

CREST

Rapport Building: Online Vs In-Person Interviews

Ewout Meijer, Katherine Hoogesteyn, Brianna Verigin and
Danielle Finnick

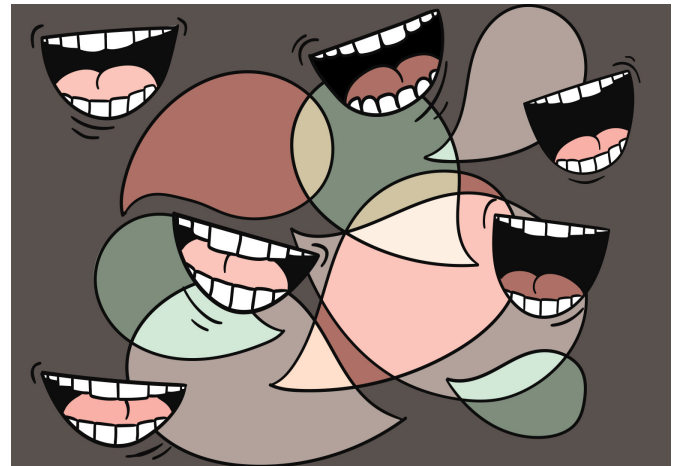
INTRODUCTION

The psycholegal literature stresses the importance of rapport for a successful investigative interview. Rapport is believed to be effective because it makes interviewees feel more comfortable and safer, fostering cooperation, and encourages witnesses to try to recall information, facilitating information gain. Indeed, experimental research has found rapport-building to increase the likelihood as well as the accuracy of disclosure from both child and adult witnesses.

The tactics recommended for rapport-building consist of verbal (e.g. finding common ground) and non-verbal behaviours (e.g. displaying empathy) behaviours. Most of the research has examined rapport in in-person contexts, where both types of behaviours are present.

Not all interviews, however, take place face-to-face. The internet has transformed the way individuals communicate, and online communication is now ubiquitous and common. In this study, we were interested in the effectiveness of conducting online witness interviews via chat, which de-emphasises the use of non-verbal rapport behaviours, compared to traditional in-person interviews.

Participants ($N = 131$) experienced a virtual reality scenario depicting a mock crime and were interviewed either in person or online via the chat function on Skype. We found that participants perceived rapport more positively when interviewed in person on three out of the five measures: *attentiveness*, *trust/respect*, and *expertise*. This indicates that, in witness interviews,



non-verbal behaviours are instrumental for the quality of rapport, which fits with earlier reasoning that non-verbal behaviours are key elements in the development of feelings of rapport between communicators. These results also suggest that there could have been detrimental effects of anonymity. Excluding non-verbal behaviour potentially causes hesitation or even distrust in assessing the interviewer as a professional.

Two other measures, *cultural similarity* and *connected flow* were not perceived differently across the interview medium. These two measures focus more on the interviewer-interviewee dynamic. Relevant for the use of chat in witness interviews is the lack of difference in the *connected flow* subscale, which measures interviewees' perceived ease of communication with the interviewer.

Considering that the purpose of rapport is to facilitate the communication between interviewers and interviewees and foster disclosure, it is relevant that participants in the chat condition felt as connected to the interviewer as those in person.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RAPPORT BUILDING: ONLINE VS IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS

Even though our results showed that chat interviews may be less appropriate for building rapport in some respects, this did not result in the reporting of less crime-related details and lower overall statement accuracy. Notably, we did find that in-person interviews yielded a greater number of peripheral details in comparison to chat interviews. This finding fits with the notion that online environments promote more focused, direct interactions.

However, participants interviewed in-person also provided more incorrect details. This observation can be interpreted in light of the social expectancies of in-person interactions. Participants interviewed in-person may have felt more pressured to provide information when prompted with follow-up questions post free recall (i.e. “Is there anything else you can tell me about...”), thus providing peripheral details they were less confident about.

In sum, we found that in-person interviews yielded better rapport ratings than interviews via chat but were equally productive in terms of the quality of information obtained, as measured by crime-related details and accuracy. Practically, our findings emphasise that when witnesses are interviewed via chat, interviewers must carefully consider how to compensate for the lack of those non-verbal rapport tactics that influence witnesses’ perceptions of *attentiveness*, *trust/respect*, and interviewer’s *expertise*.

Continuing our understanding of online rapport-building will help inform best witness-interviewing practices in an increasingly digitised society.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This report details the key findings of work conducted by the CREST commissioned project *Rapport-Building: Online Vs. In-Person Interviews*. You can view all the outputs from this project at: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/rapport-building-online-vs-in-person