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Vinicio Ntouvlis[*]

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Abstract

In diesem Beitrag reflektiere ich über das Thema, wie man in der ethnographischen Forschung von Social-Media-Kommunikation einen »channel for approaching« (CfA) auswählt, d.h. ein Medium, über das mit potentiellen Interviewpartner:innen Kontakt aufgenommen wird. Zuerst wird behandelt, wie CfAs in früheren Facebook-Ethnographien adoptiert wurden, bevor die Herausforderungen meines Projekts – auch einer Facebook-Ethnographie – reflexiv und kritisch diskutiert werden. Dazu wird auch eine Pilot-Studie präsentiert, wo Nutzer:innen via Facebook Messenger kontaktiert wurden. Alles in allem argumentiere ich, dass bei der Wahl eines CfAs Medienideologien (der Nutzer:innen sowie der Forschenden) und die Affordanzen des Mediums zu berücksichtigen sind.

Schlagwörter: Ethnography, interviewee recruitment, reflexivity, media ideologies, social media, Facebook

* Vinicio Ntouvlis, Department of Linguistics, University of Vienna, vinicio.ntouvlis@univie.ac.at.

1 Introduction: Establishing (digital) contact

Communicating with research participants is paramount to ethnographers, wherever they may be conducting their research. Recent decades have seen the emergence of ethnographic fieldwork based not only in physical field sites but also online. These digitally-geared approaches, varied in scope and methods, have been introduced under various names, including "virtual ethnography" (Hine 2000), "netnography" (Kozinets 2019), and "digital ethnography" (Varis 2016). Adopting the latter term here, in digital ethnographies the necessity typically arises of communicating with participants chiefly if not exclusively through digital channels. This may range from establishing initial contact with users to conducting full-fledged interviews in digital environments. This paper provides a reflection connecting these two points, focusing on how to go about digitally establishing contact with users when seeking to conduct online interviews with them.

The conduction of qualitative interviews online has been a topic of scholarly debate since the earlier days of the internet (see, e.g., Chen & Hinton 1999; Crichton & Kinash 2003; Mann & Stewart 2000). Issues of interest have included the optimal selection of an interview medium, whether it be a particular platform like Skype (AlKhateeb 2018; Seitz 2016) or Instagram (Hugentobler 2022), a more general preference for a-, semi- or synchronous communication channels (e.g., Clarke 2000; Kazmer & Xie 2008), or a consideration of the modalities of the conversation (audio, video, writing; e.g., Oates et al. 2022; Salmons 2012).

What these issues amount to is processes of decision-making regarding the use of media in one's research. As such, these are matters decidedly shaped by *media ideologies* (Gershon 2010); i.e., our varied stances and belief patterns surrounding the appropriate use of media in communication. Ideological judgements about the usability of media and the moral connotations of their use are of particular relevance to digital ethnographies. A key reason for this is that researchers and research participants today tend to have access to and habitually use multiple communication channels in their day-to-day lives. This idea is

captured by the notion of *polymedia* (Madianou & Miller 2013). Madianou & Miller (2013: 170) define polymedia as "an emerging environment of communicative opportunities that functions as an 'integrated structure' within which each individual medium is defined in relational terms in the context of all other media." This approach thereby puts "emphasis upon the social and emotional consequences of choosing between those different media" (ibid.). These "social and emotional consequences" are especially salient in digital ethnographic practice as researchers attempt to establish contact with potential informants in mediated environments.

Adopting this framing, in this paper I want to provide a reflexive account of my own media-related research practices for interviewee recruitment in my doctoral project. Specifically, I want focus on the choice *not* of the medium through which to conduct interviews, but of *the digital communication channel through which to establish first contact with potential interviewees*. Despite existing discussions of interview media and their pros and cons, the choice of this channel, which I will call the *channel for approaching* (CfA), is given little attention in published qualitative research on social media. Mostly, a brief note on how interviewees were contacted appears in papers' "Methods" sections (e.g., Farquhar 2012), most pronouncedly in studies on sensitive subjects (e.g., Demant et al. 2019), which also invite dedicated reflections on the topic of contacting interviewees more broadly (see Lavorgna & Sugiura 2022). Through this paper's reflection, I want to explore this hitherto under-discussed aspect of interviewee recruitment in digital ethnographies, seeking to bring attention to how media-ideological judgements are involved in one's choice of CfA at every step of the way and from multiple standpoints. Namely, *the researchers', the users',* and *the platform designers'* understandings of media and their usability, I argue, all influence the viability of our methodological choices for approaching research participants on social media, in ways that should be reflexively and critically examined.

The discussion will be structured as follows. First, I will consider how the researchers' views on how to "best" establish contact with participants play a role in the choice of a CfA. To do this, I will briefly

introduce my own doctoral project before surveying and discussing how CfAs were chosen in similar studies (Section 2.1) and what challenges I faced in mine (Section 2.2).

Then, I will present some preliminary insights from a pilot study I conducted, in which I reached out to Facebook users via the platform's instant messaging feature *Messenger*. My experiences in this pilot study shed some light onto users' views of this particular CfA (Section 3.1) as well as the platform's in-built assumptions about the feature's usability (Section 3.2).

Finally, I will present the upshot of my methodological decisions for contacting potential interviewees, highlighting the importance of dynamic and reflexive decision-making (Section 4). Section 5 will succinctly summarize the paper's main points and limitations.

Before the discussion begins, a few terminological clarifications are necessary regarding how I will be referring to technological tools. Following Tagg and Lyons (2021: 727), I use "medium" as a purposely broad term "loosely to refer to an array of channels or modes of communication, platforms, apps and devices." Then, as hyponyms of "medium," I use "platform" to refer to distinct social networking sites like Facebook or Instagram, "app" to refer to their app configurations (or other applications) where relevant, and "channel" to refer to a closer aspect of a medium that is used (e.g., the instant messaging feature of a platform). "Channel" is thus the narrowest term in scope, but it is also underspecified; hence, "channel for approaching" can refer both to sending instant messages via Facebook's Messenger and to making a Facebook post, thereby capturing salient differences.

2 Digital ethnographers seeking interviewees: The researchers' perspective

My dissertation project comprises an ethnographic study of playful, or *ludic* (Huizinga 1949), digital communicative practices arising in and around Facebook groups. A main empirical object of interest, for example, has been the creation and use of so-called "tag groups":

Facebook groups that are ostensibly created not for being joined, accruing members and content posted within, but primarily *for their titles to be tagged in Facebook postings*, thereby functioning as quoted utterances. In examining how users take up the semiotic technology of Facebook groups in such practices, I am thus particularly interested in how the *feature* of Facebook groups, as embedded onto Facebook's *semiotic surface* (Poulsen & Kvåle 2018), plays a role in the shaping of platform-specific communicative practices and, concurrently, of localized meaning-making patterns, filtered and regimented through media ideologies.

A key component of my methods in this project was the conduction of semistructured interviews with Facebook users who are well-versed in using Facebook groups for playful communicative practices. This necessitated establishing contact with participants who would be willing to be interviewed about how they have fun in and around Facebook groups. I thus found myself in a similar position as other ethnographers conducting studies on Facebook; i.e., in need of people to speak to about their practices on the platform.

In what follows, I provide an overview of how interviewees were digitally approached in previous studies like mine to show (i) how the process of establishing first contact with participants through a particular CfA is under-discussed, and (ii) how this same process is shaped by the researchers' (media-ideological) expectations on what may constitute an advantageous course of action.

2.1 Finding interviewees in ethnographies of Facebook

In the searches I conducted for this brief literature review, I managed to identify 20 publications reporting on qualitative social scientific research on Facebook which mentioned direct contact with participants (mainly interviews, but also informal chats) as a methodological component. Of these, I discuss here only those that reported on explicitly *ethnographic* research, which amounts to eleven out of 20. As Hine

(2005) points out, characterizing one's internet research as an ethnographic endeavor constructs online environments as cultural contexts, which serves here as an ontological through line connecting my empirical work with the literature surveyed in terms of its research ethos. The containment of this review's focus on specifically *Facebook*-based studies is done for practical reasons concerning the size and scope of this paper, which mainly focuses on my research experiences, and surveys other similar studies only as a way of contextualizing the discussion.

When examining ethnographies of Facebook for their CfA-related practices, a first revealing observation is that in about half – five out of eleven – studies considered, the channel through which interviewees were approached was not reported at all (Arzadon 2017; Bosch 2009; Georgakopoulou 2017; Oliveira Neto & Camargo Júnior 2019; Susilo 2014). In three of these cases, the researchers reported having *additional (i.e., project-external) online-offline ties* to the interviewed parties, as they either belonged to the same university (Bosch 2009; Susilo 2014) or they came from the researcher's extended social circle (Georgakopoulou 2017). This effectively constructs one's research "field" from which a pool of potential interviewees can be drawn up as an *online-offline* one. That is, the conception of these studies was seemingly such that contact with participants did not have to be initiated in digitally mediated environments. In turn, this may have reasonably rendered the choice of CfA less of a vital consideration for finding willing interviewees. For example, in Bosch's (2009) study, contact had been previously established with the people who were eventually interviewed, as they were university students who had already been asked to fill out a survey. Similarly, Georgakopoulou (2017) chatted with teenage informants who came from her daughter's friend circle.

Moving on to studies in which a CfA is reported, the convenience sampling approach (Salmons 2014) applied by Georgalou (2017) similarly relied on the researcher's network. In this case, the researcher sought out interviewees starting from her friends and family, who she asked to "forward [a] message to Facebook contacts of theirs" (Georgalou 2017: 27). Georgalou (2017) then emailed the participants

she found through her social circle (Facebook friends of Facebook friends), making email apparently the CfA of choice in this study. The researcher notes that her friends and family ultimately acted as "insider assistants" (King & Horrocks 2010) in this case, thereby "establishing further credibility for [her] study and […] nurturing honesty and commitment on the part of the interviewees" (Georgalou 2017: 27). It is also pointed out that the researcher's personal contacts were mobilized only as intermediaries and not as interviewees themselves for a reason: "The simple reason I did not recruit friends and acquaintances of mine was to avoid subjectivity and bias in my analysis" (ibid.). With this statement the researcher evidently sets a limit to the perceived advisability of recruiting participants that are (too) close to her.[1]

Like Georgalou, Hosseini (2017) also found willing interviews based on existing contacts, but in this case specifically *online* contacts, namely Facebook friendships from within the religious community she was studying. Regarding her process, she reports initially using Messenger to conduct some interviews, but also notes that she faced some dropping out and reluctance to participate with this method. She then turned to posting some questions directly on the page she studied, after obtaining the administrator's permission. This created an interview-like setting in the post itself, rather than having the post serve as a gateway to one-on-one discussions, or a CfA in our terms. Importantly, Hosseini reports expecting that the administrator's permission to post to the community may have bettered her chances at getting responses: "Because the admin knew about the post and accepted it, I hoped it would be more accepted by other members and viewers" (Hosseini 2017: 9). Still, this move proved not to be sufficient for her study and the researcher ultimately had success finding interviewees through established Facebook friendships, as mentioned above.

All in all, to the extent that the studies discussed so far provide information on this, we can observe an emergent trend in choosing how to approach participants, which consists in mobilizing the researcher's

1 For a discussion of similar views on the appropriateness of ethnographically studying friends and acquaintances, see Grosser (this issue).

existing online-offline network. This appears to have occurred in five out of the seven aforementioned studies, and it presumably boosts the researcher's credibility – an expectation explicitly mentioned by Georgalou (2017) and Hosseini (2017). This state of affairs provides a backdrop against which one's first contact with participants through a chosen CfA does not come "out of nowhere," to the point where the CfA used is mostly backgrounded in the study's presentation (with the exception of Hosseini 2017), either not being mentioned at all (in five out of seven studies examined) or mentioned with no further comment on its potential significance (see the choice of email in Georgalou 2017: 26). But what happens in cases where the researchers are called upon to make a good *first impression* through a digital channel, without this backdrop?

This was the case in the four remaining studies I examined. In all of them, Facebook's Messenger was used as a CfA, either exclusively or in combination with other means. Oreg & Babis (2021) report using Messenger and other online channels to approach interviewees for one of the studies they present (which was conducted by the first author). Acknowledging that "[f]eeling safe is a prerequisite of the willingness to share one's story" (Oreg & Babis 2021: 14), the authors also mention corresponding with participants via Messenger or email for some time, in order to establish rapport before the interviews were conducted.

Also assigning importance to interpersonal ties even as he reached out to "digital strangers," Farquhar (2012) used a snowballing technique, which started with sending out Facebook friendship requests before messaging the users that accepted them. We could thus consider the friendship requests the first CfA, closely tied to Messenger chats as a second stage. Farquhar ultimately befriended 346 users and, out of these, managed to secure 48 interviewees. The snowballing component of his method consisted in asking the users he befriended to "recommend other Facebookers that might take part in the study" (Farquhar 2012: 451).

Overall, establishing an *ad hoc online network* was considered a key move for these researchers, who finally found interviewees through this purposive networking. This is not the same (for our purposes here) as

mobilizing one's existing online-offline network, which may have been established over the course of the study as in Hosseini's (2017) case, but not for the explicit purpose of finding interviewees.

The two final studies I surveyed had considerably less success with Messenger as a CfA, which however may have had to do with their subject matter. Muro Ampuero (2022) studied religious conservatism on Facebook, examining a population tied to "ultra-conservative religious groups" (Muro Ampuero 2022: 1). Even so, he frames the difficulties he faced in finding interviewees via Messenger as surprising:

> Since [the examined] groups have many followers, it was thought that finding interviewees would not be a problem. However, most of the people I wrote to did not respond to my messages […] Near the end of the fieldwork I got a positive response and the opportunity to conduct an in-depth interview. (Muro Ampuero 2022: 5)

Having found only one interviewee thus, the researcher then "had to reformulate the strategy" used for obtaining emic insights (Muro Ampuero 2022: 5), and he distributed surveys instead. These were also sent via Messenger and, out of over 100 users contacted, "only 12 responded" (ibid.).

Demant et al. (2019) faced comparable challenges looking for interviewees among a hidden population unified by stigmatized practices, namely drug dealing and buying through social media. The researchers primarily used Facebook (Messenger) and Instagram to message potential participants, encountering difficulties which they directly attributed to the nature of the population: "In some instances, the team contacted over 100 identified sellers or buyers (from posts or profiles) before getting willing interviewees, which is consistent with other hidden population studies" (Demant et al. 2019: 378). The researchers then expanded their method for approaching possible participants, also using Reddit as a channel as well as enlisting the help of acquaintances from their social circle.

Finally, it should be noted that the sensitivity of the research topic may have played a key role in the interviewee-finding process also in Oreg's study discussed earlier (Oreg & Babis 2021) as well as in Oliveira

Neto & Camargo Júnior's (2019) research, which was mentioned earlier among other studies that did not report a CfA. In the former case, the participants contacted were formerly pregnant people who, after stillbirth or prenatal loss, donated human milk to nonprofit milk banks. In the latter, the participants were people living with HIV/AIDS.

Table 1 below provides, by way of summary, a tentative overview of the CfA chosen in the surveyed publications. Also listed are the researchers' connections to the informants contacted, and where relevant, additional notes on the particularities of the research.

The representation of this summary in tabular form unavoidably flattens the complex realities that underlied each study (to the extent that these can even be reconstructed from how the studies were reported in the publications surveyed). The table's messiness is also indicative of two key points: (a) the present discussion does not comprise a deterministic or correlational approach assessing the "effectiveness" of using particular CfAs; and (b) there are no obvious choices when it comes to choosing a CfA.

Regarding point (a), it must be clarified that this discussion's focus is not on finding the "best" individual channel for contacting participants in Facebook- or, more broadly, social media-based ethnographies. Such a decision must always be a dynamic, context-sensitive one that takes into account the particularities of one's project (such as its potentially sensitive topic, as also noted in Table 1). What is discussed here is the role that the researcher's subjectivity plays in this channel-choosing process.

Tab. 1: Overview of CfA chosen and researchers' connection to participants in previous ethnographic studies of Facebook

Studies	CfA chosen	Researcher connection	Notes
Arzadon (2017)	*Not reported*	*Not reported*	-
Oliveira Neto & Camargo Júnior (2019)			Sensitive topic
Bosch (2009) Georgakopoulou (2017) Susilo (2014)		Researcher's online-offline network	-
Georgalou (2017)	Email		
Hosseini (2017)	Messenger, Facebook friend requests		
Oreg & Babis (2021)	Messenger, Email	Ad hoc online network	Sensitive topic
Farquhar (2012)	Facebook friend requests, Messenger		Snowballing
Muro Ampuero (2022)	Messenger	*Not reported*	Sensitive topic
Demant et al. (2019)	Messenger, Instagram messages, Reddit		Sensitive topic, subsequently turned to online-offline network

To approach this, I adopt the view of polymedia, which "shifts our attention from social media as discrete platforms to an understanding

of media environments which users navigate to suit their communicative needs" (Madianou 2015: 1). The point I am trying to stress is that researchers are themselves users navigating media environments, and they are called upon to make media-related choices in the course of their digital ethnographic work. The ideological dimension of these choices needs to be reflexively acknowledged, especially since relevant reflections are lacking in published research. For example, no justification is provided for why email was chosen as a CfA for Facebook users in Georgalou's (2017) study, although this was presumably a conscious choice that acquires meaning when considered against the non-choice of other available channels. As Madianou & Miller (2013: 175) put it: "Email is not simply email; it is defined relationally as also not a letter, not a text message and not a conversation via webcam." At the same time, assessing the characteristics of individual platforms or apps in one's choice of CfA can also helpfully complement one's reflexive research process, as will be discussed in Section 3.2.

Turning to point (b) – "there are no obvious choices of CfA" – it is important to recognize that, whether reported or not, rationalizations of why one chose what they chose permeate the research process and are not neutral. We can observe examples of this in Hosseini (2014) and Muro Ampuero (2022). Both authors mention instances where their choice of CfAs was not conducive to them finding willing interviewees. In doing so, they report some expectations they had concerning these choices, and how these expectations were not met. This is a first step towards considering the tentative choice of CfAs in digital ethnographic studies as producing teachable moments.

In what follows, I describe the challenges that my own study faced in terms of interviewee recruitment and how they called for continuous reflection and adaptation of my research practices vis-à-vis choosing a CfA.

2.2 Challenges of finding interviewees in my Facebook ethnography

The two main reasons for the difficulties I had in finding willing interviewees for my doctoral project are interconnected. In a nutshell, they can be labelled as (i) the study's "onlineness" and (ii) the study's topic.

I use the term "onlineness" to refer to my project's reliance predominantly on the examination of online spaces. On a programmatic level, my research rejects the fallacy of "digital dualism" (Jurgenson 2012), whereby online experiences are seen as "virtual" and secondary to "real," offline life. Instead, the study's ontological foundations embrace an understanding of contemporary social life as unfolding in an "online-offline nexus" (Blommaert 2018), where strict divisions between "the online" and "the offline" are seen as fundamentally flawed since the two "planes" are intrinsically linked, and whatever boundaries can be drawn between them are inherently porous. Even so, the decision to "go online only" (or an approximation thereof) in carving out a field for one's research is not unprecedented in Facebook-based ethnographies of communicative practices (Georgalou 2017; Procházka 2020), and it has to do with the studies' analytical focus. In my case, this decision was owed to my empirical interest in examining users' *translocal ludic practices enabled by and articulated via Facebook groups*, specifically focusing on the element of mediation (in this case, the platform's digital infrastructure) that is at play in the users' experience of these practices.

When it came to finding interviewees, this onlineness gave rise to an important issue: I was among "strangers on the web." While I myself had been a member of groups similar to the ones I studied (and in fact also of the very groups I chose for closer observation) before my project started, I had been predominantly a "lurker"; i.e., a user who does not actively post but simply observes the goings-on in an online space. As a result, no long-standing relationships had materialised between me and other members of the two specific Facebook groups I chose to focus on in my project, meaning that the help of such contacts could not be planned from the get-go. As I explain in Section 4, I eventually ended up

enlisting the help of a Facebook friend who was also a Facebook group enthusiast, but in the early stages of my study I prioritised finding users who were specifically members and posters of the two groups I had chosen to observe as my "main sites."

At the same time, the onlineness of my focus meant that the experiences I sought to hear about from my interviewees were based on what we could call "chiefly online" practices, so that no criteria – and hence no strategies – for finding participants could be based on experiences in "offline" contexts, in which participants could then be approached. For example, attempting to find interviewees among the university's students or staff would be a shot in the dark as much as trying to find interviewees at local barbershops or Catholic churches.

This is because the groups I investigated and the practices I was interested in pertained to playfulness directly involving Facebook usage – and a rather "niche" usage of Facebook's affordances at that. That is, I was not looking for members or administrators of Facebook groups about, say, the University of Vienna, or any of its programmes or courses, nor for groups grounded in the local barbers' client base or the local Catholic community – regardless of whether these also spawned Facebook groups or not. Interviewees would need to be engaged in particular ways on Facebook, and thereby be knowledgeable about niche communicative phenomena with a digital origin. For instance, they would need to know what "tag groups" are and how they are used, have some understanding of "weird Facebook" (a label some users adopt for ludic Facebook groups), and potentially also be familiar with other salient cultural signifiers: e.g., terms like "flounce post" (a querulous post made when leaving a group) or "frankentagging" (the practice of tagging parts of different Facebook group titles and thereby "stitching together" an original title). So, any communities of practice that individuals were part of in their online-offline lives beyond this particular thematic space of "playfulness on/with Facebook" (e.g., in institutional contexts, like studying linguistics at the University of Vienna) could not provide any indication that the same individuals would also be avid Facebook group users in the way I was interested in. This contrasts with other Facebook ethnographies discussed earlier, where researchers could readily

leverage existing contacts (partly) rooted in "chiefly offline" contexts (e.g., Georgakopoulou 2017; Georgalou 2017).

All in all, the optimal choice for finding interviewees for my study was, seemingly, to search for them *on Facebook*, and mostly among users I had never met, physically or otherwise. In fact, the connections I established with various Facebook users in this project also turned out not to be a reliable source of willing interviewees (cf. Hosseini 2017). Users who were otherwise highly cooperative over the course of my study, namely the administrators/moderators (or "modmins") who allowed me to study their groups, did not eventually agree to an interview for various reasons. Out of seven modmins I was in contact with, one cited lack of time; another requested a rescheduling of the interview twice before our plans fell through as there was no interest in a third rescheduling. Two more modmins stopped responding to my messages after initially indicating that they would be interested in being interviewed. The three remaining modmins never expressed interest in being interviewed after I posed my request by addressing them as a group within a group chat that I had been invited into (featuring a total of four modmins and myself).

My study's topic complicated this matter further. While the main points of my project's focus were defined from the get-go and remained constant, the identification of empirical objects of inquiry and, more specifically, field sites was an *adaptive* process (Hine 2009). Ultimately, as hinted above, two – explicitly playful – Facebook groups were chosen as the main sites for closer observation, but they were by no means the only spaces observed during data collection. At the same time, while these groups could be defined as somewhat bounded sites which exemplified phenomena I was interested in, finding interviewees from within them proved a lot more challenging than expected. I have already mentioned that I had no long-standing contacts from within the groups. Still, initially, like Muro Ampuero (2022), I expected that the sheer size of the groups' member base (in the tens of thousands for each group) would render finding some interviewees doable. This turned out not to be the case, even though my chosen topic (playful uses of Facebook's

group infrastructure) was also conceived deliberately as nothing conventionally considered "sensitive."

In fact, this latter idea of "non-sensitivity" turned out to be another assumption I had to revisit. As I learned over the course of the study, the sensitivity of online postings, and especially a static understanding thereof, may not be the best working theory for reflecting on why people may not be (and in this case, were not) willing to be interviewed. Traditionally "sensitive" phenomena that potentially also necessitate a different ethical treatment may emerge fortuitously over the course of ethnographic research on social media (see Willis 2019). Indeed, this occurred in my project too, when I unexpectedly found users posting also about, say, recreational drug use or mental health struggles in the groups I was observing. These were groups I had naively conceptualized as sort of "frivolous" in terms of their content and tone, but local understandings of what meets the bar for playful content may vary, as will, generally, the norms about what can or cannot be posted in any given group at any given time.

Further, the user groupings I was observing may be conceptualized as ephemeral *"light" communities*, defined as "focused but diverse *occasioned* coagulations of people" (Blommaert & Varis 2015: 54, my emphasis), which come together around a "shared focus." "This focusing is occasioned in the sense that it is triggered by a specific prompt, bound in time and space (*even in 'virtual' space*), and thus not necessarily 'eternal' in nature" (ibid., my emphasis). Similar to those between, say, people gathering in a pub to watch a football game, or people coming together to discuss how their morning train is late (Blommaert & Varis 2015: 55), the interactions between members of these groups are occasioned by particular postings, presented to them in algorithmically mediated ways. It therefore stands to reason that users' ephemeral and porous engagement with these Facebook groups as a fleeting aspect of their day-to-day lives may make them uninterested in being cast in the role of "lay experts" for an academic interview. This is because, following this theoretical angle, when we examine how users share memes, Facebook group recommendations, and tag groups, leaving "reactions" and comments on each other's postings in Facebook groups,

we are dealing with a kind of *ludic membership* (Blommaert 2017), where local cultural knowledge may not be consciously taken on as a solid attribute in one's lifeworld:

> An online gaming forum [as an example] is not a school, even if we find organized and tightly observed learning practices on the online gaming forum too. It [sic] turns the gaming forum into a ludic learning environment in which different forms of knowledge practice are invited, allowed and ratified. Such practices – precisely – are "light" ones too – think of "phatic" expressions of attachments such as the retweet on Twitter and the "likes" on Facebook: *knowledge practices not necessarily experienced as such, and rather more frequently seen as "just for fun."* (Blommaert 2017: 4, my emphasis)

Coming back to the practical realities of my research in such "just-for-fun" spaces, my search for interviewees came to an apparent standstill at one point. For one, as mentioned, members of the administrating teams, with whom I had established closer contact, did not agree to be interviewed. Secondly, a post asking for interviewees that I made in one of the groups yielded virtually no results: it received two reactions and one supportive comment by the administrator that had approved it. So, while the administrator's support was demonstrably present (thereby boosting my confidence as in Hosseini's 2017 case), that still, seemingly, did not make people more willing to be interviewed. Meanwhile, the administrating team of the second group I was studying did not reach a consensus in the matter of allowing me to make such a post at all, for reasons I was not made privy to.

This complicated state of affairs left me with two options. One: to seek out potential interviewees among the groups' members by reaching out to them via private messages; or two: to try and find interviewees outside these groups, possibly also by contacting them individually. Messenger being the only direct option for privately contacting users on Facebook, it seemed like it would be the main CfA I could rely on. This led to yet another conundrum as a pilot study I had conducted showed that using Messenger to contact strangers on Facebook may not be the optimal course of action, for reasons that had to do both with (1)

users' views on being messaged in this way (see Section 3.1) and (2) the platform's relevant settings (see Section 3.2).

3 Findings from a Messenger-based pilot study

While my doctoral project was still in its proposal stage, I knew that it would to some extent involve contacting users that I had had no prior contact with. Hence, I conducted what I have been a calling a "pilot study" as an assignment for a course in order to determine what the best strategy may be for establishing contact with informants. My main aim was to test if contacting users from my existing, personal Facebook profile would be preferable, or whether I should use a bespoke Facebook profile. I thus set up a sort of naturalistic experiment, whereby I reached out to users from my personal profile and a purposely created, less personalized "dummy profile,"[2] in order to (i) get a rough impression of how many responses each one would net, and (ii) subsequently debrief the users that responded, asking them what motivations or rationale led them to respond to my unsolicited message in the first place. To minimize the interference of my message's phrasing, I standardized its content and style across the two conditions.

Overall, 27 members of my chosen Facebook groups were approached in this pilot project (eleven from the personal and 16 from the dummy profile), out of whom only five responded (three out of eleven for the personal and two out of 16 for the dummy profile approach). While no claim can be made for the statistical robustness of this finding given the very small sample, it can be noted that based on these numbers the cumulative response rate was approximately 18.5 %. The five respondents (nicknamed Anne, Collin, Ella, Mandy, and Rick) were first asked to evaluate the perceived trustworthiness of the researcher's approach based on the profile they were contacted from. They were then also shown the other profile and asked if they would have felt differently about responding to a message coming from that

2 The dummy profile has not been altered since and can be accessed via this link: *https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100070005105329* [Accessed 26.06.2024]

one. It is the judgements that were thus elicited from participants that are of particular interest here.

3.1 Users' perspectives on being contacted via Messenger

Participants generally judged the personal profile as inspiring more trust in the researcher by virtue of displaying more information. They reported assessing the researcher's credibility by actively checking various infrastructural elements of the Facebook profile: friends (number, lack thereof); group memberships (any in common); any content/information shared as "public" (or lack thereof); time of the account's creation (new accounts seeming "sketchy"). Negative impressions garnered by browsing these platform features were said to lead to an overall judgement of the profile, and hence the approaching party, as inauthentic: "bot or spam-related" (Collin); "an alt," i.e., an "alternative" profile created in addition to the user's main one (Mandy); "a fake account" (Rick).

These findings already speak to the bearing that media ideologies have on judgements of the researcher's credibility based on the chosen CfA. Participants expressed opinions on varied semiotic conduct that may be read as (in)authentic within a single platform and its features (here: Facebook and the Facebook profile in particular), similar to Ross's (2019) findings on the ideologies surrounding different kinds of Instagram accounts (primary profiles vs. *finstas*, "fake" Instagrams). In Ross's (2019) study, participants construed finstas as more authentic than primary Instagram profiles, citing how the former have a smaller audience (an "intimate community" in an informant's words; Ross 2019: 368) while the latter are more curated to garner likes ("it's not your real life"; ibid.). Users in my pilot study also distinguished between more and less authentic identities projected in the form of Facebook profiles, contrasting personal (and thus authentic) profiles with "alt" profiles, "fake" profiles (which were here seen as inauthentic, unlike finstas), or even accounts not tied to a person but to spam bots.

Importantly, participants mentioned basing their judgement on concrete cues that were readily read off of Facebook's semiotic surface: a recently created profile, a profile displaying few/no friends or little/no public content, etc. Baym (2010) observes that the expectations of less trustworthiness online relate to the fact that people project disembodied identities in digital spaces. In the absence of the body, the reading of cues found in the digital infrastructure becomes a central concern in demystifying others' identities (Baym 2010: Ch. 5).

In the end, despite the pilot study's data being only indicative, the participants' reports presented so far begin to demonstrate the significance of the CfA (here in the connection of one's Messenger texts to a Facebook profile) when it comes to users' assessment of a researcher's first contact with them.

But the most revealing testimonies for the present discussion emerged serendipitously, and they concerned the perceived "sketchiness" of receiving unsolicited messages from non-befriended Facebook users via Messenger. Messages received from users who are not one's friends on Facebook get automatically filed as "message requests" on Messenger. This is an infrastructural feature of Messenger's configuration (both in Facebook's browser version and on the Messenger app) in the form of a separate inbox folder, appearing as an isolated tab that is not prominently displayed. Due to the folder's lesser prominence, Anne and Collin mentioned that they often do not see messages sent there until much later. This built-in feature that isolates messages from "Facebook strangers" (non-friends) thus becomes the basis for a contrastive differentiation with semiotic potential (Poulsen, Kvåle & van Leeuwen 2018): there are "normal" messages (from friends) and mere "message requests" (see also Section 3.2 below).

In fact, participants commented, unprompted, on how these affordances of Messenger are assigned negative indexical meanings. Four out of five respondents described how receiving a message request inspires little trust. Collin mentioned always checking the sender's profile when he receives a message request (presumably for signs of authenticity, as seen above). The female-presenting respondents in particular distrusted message requests with some intensity: Ella was reluctant to trust the

researcher's message given its provenance (a male-presenting non-befriended Facebook user), while Mandy and Anne reported experiencing harassment from male users through this channel, and thus finding it "sketchy" (Mandy) or treating it with apprehension (Anne).

All in all, these preliminary findings indicated a negative perception of Messenger message requests among some users, while also showing how the embedding of this CfA on Facebook's platform invites a series of practices on the participants' end, which ultimately inform their subjective perception of the researcher as trustworthy or not. Still, the participants' perspectives form only one of many parts of the picture when it comes to the viability of choosing a certain CfA. In fact, it is not only users (researchers and participants) who harbor particular expectations about the use of media; platforms do too, by design.

3.2 Platform-imposed limitations to Messenger's use

I have so far focused on the assumptions of social actors (researchers and research participants) as they factor into the process of finding willing interviewees in one's digital ethnographic study, specifically when it comes to approaching users through a particular channel "out of the blue." Yet, assumptions are also embedded within technological tools themselves (Poulsen, Kvåle & van Leeuwen 2018). As Gershon (2010: 285) points out: "While we cannot speak of the 'intention' of a particular medium, science and technology studies have shown that designers often embed implied users and implied causal narratives within the structure of the technology." This aspect must also be taken into account when choosing a CfA.

This was a salient consideration in the pilot study I am reporting on (and my subsequent research practices). Although I have so far presented negative views of Messenger shared by participants, it could be argued that using Messenger as a CfA did lead to some – arguably limited – success in finding users willing to be speak with me. Why could the same strategy of messaging non-befriended Facebook users en masse not be

adopted for the whole project (similarly, e.g., to Farquhar's 2012 strategy of massively sending out friend requests)?

An argument against this arose from my pilot study and had to do with the rules governing the use of Messenger itself as dictated by its design. Sending out message requests en masse would amount to spamming – and not only for the users contacted, but also *for the platform*. I found this out when, during my pilot study, I received a chat ban on my dummy account after messaging 16 users. An investigation of the Messenger Help Center's cited causes for chat bans suggests that the volume of messages I sent may have been the culprit ("You sent a lot of messages recently"; Meta 2023c). The same page also includes recommendations for the prevention of similar bans, the most relevant one here being: "Once your block is over, please send messages and friend requests only to people you know" (Meta 2023c). The existence of this "disciplinary" feature paired with a clear instruction to refrain from contacting non-friends (and indeed even from befriending people one does not "know") means that sending out message requests in droves is not a viable strategy also from a technical standpoint (at least in the version of Facebook in which the present observations were made).

At the same time, in the information found on Messenger's Help Center page for explaining chat bans, one also encounters Facebook's "real name" policy as an additional expectation for how the medium is *meant* to be used. This policy is directly tied to texting other users via Facebook Messenger. Not only should contacted users be "people you know," but one is also given the following instruction for preventing chat bans: "Use the name you go by in everyday life to help the people you're messaging recognize you" (Meta 2023c). This points to the relevance that Facebook's conception as a *"real name" platform* has for researchers seeking to establish contacts on it.

This characteristic of Facebook is a key trait of the platform and has consistently been noted by researchers, but we also need to reflect on what it practically means for researchers-as-users reaching out to other Facebook users. In their early study, Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin (2008) distinguished Facebook as a "less anonymous" (or "nonymous") social media platform, where connections may be "anchored" in offline

relationships (see also boyd & Ellison 2007: 221). This norm is actively enforced by Facebook. The platform's guidelines prescribe that Facebook profiles should be based on users' legal names because "Facebook is a community where everyone uses the name they go by in everyday life" (Meta 2023a). Should there be grounds for the platform to doubt the legality of the name on one's profile, Facebook issues warnings to users, asking them to change their listed name and provide confirmation of its legal status by showing identification documents (Meta 2023b). While adherence to these "real name" guidelines is by no means total (see, e.g., Baym 2010: 109), this state of affairs may create an environment where users approached by the researcher might feel more exposed by virtue of being contacted under their legal name, in contrast to, for example, platforms like Reddit, where usernames not based on legal names are the norm – and, in fact, can even be generated by the platform itself.

In the end, aspects of a platform such as its "real name" policy or chat ban regulations (which may also be discovered through trial and error) are important considerations to take on when choosing a CfA. Using the theoretical lens of polymedia introduced earlier entails approaching first and foremost individuals and their practices, as polymedia is chiefly interested in people's attachments to media in a larger mediatized environment (Madianou & Miller 2013). Yet, taking stock of a particular medium's affordances is also necessary when specific channels for contacting potential interviewees are chosen.

While affordances are less of a static given and more of a reality dynamically co-constructed by the users making use of a technological tool (Hutchby 2001), platform-introduced norms and the (automated) enforcing actions they may entail are a key part of the puzzle. In the case of Facebook, the platform as a center of authority normatively constructs users interacting on Messenger as "people who know each other" and/or "use the name they go by in everyday life." Therefore, as a digital ethnographer, it is important to consider before "going in" how the adherence to these normative expectations influences: (i) the infrastructure's features and regulating measures (e.g., filing messages by non-friends as message requests, issuing chat bans), and (ii) the users'

stances towards being contacted via a channel like Messenger by non-friends: Can they not reasonably expect to be among "people they know" on this platform?

4 Resolution: How I found interviewees and what I learned

The insights I gleaned from my pilot study (Section 3), paired with the challenges inherent in my research design (Section 2.2), led me to approach potential interviewees through my personal profile and, most importantly, avoid writing to users I had not befriended. This amounted to a mobilization of my existing online-offline network, as commonly done in studies like mine (Section 2.1).

First, I sought out the help of a Facebook friend who I had come in contact with due to our shared interest in Facebook groups, and who then connected me with five more willing interviewees. This effectively resulted in a snowballing strategy. Another willing interviewee was found through a common acquaintance who knew of my and the interviewee's shared interest in playful Facebook groups. Two final interviewees (for a total of nine) were also found through my circle of Facebook friends. In this latter case, the Facebook friends were acquaintances who I had known for reasons unrelated to Facebook groups but who also were not close friends or family members of mine. They responded to a post I made on my personal profile asking for interviewees for my project – a different eventual CfA.

All things considered, my interviewee recruitment process exemplifies a case of actively considering the CfA's role in a Facebook-based ethnography. Namely, I reflected on my own (ideological) expectations as a researcher for what the "right" CfA might be, also informed by previous researchers' practices, and additionally taking into account both the platform's affordances/embedded assumptions and users' ideologies about being contacted via Messenger, as revealed in a small pilot study.

These reflexive practices build upon established ideas regarding digital ethnographers' need to attune to the digitally mediated environments they conduct their research in:

> In an online space, […] an ethnographer has to find a way to be active using the technologies that are available for communication with participants in that space in order to create a dialogue that allows for mutual understandings to develop. This might involve using the public space of a forum or social media profile but also include private interactions using emails and private messaging. *An online ethnographer needs to develop a sense of the appropriate etiquette for each mode of interaction.* (Hine 2017: 321, my emphasis)

While in the passage above Hine mostly refers to the distinction between public and private channels' perceived appropriateness, her use of the word "etiquette" points to communicative norms in a given space which are subject to differential evaluation. While, from a sociolinguistic standpoint, these norm configurations can be readily described as "microhegemonies" in Blommaert's (2018) sense, on a higher level of abstraction their entrenchment in people's perceptions and their association with different communication channels ("modes of interaction" in Hine's terms) reframes them as media ideologies. In this paper's reflection, I have attempted to stress that ideologies about how media ought to be used must be considered when choosing a CfA, and indeed from multiple perspectives; namely, asking:

1. What are *my assumptions, as the researcher in this particular study*, regarding the question of what channel would be most suitable for contacting participants?
2. What are my potential *research participants' views* on the channel in question (to the extent that I have learned about them)?
3. What are the *designers' assumptions* embedded into this piece of technology based on its affordances and internal regulations?

As a one-size-fits-all approach to choosing a CfA in digital ethnographies of social media is impracticable (let alone undesirable), I propose questions 1-3 above as general guidelines that can be

dynamically adapted to one's study. My hope is that these insights stemming from my own doctoral research experiences may prove helpful for other (early-career) digital ethnographers of social media communication.

5 Conclusion

When conducting digital ethnographies of social media (or indeed, in general), it can be daunting to try and find people to have an honest-to-god conversation with. Through this paper's reflection, I hope to have shown that there are no obvious choices when it comes to choosing through what channel to approach people for an interview in digital spaces. Rather, the social understandings of media must be comprehensively considered.

Still, the list of points I have raised as worthy of consideration is by no means exhaustive. For example, the (linguistic) design of one's messages when approaching users in digitally mediated settings is also crucial for the establishment of trust and rapport. While it has not been covered here for reasons of space, this matter requires its own dedicated treatment as it intersects with complex questions concerning the researcher's positionality and identity performance, audience design, and semiotic ideologies more broadly.

All in all, the significance of adopting a reflexive and critical stance towards every aspect of one's methodological choices is paramount in digital ethnography. The semiotic ideologies at play in interviewee recruitment in particular are a matter that applied linguists, and especially those of an ethnographic persuasion, are uniquely suited to examining. When it comes to choosing a CfA, such judgements may make all the difference, figuratively speaking, between approaching someone in a safe space or walking up to them in a dark alley.

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