

# From Physical to Digital Spaces:

## Innovating Qualitative Data Collection in Global Mobility Research

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### PURPOSE

1. to advocate rethinking commonly used qualitative methods (*interviews*)
2. to call for greater attention to alternative approaches (*participant observation; study of personal accounts and material objects*)

in order to capture the complexity and dynamics inherent in global mobility (GM)

### APPROACH TAKEN

- 1 reviewing data collection methods in existing studies (2015 - 2025), based on 4,975 publications extracted from WoS → 440 manually screened → 50 AJG 3–4\* qualitative studies closely analyzed
- 2 explicating why and how the field needs alternative data-collection<sup>2</sup> approaches, given that GM is a multi-layered and dynamic phenomenon spanning physical and digital environments<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> GM is not merely about who moves, where they move, why they move, and how the macro-level institutional factors influence the experiences of people on the move, but entails “diverse mobilities of peoples, objects and information [...] and complex interdependencies between them” (Guttormsen & Lauring, 2022, p. 442)







<sup>2</sup> Data collection is the entry point for gathering insights and constructing knowledge through interaction with people and contexts (Maxwell, 2018; Flick, 2018)

<sup>3</sup> Remote work platforms, online communication tools, and social media networks, among others, increasingly mediate how mobile individuals live, work, and sustain relationships across borders with(out) physical relocation (Bucher et al., 2025; Jonasson et al., 2025)

## FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

commonly used

least used

	INTERVIEWS 	PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION 	PERSONAL ACCOUNTS 	MATERIAL OBJECTS 
PHYSICAL CONTEXTS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>allowing for dialogue, direct engagement with informants, and their verbal elicitation to capture personal interpretations of relocation, social integration, and career mobility, etc.</li> <li>engaging with the plurality of narratives and perspectives within GM and tracing how these narratives evolve over time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>allowing for close, direct interaction with the communities studied to gain important inside-out perspectives for understanding the complex social dynamics often hidden from outsiders</li> <li>uncovering the complexity of the community's practices and meanings</li> <li>capturing the dynamics of mobility as it unfolds over time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>employing personal accounts (aka 'informant self-reports'), such as diaries or logbooks to uncover the complex, situated experiences of GM (emotions, meanings, constraints, social contexts, etc.) in informants' own reflexive voice and/or factual reporting</li> <li>allowing for uncovering dynamics of GM, such as short- and long-term transitions, critical turning points, breakdowns, or adjustments during GM journeys</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>studying objects people carry across borders, such as documents, clothing, family heirlooms with symbolic and emotional value helps reveal how individuals maintain cultural and social continuity during their mobile and transnational lives, as well as how these material artifacts function as extensions of identities and memories</li> <li>uncovering the dynamics of mobility as the meanings of objects can shift with time, events, and affective states</li> </ul>
DIGITAL CONTEXTS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>employing online interviews to reach difficult-to-access mobile subjects (e.g., remote expatriates and digital nomads, etc.)</li> <li>using repeated online interviews to uncover lived experiences and changes across different stages of a mobility, or engaging with highly mobile individuals (longitudinal studies without the logistical travel constraints)</li> <li>adopting digitally-enabled alternative interactions: chat-based interviews, asynchronous written exchanges, or instant messaging to suit participants' communication preferences or constraints</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>employing digitally-enabled participant observation (aka. digital ethnography or netnography) to observe daily work interactions with host-country colleagues, home-country contacts, and other counterparts virtually</li> <li>observing interactions and/or capturing digital field notes (screenshots, workflow or chat logs) to uncover social dynamics and trace how practices, interactions, and roles unfold and evolve over time in digital collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>accessing blogs, social media posts, photos, and video recordings on technology-enabled platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, and YouTube allows researchers to gain insights into mobile experiences displayed/ performed in digital contexts (via posted textual and visual content)</li> <li>studying time-stamped chronology of LinkedIn updates, the evolution of a YouTube vlog series, or comment threads on Reddit, etc. helps uncover the spatial and temporal dynamics of mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>with the rise of 3D technologies, virtual reality, and augmented reality, the images and meanings attached to material objects can be recreated, interacted with, and transported in digital environments</li> <li>exploring how digitally mobile or technologically created objects, whether memory-evoking digital models, immersive virtual rooms, or avatars, can contribute to a better understanding of informants' identity, emotional stability, and attachments across borders</li> </ul>

Best to integrate different approaches, such as combining interviews with participant observation, or interview/ participant observation with the study of material objects or personal accounts, to enhance the richness of insights