

Pszczółkowska, Dominika

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Facebook recruitment and online interviewing - suitable for qualitative research in migration?

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DOMINIKA PSZCZÓŁKOWSKA

FACEBOOK RECRUITMENT AND ONLINE INTERVIEWING – SUITABLE FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN MIGRATION?

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www.migracje.uw.edu.pl

Dominika Pszczółkowska – Ośrodek Badań nad Migracjami, Uniwersytet Warszawski,
dominikap2002@yahoo.com

Abstract

Facebook is increasingly used for recruiting research participants, especially for quantitative studies and in research in the field of health. Migration scholars have also noticed its potential. This article aims to discuss the use of the online social network for recruiting respondents for qualitative interviews with migrants. It is based on a review of the literature and a recently completed research project with 73 Polish migrants to four other countries of the European Union: the UK, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands. The use of Facebook for recruitment brought huge benefits: it allowed for access to a wide range of respondents, both in terms of geographic location and access to people who would not have agreed to an interview in person. Challenges concerned the representativeness of members of Polish Facebook groups, technical issues, and threats to the privacy of the respondents. The article also discusses the benefits and difficulties linked with conducting interviews online through communicators such as Skype or Facebook Messenger.

Key words: Facebook recruitment, migrants, online interviews, Skype, qualitative research

Abstrakt

Facebook jest coraz częściej wykorzystywany do rekrutowania uczestników badań, szczególnie badań ilościowych i w dziedzinie zdrowia. Potencjał tej sieci zauważyli także badacze migracji. Celem artykułu jest przedyskutowanie użyteczności tej internetowej sieci społecznościowej do rekrutowania respondentów – migrantów do wywiadów jakościowych. Artykuł oparty jest na przeglądzie literatury oraz zakończonych niedawno badaniach z 73 polskimi migrantami do czterech innych krajów Unii Europejskiej: Zjednoczonego Królestwa, Niemiec, Irlandii i Holandii. Wykorzystanie Facebooka do rekrutacji przyniosło ogromne korzyści: pozwoliło na dostęp do szerokiej grupy respondentów, zarówno w sensie geograficznym, jak i dostęp do osób, które nie zgodziłyby się na wywiad osobisty. Wyzwania dotyczyły reprezentatywności polskich grup na Facebooku, pewnych kwestii technicznych, a także zagrożenia dla prywatności respondentów. Artykuł omawia także korzyści i trudności, które wynikły z przeprowadzania wywiadów przez komunikatory internetowe jak Skype i Facebook Messenger.

Słowa kluczowe: Rekrutowanie przez Facebook, migranci, wywiady online, Skype, badania jakościowe

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Introduction

This paper was inspired by my PhD project, devoted to the study of destination choice among Polish post-2004 migrants. The project was executed almost exclusively online: recruiting respondents via Facebook and interviewing them via Skype or Facebook Messenger. The use of these tools proved extremely helpful but also brought particular and sometimes unexpected challenges. The objective of this paper is to look at this and other studies to discuss the benefits and difficulties resulting from the use of Facebook for recruiting migrant respondents for qualitative interviews, and the benefits and difficulties resulting from long-distance interviewing via internet communicators. I offer a classification of possible ways to use Facebook for recruiting research participants and discuss the benefits and technical and ethical challenges related with the methods I have used.

Although a wealth of research on post-European Union accession migration from Central and Eastern Europe existed when I was embarking on my project, I believed that not enough had been said about how and why migrants choose particular destinations over others. Given the complexity of an issue such as decisions to migrate and destination choice, qualitative in-depth narrative interviews seemed most appropriate to demonstrate the variety of factors involved and the decision-making process behind the choice (Mason 2018, Ryan 2015). In-depth narrative interviews, which let the respondent tell and interpret their own story, not only answer a set of questions, have been used in many studies of various aspects of migration (for example Kaźmierska 2004, Ryan 2012, Morawska 2018). As various experts on methodology in the social sciences underline (Bryman and Burgess 2002, Mason 2018), they are most useful to let the participants tell their whole story, or as in this case – the whole story of their migration and the events that preceded and influenced it. Narrative interviews are also most likely to produce information about the relative importance of events or factors, which was key for a study such as this one, which aimed to establish which were the most important factors motivating migrants' choices of migration and migration destination. They also allow the researcher access to the perceptions of various factors, which are often somewhat different than the actual objective factors. As Morawska (2018) argues:

‘Basic factual information aside, these accounts also offer initial insights into the relative significance of relevant events and circumstances for the decision to emigrate, and the sequence in which they impacted and shaped that decision’ (2018: 119).

Given the above, I decided to conduct narrative interviews with Polish migrants in four countries: the UK, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands (the four most frequent EU destinations for Polish migrants after 2004). The respondents had to be long-term migrants (a

minimum of one year in destination), with no immediate plans of return to Poland or migration elsewhere, since I also investigated their reasons for staying in the destination. In each country, I sought a group which would be gender-balanced, with about half of the respondents holding a third-level degree (needed because I conducted comparisons between the motivations of graduates and non-graduates), and a wide spectrum of ages, family situations, professions and jobs held. The costs of reaching them in person would of course have been significant, so I started considering interviews over Skype or other internet communicators. Since I was not in place and could not recruit respondents in person, I turned to Facebook – by far the most popular social network among Poles – to recruit my respondents.

1. Recruiting via Facebook

The network has been used to recruit respondents for a large number of studies, especially quantitative ones (Brickman-Bhutta 2009) and especially in the field of health (Valdez et al. 2014, Baltar and Brunet 2012). For quantitative studies, which require a large number of respondents, many researchers (Samuels and Zucco 2013) have resorted to Facebook ads, which have proven a cost-effective method of recruiting respondents. Thornton Phillip et al. (2016) attempted to review the usage of Facebook in research on medical and psychosocial issues, and concluded that a great majority of researchers used it for quantitative studies, and only 3,6% for qualitative ones.

Nevertheless, the network also creates huge opportunities for qualitative research, for example by bringing together people united by a common interest or common feature. Many authors underline Facebook's usefulness in reaching populations that are hard to reach due to their spatial distribution, the sensitivity of the issue, difficulty in identifying persons with a particular feature (Brickman-Bhutta 2012, Baltar and Brunet 2012).

The network's potential as a source of respondents has also already been noticed by migration scholars. It has been used to recruit migrant respondents, for example, Argentinian entrepreneurs in Spain (Baltar and Brunet 2012) and Polish migrants: in the UK, Ireland, Austria and Switzerland (Potsche and Braun 2017), in the UK (Ryan et al. 2016, Pustulka et al. 2017, Radziwinowiczówna et al. 2018), in the UK and Italy (Kloc-Nowak 2018). It can hugely facilitate the task of finding respondents who are dispersed over large territories or hard to reach due to lack of permanent address or telephone number. This was a huge benefit also for this study, which aimed to reach Poles living in four countries, and various parts of

those countries, from large cities to small towns. The financial and time cost of travel not only to those countries, but also within them, would have been significant.

Amon et al. (2014), who reviewed methods of using Facebook for recruiting participants for research on adolescent health, classified possible uses of the network into three types: paid advertising, searching for former participants for a follow-up interview, and creating a Facebook page of the project. Based on the literature and my own experiences, I believe there are in fact five possible ways of recruiting respondents via Facebook (and other online social networks):

1. Paid advertising. This can be targeted at particular populations and has already been extensively used (methodological discussions can be found for example in Brickman Bhutta 2012, Samuels and Zucco 2013, Amon et al. 2014, Valdez et al. 2014, Kosinski 2015, Potzsche and Braun 2017). Due to the costs involved, it is usually reserved for quantitative studies, where a large number of respondents is sought. Since the research project discussed here was qualitative and did not use it, it will not be discussed further in detail in this article.
2. Creating a page devoted to one's research project, which in turn can be advertised elsewhere.
3. Placing announcements on particular groups, such as those of people of a particular nationality living in a particular location, people in a particular professional or personal situation etc.
4. Contacting potential respondents through private messages.
5. Placing an announcement on the researcher's or the institution's profile and asking friends to respond and forward it.

Only methods number 3 and 4 were used in this study, and will be discussed in detail. First, general questions regarding recruitment via online social networks need to be addressed.

2. Representativeness

The issue of how representative Facebook is for populations in general, and for the populations of migrants in particular, is of course key. The network, which has been open to the general public since 2006, has 2,5 billion users (Monthly Active Users, as defined by Facebook (2020)). The question of the digital divide, which initially focused on the divide between those who do and who do not have access to the internet, today is more of a question

of inequalities in the use of various internet sites, dependent on the personal ease and effectiveness of use (DiMaggio et al. 2004). This concerns also social network sites, which are used daily or even hourly by some of their users, but only very infrequently by others registered on them. A number of researchers (Dekker and Engbersen 2012, Hargittai 2007, DiMaggio et al. 2004) have found that Facebook and other social network site use depends on age and level of education (or level of education of parents, in the case of young people), place of residence (urban/rural). People over the age of 60 use it less frequently (Dekker and Engbersen 2014) and so do those with lower education levels and rural dwellers. Some studies in the US (Hargittai 2007) have also shown that the choice of social network used, if any, is also related with the level of education, with Facebook having on average more educated users than other online social networks.

Significantly for this study, Facebook is also hugely popular among Poles (Gemius 2020), including Polish migrants. Facebook-generated data for a different study conducted recently showed that 410,000 Polish adult migrants live in the UK and are users of the site, and 54,000 such migrants in Ireland (Potzsche and Braun 2017: 639), thus about half of the Polish population there use it.

However, the huge numbers of Facebook users do not mean that all kinds of respondents can be reached with equal ease. The above questions of the new digital divide are also very relevant to Polish Facebook users. We do not have detailed data about the demographic profiles of Polish Facebook users in the four countries discussed, but certainly they are select group. The persons who volunteered to give an interview for this study were diverse in terms of gender, age, origin in Poland, level of education, and type of work done in the destination country. Only three groups seem to have been underrepresented: people of retirement age (who constitute a small fraction of Polish migrants), people with only primary education levels, and people originating from the countryside. It can be suspected that especially the uneducated group uses Facebook less frequently, and those who do may have felt intimidated by the perspective of an interview. Indeed, among those who responded to the recruitment announcement, there was not a single person who declared to hold only a primary school degree and only one who graduated only from middle school (*gimnazjum*). Issues of internet access may have played a part for the group originating from rural areas if they also work in the countryside in their destination. Some respondents in the Netherlands declared to have poor internet access and chose to be interviewed by telephone not online tools.

Depending on the method of using Facebook, a number of issues have to be considered. In the case of paid advertising, the customer can choose to display ads only to

people who are, for example, from Poland. This ‘from’ section is, however, filled out by the profile owner. This means that the above-mentioned numbers cited by Potzsche and Braun (2017) did not include people who put their current place of residence in the ‘from’ section or who did not fill it out at all. This is significant for researching migrants, as those with looser ties to their place of origin could probably not be reached.

This factor is perhaps even more significant when choosing method 3 – placing announcements on particular groups. Certainly, the people who choose to become a member of groups like ‘Poles in...’ may be more attached to the home country than those who do not. The smallest of the Polish migrant groups used in this study had several hundred members, the largest (‘Poles in Berlin’) over 32,000 members. However, they still covered only a small percentage of all Poles living in the four countries studied. It is not clear if there are particular categories of persons who avoid these types of groups, but certainly persons who no longer have any interest in Polish affairs or need to access information through Polish channels may not be members of these groups. Also, the most underprivileged persons, who work and live in conditions which do not allow for much internet access, would not be likely to participate actively in such groups, and perhaps even less likely to volunteer for an interview.

Although qualitative studies do not need to be representative of particular populations, the risk of omitting certain types of cases by recruiting through Facebook is certainly present, especially if the researcher is not fluent in the detailed practicalities of how the network functions.

3. Technical issues

A total of 73 interviews were conducted in various parts of the four countries, for example the UK respondents were located in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A great majority (all but five) of the respondents were recruited through Facebook and a great majority of the interviews (all but two, which took place when the respondents were on vacation in Poland) were conducted over Skype, Facebook Messenger or telephone. Requests for interviews were placed on 23 Polish-language Facebook profiles geared towards Poles living abroad, such as ‘*Polacy w Wielkiej Brytanii i Irlandii Północnej*’, [Poles in the UK and Northern Ireland], ‘*Polacy w Berlinie*’ [Poles in Berlin], ‘*Polacy w Irlandii*’ [Poles in Ireland], ‘*Polacy w Holandii*’ [Poles in the Netherlands].

Before placing such requests, the researcher first had to become a member of the respective groups. For some groups, this happened automatically, for others consent had to be requested from the group administrator. No requests were rejected, which was perhaps facilitated by the fact that I acted under my own profile, not a project or institutional one. This, including the fact that my Facebook account had existed for a significant time, perhaps increased my credibility, and made me more welcome than if I had applied from a recently-created account of a research project. The request, several lines long, explained briefly the aims of my project and the kind of respondents sought. Most of the responses to my request appeared within the first day of posting. It is thus necessary to have the whole following day or two to devote to corresponding and setting up interviews. Also, keeping track of interview times can be tricky, since many respondents may want to change these or forget when their preferred date was. Many also suggested that I contact them again on a particular day, for example Friday to set up an interview during the weekend. Time-flexibility on the part of the researcher, for example being able to talk after work hours or late in the evenings was helpful.

A number of potential respondents identified as participants of particular groups were also contacted by private message. None of them responded, and the strategy was abandoned. The lack of response may have been because messages from non-friends usually appear in another folder called “message requests”, which most people are not even aware exists. Balfe et al. 2012 reported similar problems in their study, but Radziwinowiczówna et al. 2018 reported successfully contacting future respondents through Messenger.

A number of messages from potential respondents also appeared in the researcher’s ‘message requests’ folder and were not immediately visible. This seems to have been dependent on the kind of device people used to message. Most of the messages from the Netherlands ended up in this folder, perhaps because people there used Messenger more often on their phones than on computers (which I only realized during the interviews). This may be due to the internet packages sold in the country, or due to the housing arrangements. When attempting to recruit respondents from a particular country or area, it is thus helpful to know on what devices people use Facebook there and also how good the network is likely to be (which may allow for video or only audio interviews, or in some cases – none at all).

Recruiting through direct messages may be more effective when it is narrowly focused on a particular group, and it is obvious that the researcher wants to talk to this particular person.

4. Ethical considerations

Recruiting respondents for qualitative research via Facebook raises some ethical dilemmas, particularly linked with the issue of protecting the respondents' privacy. I was first struck by this problem immediately after posting my announcements on profiles used by Poles in other countries.

My request did not specify how I wished to be contacted by potential respondents. A number chose to post reactions such as 'I will' or 'priv' (meaning: send me a private message) directly under my request. This had the positive effect of making my post more popular, and thus perhaps attracting further respondents, but it also meant that the authors of those posts were disclosing themselves to all the users of the forum as likely participants of my research.

Although I finally interviewed only some of them, since the number of volunteers was significantly larger than I needed (choosing the respondents in such a way as to have a gender balance, and a wide spectrum in terms of ages and levels education within each country), I cannot completely exclude a situation in which data from the published fragments of my interviews would be meticulously compared with information given in public by the forum users (those who do publish in public information about their whereabouts, job, children etc.) to identify the person interviewed. It may be argued that Facebook users are making their own choices by disclosing information about themselves. However, some may not be fully aware which of their information is visible to whom. To protect their privacy, in my later announcements I specified that I would like to be contacted by private message.

As Kosinski (2015) points out, especially when the research concerns a sensitive subject, researchers should be careful to protect their participants from 'outing' themselves as members of a particular group. They can easily do so by joining a group created by a researcher or commenting under a particular post, as was the case in this study.

As the sole author of this research, I chose to act on Facebook under my personal profile, rather than creating a separate profile of the research project, as is common especially in the case of larger projects and recruitment for surveys. This had the advantage of increasing the confidence of potential respondents (as Baltar and Brunet 2012 have observed before) because Facebook users could access publicly visible information about the researcher, such as my professional history. However, it also created practical and ethical problems.

Some of the respondents – either before or after the interview – requested to be Facebook 'friends'. Other researchers had also found themselves in such a situation before me, and dealt with it in various ways, for example Valdez et al. (2014) decided to ignore the friend requests, whereas Ryan et al. (2016) did become 'friends' with their respondents.

Becoming ‘friends’ has ethical implications but also practical benefits, especially in longitudinal studies (this is discussed in detail for example by Ryan et al. 2016 and Winiarska 2017).

I did not want to become Facebook ‘friends’ with my respondents for three reasons: 1) the above-mentioned issue of protecting the respondents' anonymity; 2) I also did not wish for the respondents, whom I did not know, to have access to what I publish on Facebook for my friends; 3) some of the information provided on my profile, such as my rather clearly defined political views, could influence the answers of respondents. The ‘friend’ requests were thus ignored, which led to a slightly awkward situation, but was not commented upon by any of the respondents.

5. Interviewing via Skype/Messenger/telephone

It seems a commonly held view that for qualitative interviews in-person contact is preferable to telephone or online communication. Irvine (2011) conducted a comparative study of personal and telephone interviews, and found that respondents spoke for a shorter time on the telephone (the length of speaking was measured in minutes, and the length of the transcript was not measured, which in my opinion was a mistake). If the above results would be confirmed in other studies, this would clearly not be beneficial for narrative interviews conducted by telephone. It is not clear if the same would hold for interviews on Skype, since it may be causing less of an inconvenience than the telephone (for example, computers usually have better speakers).

Despite the above doubts, many researchers have also already acknowledged that using internet communicators has great advantages. One such advantage is certainly being able to reach respondents in various locations across the world (Lo Iacono et al. 2016, Brown 2018). This was also the case in my study. Although there is an extremely rich body of research on Polish migrants to other countries of the European Union, most of them, especially smaller projects done as part of a PhD (as was the case of this research), concentrate on only one country or even one city. The use of Facebook for recruitment and Skype/Messenger for interviews allowed this study to reach respondents in diverse locations.

The limitations of using internet communicators are that the interviewer sees less of the respondent’s house and broader location (compared to visiting them, but certainly not compared to conducting the interview in an office or public place). Also, the interviewer may miss some of the non-verbal messages (Seitz 2016, Lo Iacono et al. 2016, Winiarska 2017).

To partly counter these problems, I started my interviews with the video option turned on, which allowed me to see the respondents and parts of their houses. As Brown (2018) has found before, it seemed quite possible to build a relation and a certain intimacy between my respondents and myself in this way. Several participants turned the camera to show me other things, such as their view from the window or the weather. I conducted the interviews from a room in my home which the participants could see, which sometimes served as an effective way to break the initial ice, (especially if my dog decided to accompany me during the interview). On the other hand, several respondents said they did not have cameras, or simply did not turn them on, and I did not insist.

Video transmission usually reduced the quality of the sound, so in many cases after several minutes I requested for the camera to be turned off. This reduced the non-verbal messages I could receive, but also had an unexpected benefit: I could take notes without the respondent seeing it. Such note-taking sometimes intimidates respondents during interviews in person. Only the audio track of the interviews was recorded. Before starting the recording, the respondents' permission was sought orally, informing them that the recording would only be used by the researcher. All but one agreed to be recorded. Skype allows for video-recording as well, but this option was not used.

Several of my respondents in the Netherlands said their internet would not allow for a Skype call. On the other hand, they had unlimited free phone calls to Poland and offered to call me. Several interviews took place over the phone. These were usually shorter and less detailed than the Skype interviews, confirming the observations of Irvine (2011). My sample of telephone interviews was, however, not large enough to draw any definite conclusions.

Interviews through Skype or other similar communicators seem particularly suited for a group such as migrants, not only because some might be hard to reach, but also because they are particularly able at using these technologies, frequently used to communicate with family or friends back home. It was obvious in many of my interviews that the respondent had a particular place already set up for Skyping in their house. This was, for example, at a table, but with the camera directed in such a way that the respondent could go to the kitchen to make himself some tea while continuously being seen by the camera and heard. It did not seem in this study that much was lost because the interviews were not done in person. In fact, as Janghorban (2014) has pointed out, some respondents were perhaps more at ease than they would have been during a face-to-face interview. Winiarska (2017) points out that online interviews may have the advantage of being less intrusive for the respondent. Several respondents, when asked, said that they would not have agreed to an interview in person due

to lack of time or the inconvenience. Thanks to using Skype I could better adjust to their schedules. A number of interviews were held late in the evening, after the respondents were done with all their work, put the kids to bed etc. One respondent, who used an obviously fake name on Facebook, stated clearly that he would never agree to an interview in person or to giving me his phone number, since he was trying to avoid paying child support in Poland. I never learned even his real first name.

In the comparative study of telephone and personal interviews mentioned above, Irvine (2011) also noticed that during telephone interviews the interviewer uttered fewer 'acknowledgement tokens' (expressions such as 'mm hm', 'right', 'okay', which invited the speaker to continue). This was also my behaviour at first, which was brought to my attention by one of the first respondents when he asked 'are you still there?'. In the following interviews, I made an effort to make more of such utterances, which perhaps do not come as naturally in telephone or online conversations, but are even more necessary, especially if the video is turned off and the respondent can't see the researcher's nodding or other signs of interest.

My position in these interviews was more of an insider (Botterill 2015, Ryan 2015) than an outsider, not only because I am Polish like my respondents, but also because I have been a migrant myself several times and could relate to some of those realities. The use of Facebook and Skype seemed to influence how the participants viewed me in this respect. Many were very open, addressing me by my first name, perhaps because they felt I was a member of their 'in' group (meaning the participants held a belief that I was somehow similar to them, that we had common experiences (Ryan 2015)) because I was as a member of the same Facebook group. Interviewing on Skype had the strange effect that sometimes the participants realized only halfway through the interview where I was physically located, that I did not live in the same country as them (which some people assumed), and that at the time of the interview I was not a migrant.

Conclusions

As this and a number of other studies have found, Facebook can be a formidable and cost-effective tool for recruiting respondents for qualitative interviews. In the field of migration studies, a combination of Facebook recruitment and long-distance interviewing via Skype, Facebook Messenger or other means can be particularly helpful for conducting studies with respondents who are spread over large territories.

To be effective, the recruitment method must be well-matched to the population sought. The subject and size of the potential respondent group of the study may largely influence how well Facebook can be used. Some researchers, including this author, found it relatively easy (although time-consuming) to recruit participants. This may have been a result of the population of migrant Poles studied being large and relatively well-organized into groups on Facebook. The researcher's announcements could thus be displayed to many people who fit the respondent profile. When conducting research on a narrower group of migrants, for example from a particular town who do not have their own Facebook group, the method may not prove effective, as some (for example Pustułka et al. 2017) have found.

Another method of recruiting attempted in this study was to address potential respondents directly through Facebook Messenger. The method did not prove effective, with almost no responses to about two dozen messages sent. This is likely because messages from non-friends often appear in the 'message requests' folder, which people do not check. To effectively contact somebody via Messenger, it is advisable to send them a 'friend request' first and wait for their approval. This creates privacy issues, and researchers should carefully consider the benefits and downsides of conducting research from their own private accounts/creating a Facebook page for their project.

The use of Facebook creates several issues regarding the privacy and anonymity of the respondents, the most serious perhaps being that respondents can inadvertently reveal themselves to the world as members of a particular group. It is worth debating to what degree researchers can be responsible for the disclosure of private information on the internet when the respondent discloses it him- or herself in reaction to a research project.

Skype and other internet communicators seem to be a practical and cost-effective tool for interviewing, especially if the respondents are geographically spread out. Migrants are often well-acquainted with such conversations and at ease, perhaps even more than during in-person interviews. The use of Skype or other long-distance communication methods guarantees the respondents more privacy, since the researcher does not know where they live, doesn't have their phone numbers or sometimes even their real names. Such privacy allows access to respondents who in another situation may not have been willing to give an interview.

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