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Abstract

Traditionally, focus groups have been conducted in person using the face-to-face format. However, improvements in technology have resulted in the emergence of the online focus groups. Online focus groups are an extension of traditional focus groups, which have been utilized in qualitative research for decades and, for the most part, the principles are consistent with traditional focus groups. Learning to conduct online focus groups requires the researcher to delve into the literature on traditional focus groups, as having a thorough understanding of traditional focus groups is paramount. After gaining a sufficient understanding of traditional focus groups, the researcher can explore journal articles and video clips addressing the nuances of online focus groups.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Focus Group, Online Focus Group, and Traditional Face-to-Face Focus Groups

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Conducting an Online Focus Group

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Traditionally, focus groups have been conducted in person using the face-to-face format. However, improvements in technology have resulted in the emergence of the online focus groups. Online focus groups are an extension of traditional focus groups, which have been utilized in qualitative research for decades and, for the most part, the principles are consistent with traditional focus groups. Learning to conduct online focus groups requires the researcher to delve into the literature on traditional focus groups, as having a thorough understanding of traditional focus groups is paramount. After gaining a sufficient understanding of traditional focus groups, the researcher can explore journal articles and video clips addressing the nuances of online focus groups. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Focus Group, Online Focus Group, and Traditional Face-to-Face Focus Groups

Becoming a competent researcher can be an arduous task filled with insecurities and indecisiveness. Fortunately, there are many resources available to make this process easier, engaging, and, I might add, even enjoyable. Qualitative research, on the surface, may seem straightforward and therefore an easy method to use; this belief, however, would be untrue. To carry out a quality research study using qualitative methods, the researcher must be well versed in all aspects of data collection. There are many decisions and questions which must be answered prior to actually engaging in the data collection process. For these decisions to produce a credible study the researcher will need to understand the various methods available for data collection. Technology has had a significant impact in much of our everyday lives. From basic tasks such as answering the phone, paying bills, and purchasing groceries to more complicated processes such as automobile operation, technology has impacted all of us. It is no surprise that technology has influenced the process of research inquiry. In many ways the pragmatics of data collection have been improved through technology such as digital cameras, video recorders, and transcription software. These electronic pieces have become more reasonably priced with enhanced abilities allowing for more accurate transcription of the data collected, thus helping to ensure quality. Today the digital camera, video recorder and transcription software are the staples of qualitative research.

Advances in internet applications have allowed the researcher to employ virtual communications formats to capture the research participants' understanding of a phenomenon of interest. Through online asynchronous discussion boards, chat rooms, and even online live synchronous discussions, the internet has changed the manner of qualitative data collection forever. This article will discuss my journey to understand the data collection method of online focus groups. My goal is to assist the novice researcher in understanding the use, benefits, and limitations of online focus groups. Yet to understand the utility of online focus groups one must first understand general qualitative research principles, including the data collection method of traditional focus groups.

Taking a class is an excellent way to learn more about a specific aspect of qualitative research. For me that class was one which explored data collection methods in depth. This in-depth exploration allowed me to study the different facets of data collection methods without the time constraints which would be present in a general qualitative research course. Of course the added benefit of an instructor helped to mentor me through my process of discovery. To begin the journey to understand the application of online focus groups, novice researchers will need to spend some time educating themselves on general qualitative research principles. Doing this helped me understand what constitutes a quality study as well as understand what a focus group is, and, equally as important, what a focus group is not. To explore the world of qualitative research a general text is helpful. I would recommend *Qualitative Research in Health: An Introduction* by Carol Grbich (2003). This text provides an overview of qualitative research principles and includes content on theory and design, quality and rigor issues. Specific chapters are dedicated to data collection, methodology, and data analysis. Although this text provides a solid background in all aspects of qualitative research, it lacks the in-depth knowledge on focus groups that I was seeking in my quest to understand both traditional face-to-face and online focus groups. It also contains little information about electronic medium for data collection but does, however, provide information related to software and computer usage for data analysis. Recognizing that topic-specific information was not the intent of this text, Grbich's text is an excellent resource for all interested in understanding traditional qualitative research. Recognizing that to understand online focus groups I must understand traditional focus groups, I looked to the text entitled *Doing Focus Groups* by Rosaline Barbour (2008). This text is part of The Sage Qualitative Research Kit, a series on qualitative research. Each book addresses a specific aspect of qualitative research and is authored by an expert in the specific content area of interest. This text begins by introducing the focus group and progresses to discussions on inappropriate uses of focus groups and the benefits of focus groups in understanding the phenomenon of interest. Chapters on research design and sampling are included to ensure the quality study and the design of the focus group. At times it may be easy for the researcher to become so involved in the data that ethical issues may be overlooked. Barbour does an excellent job in discussing the need to debrief the group as well as considering special issues such as vulnerable populations. Sample focus groups transcriptions are used throughout the text to illustrate key points. This text is an excellent resource for content on focus groups, yet contains a mere one page relating specifically to online focus groups, though many of the principles from this text are applicable to the online focus group.

As I was learning about online focus groups it seemed appropriate to use the internet as a teaching tool. I began by entering the term "online focus groups" into a search engine. To my surprise, hundreds, if not thousands of sites appeared. My initial excitement diminished as I began to realize these sites were generally sales related. I had forgotten that focus groups are used extensively in consumer marketing. I decided to explore YouTube in search of first-hand knowledge from individuals using online focus groups for research. Again, I discovered that focus groups are a popular marketing tool and apparently, participating in focus groups for money is a form of the "get rich quick" mentality of many. After sifting through many links and viewing a few inappropriate video clips, I came across two clips by college professor Claire Madge from the

University of Lancaster. These video clips provided an overview of synchronous and asynchronous focus groups, respectively. The first clip (Madge, n.d.a) focused on limitations inherent in synchronous online interviews such as slow typing speeds limiting participation and increased complexity of synchronous interviewing over asynchronous. The instructor discusses five aspects the researcher needs to consider in the use of synchronous online interviewing. This video was an enjoyable and educational experience, and I recommend it if you are interested in synchronous online interviews. The second clip by Claire Madge (n.d.b) focused on synchronous online interviewing. Single participant and group participant formats were discussed. The viewer was made aware that e-mail is the primary mode of communication for the individual while discussion boards are utilized by groups. Pro and cons of each format were presented along with the impact on the research process. This video clip provided me with an understanding of the different issues inherent in individual and group interviews while highlighting the issue of privacy for participants. I would recommend this clip to anyone beginning to explore online focus groups for their qualitative research. Although I found resources for understanding quality qualitative research in the texts that I reviewed, after completing an extensive review of the literature I was unable to locate a reference text that provides significant information about online focus groups. My search for learning how to conduct an online focus group would continue. It led me to journal articles that incorporate the use of online focus groups. There were few articles specifically related to the use of the online focus group; however, these articles provide an abundance of content related to the use, benefits, and weaknesses of online focus groups. Although theory is necessary, as a health care professional, I am interested in how and why health care professionals chose to use online focus groups in their studies. To me, online focus group may provide insight into our understanding of the lives of homebound individuals living with a disability. Information gained from online focus groups may assist healthcare workers in developing programs to enrich the lives of individuals living with a disability. Several articles were available which assisted me in understanding the practical application of online focus groups in health care research. Overall these articles found focus groups to be value added additions to the data collection methods available to the qualitative researcher. The answer to the “how to” of online focus groups was written by Strickland, Moloney, Dietrich, Myerburg, Cotsonis and Johnson in 2003. This article presents practical methodological steps to using the internet as a data collection tool. The article addresses the practical issues of setting up the online discussion as well as offers suggestions to maintain the discussion and is a must read for anyone looking to explore the use of online focus groups for data collection. Many measurement and quality issues can be avoided by employing the knowledge gained in this article.

The purpose of a focus group is to gain information about the participants’ view of a phenomenon of interest. The question I continually asked myself was “Is that possible in the virtual world?” I was able to answer that question in my reading of a study by Kenny (2005). Kenny studied nurses enrolled in an online focus group and found that participants were able to remain engaged in the online environment for the two month duration of the study, yielding rich data. This study lends support for the use of online focus groups in health care and is a good resource for understanding the strengths, limitations, and ethical considerations of focus groups. A study published in 2006 by Im and Chee further supports the use of the online forum as a qualitative research method.

This study was a sub-component of a larger study on cancer research the duo was conducting. In the study of the online forum, the researchers sought to understand the practical issues related to the use of an online forum as a method of data collection. Results of this study support the use of online forum for increasing credibility of the study results. From this article I learned that there can be a higher response and retention rate with online forums as the study participants are able to respond at their leisure without pressure of the other participants in the traditional focus groups setting. An aspect that I might have overlooked was the security issue of the data. This study describes several incidents of attempts to hack into the data base. If using this technology, one must be sure to have sufficient security features and update them regularly, a problem not encountered with traditional face-to-face focus groups. In general, the online focus groups provide a method for researchers to communicate with participants in different geographical areas (Im & Chee, 2006). Without this option focus groups may not have diversity of participants. This aspect was highlighted in a study by Tates, Zwaanswijk, Otten, van Dulmen, Hoogerbrugge, Kamps, and Bensing (2009), which attempted to access recent cancer survivors. The study found that the online groups allowed people to participate in the study who would otherwise be unable to attend due to distance. Furthermore, it is believed that participants may have had opportunities to share information and express themselves that may not have been present in traditional focus groups. This article was a useful tool to consider some of the pitfalls of online forums. These include the lack of non-verbal cues, selection bias as participants self-select, and issues related to computer usage and availability. I would recommend this article for understanding the application of online focus groups with hard-to-reach populations, as the findings may apply to other hard-to-reach populations. A misconception is that the online environment does not allow for members to develop a cohesive bond; however, through my research I learned that this was untrue. Watson, Peacock, and Jones (2006) looked at the interaction of group members in online focus groups and found that indeed the members of the online focus group are able to form a cohesive bond. It appears that the principles of group dynamics are applicable to both the virtual and face-to-face world. This alleviated my fear of that an online focus group would not have the same power as a traditional face-to-face focus group and would therefore impact the quality of the study results. In summary, it appears that in order to understand online focus groups one must explore traditional focus groups. Online focus groups and traditional focus groups have more commonalities than differences. Once I understood the traditional focus group process, it became apparent that online focus groups were merely a variation of traditional focus groups rather than a new process to be mastered. I look forward to experimenting with the online focus groups during my research career.

Technological advances will continue to influence the research process. As researchers, we must remain open and flexible to these advances and explore how technology can increase the credibility of the qualitative research process. Only time will tell how technological advances will shape the future of qualitative research and the data collection process. Personally, I look forward to these changes and feel the future for qualitative research is endless.

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