CONDUCTING CROSS-CULTURAL ONLINE AUDIENCE RESEARCH WITH TWO GENERATIONS: METHODOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS FROM THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

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Introduction

One of the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the difficulties in conducting empirical research (Kopecka-Piech & Łódzki 2022), not least research that involves meetings with media users (Wahl-Jørgensen 2021). While several useful compilations of research resources already exist (e.g., Garcia Garcia & Barclay 2020; Lupton 2021), this paper aims to contribute to the advancement of qualitative online audience research methodology. We will discuss some methodological, ethical, and empirical problems that arose due to forced changes in research methodology of a three-country comparative project, involving both quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. The paper focusses specifically on the benefits and challenges of conducting focus group interviews online and discusses wider implications for future audience and internet research.

The point of departure: A three-country comparative project

The larger project aims to understand whether experiences of authoritarianism affect media users' attitudes towards corporate and state surveillance. We chose countries with different historical backgrounds in terms of surveillance regimes: Estonia (subsumed by the *totalitarian* surveillance apparatus during the occupation by the Soviet Union 1940-1991), Portugal (*authoritarian regime* in 1926-1974), and Sweden (a *liberal democracy* with a welfare state legacy).

We employed a mixed-method approach, combining a quantitative survey with qualitative focus group interviews. For the online survey conducted in Autumn 2020, we sampled participants (N=3,221) from two generational cohorts: one born in 1946-1953, having had their formative years during the authoritarian regime in Portugal or the Soviet time in Estonia (or in liberal democracy in Sweden), and the second born in 1988-1995, with their formative years in post-totalitarian/post-authoritarian Estonia or Portugal (see Kalmus et al., forthcoming). In each country, we planned to conduct   six face-to-face focus group interviews (FGs) with people from the same cohorts in Spring 2021. Among both cohorts, we aimed at composing three gender-balanced groups with different profiles: one with higher education; one with mixed education, living in a small city or countryside; and one with secondary education.

Methodological implications of the pandemic

The pandemic forced us to conduct the FGs online. We chose the videoconferencing tool Zoom, which allows conducting synchronous focus groups, is relatively easy to use, and guarantees high quality recording. Online interviewing had, indeed, some advantages: it was easier to recruit people irrespective of their geographical location, and to find common times for interviews. The challenges, however, prevailed.

Effects of the technological interface on the group size and interaction

Online video conferencing tools constrain people to talk in strict turns, hindering natural dialogical conversation. To enhance group interaction, we decided to reduce the group size to a maximum of five participants, which resulted in most groups consisting of only 3-4 people. Bad internet connection sometimes interfered with some participants' ability to partake or interrupted the conversation. Online interviews needed to be shorter than f2f interviews since it was more difficult to uphold concentration among participants, and a balance had to be struck between creating a calm atmosphere and time efficiency. The online setting also modulated attention by challenging mainly young participants to stay engaged in the conversation as they were more likely to multitask.

The importance of digital skills

Besides needing a stable internet connection and access to a device with audio and video capabilities, digital literacy was paramount to navigate video conferencing software. All younger participants were familiar with Zoom for professional and sociability reasons, and the focus groups with the younger cohort were conducted according to the initial schedule in all countries. Since most participants in the older cohort were retired, many lacked experiences of video conferencing software. Zoom was a new and challenging environment for them – even for those who were used to computers during their vocational life. Although we recruited participants among internet users, many elderly participants had technological difficulties. Several did not manage to connect and could thus not be interviewed.

In all countries, some elderly informants with lower levels of education felt uncomfortable with the group interview in the online setting, which led us to complement the sample with individual interviews. This methodological decision, while prolonging the data collection,

provided flexibility in choosing the interview mode and channel appropriate for each participant. In Portugal, eight participants with scant digital skills preferred WhatsApp they had gotten familiar with during the pandemic to interact with relatives and friends. In Estonia, Zoom, Messenger and face-to-face contact were used alternately to conduct five individual interviews. In Sweden individual interviews had to be used to compensate for the number of no-shows in the FGs.

Ethics-related considerations

Using online platforms introduced new types of privacy concerns. Zoom interviews made the researcher, sometimes inevitably, enter participants' private space. Younger participants tended to be better equipped and more skilled in protecting their privacy, e.g., by participating via a mobile device from their car, garage, or sauna, or using filters to blur the background. The majority, however, participated from their living rooms (older participants) or bedrooms (younger participants). Securing the informants' confidentiality was sometimes beyond the researcher's control as they could not know whether participants were alone in the room.

Concluding remarks

Our analysis revealed vast differences between the two generational cohorts. Although we encountered some cultural differences between the three countries, our main methodological lessons and suggestions for further audience and internet research center on the need to consider the many subtle facets of inter-generational differences when planning online interviewing.

As we witnessed, not all barriers were rooted in access to technology and connectivity. Levels of digital skills and self-confidence in use also played a role in older participants' possibilities and willingness for taking part in online research. Considering the various aspects of the gray digital divide (Huxhold et al. 2020), researchers should reflect on the ways in which age and online methods intersect.

As a contribution to methodological development within internet research, the study provided some insights into challenges in engaging different generations in online interviewing:
- Group size and communication dynamics need to be adjusted to the online setting. Our recommendation is to use smaller groups and encourage turn-taking among participants;
- Participants' digital skills, familiarity with the medium, and educational and vocational background are crucial factors. We recommend flexibility in choosing interviewing tools to build trust in technology and in the interviewer and overcome insecurities among participants;
- In online interviewing platforms, additional ethical considerations, related to participants' privacy and confidentiality, become paramount.

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