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# Skype as a Tool for Qualitative Research Interviews

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## Abstract

Internet based methods of communication are becoming increasingly important and influencing researchers' options. VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies (such as Skype and FaceTime) provide us with the ability to interview research participants using voice and video across the internet via a synchronous (real-time) connection. This paper highlights the advantages of using Skype to conduct qualitative interviews and weighs these advantages against any limitations and issues that using this tool may raise. This paper argues that Skype opens up new possibilities by allowing us to contact participants worldwide in a time efficient and financially affordable manner, thus increasing the variety of our samples. At the same time, the use of Skype affects the areas of rapport, non-verbal cues and ethics by creating limitations but also new opportunities. The observations in this paper stem from two different researches, carried out by the authors, on dance (as a form of trans/cultural heritage) and wayfinding (the experience of getting from A to B in various settings). These studies lent themselves to using Skype for qualitative interviews, because of the need to reach an international, varied and purposeful sample. The researchers' experiences, combined with feedback from participants in Skype interviews, are used in this paper. The conclusion is that, although VoIP mediated interviews cannot completely replace

face to face interaction, they work well as a viable alternative or complimentary data collection tool for qualitative researchers. This paper argues that VoIP based interviews offer new opportunities for researchers and should be embraced with confidence.

**Keywords:** Qualitative Interviews, Skype and VoIP, Internet Research Methods, Intangible Heritage Research, Wayfinding Research, Dance Research

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## Introduction

The Office of National Statistics ([2015](#)) in the UK found that 'In 2015, over three quarters of adults in Great Britain used the internet every day, or almost every day'. This suggests that internet based methods of communicating are becoming increasingly important. Within academia, online technologies are becoming more common as research aids, with the internet now being a powerful tool for future research ([Illingworth 2001](#)) and providing 'new horizons for the researcher' ([Coomber 1997](#)).

Methods that have been a topic of enquiry include: online ethnographies ([Beneito-Montagut 2011](#); [Garcia et al. 2009](#); [Kozinets 2009](#)); blogs analysis ([Hookway 2008](#); [Rettberg 2008](#)); Facebook as a research tool and source of data ([Baker 2013](#); [Baltar & Brunet 2012](#); [Brickman Bhutta 2012](#); [Taylor et al. 2014](#); [Wilson et al. 2012](#)). VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) mediated technologies, however, in spite of their growing importance in everyday life, have had very limited coverage so far in terms of academic research, with very few articles covering qualitative interviews using video and audio VoIP tools as their main topic ([Cater 2011](#); [Deakin & Wakefield 2013](#); [Hanna 2012](#); [Janghorban et al. 2014](#); [Seitz 2015](#); [Sullivan 2012](#)).

VoIP is a system which provides users with a way to send voice and video across the internet via a synchronous (real-time) connection. Currently, the most popular services that use VoIP are Skype and FaceTime. The system that we have used for our qualitative interviews on the topics of dance and wayfinding is Skype, not only because of the researchers' familiarity with it, but also because we were able to employ the EVAER® software, which is recommended by Skype. This software allows the interviewer to record the video conversation, with both parties captured in the recording.

Literature on VoIP as a qualitative research data collection technique is often grouped together with other methods, such as email and online messenger services, services which also use the internet as their medium. For example, Hesse-Biber ([2012](#)) groups together VoIP, instant messenger (IM) services and email techniques of data collection, under the one title of 'internet research methods'. The issue, however, with grouping emails, messenger and VoIP together, is that they are media with quite different communicative properties. VoIP allows for synchronous communication including sound and video, with the option to also use written text. These characteristics are not shared by emails and

messenger protocols, both of which only use written text, with emails being asynchronous. Hence, email, Skype, Messenger services and other VoIP video technologies involve different ethical considerations, different advantages and disadvantages.

With this article, we hope to help contribute to this underdeveloped area in the qualitative methodology literature by presenting reflections on using Skype in combination with EVAER® software to record video interviews. The ability to record audio and video at the same time, without the need for additional equipment, is a particularly important advantage of Skype, which so far only Hanna (2012: 241) and Cater (2011) have highlighted.

Our observations on using Skype/EVAER® for qualitative interviews, stem from the two main authors' different researches. The first research topic is Egyptian raqs sharqi (a dance genre commonly grouped with other Middle Eastern, fusion and Northern African dance genres under the term belly dance) as a form of cultural heritage. The second is on wayfinding (the cognitive and corporeal process and experience of locating, following or discovering a route through and to a given space (the definition used by author Paul Symonds in his work to define wayfinding)).

In the discussion that follows, we first provide a brief introduction to our topics of study, the methodologies we used and the rationale for using Skype to conduct some of the qualitative interviews. We then highlight the advantages of using VoIP and weigh them against limitations of VoIP and concerns that using this tool for qualitative interviews may raise. In order to illustrate these reflections, we use comments our participants made about their experience of being interviewed via Skype since, as suggested by Seitz (2015: 6), 'it could ... be valuable to ask participants how they feel after being interviewed via Skype'. All interviews took place between July and October 2015 and pseudonyms have been used in every quotation.

It is worth noting that the points we raise in this article are of a conceptual nature, focusing on developing justifications for the use of VoIP interviewing solutions in qualitative research (in our case Skype). For reasons of both space and focus, we do not undertake to discuss technical issues in this paper. From our research experiences and having reviewed the available literature, five main points have emerged, which are relevant for the use of Skype and which we cover in this paper. The first one is the idea that, for topics (such as dance) that involve different cultures and which are not limited within territorial boundaries, tools such as Skype are invaluable since they allow researchers to involve participants wherever they are in the world. Second, we explore how VoIP technologies potentially make research more democratic by reducing the resources needed with specific reference to money and time requirements. Third, we cover the areas of rapport and nonverbal cues. These are the areas for which qualitative interviews via Skype encounter the biggest limitations, but may also open up offering unexplored new opportunities. Fourth, we discuss ethical issues arising from this

data collection technique and how we resolved these issues in our researches, in order to safeguard participants' safety and right to privacy. Finally, we conclude by highlighting the opportunities that VoIP tools open for research, in spite of any inherent limitations they may have over conventional approaches.

## **Research Methodology and Rationale**

### ***Raqs Sharqi as a Form of Cultural Heritage***

The research on Egyptian raqs sharqi was inspired by the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage ([UNESCO 2003](#)). Egyptian raqs sharqi (which originated in Egypt but is now practiced worldwide) is not currently in UNESCO's lists, but other physical activities, which also originated in specific areas of the world but are practiced internationally, such as flamenco, tango and Capoeira are ([UNESCO 2014](#)). Raqs sharqi was chosen as a case study, due to one of the researcher's familiarity with it. In particular, the main aim was to understand how dance (but also other forms of intangible heritage) could ever be conserved or protected and documented as heritage, considering the fact that dance changes not only over time, but also as it is transmitted across cultures.

Because of the complexity of this form of heritage and the questions raised, our approach was holistic, as dance was considered a form of 'living heritage' ([Lo Iacono & Brown 2016](#)), rather than simply being intangible. The idea of living heritage expressed by Lo Iacono & Brown denies any binarism between tangible and intangible elements of culture, assuming instead a holistic view. Following this framework, dance as heritage was analysed from multiple perspectives, to include material and non-material elements. In order to do so, we used a combined methodology, which included: the analysis of dance videos of famous dancers available online (on sites such as *YouTube* and *Vimeo*); gathering secondary data in the form of practitioner focused books, internet blogs, websites, open forums and social networking sites; qualitative one to one interviews. Qualitative interviews were essential to allow the researcher to engage with people (raqs sharqi practitioners) as individuals on a deeper level, in order to understand how practitioners from different cultures experience this dance. The benefits of such interviews are highlighted by Rowley ([2012](#): 262) who explains that 'interviews are useful when: the research objectives centre on understanding experiences, opinions, attitudes, values, and processes'.

The interviews phase is where Skype was very useful, because we did not want to limit our range of participants to those we could only physically reach and interview in person. Egyptian raqs sharqi (although it originated in Egypt), is now, as mentioned at the start of this section and as McDonald and Sellers-Young ([2013](#)) argue, a worldwide community, made up of practitioners who travel worldwide to attend events and who also communicate with each other across time and space by using social media. Hence, Skype allowed us to keep a transcultural focus during the interviews stage of the

data collection. 10 interviews were carried out, of which three were in person in the authors' local area (Cardiff, UK); one by email (with a participant located in Finland who preferred to use emails over Skype); six using Skype (with participants located in the USA, Italy, Portugal and London).

### **Wayfinding**

This study is about how the body influences the process of finding one's way while travelling. The author argues that it is not just a matter of getting from A to B as quickly and as directly as possible, but also about the embodied experience that travellers have, which can influence their choice of route. In this study, the way in which wayfinding is a social activity was also explored.

The methodology used for this research was a combination of qualitative interviews and autoethnography. For this study, choosing an international sample was not as central as it was for the raqs sharqi study. However, it was necessary for the sample to be purposeful ([Mason 2002](#); [Sparkes & Smith 2014](#)) and based on maximum variation sampling, which made it possible for the researcher to ([Sparkes & Smith 2014](#): 70) 'explore multiple facets of a problem and investigate issues holistically' and ([Maykut & Morehouse 1994](#): 57) 'select persons ... that... represent the range of experience of the phenomenon'. Using Skype helped greatly to widen the range of our sampling, thus incorporating variety in the research by allowing us to reach many different types of travelers without geographical limitations. This research also included respondents found using snowball sampling. According to Maykut and Morehouse ([1994](#): 57) 'for the purpose of maximum variation, it is advisable for the qualitative researcher to use the snowball technique ... to locate subsequent participants or settings that are very different from the first.'

Out of the 22 participants involved in this research, 14 were interviewed using Skype. 10 of these lived in locations as far afield as Russia, Thailand, Belgium, France and around the UK. Four, however, lived in the same city as the interviewer, but preferred to be interviewed via Skype as this method allowed respondents more flexibility with regards to location and times for the interview.

Thanks to Skype, we were able to get a wide perspective over the phenomenon of wayfinding, by being able to interview people in a diverse range of countries and cultures. We were able to interview people according to the type of wayfinder they were (i.e. commuter, business person, professional caver, police-officer and a body-guard), rather than sampling on a geographically limited basis.

### **International Sampling**

As mentioned above, a great advantage of using Skype as a qualitative research tool is that it allows researchers to transcend geographical boundaries, by nullifying distances and eliminating the need 'to visit an agreed location for interview' ([Rowley 2012](#): 264). This means that researchers can widen the range of their sample, by connecting with participants from all over the world and a wide range of

cultures, breaking down the barrier of 'time and space' ([Burkitt 2004](#): 222). King and Horrocks ([2010](#): 29) make the following point:

Researchers seek to recruit participants who represent a variety of positions in relation to the research topic, of a kind that might be expected to throw light on meaningful differences in experience.

Mason ([2002](#): 124) chooses to talk of encapsulating a 'relevant range in relation to the wider universe'. Online video methods do in fact offer us a literal universal range of potential research subjects. This has been a great advantage in our research on wayfinding as it gave us the opportunity to include such diversity in our samples. It has been, however, vital in investigating a form of heritage such as dance. Many forms of dance are transcultural; for example, ballet is performed in places as far afield as Hawaii ([Van Zile 1996](#)) and China ([Desmond 2003](#)). Fensham and Kelada ([2012](#): 370) state that it is not uncommon to see:

A young man from Calcutta who is the reigning Indian salsa champion, an Hawaiian hip-hop dancer and an Aboriginal Zorba ... whose re-coding of dance forms, stylisations and gestures appear to exemplify the success of a globalising popular culture.

And Shapiro posits ([2008](#)):

The human migration across borders, the shrinking of distance and time through technology, and the growing connections between diverse communities are creating a world that is transforming our sensibilities and understandings of others.

For researchers who want to study any human phenomenon transculturally, Skype is an invaluable tool. In this context, we refer to Welsch's ([1999](#): 197) concept of transculturality:

Cultures ... have ... assumed a new form, which is to be called transcultural insofar that it passes through classical cultural boundaries. Cultural conditions today are largely characterized by mixes and permeations. Transculturality is ... a consequence of the inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures.

As Amselle ([2002](#): 220) points out, 'there is not, nor has ever been, such a thing as a closed society'. However, the internet has played a huge part in accelerating the facilitation of contacts across vast stretches of space and time. According to Seidler ([2010](#): 175) 'The emergence of the internet has provided a globalised space... This has helped to shape new transnational identities and cosmopolitan identities, for it has allowed people to sustain contact across different global spaces'. In modern days 'local times and people are tied with global agendas' ([Nowicka 2006](#): 414).

Without Skype, we would have had to limit the range of our samples or we would have needed much bigger financial and time resources to travel and reach the same variety of participants. In the section that follows we cover the topic of resources and how VoIP technologies can make the research process more democratic.

## Resources and Democratisation

Skype and other VoIP technologies provide a platform, which moves us towards an opportunity for a more democratic research process. Fleitas (1998: 286) argues that 'distance is a variable that prevents an international representation of participants in most qualitative studies. The internet eliminates this barrier'. Kozinets (2009: 70-71) also highlights these problems faced by researchers, stating that:

Once someone clears the financial and technical hurdles required for aptitude at computer-mediated searching and communication, an extremely wide array of social interactions is made accessible to them. The participatory, egalitarian ethic of the Internet apparently originated from its contact with academic and hacker communities whose ethos was 'information should be free'. Online social interactions manifest this ethos through the general democracy and inclusiveness of many, if not most, online social groups.

We agree with Deakin and Wakefield who posit that Skype provides (2013: 5) 'an opportunity to talk to otherwise inaccessible participants'. As one of our research participants stated, Skype is 'a very convenient way of being able to maximise your research effort on a budget' (Stacey R.). Skype also gives participants themselves a greater freedom to participate in research if they want, without the need to travel.

Moreover, Skype also offers us the chance to direct research away from a purely geographical-centric focus. Johnston (2001), for example, uses the term 'Western rationality' to explain how some studies might perhaps be too Westernised in their focus. These days, as Kim (2008: 363) posits 'people around the world are increasingly exposed to the images and sounds of once distant cultures' and influencing cultures are not just the supposedly dominant western cultures, but cultures from every corner of the world, which leads to a process of hybridisation 'in which globalization encourages a blending of the diverse set of cultural repertoires made available through cross-border exchange' (Holton 2000: 141). In our wayfinding research, even when Westerners were interviewed, these interviewees were sometimes living in locations such as Thailand and Russia, in cultures which provided different experiences of wayfinding, which we were able to draw upon.

The absence of the need to find a specific venue for the interview, also saves us from certain financial and logistical issues. When using Skype and other similar technologies, interviews can easily be conducted from the comfort of one's home, eliminating not only the need to travel but also the need to find a venue, a venue which can be unfamiliar for the participants and, in some cases, may cost money to hire. With Skype, 'the place of the interview becomes much more fluid' (Deakin & Wakefield 2013: 7) and logistical issues with regards to access to certain spaces such as a classroom, meeting room, area of a hospital, a sports centre or dance studio are also eliminated.

Financial resources are connected with the resource of time, especially in the contemporary era when 'with the advent of modernity... lived time loses its form and its social interest - with the exception that is, of time spent working' ([Lefebvre 1991](#): 95). With the use of VoIP technologies for interviews, time can be used in a more flexible way, around the needs of participants, while retaining synchronicity with the interviewer. Cater used Skype for her interviews because ([2011](#): 2) 'many participants live busy lives' and Deakin and Wakefield state that ([2013](#): 6) 'Skype interviews allowed for greater flexibility' with regards to timing of the interviews. Indeed, participants in our research often mentioned the idea of saving time, such as Roger E. who said:

I find it very comfortable. And in some ways it's preferable. Because in a minute I'll pop off and make a cup of coffee. Get back on with my work and - I haven't put myself out very much.

Another participant, Stephen D., remarked:

I'm more comfortable in my own home than say if I was to come to your office... everything's around me... time-wise... I can't understand... why say for example, my sister would waste half a day driving to Birmingham to interview somebody, when lost productivity is horrendous when that person, could quite easily go into another office, open a laptop and they could have that exact same discussion via Skype.

For all the advantages of Skype and similar technologies, in terms of democratisation and saving time and money, there are some limitations. Many communities and peoples worldwide still lack access to the internet, although this situation is rapidly improving. While internet usage was limited when Chen and Hinton ([1999](#)) started using it for real time interviews, today estimates suggest that there are now over three billion internet users ([Internet World Stats 2015](#)) with over 40% of the world's population having internet access. As Fleitas ([1998](#): 283) contends, the internet permits us to think bigger, given that it provides us with worldwide access to data.

Another common obstacle to using VoIP has been the access to a computer with the necessary software and the ability and/or the will to use this technology. It has been suggested that some people may be reluctant to embrace technology, especially people of an older age. Sullivan ([2012](#): 57) refers to the use of Skype, 'for most younger people, this is not a problem, but if you were interested in the elderly, for example, many might not have or want access to such a thing'. However, in the course of our research, we have found that this was not the case; our experience reflects the findings of other studies which show how the elderly are willing to embrace new technologies for practical uses ([Fokkema & Knipscheer 2007](#); [Kiel 2005](#); [Shapira et al. 2007](#); [White et al. 2002](#)). We found that our participants over the age of 70 were comfortable using VoIP technologies, while some much younger interviewees admitted to struggling to get connected. For example, our oldest participant, Marie T., is 72 and uses web technologies routinely to interact with the global dance community (she has her own website, uses Facebook, FaceTime and email often). To participate in our research, she downloaded



Skype, which she had never used before, and she had 'no problem with Skype' (Marie T.). A younger participant, in her forties, was initially fazed by Skype but she then got used to it: 'I've become immune to the weirdness of Skype [laughs]. It just doesn't faze me in the way it used to.' (Vivienne B.). Furthermore, younger people are not always necessarily keen on Skype, as Roger E. pointed out saying: 'with my students now I'm doing Skype tutorials and that's proving rather popular and people I suggest it to either, definitely won't - they look at me like I've just landed - or they jump at it.' VoIP systems are opening up a wide range of opportunities by connecting researchers with a variety of potential participants across the world and with minimum constraints in terms of time and money. However, another contentious issue around VoIP technologies and their limitations is the building of rapport, an issue we discuss below.

## Rapport

It might initially seem that it is harder to offer the same level of rapport on email, telephone or via online methods, compared to offline face-to-face interviews. 'Rapport is ... about trust – enabling the participant to feel comfortable in opening up to you' (King & Horrocks 2010: 48). According to Cater (2011) building a rapport over Skype is challenging. However, Deakin and Wakefield (2013: 8) found that 'Skype interviewees were more responsive and rapport was built quicker than in a number of face-to-face interviews. Online rapport is... only an issue when interviewing an individual who is more reserved or less responsive'. In order to create a connection with participants over time, they exchanged a series of emails before the interview. Seitz also suggests that (Seitz 2015: 5) 'emailing several times before Skyping might... strengthen rapport.'

Interviews which may be ultra-sensitive such as interviews connected to abuse, drug habits or alcoholism, might arguably be better undertaken in shared space. As Seitz found (2015: 5), for personal topics, such as online dating experiences, participants are more diffident about being interviewed on Skype and 'overall, it appears to be more difficult to obtain in-depth responses to sensitive questions via Skype' but she then adds that this may be due to suspicions related to the video element of Skype, rather than lack of trust in the researcher. Overall, research findings by Carr (2001) suggest that synchronous online methods may be just as effective. On the other hand, as Seitz (2015) argues, technical difficulties may create a loss of intimacy. If, for, example, the connection is lost during an emotional conversation 'this creates an abrupt feeling in the interview that is hard to move forward from' (Seitz 2015:4). However, in the context of our interviews, we have found that there was no problem with regards to rapport. Even on those rare occasions when the call was interrupted by the loss of connection, there was no problem resuming the conversation. Rapport was good possibly because we knew most of our participants (either in person or through previous repeated contacts via online social media). According to Roulston (2009: 98):

For researchers using personal connections to informants as a means to recruit participants, relative intimacy and rapport with participants may enhance the generation of data in interview settings in ways not possible for 'outsider' researchers

Respondents in our two studies were aware of the limits of Skype, but also the opportunities that it opens up. As one of the participants explained:

I think a machine is never a person and a machine can never replace the personal. Because you are not getting my energy, you see, there are details you are not catching, impossible. We have a screen between us. So, I think in person is always better, but [...] you wouldn't be able to interview me right now if it wasn't for Skype, right? So I think it's great! Why not? (Hilary S.)

For another participant, overall there was no problem at all in being interviewed using Skype:

You are not in front of me in person but I can still see you clearly and I can still hear you as if you are in front of me sitting in front of me. So no, I don't see there's a lot of difference whether it would have been live next to each other or via Skype. Yeah, it might feel a bit artificial, but it's not a problem, I don't see it as a problem at all. (Rosie M.)

The subject of 'rapport' is also considered by Rowley (2012: 265) who claims that for 'telephone and Skype interviews...something of the rapport and richness of the interaction may be lost'. It is indeed true that some of the rapport may be lost as a face to face interview would be, like one of our participants said, 'more three dimensional social experience with all the sensory' (Hector N.). On the other hand, some participants may be more inclined to open up when being interviewed via Skype, because they can stay in their own chosen environment or, as Hanna (2012:241) states, 'both the researcher and the researched are able to remain in a safe location without imposing on each other's personal space'. The fact that the participant is in a familiar environment may be, as Seitz (2015:4) suggests 'more beneficial to participants who are shy or introverted, allowing them to feel more comfortable opening up in front of a screen'. Meho (2006) used email interviews in order to interview shy people and those who have difficulty to otherwise express themselves. It can potentially be hard for a shy person to agree to sit in front of an interviewer for any length of time and to do so, particularly in the same-space presence of someone whom the volunteer sees as authoritative. It may be that online video interviews may attract different volunteers to accept the invitation to be interviewed. Indeed, one of our participants mentioned of feeling 'more loose tongued - in Skype than I do face to face [...] there's something that almost makes you want to open up' (Roger E.).

Skype can also be a useful method for some researchers to feel more at ease. According to Novick (2008: 7) some 'researchers may feel awkward when interacting with participants in person...interviewers need to develop strategies to feel comfortable, put participants at ease, and develop rapport'. Skype and other VoIP video methods, we argue, offer a viable option as a research

method, for those who feel that offline face-to-face interviews do not suit their specific interview style.

What is clear is that building a rapport and 'establishing a safe and comfortable environment for sharing the interviewee's personal experiences' ([DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006](#): 316), be it via online or offline methods, offers us the potential to gather richer data. We argue, that whether Skype or face to face interviews are better to build rapport, really depends on the topic of the research and on the personality of the participant and interviewer. We would argue that there are certain situations in which offline face-to-face interviews can produce less effective and less rich data collection than using Skype video or telephone. Carr ([2001](#)), for example, found that, in a hospital setting, her participants were not able to speak openly and this affected the richness of the data. She used telephone interviews afterwards and these produced much better data.

The issue of body language (covered more in the next section), impacts upon rapport. Not being able to look each other in the eyes, is noted by Seitz ([2015](#)) and Petralia ([2011](#): 114):

One of the imperfect aspects of using Skype to communicate is that it is virtually impossible to look the person you are speaking to in the eyes because of the position of the camera in relation to the screen (the camera would have to be directly in the centre of the screen to correct this). In face-to-face communication, eye contact can be a powerful tool for establishing trust.

Petralia goes on to explain though, that this was not too disorientating as he and his collaborators already knew each other and had been able to build trust previously. We found that the same applied to our research. With those participants whom we had not met in person before, we did not find the issue of eye contact to be a problem either. We quickly got used to it and the participants seemed at ease and nobody raised the lack of eye contact as an issue, maybe because most of them were used to using Skype before-hand and have become accustomed to this mode of interaction. Moreover, the fact that Skype allows people not to look at someone in the eye during an interview, might actually be an advantage in helping shy people to open up. However, there are other nonverbal cues that may be missed and we will explore this topic in the following section.

### ***Nonverbal Cues***

According to Hesse-Biber and Griffin ([2012](#): 56) 'tone of voice, and gestures, all provide a certain richness to qualitative data'. Cohen ([2007](#): 153) agrees on the importance of nonverbal cues, stating that, because of the absence of such cues, 'telephone interviews can easily slide into becoming mechanical and cold'. Novick ([2008](#): 5) further highlights this point in saying that 'nonverbal data, which includes responses such as facial expressions and body language' can be lost in some forms of interview, such as when using telephone interviews. According to Talja and McKenzie ([2007](#): 102) 'paralinguistic cues such as gesture, facial expression, and tone of voice can both convey emotion and provide the hearer with clues for interpreting the meaning of an utterance'.

With Skype video calls we can see facial expressions, thus avoiding some of what Holt (2010: 116) refers to as the 'the lack of non-verbal communication' that telephone interviews have. Most often than not, however, we can only see the face, missing important cues from the rest of the body. Bayles (2012: 578), in relation to Skype, argues that 'in a head and shoulders presentation we lose the full range of postural, gestural, and expressive movement that the body conveys, as well as the intentionality that is carried and expressed in that movement'. This limit can be overcome, according to Seitz (2015: 4) though, by listening more carefully to the participant's voice and looking carefully at their facial expressions and 'researchers should use their own facial expressions deliberately to convey understanding and emotion too.'

In this respect, we can learn from the use of Skype in dance research, where, even if we cannot see the whole body but only one part (such as the face or a hand), this helps us to better interpret that part of the body and helps the viewer focus on details that otherwise might have been missed:

The close-ups of the face can reveal the expressions during the dance. The close ups of the hand gestures and feet can also give an understanding of the grammatical aspects of the dance. (Ghosh 2013: 84)

In the context of Skype interviews, we argue that, by focusing on the head and the shoulders, we can gather more details of these specific body parts, which can counterbalance not being able to see the rest of the body. When it is absolutely necessary to be able to see more than just the head and shoulders, it is possible to connect a high-quality external video camera to a computer with a wider angle lens that enables better vision of a bigger space, enough in fact to see the whole body, as Petralia's (2011) team did during their Skype mediated choreographic project.

Dance is a field in which Skype has been employed for various aims, including: creating a piece of choreography between dancers across different countries (Petralia 2011), dance therapy sessions (Krampe & Musterman 2013) and pedagogy (Ghosh 2013). The general consensus is that using Skype cannot completely replace sharing the same space, but it is a complementary tool and certainly better than nothing at all. For Petralia (2011: 116):

If the choice is to use a slightly imperfect set of technologies to facilitate working together or not to work together at all, then I choose the former. Especially as travel costs rise and the environmental impact of air travel becomes more problematic the Internet seems the (im)perfect tool to allow collaboration across great geographic distances.

As researchers, we agree with Petralia's observations, arguing that they apply to qualitative research interviews, as well as dance projects. Skype has another benefit over face to face interviews, in that video footage of both the interviewer and the participant can be recorded very easily (with additional

easy to use software such as EVAER®), without the need to set up additional cameras (as long as the computers being used have built in web cams). This way, the body language and interactions can also be analysed during annotation.

Skype video interviews offer us another quite unique opportunity, which most if not all other research methods cannot offer. An interviewee who is using a tablet or smart phone for the interview, for example, has the ability to show the interviewer the environment and context in which the interviewee is based, by walking around and being able to set the camera on their device to show a back or front view. Such level of detail in the video can also impact upon what Erving Goffman (1990 [1959]) refers to as the 'presentation of self', which the interviewee can influence through their choice of interview location, which also potentially adds to the data collection. 'As part of the personal front we may include: insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like' (Goffman 1990 [1959]: 34). For interviews, there is a case for arguing that the choice of location, in addition to how that location is set (including with background insignia), also may convey useful meanings. Moreover, the participants interviewed via VoIP are quite often in their own environment. This means that they can have access to a variety of artefacts and objects that may emerge as relevant during an interview, which they may find useful to show the researcher. VoIP also allows quick easy follow-up communication for these purposes as well. For instance, one of our participants in the wayfinding study decided to show us a map to describe the location of one of her trips: 'Let me show you the maps. Hang on a second [Vivienne physically goes to grab the paper maps]. I just plotted these.' (Vivienne B.).

Another level of communication which it is important to note in a Skype video method is the ability to exchange files (such as photos) in real time and to type through the messenger service which is connected to the same Skype interface. Using photos and videos (taken either by the researcher or the participants) as a source of data (either secondary or primary) is a process already established in qualitative research (Flick 2009; Hammersley 2013; Marshall & Rossman 2010; Maykut & Morehouse 1994). Multimedia research is now even more relevant in online environments (Beneito-Montagut 2011; Dicks 2006; Dicks & Mason 1998; Garcia et al. 2009). For dance research in particular, for which using multimedia is an established process in research (Giurchescu & Torp 1991), it can be very useful in real time to exchange, for example, links of dance videos published online and to be able to watch and discuss the videos together. Likewise, for wayfinding it can be useful to exchange files such as photos and maps. This is, of course, also possible to do during face to face interviews, but only if a computer with internet connection is immediately available. Conversely, if the interview is done via Skype or other VoIP systems, the computer and internet are always available, as they are the sine qua non of the interview itself.

As we have seen thus far, Skype (and other VoIP technologies) have limitations but also offer new opportunities. Another area in which these technologies raise new questions is the area of ethics, which we discuss in the following section.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethics is central to data collection methods in every piece of research ([Cohen et al. 2007](#): 51; [King & Horrocks 2010](#): 98; [Myers & Newman 2007](#): 23), including interviews carried out using Skype. All empirical qualitative studies must respond to a range of ethical considerations identified by Plummer ([2001](#)) as including; 1) Intellectual property, 2) Informed consent, 3) Right to withdraw, 4) Unintended deception, 5) Accuracy of portrayal, 6) Confidentiality and 7) Financial gain. With the advent of online research, the above concerns are still valid, but less easy to define. In particular, 'the blurring of public and private in the online world raises ethical issues around access to data and techniques for the protection of privacy and confidentiality.' ([Garcia et al. 2009](#): 53). Moreover, gaining informed consent if not meeting in person could be tricky and the use of cloud storage could put data at risk of being hacked ([Buchanan & Zimmer 2012](#)).

For the purpose of carrying out Skype interviews in our research, we followed standard ethical procedures to make sure that the Plummer's points were met. We ensured that the volunteers had a chance to pre-read the consent form; they were pre-warned and asked if the interviews could be recorded; they were informed that the recording of the interview could be stopped at any time on request and that they could withdraw at any time from the research; they were given the opportunity to choose the location, day and time of their interview. To meet confidentiality, once collected, data was transcribed and stored on a password protected computer and only the people involved in the project had access to the research data. With a Skype video interview though, there are some additional ethical considerations to take into account, namely the issues created by the fact that the interaction is mediated through the use of technology (which is owned by third parties); the verification of participant's identity; and issues raised by the interview environment and the nature of recording this. We consider each in turn below.

## ***Electronic Data and Big Brother***

How data is stored, analysed and used by large I.T. companies such as Google and by governments including the UK and U.S. is difficult to assess. ECHELON is a commonly known system ([Bomford 1999](#)) for monitoring telephone calls and thought to be triggered and to track calls according to the utterance of certain keywords. This system is said to now monitor not only telephone calls but email and all electronic communications. There is certainly a chance that if certain words relating to matters of interest to intelligence services are spoken, such as terrorism, then Skype video calls might also be monitored. It is therefore important, from an ethical stand-point, to remind participants that their discussions online may be accessed and stored by governments agencies or corporations. This might

be especially important for studies relating to sensitive issues. In addition, communication via Skype is supposed to be encrypted but Garfinkel (2005: 5) reminds that,

While the actual communications between Skype clients appears to be encrypted, searches conducted on behalf of Skype users - including searches necessary to initiate Skype calls - are observable by the Skype network. This means that it should be possible for even unprivileged participants of the network to perform traffic analysis and determine when one user calls another user.

Moreover, in order to enforce its terms of use, 'Skype reserves the right to review content submitted on or through the Software, Products and Skype Websites for the purpose of enforcing these Terms' (Skype 2014: par. 5.7). This is to make sure that users do not infringe third party copyrights, do not violate other people's privacy, nor share anything illegal or inappropriate. However, as long as participants are made aware of this possibility and nothing illegal is discussed using Skype, this should not be an issue. In order to mitigate this issue in our researches, we created a specific Skype account for each research study. At the termination of the studies, the Skype accounts were closed and subsequently all the participants' online details and data were removed. This might help to protect participants' anonymity in the face of the increasing data surveillance that is taking place, but of course it does not and cannot completely ensure it.

### *Verification of Identity*

Verifying a volunteer's identity would seem much easier when interviewing a person offline, rather than online. However, Sullivan (2012:56) (drawing on Goffman's [1959] Presentation of Self) posits that 'the presentation of an authentic self or an accurate presentation of the self are both difficult to gauge in both face-to-face and online interactions'. King and Horrocks (2010: 98) suggest using some other form of media to verify the participants' ID when using telephone and online messenger style interviews. Trying to verify someone's online messenger ID is difficult given that it is very easy to assume a fake identity online (Kozinets 2009). In Skype video interviews we can see and hear the person and the problems faced by email and messenger interviews are negated to an extent. There is the option to request for the person to hold ID up to the camera, but this may not be the best way to build rapport. 'Snowballing' (Myers & Newman 2007; Sparkes & Smith 2014: 71) at least provides one level of validity, in that the participants are personally known in some way.

Another method is to attempt to cross reference the participants' identities through consulting other forms of social media. As so many people use online media (such as Facebook and Twitter), participants' identities are likely to be available for verification elsewhere. Sullivan (2012: 56) considers that 'so much of our time is spent on the web that presentations of self online are potentially more accurate than they were 20 years ago'. Indeed, during our research on Egyptian raqs sharqi, even when we interviewed practitioners via Skype that we had never met before in person, we knew who they were. We had seen their videos on YouTube, read their blog posts and/or their books, seen their posts and pictures on Facebook and connected with them. This tactic worked well in the case of

research on raqs sharqi, as practitioners have created a worldwide dance community whose members often meet in person at workshops internationally and also keep in contact online, whether they have met before or not. This is a process similar to what happens for American Tribal Style (ATS) practitioners ([Cutler-Broyles 2013](#)) and for Lindy hop, for which 'dancers have enjoyed a national scene with internet websites, workshops, competitions, and city-wide social events occurring year-round across the US and, increasingly, around the world.' ([Wade 2011](#): 228). However, this practice also raises ethical principles of its own and may need to be explicitly requested when gaining participant consent.

### ***Interview Environment and Video Recording***

As discussed in the section on resources and democratisation, one of the advantages of remote interviews is that participants can be interviewed from the comfort of their own homes. In the section about nonverbal cues, we even considered how important the choice of location can be for the presentation of self, which in itself could generate useful data. Although this is a big advantage, it can also have a downside, in that the researcher lacks control over the participant's physical environment during online interviews, which has implications for confidentiality. The volunteer will often choose her/his own environment and this might sometimes be someone's bedroom or other personal space, or a public space.

Participants may be unaware of what is within range of their camera and inadvertently disclose something that they would rather keep private. In some situations, a 'mirror effect', can take place, when images are reflected that were not intended to be seen. [\[2\]](#) In other instances, it may just be that participants may become unaware of what is in the background and visible within the range of their cameras. We addressed this issue by advising participants on the selection of appropriate locations from which they were interviewed, with reference to issues of privacy.

The use of the Skype/EVAER® software to record sound and video of the interviews, required additional ethical safeguards. These are connected with the above point of uncontrolled environment, but another issue was that, with the use of EVAER® software, the participants do not know when recording is started unless informed by the interviewer. In order to address this, participants were informed when recording had begun, was paused or stopped. All participants were also offered the opportunity to listen to a copy of the video/audio recording of the interview, thus responding to Plummer's ([2001](#)) points 4 and 5: *Unintended deception and Accuracy of portrayal* respectively.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper we have discussed advantages as well as limitations of Skype for qualitative interviews. We have, however, also highlighted how the limitations can be overcome or, in some cases, create new opportunities. Overall, we would not argue that interviews via VoIP technologies such as Skype



should completely replace in-person interviews. Instead, VoIP methods are best viewed as a complimentary data collection tool for qualitative researchers, which works well alongside other data collection methods as part of a broader research design and strategy.

Seen in these terms therefore, we do not share the well-intentioned advice of King and Horrocks (2010: 84) that 'qualitative researchers should be cautious about the use of remote video for interviews'. Kings and Horrocks advise caution because of technical glitches in sound and video transmission. However, since 2010, the quality of VoIP technologies has hugely improved. Although not suitable for all instances of qualitative interviewing, where interviewing subjects from a diverse geographical and socio-cultural range is advantageous to the study, we would argue that VoIP video research methods might be embraced with some confidence, rather than cautiously considered.

In the context of our specific researches in wayfinding and dance heritage, we have only used Skype for interviews, but we think that there is potential for other more creative uses. For example, Skype could be used for surveying (in the case of wayfinding) or documenting (in the case of heritage) a certain space from a distance. This could be done with the use of tablet computers, where the person in the location to be documented could walk around the space, while showing it to the researcher who could guide and make suggestions from a distance. The researcher could also record the video and sound using software such as EVAER®.

Skype has been invaluable for our researches, but we also conducted face to face and email interviews. We thought that the data gathered using Skype, in our personal experience, was just as good as the data gathered using face to face interaction. In some cases even better in fact. Using Skype, we could not share the same space as our participants, so we lost a bit of the social contact and the energy from the other person. When interviewing someone in person, just the act of making them a cup of tea or coffee, for example, can create a connection. On the other hand, when we interviewed participants over Skype, they were often less worried about time because they were already at home and they were in a comfortable environment. Hence, they tended to talk for longer. Two of the interviews about raqs sharqi went on for two hours each, which allowed the researcher to gather very useful information (after an hour we asked the participants though if they were still happy to talk, to make sure we were not taking advantage of the volunteers' time). Email interviews (of which we only did one for the dance research) were the least interesting because rapport was lacking and the engagement with the data was less intense. With interviews on Skype or face to face there is interaction between the researcher and the participant and, during transcription, the researcher can engage with the data and almost relive those moments of interaction and remember the personality and the emotions of the participants. With emails this connection is lost, although emails are still useful if they are the only way to access a participant.

We have used Skype for research in dance and wayfinding, but this tool can be applied to any other topic for which overcoming geographical barriers in an affordable way is useful. Moreover, although we have based our justification for using Skype on the concept of transculturality and the necessity to reach out to people in many geographical locations, as well as the need to democratise research, there are other rationales that can support the use of VoIP, but are beyond the scope of our research. For example, the idea of disability and accessibility for people who may find physical re-location difficult but who may still be happy to participate in an interview. Another consideration that helps justify the use of Skype is to build in more sustainability to the research process by limiting the pollution caused by means of transportation to interviews ([Hanna \[2012\]](#), for example, used Skype for this purpose in his study on sustainable tourism). Moreover, where internet access is possible in remote locations, Skype and other VoIP video methods could, in some situations, also be used for pilot studies to evaluate the worthwhileness of travel to these distant and very expensive to reach locations, for ethnographic research.

The use of Skype and other VoIP technologies for research is still at its infancy and the additional possibilities these offer are numerous and require further investigation and reflection on this technique. VoIP is not the answer to all researchers' problems but it is a very useful tool which, from a technological point of view, is continuously improving alongside internet connections which are increasingly more stable and faster, factors which obviate some of the earlier concerns about the technique.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Another software used by Cater ([2011](#)), which records both video and sound, is Call Recorder from Ecamm.com. This is, however, only compatible with Mac computers.

<sup>2</sup>This was the case, for example, of some eBay sellers whose undressed reflections got caught on camera as they took pictures of items they wanted to sell ([Hills 2013](#)).

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