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Anonymity as a Double-Edge Sword: Reflecting on the Implications of Online Qualitative Research in Studying Sensitive Topics

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Abstract

In this article, I reflect on the potentials of using online qualitative data collection methods to elicit narratives from adolescent participants who have experienced victimization within their friendships. Specifically, this article examines the impact of anonymity on participants' self-disclosure, while also considering the potential limitations of online qualitative research, namely, building rapport amongst participants and the researcher, participant authenticity, and participant safety. It is the hope that other novice researchers will benefit from these methodological and ethical reflections of using online qualitative data collection methods for research on sensitive topics.

Keywords

Online Research, Qualitative Research, Sensitive Topics, Anonymity, Participant Self-Disclosure

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Anonymity as a Double-Edge Sword: Reflecting on the Implications of Online Qualitative Research in Studying Sensitive Topics

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In this article, I reflect on the potentials of using online qualitative data collection methods to elicit narratives from adolescent participants who have experienced victimization within their friendships. Specifically, this article examines the impact of anonymity on participants' self-disclosure, while also considering the potential limitations of online qualitative research, namely, building rapport amongst participants and the researcher, participant authenticity, and participant safety. It is the hope that other novice researchers will benefit from these methodological and ethical reflections of using online qualitative data collection methods for research on sensitive topics. Keywords: Online Research, Qualitative Research, Sensitive Topics, Anonymity, Participant Self-Disclosure

Given the pervasiveness of Internet usage in Canadian homes¹, more and more researchers have opted to utilize online methods for conducting qualitative research. After initially gaining popularity through marketing research in the 1990's, online qualitative focus groups and interviews have been increasingly utilized in health, social and psychological studies (Williams, Clausen, Robertson, Peacock, & McPherson, 2012). While numerous authors have opted to use online methods in order to "keep pace with advances in communication technology" (Fox, Morris, & Rumsey, 2007, p. 539), there still exists a paucity of research that reflects on the use of online methods as a distinct methodological practice, rather than as a reproduction of traditional techniques using the Internet. In contrast to more traditional offline qualitative research, online research has the potential for participants to share their experiences in an anonymous space. This perceived anonymity has demonstrated benefits and limitations to the data collection process as well as participants' overall experiences with being involved in the research. It is the purpose of this discussion to introduce this double-edged sword that results from participant anonymity within online qualitative research, drawing from examples from my own proposed dissertation research, as well as from examples from current research that have utilized online qualitative methods. It is the hope that other novice online researchers can use the reflections found in this paper as a useful starting point in beginning their own online qualitative inquiries, by considering particularly, the implications of anonymity on the research process.

Background on my Proposed Dissertation Research

In preparing my dissertation proposal, I focused much of my writing on elucidating my decision-making for using online qualitative research. My justification for choosing these methods stemmed from my proposed subject of inquiry: victimization within adolescent friendships. In this study, I hope to understand how victimization manifests within adolescent friendships and how these victimized young people are impacted by and respond to this

¹ 83% as of 2012, according to the Canadian Internet Use Survey, *Statistics Canada*, 2012.

victimization. While much is known about the processes and potential impacts of the varying forms of victimization on young people's development, there has been little consideration of the ways that specific relational contexts, such as friendships, may impact the experiences of victimization. There is limited recognition within current childhood bullying research of the distinction between victimization within friendships and victimization perpetrated by non-friends. Preliminary research on friendship victimization does indicate that the outcomes of friendship victimization may be similar to victimization from non-friends, however, these reports also indicate that children and youth may perceive that the benefits of the friendship outweigh the consequences of the victimization and may therefore continue in these relationships despite their suffering (Daniels, Quigley, Mernard, & Spence, 2010; Mishna, Wiener, & Pepler, 2008).

While there is a small emerging discourse that recognizes the complexities of children's friendships and the coexistence of both friendship and victimization within a relationship, there is more that requires examination. First, there is still a limited understanding of the impact of victimized children's perceptions of friendships (including quality and satisfaction) on experiences with victimization within friendships. Equally, there is little known about how friendship victimization can impact perceptions of friendship. There have been recommendations within the literature to consider the potentially enduring consequences of victimization within friendships, with a particular emphasis in how friendship victimization may change over time (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Wei & Jonson-Reid, 2011). There is also a dearth of knowledge on how children and youth's social contexts and interactions (i.e., the peer group, teacher-student relationships, school climate, etc.) can perpetuate or mitigate experiences of victimization occurring within friendships.

Additionally, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that children's experiences with victimization changes in relation to development (e.g., Pepler, Craig, Connolly, Yuile, McMaster, & Jiang, 2006), yet there is a paucity of research that seeks to uncover these changes within victimizing friendships, and whether victimization within friendship follows similar trajectories as victimization occurring within the larger peer context. There has also been a limited focus on how these children and youth with conflictual friendships can be supported, particularly within current bullying intervention/prevention programming. Drawing from these insights, the overarching research question for this qualitative study is: How is victimization within adolescent friendships experienced?

A limitation to current research that seeks the subjective views of youth's bullying/victimization experiences is the sensitive nature of such discussions. Young people are often reluctant to share their victimization experiences with adults, including researchers; this is particularly pronounced when these discussions may implicate the aggression of a close friend (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Mishna, 2004). The anonymity of online data collection may be especially useful in soliciting the views of youth on their experiences of victimization. To my knowledge, there have been no qualitative inquiries into young people's experiences with victimization utilizing online asynchronous methodologies. This highlights a particular avenue for future research, as these methods may provide meaningful perspectives on the bullying/victimization phenomenon.

The following paragraphs will provide justifications for the proposed qualitative methods for this study on victimization experiences within adolescent friendships – including the use of online methods, more generally, and the use of asynchronous data collection through forums and personalized messaging. Subsequent paragraphs will include a discussion on the unique methodological and ethical considerations resulting from the anonymity that characterizes this research.

Online Qualitative Methods

In my methodological journey, I questioned why I felt that online qualitative methods would produce data that has the potential to meaningfully contribute to bullying/victimization research. I knew that my justifications needed to transcend practicalities. While online research does afford certain feasibility benefits to researchers, I agree with Ignacio (2012) that online methods should not be selected in order to “expedite” traditional approaches, but rather should be selected because of its appropriateness in contributing to the understandings of a particular phenomenon. I also agree with Graffigna and Bosio’s (2006) assertion that online qualitative research should be considered as a “differential perspective,” as it should be “considered to be a new, different, complementary tool in a qualitative researcher’s tool box” (p. 5). This perspective has been similarly applied to numerous online qualitative works, prompting researchers to be critical and transparent on the methodological and ethical implications of this form of research (e.g., Im & Chee, 2004; James & Busher, 2006; Jowett, Peel, & Shaw, 2011; Strickland et al., 2003). Additionally, researchers are tasked with developing and justifying innovative criteria for examining online qualitative research data. Much of these exercises require researchers to reflect on the implications of anonymity in online qualitative data collection.

Before we can begin a more comprehensive discussion on the benefits and limitations of anonymity in online qualitative research, a further delineation of online methodologies is required. Online qualitative research encompasses a range of discussion types, through two distinct temporal contexts. For example, data can be collected synchronously (in “real-time”) or asynchronously (participants contribute to discussion in their own time). Synchronous methods might include online chats, real-time focus groups, and video imaging chats (such as through Google Video Chat, Skype, etc.), whereas asynchronous methods typically elicit data through message forums, blogs, and emails. While synchronous data collection methods may hold particular advantages for mimicking real-time face-to-face conversations with participants, and allow for the quick collection of data from many participants, asynchronous methods were chosen for this current study so that participants from hard-to-reach populations (for a discussion on this, please see Wilkerson et al., 2014) could reflect and formulate thoughtful responses in their own time in a familiar location.

For my dissertation research, I chose two methods of asynchronous online data collection, focus groups via message forums and individual interviews via personalized messaging. While there is some debate on whether online message forums embody our traditional understandings of focus groups, many researchers have argued that because participants engage in interactive and intensive discussions based on specific research questions, this form of communication should be constituted as a focus group method (e.g., Mann & Stewart, 2005; Rodham & Gavin, 2006). Online forums allow participants to write messages to other participants, in an open format, over periods of time. Participants can respond to other’s comments and begin their own “threads” on specific issues. Online forums have the potential to garner a breadth of perspectives of participants’ experiences. In contrast, individual interviews, via asynchronous personalized messaging between a participant and the researcher, can allow for more in-depth narratives to develop (Wilkerson et al., 2014). This is the space where researchers can develop rapport with participants while engaging in more personalized discussions. While many studies have cited that participants feel encouraged to share their experiences more freely within an online forum (Seale, Charteris-Black, MacFarlane, & McPherson 2010; Synnot et al., 2014), personalized messages between the researcher and participants may offer further sanctuary to participants discussing sensitive issues, such as experiences of victimization. The temporal contexts of data collection, combined with the online nature of the research, corroborate to impact the data that is collected and participants’

experiences partaking in the data collection process. Considering the implications of anonymity in these data collection methods can assist researchers in explicating these effects.

Anonymity in Online Qualitative Research

The perceived anonymity of online data collection affords certain benefits to qualitative research that examines sensitive topics. These benefits center on the effects of participant self-disclosure. Many authors have argued for the potential of online research to help illuminate participants' experiences with sensitive topics, particularly where social desirability effects or stigmatized topics can impact participants' responses (e.g., Nicholas et al., 2010). For example, in Suzuki and Calzo's work (2004), the researchers found that the online forum allowed for young people to candidly discuss sensitive topics, such as issues with health and sexuality – issues that youth typically find difficult to disclose to adults. Similarly, in Wilkerson et al.'s (2014) discussion on their previous studies examining sexual health, behaviour, and polyamorous parenting, the authors found that their participants felt comfortable sharing experiences within the online environment. In Mann and Stewart's (2000) seminal online work, they found that young men were more likely to candidly discuss their alcohol and sexual experiences in online discussions. This stood in contrast to the limited data that was obtained in the more traditional face-to-face focus group format.

Justifications for conducting sensitive research online often stem from the perceived anonymity that the Internet provides. The perceived anonymity in online research has been demonstrated to have a disinhibiting effect, where social desirability is limited, and where participants feel free to exchange their true attitudes and opinions without fear of reproach from researchers and other participants (Rodham & Gavin, 2006). In Hill's work (2006) with adolescent populations, he found that adolescents preferred having sensitive discussions with unfamiliar people, especially about issues that could impact their relationships. The perceived homogeneity that may result from participants sharing in experiences of a similar phenomenon may also serve to strengthen the participants' comfortability, and may "actually facilitate the expression of a true self" (Williams et al., 2012, p. 373). Participant self-disclosure about sensitive issues continues to be a debated topic amongst online qualitative researchers, as it is difficult to secure the ambiguous and arbitrary nature of our "true selves" (see Suler, 2004). Despite this, many authors have argued that this online disinhibition effect can be especially advantageous for research on sensitive topics. Drawing from this literature, researchers should consider the sensitive nature of their topics, and decide whether their participants will feel more comfortable discussing their private experiences within an anonymous environment.

Anonymity and Bullying/Victimization Research

There have been many impactful qualitative studies that seek to examine young people's experiences of victimization through traditional focus group methods (Agaston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2011; Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Wyatt, 2010). However, due to the sensitive nature of victimization, many of the focus groups discussed children and youth's *perceptions* of bullying/victimization but rarely investigated the personal specifics of these hurtful experiences, including the corresponding impacts of the victimization. I would argue that qualitative researchers understand more about *hypothetical* experiences of victimization and/or *perceptions* of victimization and still know very little about young people's actual experiences of being victimized, especially within a friendship context. Research methods conducted in an anonymous online format have the potential to illuminate an understanding of victimization as experienced by participants. The

reported benefits of focus groups in producing comfortable environments for participants, especially young participants, where the adult-child relationship between the researcher and the participant is less pronounced (Heary & Hennessy, 2002; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2011), combined with the security afforded by participants' perceived anonymity in online qualitative data collection, has the potential to produce meaningful co-constructed narratives of participants' experiences with friendship victimization.

Participant Authenticity

To be sure, there are notable limitations of online data collection, much of which derive from participants' perceived anonymity. As with any study, either online or offline, participants' authenticity is a consideration. While issues of fraudulence or misrepresentation of experiences may be more prevalent in quantitative surveys or questionnaires because less is required of participants, authenticity is still a critical issue for qualitative research using the Internet. It may be impossible for researchers to completely verify the identity of participants, this is especially pronounced if participants are recruited online. There are some strategies that have been suggested to researchers to help to ameliorate against participant falsification. First, Hamilton and Bowers (2006) suggest that researchers can conduct an *equivalency test*. This involves the researcher searching for consistent responses across similar questions posed in different parts of the focus group or interview. Secondly, researchers can require additional screening methods, such as hard copies of consent forms or phoning participants for verbal consent. However, researchers must keep in mind that these additional hurdles may decrease participant retention beyond the initial recruitment process. While it is important to be vigilant of participant authenticity, I agree with Rodham and Gavin (2006) who articulated that, "it is no more difficult to create a different identity when completing questionnaires, answering an interviewer's questions, or by taking part in online research" (p. 94). Other researchers have shared this sentiment, agreeing that the validity of participants' responses relies on participants' integrity and honesty, regardless of whether the data were collected in an online or traditional format (O'Connor, Jackson, Goldsmith, & Skirton, 2008).

Participant Safety and Comfortability

Working from a "differential perspective" of online data collection may prompt researchers to consider the limitations of anonymity as an issue concerning participant safety. While I argue that participants' identities and narratives are difficult to authenticate in either offline or online formats, ensuring participants' safety throughout the online data collection process is a significant concern, one that is likely complicated by the online format of the research. Researchers need to develop an informed protocol on how to manage any disrespectful or disparaging comments documented in the online forum and have specific measures in place for contacting participants who post inappropriate commentary. In the case of my study, I will be creating my own web forum software, so I will have the ability to customize the security settings of the website. To promote the safety of my adolescent participants, I will restrict the abilities of participants to directly contact one another, thereby ensuring that all communication that occurs between participants will exist completely in the forum setting.

Jowett, Peel, and Shaw (2011) acknowledged that it was often difficult to assess the emotional impact of the research on their participants. In offline interviews and focus groups, it may be more obvious to a researcher if participants are becoming discomforted, as this is often communicated through the participants' body language, tone of voice, reluctance to

answer certain questions, etc. Because online research does not afford researchers the opportunity to reflect on these subtle cues, researchers need to rely on alternative means to assess whether participants are uncomfortable. First, and as is the case with offline interviews and focus groups, researchers need to be vigilant of participants' responses, being mindful of the language that participants are using that may demonstrate their discomfort. Since asynchronous data collection methods are characterized by periods of silence between responses, it will be difficult to rely on these silences as indicators of uneasiness. To ameliorate this, researchers can use the individual interviews via personalized messaging as opportunities to engage participants in an ongoing process of assent, continually checking-in to gauge their comfortability and their willingness to continue on in the research process. Similarly, it will be difficult to assess whether absent responses on the online forum indicate a reluctance to respond to certain lines of questioning, or whether participants did not respond for a variety of other reasons (i.e., missed the question, more engaged in other question themes on the forum, did not have a response for the question, etc.). Again, the individual interviews provide a space for researchers to connect with individual participants about their emotions and status related to the data collection.

If participants have become discomforted during the research project, it is imperative that the researcher has a protocol for providing adequate support. In the case of my study, adolescents may become upset with their recalled memories of victimization. Because of this potential, I have planned to advertise on the website various agencies to assist these adolescents in the event they wish to seek support. At the outset of the study, participants need to be made aware of the risks for their participation, your limits as a researcher in providing support, and must be provided with accessible information for where they can seek outside help. The online environment presents a unique opportunity for researchers to embed this information for outside support within the research study site.

Developing Rapport

The building of a positive and supportive rapport amongst participants and between the participant and researcher can assist in promoting participant safety and comfortability throughout the research process. Some researchers have argued that building a sense of comfort and trust within an online setting can be very difficult due to the anonymity of participant's identities. This has necessary implications on the construction of the data, particularly so for research on sensitive topics (Mann & Stewart, 2000). There has been little consideration in online qualitative research that depicts best practices for establishing rapport with participants. Walther (1992) has argued that it is possible to develop meaningful relationships with participants in an online format, but that researchers should be prepared for this connection to take more time than in traditional interviewing formats. In their study on adolescents' experiences with chronic skin conditions, Fox, Morris, and Rumsey (2007) found that their young participants preferred to meet online to have personal discussions. The authors argued that the Internet represents a social space where adolescents are particularly comfortable and confident, and that this significantly contributed to the rapport-building between participants and between the researcher and participants. From their experiences with online research with adolescents, they argued, "the Internet might have the potential to facilitate research situations that challenge some of the inherent power dynamics associated with conventional methods" (p. 545). Therefore, building rapport amongst participants and between the participants and the research may be advantaged by the perceived anonymity of participants' identities. Again, in Fox, Morris, and Rumsey's work (2006), they found that this heightened sense of anonymity encouraged participants to explore their experiences within a developed context of support.

A limitation to online research that can impact the level of rapport between participants and the researcher concerns the portrayal of emotions. Researchers have argued that emotions are difficult to evoke in an online environment, even with the use of emoticons. Mann and Stewart (2002) argued that these paralinguistic features of online communication can be misunderstood or misinterpreted by other participants and the researcher. In Jowett, Peel, and Shaw's (2011) online qualitative study, the authors found that the expression of empathy was difficult in an online format, but could be similarly conveyed through mutual self-disclosure. While posing potential barriers to the development of rapport amongst participants and the researcher, the self-disclosure that results from the anonymity found in online qualitative data also has the potential to produce supportive, empathetic spaces, where participants feel secure exploring their experiences.

Conclusion

There continues to be a paucity of research that seeks the subjective views of youth who have been victimized by close friends, despite many calls from researchers to explore how the relational contexts of bullying and peer victimization can impact children and youth's psychosocial outcomes (e.g., Mishna, Wiener, & Pepler, 2008; Wei & Jonson-Ried, 2011). The results from this dissertation study will contribute to current literature on children and youth's bullying/victimization experiences, and potentially encourage researchers to consider the role of relational contexts, such as friendships, in victimization experiences. Findings from this study are expected to illustrate the complex emotions involved with friendship victimization, the factors that motivate adolescents to persist in or end abusive friendships, the mechanisms utilized to cope with or manage friendship victimization, as well as the factors that may trigger, sustain, or diminish adolescents' experiences with friendship victimization.

Methodologically, my dissertation research will assist current conversations on the viability of using online qualitative research methods to examine sensitive topics, and may point to the specific advantages of anonymity when examining participants' lived experiences. The specific advantages and limitations of using asynchronous focus group and personalized messaging methods will also help to shape researcher expectations and protocols when employing these particular methods. Most importantly, I hope that this study, and its accompanying reflections on the use of online methods to examine victimization within friendships, will encourage researchers to consider the unique methodological and ethical benefits and challenges of using online qualitative methods. It is also my hope that this current paper will serve as a potential foundation for novice researchers in beginning to think about these issues, as these reflections have contributed significantly to my understanding of my own methodological choices.

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