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# Online Interviews as Feminist Practice: Insights on Navigating Research Relationships With Digital Feminist Artists

## Abstract

This case study is based on research that explored the experiences of digital feminist artists. The research worked from a feminist perspective and employed online unstructured interviews to examine how digital feminist artists produce their work, how they experience online platforms, and how their work matters to feminism. Online unstructured interviews proved to be the most advantageous method of data collection for three main reasons. First, this method is well situated within a feminist epistemological position, emphasizing women's experiences as legitimate ways of knowing. Secondly, online interviews allowed access to a hidden and geographically dispersed population. Finally, online unstructured interviews provided an important and unexpected space for the negotiation of power between researcher and participant, furthering the feminist potential of this methodological approach. Through a thematic analysis, the research argued that digital feminist artists embody a quiet resistance in their negotiations with online spaces and within their art. This case study demonstrates how online unstructured interviews are a valuable method for feminist researchers, as they allow inclusive and accessible spaces which foster a challenge to traditional power dynamics within research processes.

## Learning Outcomes

Having read this case study, readers should be able to . . .

- Identify the ways in which online interviews can support data collection with geographically dispersed, or hard to reach populations.
- Describe the strengths and limitations of online unstructured interviewing as a research method.

- Discuss the importance and value of navigating power within research relationships and why these matter in the context of feminist epistemology.
- Design qualitative research methodologies that are inclusive and accessible.

## Case Study

### Project Overview and Context

This research was conducted for my PhD, which was completed in 2022. Following an MA in Women's Studies, I was passionate about feminism and feminist research. During my MA I had developed an interest in visual and media cultures and how it is possible to analyze and understand these from different feminist perspectives. I was also conscious of various feminist movements mobilizing in online spaces. There was a visual aspect to this, where art and feminist activism collided. I recognized that there were artists who worked with feminist themes and who participated in online cultures and that this intersection between feminism, art, and digital spaces needed further exploration. I wanted to explore how digital feminist artists experienced the digital spaces in which they were situated, how gender and bodies mattered to them in terms of the aesthetic content of their art and in how they existed online, and how feminism and digital spaces shape each other.

Art and feminism have had a long relationship. Feminist art historians have done the work of both critiquing the wider discipline of art history for ignoring contributions made by women, and highlighting the value and importance of feminist art (Parker & Pollock, 2020). Judith Brodsky and Ferris Olin (2008) outline how feminist artists, and in particular the feminist art movement emerging from the 1970s, are celebrated for the ways in which they shaped art. They explain how the feminist art movement brought about representational challenges to the male gaze, centered women's bodies and sexualities, and imagined ways of being beyond patriarchy and white supremacy. Feminist art was therefore inherently political. I recognized how feminist art across digital platforms also focused on these political goals. Therefore, I wanted my research to address this emerging relationship between feminism, art, and technology.

Feminist scholars had been examining this rise of feminist art across digital spaces. In Magdalena Olszanowski's (2014) research, for example, she found that censorship created new challenges for feminist artists, especially when their work was shared on Instagram. She points to

how online forms of censorship lead to new types of art being created, where feminist artists are incorporating the politics of censorship into their work. In this way, a new feminist aesthetic is created due to the complexities inherent to the intersection of feminism, art, and technology. Moreover, Judith Brodsky (2021) argues that digital artists challenge the patriarchal context of technology. By recognizing how women artists, particularly women artists of color and queer artists, have worked innovatively with digital technologies to make art, she argues of the liberatory potential of this intersection.

## Section Summary

- Feminist art has not been given the recognition it deserves within the wider discipline of art history, according to feminist art historians.
- Feminist art is inherently political and works to challenge patriarchy through obscuring the male gaze and centering the body and sexuality, among other varied representational strategies and creative techniques.
- Digital platforms and spaces are shaping the content and aesthetics of feminist art through an intersection of feminism, art, and technology.

## Research Design

### Qualitative Unstructured Interviews

My research design was based in qualitative methodologies and I used unstructured interviews for data collection. This meant that I did not create an interview guide prior to the interview with set questions to ask; instead I prepared topics to discuss and allowed the interviews to be guided by what was important or interesting for participants. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were all audio recorded and transcribed following the interview.

I chose unstructured interviews because they are valuable for feminist research. My postmodern feminist epistemology provided the rationale for the methodological decisions made, it was essential that my research centered marginalized voices and began with the position that their experiential ways of knowing about the world are legitimate, multifaceted, and socially situated. Unstructured interviews are defined primarily by the value placed on the perspective of participants and their conversation-like style (Bryman, 2012). For feminist research, unstructured

interviewing offers a challenge to objectivity and truth finding by embedding subjectivity into the foundation of the knowledge being produced. The in-depth, conversational style of unstructured interviewing invites a troubling of the relationship between knowledge and power as the researcher is decentered as the expert, and the participant becomes central to how knowledge is being produced. Gayle Letherby (2003) argues that unstructured interviewing challenges ideas about interviewees as passive, and this disrupts the power within the research relationship.

## Sampling

The sampling method used was purposive sampling because I had specific inclusion criteria. Participants needed to self-identify as women, they needed to be artists who identified their work with feminist themes, and they needed to have a digital component to their work. Self-definition is one particular way that I embedded inclusivity into my research, I did not define womanhood through biological reasoning, and welcomed trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming women. This decision is also grounded within feminist epistemology; as stated there cannot be a universal position or definition of womanhood. I used search engines to seek out digital feminist art exhibitions, artist websites, women's art platforms, and queer art platforms to identify potential participants. Potential participants were sent an email inviting them to participate in the research. If they responded with interest I sent the information sheet and digital consent form.

## Analysis

I used thematic analysis to analyze data, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step approach. The first step of the process of thematic analysis involved becoming familiar with the data, which meant reading and rereading transcripts. During this stage I returned transcripts to participants so that they were able to reflect on the interview, and I welcomed them adding or amending any aspects of the transcript to reflect their ideas following the interview. This was another intentional design choice to embed inclusivity into the research process, and it strengthened the emphasis placed on reflexivity, central to a feminist perspective. This provided further challenge the power in the traditional interview model, which is a transfer of information from interviewee to interviewer. The following stages of thematic analysis include generating codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, naming themes, and writing the report.

## Feminisms and Epistemologies

My research design is grounded within my feminist epistemological position. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. It is concerned with how we know things, where knowledge comes from, what makes knowledge legitimate, how do we construct realities and know them as truths. Feminism offers an important theoretical and epistemological position because, in general, it offers the notion that knowledge about the social world has been produced at the exclusion of women. Within a Western social context, knowledge and truth are rooted within scientific reason and rationality and is legitimized through social institutions. Feminist epistemologies recognize this as a masculinized way of knowing, because, historically, those who have had access to knowledge and knowledge production have been men. Women can only be known from the perspective of men.

Feminist standpoint theory is an epistemological position which challenges the masculinization of knowledge production. Feminist standpoint theorists assert that knowledge is socially situated, not an absolute truth, and that the production of knowledge should start from the women's standpoint as they occupy a marginalized perspective (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). The claim is that, by beginning from the perspective of the everyday and embodied experiences of marginalization, women actually have a privileged perspective on social structures (Hartstock, 1983, 1997). However, there is debate amongst feminist scholars around the possibility of a women's standpoint. Postmodern feminists and Black feminist thinking has argued that such a universalizing of the notion of 'woman' trivializes the differences between women (Hill Collins, 1997). Women do not simply exist in opposition to men, rather their experiences of marginalization are compounded and shaped by class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, as well as gender. Women's experiences are multiple and fragmented, and there cannot be a universal experience of marginalization for all women, so there cannot be a shared 'women's standpoint.'

Postmodern feminist epistemology begins with difference. Rejecting universalism over identity categories, this position starts with troubling the relationship between knowledge and power (Fraser & Nicholson, 1988). Instead of asking and confirming which knowledge is true, postmodernism asks why there are different claims to knowledge and how were they constructed (Foucault, 1980). Discourses which determine what can or cannot be true are socially, culturally, and historically specific and so are changeable, not universal. Reality and truth, therefore, are not

discoverable through scientific enquiry because they do not exist, they are produced within specific contexts. Dismantling the very claims on which truth and reality are bound within, postmodernism makes space for fragmented and multiple stories about realities to be told, based on the specific conditions in which we are situated.

## Section Summary

- Designing research methodology stems from your epistemological position as a researcher. In this case, a postmodern feminist position underpinned methodological decisions.
- A qualitative methodology was designed that included unstructured interviewing as a data collection method and thematic analysis as an analysis method.
- Unstructured interviewing is conversation style interviewing that focuses on what matters to participants. This challenges the power imbalances between researcher and interviewee in traditional interview methods.

## Research Practicalities

### Accessing a Hidden Population

A major practical challenge was sampling. I had selected purposive sampling based on how my project had specific inclusion criteria. What I had not considered fully though, was how hidden digital feminist artists are as a population, and how I would need to consciously work on my sampling approach in order to obtain a diverse sample. Hidden populations refer to populations that are not easily identifiable based on a lack of shared group identity, a lack of official statistics or documentation concerning the group, or a wide geographical dispersion of potential participants (Baltar & Gorjup, 2012). While artists are not generally defined as a hidden population, Jeffri, Heckathorn, and Spiller (2011) note how artists often work alone, are self-employed, and only those with professional representation are known as artists. Beyond this, my sample of digital feminist artists were both women and feminist artists, neither of which receive much attention within traditional art spaces and so remain largely invisible.

I also recognized that my method of using search engines to search for potential participants was grounded within my own experiences of someone with prior knowledge of the field. The spaces which I was engaging with to search for participants were culturally and globally specific

based on my own position in the world as a white, cis-gendered woman from the Global North. Many of the potential participants I had contacted with initial enquiries were based in the Global North and were white cis-gendered women. Noticing how my identity was shaping the sample, I was conscious that I was further marginalizing the perspectives of digital feminist artists from the Global South, queer women, and trans and nonbinary women.

Taking a reflexive approach, I designed a second wave of sampling with a more conscious effort to engage with a wider hidden population and be more representative. A core feminist principle of my research was inclusivity, so although this prolonged the sampling process and created a messy overlap with second wave sampling and interviewing happening at the same time, it was vital that this was actioned. The desire for representativeness does not stem from a need for generalizability; instead, I was driven by my postfeminist epistemology by which understanding the multiple and complex experiences of digital feminist artists was important. I did not want to reproduce discourse about women that was based only in white women's experiences from a Global North perspective.

### Online iInterviews

Part of being a hidden population means that digital feminist artists are widely geographically dispersed, and so accessing this population to conduct interviews was very challenging in a practical sense. As this was doctoral research, I had limited funding and limited time, only scheduling around six months for data collection. It was not possible for me to travel internationally multiple times to interview participants as there were restraints on practical resources. To navigate this particular practical challenge, I shifted focus on online interviews. Instead of meeting participants in person, I decided to meet participants in digital spaces. This worked well for two main reasons. First, it allowed access to a hidden population, and second, it created the context for discussions that challenged power dynamics in the research relationship.

### Ethical Considerations

I had to be very mindful about how to navigate anonymity with my participants. Maintaining participant anonymity is essential for protecting participants from harm, as outlined in the British Sociological Association ethical guidelines (2017). I had made the decision not to include any images of participant's artwork in my final thesis as this would have made participants identifiable. I also used pseudonyms when writing up analysis and discussions, and I had discussed with

participants which pseudonym they would like to choose. This was another decision I made to encourage participants to be active and agentic in the research process.

Anonymity was a challenge that I had to navigate with participants. While artists are not deemed to be a vulnerable population in a general sense, some of my participants were concerned about being recognized as politically liberal feminist artists. This is because some of my participants were living in politically conservative countries or regions and had faced threats of violence over their work, both on social media platforms and in their everyday lives. During interviews we discussed these concerns and I had to think carefully about how to manage the risk of harm that could stem from participating in my research. As well as using pseudonyms, I also obscured details about where in the world participants were located and about their work, so that they were not identifiable.

## Section Summary

- Reflexive sampling approaches are necessary when working with hidden or hard-to-reach populations because they allow you to consider how your positionality impacts how representative your sample will be.
- Limited resources such as time and money might mean you need to adapt methodological plans throughout the research process.
- Online interviews can offer a practical solution, and they also allow researchers to build inclusive and diverse samples.
- Ethical concerns should be specific to your sample to address the multiple ways that harm might be understood within the context of the group.

## Method in Action

### Accessing a Global Sample

One of the most successful aspects of using online interviewing methods for my research was that it allowed me access to a global sample. I worked with 16 participants in total, all digital feminist artists. All participants were self-identified women and were aged between 23 and 50 years old. Participants were located across the United Kingdom, France, The Netherlands, Germany, Italy,

Canada, and the United States. While all participants were located in major cities at the time of interviewing, they frequently relocated.

The online approach to interviewing created ways to engage with participants from around the world who were part of a hidden group. This meant that I was able to construct an inclusive space by which multiple perspectives were centered as valuable to the construction of knowledge and were made visible. This has a direct relationship to the epistemological underpinnings of my research where I recognize that multiple and fragmented experiences of womanhood, and in this case being a digital feminist artist, are all valid ways of knowing about the world. The dispersed geography of my participants was important in that makes visible the experiences of a hidden population, and values the multiple perspectives that shape the ways that digital feminist artists experience their work and their identities.

### Challenging Power Dynamics Within Qualitative Research

Conducting online unstructured interviews with digital feminist artists worked particularly well because the online context created space to question power within the research relationship. I found that participants had more agency over the interview process, which is a key way to challenge the power imbalance within research settings. My participants were able to select times and dates for the interview that were suitable for them, they were able to select the online platform they felt most familiar with, and they did not have to travel to a suitable location. Most participants chose to be in their homes for the duration of the interview, but some were working in their studio or workspace when speaking with me. Kazmer and Xie (2008) argue that having agency and being more active in the choices surrounding the interview can help to establish stronger rapport for participants because the interview feels more authentic. I found this to be true in my research, as one participant in particular told me how she had felt nervous about the interview because she assumed it would be more formal (like a job interview, she thought). During the online interview, she reflected on the experience and told me that she was enjoying the interview as it felt like arranging to catch up with a friend or colleague because of the more relaxed conversation-like style of unstructured interviews.

Being more agentic was compounded with the use of technology to conduct the interview, and the use of the online space also worked to challenge power imbalances. The use of online spaces felt familiar to participants as they use these platforms in their everyday lives. Instead of arranging

to meet at a university campus for the interview, which would be unfamiliar and not practical for my research, online spaces felt familiar and comfortable. This, along with the unstructured nature of the interviews, allowed participants to speak freely.

The authenticity of speaking through an online platform allowed space to break down the barriers upholding power between interviewer and participant. Feminist interviewing focuses on creating nonhierarchical relationships between interviewer and participant to challenge traditional power imbalances within research (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). In my research, using online spaces to conduct interviews meant that participants were more confident to take a more active role which readdressed such a power imbalance. Participants were centered as experts and central to the conduction of knowledges. During interviews participants often asked me questions, and there was laughter and shared reflections. The familiarity and authenticity of online spaces helped to create the conditions to conduct feminist research, which negotiated this power dynamic.

## Challenges

I faced challenges during the research, some anticipated and some not, that are useful to share here:

1. **Time zones:** Arranging interviews across time zones was sometimes complicated. As I encouraged participants to offer times and dates for interviews that were suitable for them, this meant that sometimes I was conducting interviews very early in the morning or very late in the evening, beyond my usual working hours. When trying to organize interviews with participants, I had to be mindful about where they were located and their time zones. In one instance I mistakenly used UK time to arrange an interview, and when I logged in the participant did not turn up. This miscommunication over time zones meant that I had to then rearrange the interview.
2. **Language and dialect:** While the interviews were conducted in English, I experienced some challenges with language and dialect during the interviews. For some participants, English was their second or third language, and I speak only one language. At times during some interviews, we had to navigate our understandings of both questions and answers. For example, with one participant we were discussing how it feels to exist as a particular artist identity online, and I asked “Do you feel disembodied online?” My participant told me she was not sure what I meant, and I struggled to

articulate or rephrase the question. We stumbled through the ideas around real-life bodies and online identities, but the language barriers made me question how well I could fully analyze the interviews while interpreting meanings that might not be accurate.

3. Ethical boundaries: Some participants expressed that they enjoyed the interviews and that they had liked speaking with me during the interview. I also enjoyed the interviews and quickly built a rapport that felt like friendship with many participants. On some occasions this caused ethical tensions. For example, one participant invited me to an exhibition, and another invited me for coffee. Ann Oakley (1990) discusses feminist interviewing and suggests that feminist interviews can benefit from elements of friendship between interviewer and participant because they can create more collaborative research. However, I was mindful that boundaries around research relationships create more ethical research. I navigated this with participants, reminding them that this was a research relationship.
4. The context of interviews: Some of my participants were well-known artists within digital art fields, and they are regularly interviewed by journalists for magazines. This sometimes caused a challenge because participants expected a certain type of interview from me, and my expectations were different because I was using an unstructured interview method for the purpose of academic research. Some participants expected to have pre-planned questions sent in advance, and one participant remarked that she only expected to be asked about her work and not about her thoughts or feelings about her position and experience as a digital feminist artist. I had not expected this particular challenge, so after the first interview I had to adapt my approach to ensure that I made space at the beginning of interviews to discuss my understanding of the interview and encouraged participants to ask questions. This led to interesting discussions about the purposes of academic work, and the value of interviews more broadly.

## Section Summary

- Online unstructured interviews can be useful for challenging power dynamics within the research process as they can feel more authentic for participants.

- Challenges surrounding time zones and language need to be carefully navigated when working with an international sample.
- Researchers should be reflexive and adapt their methodology according to emerging challenges.

## Practical Lessons Learned

Each research experience is a rich learning opportunity. Here are some of the important things I learned that have since shaped my research practice.

### Qualitative Research Is Messy

During my PhD research I was worried that the research process felt complicated and messy, and I struggled to neatly tick off tasks as everything felt like it was ongoing and never finished. Many of the research steps overlapped, I was undertaking a second wave of sampling while conducting interviews and starting to transcribe and analyze at the same time. It felt like I would never be able to make sense of the data. What I learned through this process is that qualitative research is messy, and that is fine. I learned to work in a messy way and embrace the complexities of qualitative research.

This sense of messiness also helped to develop my understanding of doing feminist research. Briony Anderson, Kajsa Lundberg, and Samantha O'Donnell (2024) argue that mess *is* the research, and we should not try to manage or clean up messiness. Instead, they suggest that mess highlights the feminism within feminist research because it exposes the complexities and the ideas beyond binaries that are inherent to our gendered ways of knowing. They also recognize mess as sparking reflexivity. I found this in my research, that I was constantly reflecting on my position and how it impacted the research, and I was constantly thinking about ways to be more inclusive and conduct ethical research. Feminist research is messy, lively and dynamic, this is where the richness of the research happens. Learning to exist with and through the messiness is my most valuable lesson from conducting research.

### Pay attention to practical challenges

Practical challenges such as time zones and using technology can be easy to overlook, but it is important to think carefully about how you will navigate these challenges early on in the process.

If you are using online interview methods for data collection, make sure that your software works and you know how to use it, that you know how to record the interview, and that your participants also have access to the software. Be mindful about where in the world your participants are and remember to convert time zones where necessary. When arranging interviews, think about what time of day it will be for you and if you will be available to interview at that time.

## Review and adapt interviewer style

All interviews are different, so it is vital that you are flexible and adaptive to different styles of interviews. With unstructured interviews in particular, you might find that some participants are very comfortable with taking the lead, where other participants might be more reserved. As the interviewer you need to be responsive to participants and allow each interview to be different. Sometimes you might need to ask more follow up questions or you might need to redirect the interview if you feel it is too far off topic.

If you want to use semi-structured interviews, it would be important to write an interview guide which maps the themes and questions you would like to cover within the interview, but also leaves space for the participant to discuss what they feel is important. I use this approach more than unstructured interviews in my current research, as I find semi-structured interviews more useful for addressing certain research questions. I value the lessons learned from conducting unstructured interviews, but semi-structured interviews using an interview guide can help with shaping the interview and moving between different topics based on your research aims.

## Section Summary

- Qualitative research is messy. This is valuable as it can help to spark more reflexive thinking.
- It is important to make time to consider how you will navigate practical challenges specific to your research.
- Make sure that you are flexible and can adapt to different interviewing styles.

## Conclusion

Using a feminist qualitative methodology that included online unstructured interviews and thematic analysis was a valuable and productive approach for my research with digital feminist

artists. Not only did this methodology allow the collection and analysis of rich, meaningful data, but it also allowed for an exploration as to how methodology itself shapes how we construct knowledge about the social world. Postmodern feminist thinking underpins the research and offered the epistemological frame in which to construct the methodology. I have demonstrated through this case study the ways that online structured interviews have been useful: they provide scope to challenge power dynamics in research, are accessible and inclusive, and can support accessing hidden or geographically dispersed populations. However, as with all research, online unstructured interviews present practical and ethical challenges, often requiring a reflexive approach to adapt the research.

This style of methodology is particularly useful for feminist researchers as it centers participants and their experiences, and values those experiences as legitimate knowledges. For future researchers, this approach encourages reflexivity and a consideration of positionality, and the wider politics of what it means to do research and construct knowledges. This is a particularly useful approach for examining topics surrounding marginalized experiences, power, identities, and social inequalities.

There are many aspects of my methodology that could be applied to your future projects, they do not have to all be used together. You can use online interview methods to access hidden or hard to research populations, or you could use unstructured interviews in person to explore identities or inequalities. You can also use a thematic analysis with semi-structured interviews instead of unstructured interviews. All of these decisions around how to design methodology need to be informed by your ontological and epistemological perspective, research question and aims, and your sample.

Overall, the approach outlined worked well for the specifics of my project and I continue to use these techniques in my research. I value the reflexivity embedded within this way of researching, and learning to embrace messiness can help to construct meaningful knowledges about the social world.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the strengths and limitations of using online interviews?

2. How can unstructured interviews challenge power dynamics between researcher and participant?
3. What are some practical challenges you could encounter when researching a hidden or geographically dispersed population?
4. Why is it important that researchers engage in reflexivity throughout the research process?
5. How can feminist epistemology shape methodological decisions in research design?

## Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. Which of the following statements best describes an unstructured interview?
  - A. The researcher prepares an interview guide and asks all participants the same questions in each interview.
  - B. The researcher prepares minimal predetermined questions and allows the interview to be guided by what is important to participants. CORRECT
  - C. The researcher sends participants a list of interview questions and they respond in writing.
2. The sampling technique that focuses on inclusion and exclusion criteria is called
  - A. Purposive sampling. CORRECT
  - B. Snowball sampling.
  - C. Random sampling.
3. What does the term 'hidden population' refer to?
  - A. A group of people that live far away from the researcher
  - B. A population that are not easily identifiable based on a lack of shared group identity, a lack of official statistics or documentation concerning the group, or a wide geographical dispersion CORRECT
  - C. A population that does not want to take part in the research process.
4. Which step was taken to attract a more inclusive and diverse sample?
  - A. Second wave of sampling CORRECT
  - B. Starting the sampling process again

### C. Putting posters up in local town center

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