Chapter 15
Researching Online Dating: Instant Messenger and Email in Consideration

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ABSTRACT
In this chapter the authors discuss two different online interview methods (IM and email). The chapter is based on the authors’ experiences in conducting a qualitative research project online, with a particular focus on online dating and sexual health. They also provide discussions on the benefits and challenges of each interview method and how the methods compare to each other. They provide examples from their interview transcripts and from the field notes they took during the project. The authors argue that there continues to be an expansion of Internet usage and increasing uptake of high speed broadband in various places. This may mean new populations become accessible for online interviewing and also increases the possibility of researchers moving beyond text-based interviewing to online video interviewing. Yet regardless of these changes, it will continue to be important for researchers to make an effort to determine which method is most appropriate to the environment, users’ preferences, and research questions.

INTRODUCTION
In this chapter we discuss two different online interview methods. The chapter is based on our experiences in conducting a qualitative research project online, with a particular focus on online dating and sexual health.

Since the 1960s, the rise of the Internet offered extended opportunities and methods for individuals to seek relationships online. Online dating has become an increasingly popular way for people to meet partners for romance, companionship and/or sex. Online dating is commonly undertaking through Websites focused on dating, with these
Websites allowing people to set up a personal profile where they can detail their physical and personal attributes, demographic details, likes, dislikes, include photos and so on. People are able to search these online dating Websites for other people who match their interests or what they are looking for in a partner. These sites are databases of prospective partners (Sautter, Tippett, & Morgan, 2010) allowing the profiles to be searched and organized according to by search variables of interest, such as gender, sexuality, age and geographic region.

Early research into the use of the Internet to seek sex suggested that people who use the Internet to seek sex might be at higher risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infections and HIV (McFarlane, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2000), that men who have sex with men met through the Internet were more likely to have unprotected sex (Liau, Millett, & Marks, 2006), and that women who sought sex online engaged in higher risk activities but also engaged in protective activities (McFarlane, Kachur, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2004). Although more recent research questioned the role of the Internet in the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (Al-Tayyib, McFarlane, Kachur, & Rietmeijer, 2009). Online dating has also been perceived as risky in general by some people.

Our research project was a qualitative investigation exploring how online daters interact with other people they meet through online dating from sociological and public health perspectives. The research focused on the perceived risks on online dating and sexual experiences and outcomes.

As we conducted in-depth qualitative interviews a theme list was used to direct the interviews. This allowed our core areas of interest to be investigated and also provided the flexibility for us to investigate emerging themes and to further delve into these emergent themes as relevant. The main themes we investigated were how people who use online dating:

- Consider the concepts of risk and safety;
- Experience engagement and interaction with those they meet, both online and offline, particularly in a sexual context;
- May or may not protect themselves from sexual health problems and other perceived risks; and
- To explore any possible public health risks and opportunities presented by online dating.

As our project was investigating the experiences of online daters we wanted to use in-depth interviewing. This allowed us to question and explore the participants’ online dating experiences and also to gain insights into their own understandings and interpretations of online dating (Liamputtong, 2009). Given we were exploring an online social phenomenon – online dating - the use of online interview methods seemed appropriate, as our potential participants were already regularly communicating online because of their online dating activities. We identified instant messaging (IM) as our intended method for undertaking the interviews as online daters often use IM to communicate with each other (Couch & Liamputtong, 2009). Participants were recruited through advertisements or emails sent out through online dating Websites, through online articles about the project and through a magazine article. Potential participants were asked to visit the study Webpage hosted by our university to find out more and then to email the researchers at onlinedating@latrobe.edu.au or to add that email address to Windows Messenger (the main IM program we used, although we were prepared to use other programs if potential participants requested it via email – see further discussion on this issue in the Background section below) to find out more about the project in real time when the researcher was online. During the project a few participants indicated their preferences to be interviewed via