrounding the use of IM interviewing. This design chapter takes a storytelling approach to answer two specific research questions: (1) Do rich data collected via IM stand the test of time? (2) How can an IM program be built designed specifically for researchers? The chapter is organized into three parts. Part one reviews recent, related research. Part two takes a somewhat unusual approach to answer the research question regarding the long-term power of IM data by re-visiting the author's experience from 2007 using IM to interview female participants about their feelings using online dating sites. Part three is a detailed description of a prototype IM program, Ethnochat. There are many IM clients in existence, but nothing has been made specifically for professional researchers for semi-structured or unstructured interviews. Having the best tool available will help urban planners conduct their research more efficiently and at a significantly reduced cost.

INTRODUCTION

This is a design chapter that tells the story of Ethnochat, a prototype, instant messaging (IM) program created specifically for researchers conducting semi-structured or unstructured interviews. IM programs are powerful and unique tools for conducting online interviews. However, there are still many unanswered research questions surrounding the use of IM interviewing. For specific reasons, this chapter takes a kind of storytelling approach—organizing the paper into three sections so that each acts as a mini-chapter in a larger story. By linking existing research +

methodological experience + design, the reader/ future designer will receive a sense of the experience and rationale that led to my final design of Ethnochat. This story begins with a state-of-the-art on interviewing with IM. Next it puts the author's own methodological belief in IM interviewing to the test by reflecting back on interviews the author conducted in 2007 to see if the interviews still contain rich data. Finally, the paper dives into the specific design features of Ethnochat. This approach will hopefully offer value to both researchers and designers (who may never have conducted IM interviews). The ultimate goal of this "design story" chapter is an attempt to answer two specific research questions: (1) Do rich data collected via IM stand the test of time? (2) How can we build an IM program designed specifically for researchers? Design is an iterative process. This chapter is part of that process. It is yet another iteration of Ethnochat, another part of the larger dialog on designing tools for the 21st century researcher. If other researchers/designers are using or thinking of using IM, hopefully this chapter will inspire them to use IM for interviewing and/or to build upon the design of Ethnochat so that other researchers will have the best tool to do the best job.

STATE-OF-THE-ART

Conducting interviews through IM is a fairly recent phenomenon. Though there is, unfortunately, very limited research on IM interviews, much of the research done has had a self-reflective quality as the authors of various papers not only use IM but reflect on the experience of using it as a methodological tool. For example, Voida, Mynatt, Erickson, and Kellogg (2004) wrote:

Pragmatic challenges of interviews include the travel that may be required to meet face-to-face with a respondent or the time necessary to transcribe the exchange. As a tool for conducting

interviews, instant messaging presents some compelling potential benefits to mitigate challenges such as these. And yet, over the medium of instant messaging, the genre of the interview takes on a different character (Voida et al., 2004, p. 1344).

Voida et al., go on to write, "We have reflected on our own experiences interviewing over instant messaging, exploring the ways in which expectations about attention, timing, limited context, and persistence impact the genre of the interview" (Voida et al., 2004, p. 1347). Voida et al. identify, early on, some of the key elements in IM interviewing (timing, context, multi-tasking, etc.). They also explain that the medium of IM changes the genre. Fontes and O'Mahony (2008) chose important practical reasons for using IM interviews: It is cheap, if not free. As soon as you are done, the interview is transcribed, and you can conduct interviews with participants regardless of geography. Fontes and O'Mahony also discovered the benefits of the medium itself. For example, they write, "the lack of visual and auditory cues creates a level of detachment between the interviewers and the interviewees, which is particularly useful when conducting research on sensitive areas such as health, sexuality and so on" (Fontes & O'Mahony, 2008, p. 3). The authors also discuss the importance of the linguistic conventions (they may even be more like traditions than conventions at this point), such as, abbreviations or emoticons of which researchers should be aware. They write that if a researcher is not "*au fait*" with these aspects, they may not find the use of IM to be as rewarding" (Fontes & O'Mahony, 2008, p. 4).

Although the authors do explain that participants are open to explaining what *they* mean when they use an unknown abbreviation, it is critical to highlight this element for researchers using IM. Simply asking a participant what they mean by the use of an abbreviation or emoticon is not just to help the researcher, but it can create a stronger bond between both participant and researcher.

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