Running studies online - tips, tools and lessons learnt

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Since moving to a regional, largely online university in 2018, my lab has faced the challenge of carrying research without a conveniently large population of undergraduate Psychology students on whom to run behavioural studies. Rather that switch entirely to survey research, for the last three years we have been running both hybrid (survey + behavioural) and purely behavioural studies in an online environment using Inquisit and Qualtrics. This has presented some challenges and some unexpected benefits – such as the ability to collect data from much larger samples, which enables investigation of individual differences questions.

Across the three years, we have collected behavioural and survey data from over 600 participants on tasks such as finger tapping, psychomotor vigilance, executive function, and working memory, and also on established questionnaire measures of mood, sleep quality, autism spectrum characteristics and alcohol use. Interestingly, although questionnaire measures all correlated strongly, in general they were poor predictors of behavioural measures. Behavioural measures were reliable and correlated with each other, suggesting this result was probably not due to issues with measuring behaviour online. This aggregated research has implications for our understanding of both behavioural and questionnaire measures - are we measuring what we think we are measuring, and how do we know?

I will also discuss the challenges and technical issues we have faced, some alternative platforms to consider, and some possible future directions for this type of research.