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# **Researching Tenant Activism by Using an Uncommon Method: the Online Written Interview**

In *SAGE Research Methods: Doing Research Online, Cases*

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## **Abstract**

Under constrained resources, when costs of interview transcription were prohibitive and my time for data collection was limited, I ventured to take online an uncommon method, the qualitative questionnaire. It was my first attempt. The research was conducted in 2020 in the United Kingdom with private renters engaged or interested in tenant activism. I explored private tenants' renting experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic; modalities of activist engagement; and their demands to the government. As a qualitative researcher, I worried for low take-up and poor data. I should not have! The online qualitative questionnaire collected data of extraordinary breadth and depth. It is this richness of answers to open-ended questions, which we tend to associate with interviews, that makes an online questionnaire better described as an, henceforth, online written interview. Drawing on my positive experience, this case study aims to raise awareness of this valuable method and give practical advice on designing and promoting it online. Through participant quotes and data quantification, I illustrate the method's potential to collect rich data. Importantly, I reflect on the challenges posed by participant self-selection in online research and related limitations, and consider the ways in which these can be overcome or interpreted. Briefly I also open a window on preliminary data analysis and creative ways to combine the method with other approaches. My final word: go for it, you will be pleasantly surprised.

## **Keywords**

Online written interview, Qualitative questionnaire; Tenant activism; United Kingdom, Research method;

## **Author's biography**

Dr Adriana Mihaela Soaita is a Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow, United Kingdom and a chartered Romanian architect and planner. She received her PhD degree from King's College London in 2011. Adriana teaches courses on housing and urban studies, social and public policy. Her research has focused on some of the ways in which housing and home are permeated by, and shape our ideas of, politics and power, space and place, emotions and embodiment. She is particularly interested in the individuals' experienced nexus between housing, socioeconomic and spatial inequalities. Adriana has published more than 20 articles in

renowned academic journals, including *Geoforum*; *Environment and Planning A*; *Habitat International*; *Housing Studies*; *Housing Theory and Society*; *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*; *Journal of Youth Studies*; *Urban Studies*.

## **Learning outcomes**

By the end of this case, students should be able to:

- Evaluate the potential of the online written interview to collect data of breadth and depth.
- Design and promote an online written interview.
- Recognize the ethical and epistemological challenges posed by participant self-selection in online research, and how related limitations could be overcome or interpreted.
- Combine the online written interview with other approaches in order to reach the digitally-excluded or gain deeper understanding of certain aspects of your enquiry.

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has re-emphasized the importance of a *good* home to peoples' and society's health and wellbeing, bringing under the spotlight the dire home's vulnerabilities affecting the private rental sector in many countries across the globe. It has thus become more important than ever to chronicle tenants' *renting experiences* during the pandemic through their own voices, as well as their *demands to the government* in order to enable renters to make a private tenancy home. In order to hear from those tenants who are more vocal, I framed my study in the perspective of tenant activism.

Funded by the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE), University of Glasgow, my research has taken the United Kingdom (UK) as a case-study. While a focus on tenant renting experiences and tenant activism has relevance beyond the UK, findings will be unavoidably contextualized in specific national, even local geographies. For instance, to use the examples of the two countries I have researched and lived-in the most, Britons have a richer culture of activism and higher expectations for good housing than Romanians do. But Romanian tenants have more market-power as they are favored by the supply/demand balance than British tenants are.

My research interest in the private renting sector predates, however, the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, I am concerned with the inequalities produced through the housing system between the property haves and have-nots. In a recent review of 125 publications regarding selected OECD countries, I exposed together with my colleagues Duncan Maclennan and Kenneth Gibb (2020) the worrying social and economic consequences of housing wealth inequalities to individuals' and societies' wellbeing and performance. If you are interested in the topic, this makes an easy introductory read.

On the other hand, I have always argued there is no other role of housing to trump that of being someone's home. I am profoundly troubled by the dire constraints that private tenants face in making their private tenancy home. The fact that a private tenancy in the unregulated private markets of the Anglo-Saxon and the post-communist European states (to name, again, those with which I am more familiar) rarely constitutes the place of safety and comfort that we call home has been increasingly documented. Together with my colleagues Moira Munro and Kim McKee (2020), I reviewed 69 qualitative publications focusing on Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, UK and USA, exposing the difficulties that private tenants face. If you are interested in the subject, this review makes a sober reading and flags key references in the field.

So, how have I come to use the method of an online written interview? Next section takes you through my 'research design' journey.

### **Section summary**

- Housing in general and the private renting sector in particular have become a mechanism that produces substantial socioeconomic inequalities of concern to individuals and society.
- Indeed, in many countries private tenants face dire housing conditions and innumerable constraints in making their tenancy home. The COVID-19 pandemic has only magnified their suffering.
- Hence, I was keen to document private tenants' renting experiences during the pandemic in the UK and, crucially, their related demands to the government.
- To answer these questions, I took the perspective of tenant activism. While both questions have global relevance, the answers are unavoidably contextualized in the particular geography of the UK.

## Research Design and Practicalities

The ‘social movements’ literature offers an important perspective to understand and methodologically operationalize tenant activism. Enquiries on radical housing activism are emerging, chronicling ‘occupy’ and ‘squatting’ movements, street protests, and unionized action across the globe. The new *Radical Housing Journal* (2020) is a good open-access resource. Given the exceptional and rebellious nature of such radical actions, an ethnographic approach would be appropriate, inviting the researcher into action, observing, documenting, conversing and interviewing organizers and their close networks. Qualitative interviews, conducted individually or in focus groups, constitute another valid approach if access and trust can be gained (prior familiarity with the group is commonly required). I confess I considered interviewing Tenant Union organizers but I was unable to obtain access.

However, I was also uncomfortable with this exclusive, radical view on tenant activism. Clearly, radical activism is supported by many other people who are less directly or only occasionally engaged. There are also other forms of activism, which are less visible and more dispersed. For instance, the housing literature suggests that tenants’ ‘activist agency’ is also expressed by complaining against the landlord, signing petitions, emailing to their Member of the Parliament, speaking up to the media. Hence, I embraced the idea of ‘everyday activism’, developed in a small but growing scholarship, coming to be understood, in Jane Mansbridge’s words, as “*talk and action in everyday life that is not consciously coordinated with the actions of others but is (1) to some degree caused (inspired, encouraged) by a social movement and (2) consciously intended to change others’ ideas or behavior in directions advocated by the movement*” (2013 p.437-8).

The perspective of everyday tenant activism, allowed me to think and sample more broadly, i.e. private tenants who considered themselves engaged or interested in activist action, either taken individually or collectively. It excluded an ethnographic approach given the dispersion of the group. It did not exclude the qualitative approach of interviewing, but my limited resources did. Hence, I ventured, and never regretted, taking online the approach of a written interview, which suited my perspective on the subject and my limited resources. I confess, at the time I had not even heard of ‘qualitative questionnaires’ but have twice conducted a written interview with

hard-of-hearing participants. Exactly what I have done, the challenges I faced and the results obtained are explained step by step in the next section.

### **Section summary**

- The ways in which we define the subject of study determine the approach taken to research design, particularly in terms of identifying the relevant participant groups, and the ways we approach them. The difference between radical and everyday activism is one such example.
- However, the perspective we take in defining the subject of study does not fully determine the research design. There are choices to be made and practicalities to consider, such as access and available resources. My choice between remote interviewing and the online written interview was based on pragmatic considerations alone.

### **Method in Action: Practical Lessons Learned**

In this section, I take you step by step through: designing and promoting an online written interview; understanding the ethical and methodological challenges of participants' self-selection into online research; a demonstration of the rich data obtained which makes this method better described as a written interview. I also open a window to preliminary data analysis and creative ways to combine the method with other approaches.

#### **Design**

As an UK academic, I had privileged access to Bristol Online Surveys (<https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/>), a platform specially created for easy construction of an online survey. While the design is far from spectacular, the platform ensures a screen free of advertising, is compliant with the UK regulations on data protection, and quality-standards are certified. However, several Survey-Builder platforms are available across the World Wide Web, some offering limited free access (e.g. up to 10 questions, the survey kept open for two months only, data downloaded in Excel only) or by month to month subscription.

To maximize the number of responses, I decided to design a short qualitative questionnaire of 24 (mostly) mandatory questions, of which 11 were open-ended. Every open-ended question was further explained/expanded through prompts in a similar way to a structured interview. To emphasize the difference between the question and its prompts, I used bold, black lettering for

the former and italic, grey lettering for the latter. I specified the ‘typing box’ of a minimum two characters (to give participants the ethical choice of actually not answering a question) to unlimited number of words. To ease typing, I left the size of the box generous (120 characters by 7 rows). Sometimes, I encouraged participants to write as much as they wished (see Table 1).

The 13 closed-ended questions asked information related to household arrangements, participants’ demographics and socioeconomics. This information is clearly needed for analysis but it can also be useful to contrast the characteristics of the sample with statistical data of the population, if available. Only fully completed questionnaires could be submitted.

The questionnaire was carefully piloted with eight relevant volunteers (e.g. tenant activists and renters). This is particularly important. It helped me detect unclear phrases, faults in the digital flow of screens, and questions I had not thought before.

The methodological approach was ethically approved by the University of Glasgow. The first screen offered information about the study and asked confirmation of eligibility (private renter aged 18 and over); the second screen asked for informed consent; then the questions followed (one or two per screen).

### **Promotion**

Fieldwork was launched on 11-Sep-2020 by advertising on my personal and institutional Twitter networks (re-tweeted by relevant groups/organizations). I also posted inviting notes in two Facebook tenant groups hosted by tenant unions in England and Scotland, with which I was already familiar. As I wanted to keep the number of questions small, I did not ask participants where they saw my invitation. I cannot emphasize enough how vital is to know where to post your invitation. Imagine the World Wide Web as an ocean, in which your online interview is but a water molecule! The effort to discover those digital platforms which are likely to be visited by the group of your interest pays off.

A slow take up was expected. Over the first 50 days, only 23 responses were received, which I confessed, worried me. The take up increased unexpectedly with the help of our communication officer, Lynsay Cooper. Her brilliant promoting text – “*we have so far received 23 responses,*

*could you help us reach 30?*” – indicated to participants that their input indeed mattered. It is therefore important not only where you promote, but how you promote it. It is of course important to be honest and open all along. You also have to be attentive to local norms, where respect, appreciation and interest may require a specific mix of formal and informal language.

By 25-Nov-2020, 60 responses were completed, with which I closed fieldwork. Overall, this was a speedy completion if compared to Jowett and Peel’s study (2017) of 82 responses received over seven months. Across the few studies using qualitative questionnaires, online or otherwise, the time of reaching a certain sample size varied largely, depending on researchers’ effort in promoting and the relationship between the researcher and prospective participants. There were dependent relationships (e.g. lecturers/students; doctors/patients) and peer relationships (e.g. conference attendees; students). Please be aware that such relationships pose additional questions of ethics and validity. You have to strategically balance the time you have for the fieldwork (start as soon as you can!), and the sample size. The latter will depend on many variables. My literature exploration found samples ranging from 10 (quite often) to over 500 (rarely). Do not be disheartened by a small sample size, the richness of data matters. Small samples of hard-to-reach participants and rich data are valuable. As I will demonstrate later in this section and hope it will stay with you, this is a genuine qualitative method whether you call it a qualitative questionnaire or a written interview.

### **The sample**

I obtained welcome variation in terms of age groups, housing and household types, and financial situations; four participants were shielding. Only one participant was a key worker, so without prior intention, my research represented the experiences of private tenants confined to home during the pandemic, working or schooling from home. This was not necessarily a bias, if correctly interpreted. I flagged the missing keyworkers as my key recommendation for future research. Geographically, responses came predominantly from the pressured markets of southern England and the Scottish central belt, which can suggest that everyday tenant activism is stronger where the vulnerabilities posed by the market are higher.

One participant identified as ‘other’ (be mindful to give this option as well as ‘I would rather not say’). Females were over-represented (n=46/60) by the same magnitude as in the few studies using qualitative questionnaires (Butler and Modaff 2016; Jowett and Peel 2017). However, only 25 represented single households as 15 were couples using the ‘we’ rather than the ‘I’; and six were single mothers. Even though this seems a huge bias and I now regret my childish, superstitious attitude of not checking the sample composition while the survey was open. I advise you to do so. Digging deeper in order to posit this bias across relevant literature, I am confident to affirm that female over-representation was similar to many qualitative studies notwithstanding the method or topic.

Nonetheless, a more balanced sample could be derived through targeted promotion but it can never be guaranteed. I disagree with removing over-represented participant categories from the database as this is both unethical and methodologically weak, whatever the criterion used. Promoting with honesty, for instance “*As females are over-represented in our sample, we are now looking for people who identify as male and other genders to give us more diverse perspectives (but females can still participate if they wish)*”, may be a way to address a biased representation. A stronger approach would be closing the questionnaire for those ticking ‘female’. I would, however, do this only after my minimum sample size has been achieved.

Overall, given the difficulties in reaching a balanced sample, I am not sure if the effort required or the delay to the project would be worthwhile. You must make this decision to suit your circumstances. A ‘balanced’ sample is still not a ‘representative’ one not least because the characteristics of the population of interest are often unknown and some remain digitally-excluded. For these reasons, when I reached my minimum of 60 responses and noticed the female over-representation, I did not pursue ‘balancing’ strategies. My timeline for analysis kicked in, and there was no guarantee of successfully addressing this bias. I had to live with it.

### **Rich data**

I confess it was my anxiety regarding data quality that made me shy away from checking the responses received while the survey was open. But how pleasantly surprised I was when I had my first look at the rich data received. Responses totaled over 33,000 words across the 11 open-

ended questions (max=2,689; average=555; min=44). This is equivalent to seven one-hour interviews, with the benefit that every word is data (rather than questions asked by the interviewer or chit-chat ‘noise’). Tellingly, the two optional open-ended questions were answered by 55 and 32 respondents.

Likewise, many respondents gave their time by answering the questions fully. The time for completion varied between less than 10 min (n=7), 10-44 min (n=40) and over 45 min (n=13). A basic quantification of the text by questions, as shown in Table 1, further demonstrates the richness of data. It is this richness of answers to open-ended questions which we tend to associate with interviews, that makes an online questionnaire better described as an online written interview.

**Table 1:** Selected questions and related data quantification

	Main question (bold black) and prompts (italic grey)	Valid responses	No words
Q9	<b>Please describe in your own words your renting experience immediately prior to the Covid19 lockdown.</b> <i>For instance, you may tell us briefly your renting history (how many properties over how many years); satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the quality/maintenance of the accommodation(s); relationship with landlord(s)/letting agent(s); rent affordability; intentions to move.</i>	n=60	<b>7,775</b> min=1 avg=130 max=1126
Q10	<b>Has your rented property - and its location - been comfortable for a ‘stay at home’ policy?</b> <i>For instance, you may comment on the availability and quality of space; privacy; access to green space, shopping and exercising; and whether your perception of the quality of the accommodation changed during the lockdown.</i>	n=60	<b>3,718</b> min=1 avg=62 max=414
Q17	<b>Please tell us about your experience of tenant activism in as much detail as you wish.</b> <i>For instance, we would like to know what you did (when, with whom), what caused you to become involved and what you hoped to achieve. Overall, have you enjoyed doing it or it has been a stressful experience?</i>	n=48	<b>3,928</b> min=2 avg=82 max=962
Q22	<b>In your opinion, what should the government do to help private tenants make their rented property home?</b> <i>Please think what would be of help to you and also tell us if you believe that such changes are likely to happen soon.</i>	n=60	<b>3,706</b> min=1 avg=62 max=606

**Note:**

- Four open-ended questions are not shown: Q24, living arrangements in 5 years time (1,681 words); Q25, change in financial/working situation (1,824 words); Q26, anything else (optional; 296 words).
- All typed words = 33,293. Per participant: min=44, avg=555, max=2,689. Three respondents typed <100 words; 30 between 100-500; 20 between 500-1,000; five between 1,000-3,000.

**Familiarize yourself with your data**

Most Survey-Builder platforms allow checking the data while the survey is still open, either online or by exporting into an Excel file. I have already said I regret not having done so. As in any qualitative research, it is useful to familiarize yourself with the data *before* closing the survey - sometimes this is called preliminary analysis. For instance, automatically generated graphs on closed-ended questions (e.g. gender, age group, financial situation), make it easy to detect sample biases in time to try to address them or to judge their relative importance against other sample characteristics.

You can also read the data ‘vertically’ by each question across all participants or ‘horizontally’ by each respondent across all his/her answers. When doing this, it is useful to think about Johanna Eckerdal and Charlotte Hagström’s (2016) stirring questions: “(a) *What concordances can we find in the material?*” (b) *Which answers have appeared as odd or unusual and what can we say based on them?* (c) *What is surprising or deviant?* (d) *What silences do we note in the answers, which questions did not generate any answers?* (e) *Do we miss something?* (f) *In what ways is the phrasing of the qualitative questionnaire shaping the answers?*” (bullets my own).

Guided by the questions above, I could observe certain peculiarities of the data, for instance the fact that descriptions of good housing tended to consist of small statements whereas poor housing generated large narratives. Such early observations will be important for how you analyze and interpret the data. While I do not focus here on data analysis, it is nonetheless useful to mention that you can opt for any qualitative approach. SAGE Research Methods Cases offer useful advice. In particular, I recommend the step-by-step guide to thematic analysis by Jon Swain (2018); Matthew Oware’s (2018) instructions on combining thematic and content

analysis; and particularly useful for small samples of under 20 participants, see Alison Hramiak's (2016) step-by-step guide to conducting grounded-theory.

### **Combined approaches**

The issue of technological and digital exclusion remains pertinent to any research relying exclusively on online recruitment and participation. Given that the private renting sector in the UK and other developed countries is usually accessed through digital letting-estate and tenant-sharing platforms, my research unwillingly excluded those tenants who face extra hurdles in finding a tenancy. The issue of digital exclusion is even more relevant in countries where digital coverage is sparse and for social groups for whom digital access is expensive, technical skills are limited, and trust/confidence in technology/digital platforms is low. It should never be underestimated but carefully considered (please consult the 'digital divide' literature, e.g. Ferreira et al 2021 and van Dijk 2005). Of course, other excluded participants were those unable to read, write or speak English, all reasons for discrimination in the UK private renting sector. Questionnaires - in several languages if pertinent - can be handed over, posted, or completed over the telephone as ways of combining the online approach in order to address the issue of digital, technological and other exclusions.

Depending on your research topic and questions, you may find the method either inappropriate or you may wish to take it a step further to a more creative approach. For digitally savvy participants, the online written interview can be ingeniously combined with visual data. For instance, participants can be invited to upload or send you by email photographs or videos of their environment together with explanatory text. This is a good way to give primacy to participants' world and draw attention to the materiality of things and the body. Alternatively, to stir participants' memory or interest, or focus a question, you can provide photographs for participants to elaborate on. As I am interested in visual method, I together with my colleague Kim McKee (2020) wrote a brief text on the use of photographs in social research. Please keep in mind that use of photographs poses additional ethical concerns, and needs understanding of the technological implications related to data requirements.

Finally, while the online written interview has the potential to successfully collect data of breadth and depth, you may want to look at certain questions more in-depth. In this case, the method can serve as a base for recruiting selected participants for follow-up in-depth, oral interviewing.

### **Section summary**

- Designing well an online written interview is important; piloting is essential.
- Prior knowledge of relevant digital platforms for recruitment is helpful for successful promotion. Making prospective participants feel their input matters is essential to successful completion.
- The challenges of participants' self-selection in online research may be difficult but not impossible to address, whether you go for further targeted promotion or for careful interpretation.
- You will more likely get good data of breadth and depth. You can set a numerical target for your sample, however, a 'good' sample size depends on your particular research questions and overall research design.
- It is useful to familiarize yourself with the data before closing the survey in order to detect sample bias, consider the quality of the data and inform your methodological choice for data analysis.
- The method can be used in combined approaches. You can: combine online with traditional distributions in order to reach the digitally excluded; use photographs to stir participants' memory or interest, focus a question, or 'enter' participants' world. The method can also give entry for follow-up in-depth, oral interviewing.

### **Conclusions**

The online written interview is an uncommonly used method despite its excellent potential to collect data of breadth and depth with constrained resources. One reason for this lack of popularity may be its unfortunate hybrid naming of 'qualitative questionnaire', which induces suspicion from qualitative and quantitative researchers alike. Another may be the fact that writing on paper is obviously cumbersome; hence, given the ease of digital typing, the method may become more popular with research being increasingly conducted online. As opposed to an oral interview, the online written interview gives time-pressured participants a space to express what they wish at a time of their choosing. Drawing on this inexpensive method and using only 11 open-ended questions, it is telling that, in fairness to the richness of my data, I produced two publishing outputs instead of my initial plan of one.

Clearly, I am so in love with the method that I wanted to inspire you. I have already started my second project in which I use this method. I now combine the online written interviews with participants' photographs and a few follow-up oral interviewing in order to develop an analysis of the temporal rhythms of migration and everyday life in a post-Brexit/post-COVID Britain.

Used on its own or combined with visual data or oral interviews, the method deserves recognition as a valuable tool in social research whether conducted online or otherwise.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. To what extent do you agree with the author's statement that the perspective you take in defining the subject of study defines but does not fully determine your research design. Discuss with examples in this text or try to apply the question to a research project you would like to undertake.
2. Discuss the advantages and limitations of using an online written interview, generally or in a research project you would like to undertake.
3. When is it worth trying to obtain a more balanced, sample through an online written interview and how would you go about it?
4. Why is it useful to familiarize yourself with your data *before* closing the survey and what options would you have?

### **Multiple Choice Quiz Questions**

1. What is the closest method to an online written interview?
  - a. A structured interview
  - b. A qualitative questionnaire
  - c. A survey
2. Why do I argue that the phrase 'written interview' better describes this methodological approach than the alternative 'qualitative questionnaire'?
  - a. To signal the richness of the data collected, which we usually associate with interviews

- b. To signal that it is a more qualitative than quantitative approach
  - c. To claim unwarranted originality
3. What type of sample should we aim to achieve with this method?
  - a. A balanced sample
  - b. A representative sample
  - c. A purposeful sample
4. What strategies of including digitally-excluded participants are feasible in the short-term?
  - a. Expanding digital education to all
  - b. Sponsoring access to technology
  - c. Using combined methodological approaches
5. When should we combine the online written interview with other methods?
  - a. Never, the method is excellent as it is
  - b. When suitable to the topic under investigation
  - c. Always, it enhances originality

## Further Reading

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## Web Resources

- **Conducting Qualitative Research** <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/mp/conducting-qualitative-research/>
- **How to write Qualitative Research Questions and Questionnaires** <https://www.questionpro.com/blog/qualitative-research-survey-question/>
- **Questionnaire: Definition, Examples, Design and Types** by Saul McLeod, updated 2018, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/questionnaires.html>
- **The difference between quantitative and qualitative research** <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/mp/quantitative-vs-qualitative-research/>

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