

**Collecting Bullying and Cyber Aggression Data with
Schools in the Digital Age: Opportunities and
Challenges of the Online Approach**

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Pub. Date: 2016

Access Date: January 27, 2017

Academic Level: Advanced Undergraduate

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd

City: London

Online ISBN: 9781473956575

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473956575>

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Abstract

In this case study, the research methods used to collect data from school-based populations online, by postal survey and in a face-to-face setting are examined. While the online context provides a great opportunity for data collection with relative ease, it also presents a number of challenges for researchers. Online data collection offers the unique potential for large national and international sampling, at minimal cost, and can allow for access to groups which are typically under-represented in research studies. However, there are also difficulties associated with this approach such as the potential for bias and difficulties in obtaining a high response rate. Furthermore, although there is often greater cost associated with face-to-face data collection at a national level, there are potential benefits such as consistent administration of research instruments and meaningful contact with the population of interest. The review of the methods used in our research will highlight some of the key factors associated with conducting research with schools in the digital age.

Learning Outcomes

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

- Have a clear understanding of the challenges faced when conducting research with populations in schools – both online and in face-to-face settings
 - Recognise the potential for response bias when conducting research relating to a specific issue such as cyber aggression/cyberbullying – particularly in an online setting
 - Understand the potential for collecting data on a large scale via online resources while also comprehending the potential pitfalls of this approach
 - Comprehend the advantages associated with face-to-face administration of research
 - Identify the appropriate approach to data collection
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Project Overview and Context

The purpose of this research was to (a) conduct an audit of secondary school principals' management of bullying problems in the Republic of Ireland and (b) examine secondary school students' experiences of bullying and victimisation both in a school setting and in a cyber setting while also assessing psychological correlates such as empathy, mental health and coping styles.

There is wide consensus that bullying is a sub-type of aggression which is characterised by intention to cause harm, repetition of the behaviour over time and power imbalance between those engaging in bullying behaviour and those victimised. Although there is a large body of

knowledge regarding 'traditional' forms of bullying, in recent years cyber-based aggression (often termed *cyberbullying* – both terms are used in this case study) has emerged as a new and unique challenge for students, parents, teachers and the research community. Thus, in the context of new anti-bullying guidelines in Ireland, the purpose of our research was to gain an understanding of the management and student perspectives of the issues at a national level. Therefore, a national audit of principals (Study 1) was a logical first step in this research, with a national study of students (Study 2) as the second step. Both studies will be discussed hereunder.

Ethical Approval and Consent

Prior to commencing Studies 1 and 2, ethical approval was obtained from the departmental ethics committee within the host institution. All participants in both studies provided informed consent. Although Study 2 included children and adolescents, principal consent (rather than parental consent) was obtained in order to allow students to participate. The reasons for this were as follows: first, principals act in loco parentis and therefore are able to make decisions in the interests of the students and, second, as suggested by Jaana Juvonen and Elisheva Gross (2008), there is the possibility that children and adolescents who may be most at risk of cyber victimisation could choose to abstain from the research rather than seek parental consent, for fear of parents being alert to online risk and monitoring their use of information and communications technology. However, parental consent was obtained in schools where it was policy to do so.

Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to gain an understanding of how secondary school principals in Ireland were managing bullying problems in the absence of specific guidance relating to cyber aggression.

Collecting Data from School Principals

At the time of data collection (2011), 18 years had passed since the most recent directives from the government in relation to countering bullying in schools. During this time, the emergence of the World Wide Web and proliferation of mobile phones, smartphones and other mobile computer devices such as tablets had given rise to the new challenge of cyber-based aggression. Thus, as an initial starting point, it was important for us to obtain a broad overview of principals' experiences and efforts to manage this aggressive behaviour.

The questionnaire used in this study examined a number of aspects of management of

traditional bullying and cyberbullying/cyber aggression (cyberbullying was a more appropriate term at the time of data collection), including

- demographic details (e.g. How many teaching staff are currently employed in your school? $n =$),
- implementation of an anti-bullying policy (Do you have an anti-bullying policy in your school? Yes/No),
- implementation of anti-cyberbullying policy (Does your anti-bullying policy incorporate the issue of cyberbullying? N/A/Yes/No),
- whole school approach to policy design (e.g. Who participated in devising your anti-bullying policy (e.g. Board of Management, Parents' Association, students, outside specialists in the area of bullying and so on)? open question),
- provision of training for staff, students and parents in relation to traditional bullying, cyber-safety and cyberbullying (e.g. Have staff at your school received any training to prevent/deal with traditional bullying? Yes/No),
- designation of a staff member to deal with cyberbullying incidents (Have you designated a member/members of staff to deal with incidents of cyberbullying? Yes/No),
- respondents' encounters with traditional bullying and cyberbullying within the school during the previous month (e.g. In the past month how many incidents of cyberbullying have come to your attention? 0/1-5/6-10/11-15/16-20/20+),
- dissemination of directives from the Department of Education and Skills in relation to cyberbullying (e.g. Have you received any directives from the Department of Education regarding cyberbullying? Yes/No),
- respondents' use of available resources and materials regarding cyberbullying (e.g. Have you availed of any resources/materials in relation to cyberbullying (e.g. the Office for Internet Safety's free resources 'Get with IT!')? Yes/No),
- respondents' desire for help from the Department of Education and Skills with regard to cyberbullying (e.g. Is there anything the Department of Education could do to help you cope better with cyberbullying? Yes/No),
- respondents' concerns regarding cyberbullying (e.g. Have you any specific concerns/worries in relation to cyberbullying? Yes/No),
- availability to participate in other aspects of the research programme, such as a study among the students in the school.

The questionnaire contained some closed, categorical response options together with open questions to allow for qualitative responses and richer analyses. For instance, respondents could indicate whether they had provided training for various members of the school community

with Yes/No responses and could then elaborate on the form that the training took through answering an open question. This questionnaire was initially posted online so as to collect data from principals.

Collecting Data Online

To gain access to the majority of secondary school principals in Ireland, a web-based survey was designed as there are potential advantages to this approach, including the lack of printing or postage which reduces costs, thus allowing for exhaustive sampling and convenient storage of data (as outlined by Madge et al., 2012). We used Zoomailer (a tool which allows users to post a questionnaire online and invite potential respondents via an email campaign) as a data collection tool in the initial online phase of the study. To begin, an email of invitation was sent to 584 school principals (all members accessible via the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) database). Thus, a large proportion of the total population ($N=712$) was invited to participate in the audit study. A link to the questionnaire was embedded in the email to allow willing respondents to access the questionnaire. The initial email had the subject 'Study 1' – a subject which we later acknowledged was vague and therefore may not have attracted recipients to open the email. However, a reminder email with the subject 'Cyberbullying Research' was sent after a 2-week period, in an attempt to attract more participation.

Zoomailer also provided intelligence on responses from the sample (e.g. how many emails were successfully delivered, how many were opened, how many were forwarded, how many were deleted and how many clicked on the embedded link). The responses to the initial email (time 1) and the reminder email (time 2) are provided in [Table 1](#). This provides insight regarding the response to the research.

Table 1. Zoomailer intelligence regarding email campaign.

Email intelligence	Time 1		Time 2	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Emails sent	584	100.00	577	100.00
Emails delivered	516	88.36	507	87.87
Number of recipients who opened the email	127	21.75	118	20.45
Number of recipients who did not open the email	389	66.61	389	67.42

Number of recipients who clicked the link to the questionnaire	59	10.10	66	11.44
Number of emails that did not reach the inbox	68	11.64	70	12.13
Number of recipients who unsubscribed from the mailing list	5	0.86	2	0.35
Number of recipients who answered the questionnaire	11	1.88	7	1.21

Table 1 shows that over 10% of emails failed to reach the recipients' inbox on either occasion. A further 389 recipients did not open the email on either occasion and therefore were unable to read the invitation to the research. Of those who did read the invitation and clicked the link to the questionnaire (>10%), only 18 principals chose to participate in the research. This constitutes a response rate of just 3.08%.

Follow-up Postal Survey

Because of the very low response ($n = 18$) achieved from the online campaign, a postal campaign was undertaken. While the web-based questionnaire allowed for access to the entire membership of the NAPD, a paper-based survey was costly and therefore had to be restricted to random sampling from the overall population ($N = 712$). The sample for the postal campaign was obtained from the Department of Education and Skills database, which contained all 712 schools in the country. Schools which had responded to the email campaign were excluded from the postal campaign. Schools were divided into four categories: Irish-speaking schools, non-fee-paying schools, fee-paying schools and schools which cater for alternative education. These categories were partly based on the categorisation system used in the Department of Education and Skills database. Approximately 12% of schools in each category were randomly selected and invited to participate in the research. Those targeted by the postal campaign received a letter of invitation, with a paper copy of the questionnaire and a stamped, addressed return envelope enclosed. Although this incurred extra costs for the researchers, the stamped return envelope was included to encourage principals to respond. Also enclosed with the invitation was a form with which principals could indicate that they did not intend to participate in Study 1 but would like to participate in the follow-up study of students (Study 2). The postal approach was more successful than the online approach, yielding a higher response percentage. A total of 87 schools received a letter of invitation, and a sample of 27 principals responded to the questionnaire by post. Overall, from both the online and postal campaigns, a total sample of 45 principals participated in Study 1.

Practical Lessons Learned from Study 1

Although web-based data collection offered an inexpensive and convenient method for accessing a large proportion of the entire population, the response rate was extremely low and therefore not representative of the overall population. Not only was the response rate poor, but in fact the expected access to principals was over-estimated as just one in five principals viewed the invitation email despite the email being delivered to their personal email address as opposed to the school email address. Personal email addresses were obtained from the NAPD database, and permission to contact principals via these addresses was obtained from the director of the association. Although the postal campaign received a superior response rate, the overall sample remained small due to the restricted invitation to participate as a result of costs of printing and post. When presented with a small sample such as that obtained in Study 1, it is important to question whether those who have been faced with cyberbullying/cyber aggression problems on a frequent or severe level, or perhaps have a particular interest in this topic, are more likely to respond. Michael Passer (2014) describes nonresponse bias as an issue that 'occurs when people who were selected but didn't participate in a survey would have provided significantly different answers (or other data) from those provided by participants' (p. 222). One finding to emerge in this research was that the majority of the respondents implemented anti-cyberbullying policy in the absence of a policy or legislative obligation to do so. It is difficult to ascertain whether this is in fact representative of the population or merely a product of nonresponse bias. As a result of the low sample size and lack of capacity to generalise findings, the qualitative data provided more valuable insight regarding the experiences of principals attempting to counter bullying in school and cyber contexts.

The response rate in this research is of concern as it may reflect lack of interest in relation to bullying during a time of immense change. Alternatively, the low response rate may be attributable to the demands that are currently placed on school management in terms of increased workload. However, there is a clear and immensely important problem with online data collection among secondary school principals in Ireland, given the inaccessibility even when emailing their personal email address directly. Perhaps there is a need for greater encouragement of this form of communication in modern times considering the need for teachers and principals to be 'tech savvy' when attempting to educate young people about protecting themselves online.

Thus, despite our attempts to use an email and survey platform embedded with advanced technology that allows for 360° intelligent feedback on how respondents deal with the initial email request and subsequent questionnaire completion, the old ergonomic adage holds: you can design the most technologically advanced system and interface – but if the user cannot

engage with it, it's useless. So, major questions arise regarding the technological approach. So too do fundamental questions regarding respondent motivation to engage with this non-face-to-face approach.

Similarly, Conor Mc Guckin, Michael Shevlin, Sheena Bell and Cristina Devecchi (2013) collected data using the same technology in a different national-level online survey that ran concurrently with our Study 1 reported here, focusing on the access and progression experiences of students with special educational needs in Ireland progressing to further education or higher education. They also experienced a very low response rate, with many of those contacted failing to open the email invitation to the research (principals, colleges, universities, professionals and support groups: $N = 2500$). Mc Guckin and colleagues highlight the fundamental issue that by failing to open the email, recipients had no knowledge of the contents of the email message or the survey. Furthermore, of those who did open the email, few of them proceeded to look at or participate in the survey. Mc Guckin and colleagues asserted that this lack of motivation on the part of professionals to engage with the research is an important consideration for anyone involved in educational research using this methodological approach. This suggests that the poor response rate to our Study 1 may be less a reflection of a lack of interest in cyberbullying/cyber aggression issues specifically and more a reflection of a lack of engagement with the research community in an online setting. This is supported by the serious problems encountered by Mc Guckin and colleagues – serious enough to render the whole work package relating to surveys in their nationally funded research to be so impaired as to have no usefulness to the project. Considering the extent of planning for such surveys, this highlights a substantial and serious issue for anyone contemplating the use of online survey methodology in the school or education sector.

What You Need to Consider When Conducting Online Surveys

Robert Groves and colleagues (2009) describe how 'huge leaps in the efficiencies of surveys came from the invention of the computer' (p. 7) with the possibility for reduced reliance on human resources for survey data collection. Groves and colleagues emphasise that computers (including handheld devices and networked systems) are used not only for data collection but also for survey design purposes and data analysis. While it is true that the Internet has facilitated more efficient data collection and analysis, Study 1 illustrates the difficulties that can be associated with eliciting a high response rate. Don Dillman, Jolene Smyth, and Leah Melani Christian (2014) describe a study on doctoral student experience in which steps were taken to maximise the response rate to a survey. The steps taken over a period of 22 days were as follows:

1. A postal invitation letter was sent to potential participants asking them to respond via the Internet. A small financial incentive of US\$2 was included with the letter.
2. An email was sent with additional information and also communicating that another email would be sent containing the survey link.
3. A second email request was sent.
4. A postal letter together with a paper version of the questionnaire and a stamped return envelope was sent for those who would prefer to answer using pen and paper.
5. A final email follow-up was sent.

This approach led to incremental increases in response rate with each contact made. Similar to this study of doctoral students, Study 1 showed that a combination of survey modes may boost the response rate. However, Dillman and colleagues describe a more thorough and pre-planned approach with a budget that allowed for including a financial incentive and for postal contact, while Study 1 included only a small-scale postal campaign as a response to the low participation rate.

Michael Kaplowitz, Timothy Hadlock, and Ralph Levine (2004) also highlight potential advantages of conducting web surveys including reduced cost and time saving. However, they also discuss the finding that web and email surveys do not always match the response rates achieved by other data collection methods. To better understand why this disparity might exist, they collected data from students on a large college campus with access to the Internet. One random sample of students received a hard copy of the survey which was mailed to them, whereas another random sample received a web survey via email. Kaplowitz and colleagues found that a web survey can achieve a response rate which is comparable to a questionnaire delivered by postal mail if the web survey follows a postal mail notification. Furthermore, they found that while a mail pre-notice can increase response rates, a reminder notification to respond was not as effective. This finding also has interesting implications for Study 1 which used a reminder email, but no pre-notice.

Although Study 1 highlighted a number of advantages and challenges associated with online surveys, there are additional considerations with regard to this approach. Mario Callegaro, Katja Lozar Manfreda, and Vasja Vehovar (2015) offer a thorough review of the overall advantages and limitations of conducting web surveys. With regard to cost, they indicate that web surveys have a different cost structure than other methods, and this is often an appealing aspect of this data collection method. However, they make four critical points on this issue:

1. fixed costs, such as the maintenance of an online panel of the general population, can entail costs which may be comparable with other methods such as telephone surveys.

2. when costs are lower for data collection, the money saved can be used to collect higher quality data through larger sample sizes, incentives and so on.
3. web surveys may incur costs to respondents such as the cost of answering a survey via smartphone.
4. quality of the data should be a key consideration and the researcher's focus should not be on budget alone.

In addition to the gains associated with reduced cost, research has indicated that web surveys can be a much faster mode of data collection. Although making the data collection process quicker for the researcher is one benefit, Callegaro and colleagues refer to evidence that answering questions in this format may also be quicker for the respondents who do not have to handwrite an answer or verbally answer a question. However, it is also important to consider that this increased speed may reflect less attention to detail and therefore lower quality of data.

Another aspect of web surveys discussed by Callegaro and colleagues is the ease with which the research can be implemented compared with other methods such as postal surveys. They also highlight advantages associated with the computerisation of data collection such as avoiding branching errors, randomisation of questions to avoid question order effect and no separate data entry process which can lead to transcription or inputting errors. Callegaro and colleagues argue that computerised questionnaires can enhance the quality of the data and the satisfaction of the respondents, but only when the design is 'respondent friendly', when there are no programming errors and when the methodological principles are sound.

An additional bonus of web surveys is the potential for inclusion of multimedia, including animations, video clips and audio stimuli. However, Callegaro and colleagues advise that such features should be considered prior to inclusion because (a) they require compatibility of respondents' devices and therefore may cause frustration by, for example, slowing download time, and (b) stimuli may have unpredictable effects on responses to questions. Therefore, it is suggested that these features should be used only when necessary.

A unique characteristic of online research is the potential to collect data at any time and without geographic restriction as long as the respondents have Internet access. Callegaro and colleagues also refer to the additional advantage of reaching low-incidence populations with less cost. Imagine a scenario where you need to administer a questionnaire to a sample of people with a rare physical or psychological disorder. A web survey could potentially allow you to access your population of interest internationally with relatively little cost. However, it is also important to consider the potential pitfalls of a web survey, such as restricting data collection to respondents in a specific region. Consider also the additional work required to translate a

questionnaire when it needs to be administered cross-nationally.

The self-administrative nature of web surveys means that there are certain advantages, including, for example, removal of any biasing effects of an interviewer's presence such as social desirability and flexibility to partially answer, leave and return to a survey. However, Callegaro and colleagues highlight some potential disadvantages of self-administration such as selection bias, lack of motivation to complete a survey due to lack of human interaction, respondents who are engaged in other tasks and do not give the survey their full attention and the lack of potential for further probing questions. In addition, for people with specific characteristics, such as blindness or reading comprehension difficulties, a web survey presents significant challenges. Overall, this review by Callegaro and colleagues highlights the many benefits associated with collecting data via web surveys, while also cautioning researchers against a naïve approach with no consideration of the potential flaws and pitfalls.

Study 2

The purpose of our Study 2 was to gather data from a nationally representative sample of secondary school students so as to explore their experiences of bullying, cyber-based aggression and bullying, use of technology and psychological correlates such as empathy, mental health and coping styles in a cyber context.

Collecting Data from Secondary School Students

A questionnaire was deemed the most appropriate method for gaining representative quantitative data from a large sample. The questionnaire used for Study 2 was adapted from a questionnaire previously used by Fabio Sticca, Sabrina Ruggieri, Françoise Alsaker and Sonja Perren (2013) from the netTEEN research team in Switzerland for the purposes of a longitudinal study which focuses on Swiss adolescents and collects data on various aspects of respondents' lives. While the netTEEN research team had sufficient resources to supply participants with laptops so as to allow them to respond to the questionnaire electronically, allowing for easy and convenient electronic data collection and storage, we were restricted by greater financial constraints – there is always a trade-off between methodological rigour and the real-life practicalities of conducting research – most notably how sufficient financial support can facilitate the methodological requirements. Although it would have been a possible alternative to collect data online in this study using an online survey to be accessed via school computers, based on the challenges faced in attempting to collect data online during Study 1, the paper questionnaire was considered the more appropriate method for Study 2.

Collecting Data Face-to-Face

In all, 17 schools from Study 1 self-selected their students to participate in Study 2. A total of 2474 secondary school students responded to the questionnaire, following the exclusion of 52 respondents who did not answer the complete questionnaire adequately (their questionnaires contained too much missing data to allow for inclusion in analysis). The sample consisted of 1082 males (43.73%) and 1390 females (56.18%) aged from 12 to 19 years (mean = 14.70 years; $SD = 1.60$), and the majority of the sample were Irish students ($n = 2205$; 89.13%), as opposed to international students ($n = 257$; 10.39%) (some missing data among the 2474 respondents). Considering that the participants were located in all four Irish provinces, the sample could be considered to be nationally representative.

As a paper-based questionnaire was used to collect data, we were required to print sufficient copies of the questionnaire and travel to each school to administer the research. There is considerable cost and time involved in conducting research in this way. However, the web-based survey had failed to gain a large representative sample in Study 1 and therefore was not considered appropriate. In addition, the face-to-face administration of the questionnaire in Study 2 allowed for a number of advantages. We had the opportunity to ensure that the questionnaire was administered consistently for all respondents (in one instance in which a school required the questionnaires to be administered simultaneously in separate classrooms, a detailed set of instructions was provided to each teacher). In addition, this face-to-face approach allowed us to attend the schools involved and to meet both students and staff in the process. In many instances, researchers collecting data from schools post their questionnaires to school administrators, collect data online or meet with school staff for interviews and focus groups outside of school hours. Researchers who do not personally visit the schools which participate in the research miss an important opportunity to learn about the inner workings of a school. Visiting a school allows a researcher to gain insight regarding the similarities and differences across schools, to learn about the management required to facilitate such research in the context of a busy school timetable and to speak with staff and students about the challenges they face personally. In addition, engaging on a personal level with the school community can provide a researcher with important sign posts as to what topics require attention from the research community.

We would agree that this personalised approach, while costly in terms of questionnaire production, travel and researcher time, provided such huge benefits that these issues became minor and trivial. We are troubled by the number of psychology and educational researchers who conduct and report research regarding schools and education, yet have never visited a school in the research process. The only way to obtain trust, data, personal and professional development and understanding of the contextual factors associated with research using, for

example, survey approaches is 'to get your hands dirty' and 'get out there' and engage!

Conclusions

This research raises questions about how best to collect data from large samples of secondary school staff and students in the modern age. It is clear that there are advantages to collecting data via web surveys. There is the potential for millions of responses nationally and internationally. An online approach can greatly reduce time of administration, labour requirements and financial cost. Indeed, in Study 1, the online approach allowed us to contact almost 600 school principals – a task made too difficult by the financial cost of a postal campaign. However, as was highlighted, the access to principals was limited by their engagement with their own personal email account. In addition, this online survey allowed for easy and convenient collection and storage of data, whereas collecting data via postal survey required us to enter the data into an electronic format.

In light of the difficulties we encountered during Study 1, a paper-based questionnaire was used for Study 2 so as to collect data from a large, nationally representative sample. Considerable cost was associated with this approach as we were required to print questionnaires and also travel to 17 schools around Ireland in order to administer the questionnaire. However, as highlighted previously, there are a number of benefits associated with this approach such as consistent administration of the research and engagement with the population of interest. We could alternatively have collected the data for Study 2 using a web survey. Such a survey could be used to collect data via school computers. Prior research on cyberbullying by Juvonen and Gross (2008) has involved collection of data from adolescents and teenagers by posting information about the survey on popular websites. However, there are limitations to such an approach, such as the following:

- A nonresponse bias could lead only those who have experienced cyberbullying to respond to the questionnaire, resulting in an unrepresentative sample. This is an important consideration for this research, one purpose of which was to gain insight regarding the incidence of bullying and cyber-based aggression in Ireland.
- It is not currently possible to obtain a random sample of Irish secondary school students using such a method. However, the methods used in Study 2 allowed for a type of random sampling, at least in order to recruit the school via postal survey in Study 1.
- There are ethical issues associated with inviting children to participate in research via online advertisement. For instance, one can request parental consent before undertaking the research but cannot ensure that it is in fact provided.
- A participant may experience emotional distress during or following the research, but the

researcher cannot be sure that each participant reads the debrief information or seeks appropriate support. By contrast, in face-to-face administration of research, it is possible to ensure that every participant receives a debrief sheet including suggested support services.

- It would be difficult to ensure that the same participants do not make multiple submissions of their data (Kraut et al., 2004, as cited in Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2009).
- It would be difficult to ensure that all participants answer the research in similar conditions. While one participant could be sitting at a computer in a quiet room, another could be answering the questionnaire while travelling in a noisy bus. Thus, the researcher cannot ensure that every participant experiences the same environment.

Overall, it is apparent that there is great potential for effective sampling of school communities through an online forum. However, currently, researchers face a number of challenges when conducting online research in an Irish school context, while face-to-face administration offers a number of advantages despite the additional financial, time and labour costs.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What are the potential benefits to your research when conducting surveys online?
2. What are the challenges associated with conducting surveys online?
3. What are the potential benefits to your research associated with conducting surveys face-to-face?
4. What are the limitations associated with conducting surveys face-to-face or via post?
5. Is it really possible to conduct meaningful research with samples that you never meet or engage with?
6. Determine a data collection approach for your research by following these steps:
 - (a) Choose a research question.
 - (b) Identify the population of interest.
 - (c) Examine the different methods of accessing a sample.
 - (d) Explore the various methods you could use to collect your data (e.g. Is a questionnaire appropriate?).
 - (e) Examine the potential to collect data via post, online and face-to-face while considering issues such as budget, time, ethical considerations and location of your sample.
 - (f) Develop a plan of how the research could be conducted.

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