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Abstract

Focus groups have long been used as a qualitative research methodology to gather information on a particular topic in a non-threatening setting. Adapting the traditional face-to-face (FTF) focus group to the online environment is a natural adaptation in the use of advanced technology for local and national research. The anonymity of the online environment is non-threatening allowing for open discussion. WordPress® provides a secure, easy to navigate website to conduct focus group research. Upon completion of a research study, the participant's typed responses can be downloaded into a Word document to upload in to a qualitative data analysis program. WordPress® provides the novice and experienced qualitative researcher an alternative to the traditional focus group.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Focus Groups, Online Focus Groups

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The Use of WordPress in Online Focus Group Studies

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Focus groups have long been used as a qualitative research methodology to gather information on a particular topic in a non-threatening setting. Adapting the traditional face-to-face (FTF) focus group to the online environment is a natural adaptation in the use of advanced technology for local and national research. The anonymity of the online environment is non-threatening allowing for open discussion. WordPress® provides a secure, easy to navigate website to conduct focus group research. Upon completion of a research study, the participant's typed responses can be downloaded into a Word document to upload in to a qualitative data analysis program. WordPress® provides the novice and experienced qualitative researcher an alternative to the traditional focus group. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Focus Groups, Online Focus Groups

Introduction

Focus groups have long been used as a qualitative research methodology to gather information on a particular topic in a non-threatening setting. Limited attention has been given to the impact of the Internet on the fastest growing segment of the marketing industry in promoting qualitative research in healthcare. Adapting the traditional face-to-face (FTF) focus group to the online environment is a natural adaptation in the use of advanced technology for local and national research. The low-cost of implementation and the ability to employ difficult-to-access groups are primary reasons for using the online environment for qualitative research (Nicholas et al., 2010; Watson, Peacock, & Jones, 2006). The purpose of this paper is to discuss adapting the focus group to the online environment using the blogging site WordPress®.

Literature Review

Online focus groups take place in a virtual discussion room where participants can view, react, and respond to the moderator and fellow study participants. A primary concern of online focus groups is the quality of research and data collected (Bruggen & Willems, 2009); however, studies cited by Kenny (2005) identified the advantages of online focus groups outweighed research concerns. Issues of groupthink, social posturing, and dominant participants were not discovered in the majority of studies (Kenny, 2005). More individuals can participate anonymously providing a broader perspective (Watson et al., 2006). Evaluating qualitative research online requires reviewing the depth, breadth, efficiency, group dynamics, nonverbal expressions, and respondents (Bruggen & Willems, 2009).

Online discussions may lead to less in-depth information; however, anonymous online discussions may provide reflective, honest responses. Current studies vary in the area of breadth. Bruggen and Willems (2009) discovered via their literature review information from online asynchronous group discussions led to broader information than synchronous group discussions. An additional discovery was asynchronous group discussions provided deep information at the expense of breadth (Bruggen & Willems, 2009).

Efficiency was noted with synchronous focus groups. Immediate availability of a moderator to facilitate a discussion to answer the research questions encouraged efficiency. Group dynamics differs in written online discussions without nonverbal cues. Posture and

facial expressions are not part of the group dynamic; however, written communication in the online environment has developed. Feelings are noted with the use of symbols, emoticons, emojis, or abbreviations, such as a smiley face or the term “LOL” meaning laugh-out-loud. Respondents or study participants are more likely to participate in an online focus group than an FTF focus group citing busy schedules (Bruggen & Willems, 2009; Watson et al., 2006).

The anonymity of the online environment is non-threatening allowing for open discussion. The virtual space of the online environment provides a neutral ground for the focus group where participants are equal. The nonverbal cues of appearance, dress, and posturing are not available to participants (Kenny, 2005; Mason & Davis, 2007; Nicholas et al., 2010; Schneider, Kerwin, Frechtling, & Vivari, 2002) potentially affecting the focus group dynamic. Additionally, focus group members are not directly exposed to members who hold a position of power; therefore, the interactions between participants are not bound by social constructs (Schneider et al., 2002).

Asynchronous On-Line Focus Group

The research study was seeking the perspective of male registered nurses (RNs) in how they chose their nursing specialty. Because male RNs are few-in-number in healthcare organizations and work varied schedules, the online focus group research design was employed to encourage participation in the study. The asynchronous format provided flexibility allowing the male RNs in the study to participate in the study while working and attending to personal commitments.

Disadvantages

Disadvantages of the asynchronous online focus group design lie in the technology-based format. Traditional focus groups use taped interviews noting verbal communication, body language, and group dynamics. Critics argue crucial non-verbal communication, such as visual expressions, the tone of voice, and eye contact is lost in an online focus group (Bruggen & Willems, 2009; Watson et al., 2006). However, the use of emoticons, emoji, capitalization of words, and punctuation of responses in the threaded discussion provide the researcher with substantial non-verbal communication helping to convey mood and nuances in expression (Im & Chee, 2006; Kenny, 2005; Watson et al., 2006); thereby providing the non-verbal component of the focus group.

Unlike the traditional FTF focus group, online focus groups must remain open longer. The researcher refines and develops guiding questions to promote discussion as the study unfolds. The time lapse between discussions may yield issues with participant retention. Additionally, participants may sign up to participate in a focus group but may simply watch the focus group unfold and not participate; thereby affecting the study's results (Watson et al., 2006).

Advantages

The asynchronous online focus group provides a forum for the busy professional to discuss the research topic at a time and place convenient for the individual potentially increasing recruitment. The asynchronous environment allows participants to reflect on the interview questions and the responses of others before responding providing more depth and richness to the data. The sample is not bound to a geographical location; therefore, the sample could be more diverse adding to the richness of the data obtained. The anonymity of the online environment is non-threatening allowing for open discussion. The virtual space of the online

environment provides a neutral ground for the focus group where participants are equal. The nonverbal cues of appearance, dress, and posturing are not available to participants (Kenny, 2005; Mason & Davis, 2007; Nicholas et al., 2010; Schneider et al., 2002) potentially affecting the traditional focus group dynamic.

Participants have more time to reflect upon their answers to the interview questions before responding leading to richer data. Because the transcript is available during the study, participants can view and clarify their responses and ask questions. The moderator can elicit more detailed responses and perform member-checking during the focus group. At the end of the focus group, the typed transcript can be downloaded into a document compatible with a computer-assisted data analysis software (CADAS) program eliminating transcription errors (Watson et al., 2006).

Why WordPress®?

WordPress® is a public access open forum website belonging to the WordPress® community with the primary focus of blogging. Despite WordPress® being a free, open community blogging site, its use in an asynchronous online focus group is relatively new. WordPress® software is post-centered, meaning the content posted by the owner of the blog and blog participants are published in a post format, similar to the learning management system Blackboard®. Posts can be scheduled to publish at a specific date and time encouraging research participants to enter the online focus group often and respond to fellow participants. Threaded discussions in a website can be accessed from any Internet provider (Jones & Farrington, 2011a, 2011b) providing ease of use for the participants and not limiting access to the focus group.

The WordPress® blogging site was chosen for the research study based on ease of use and affordability. Novice and technology-challenged researchers will discover the accessibility of WordPress® meets the needs of an online study (Jones & Farrington, 2011a). Interview questions are easy to post and located in multiple web pages providing research participants clear direction in navigating the site's web pages. In addition, the interview questions can be scheduled to post on different dates. Participant's responses to the interview questions and discussions with fellow participants are viewed as a threaded discussion board providing uncomplicated facilitation and member checking.

Using WordPress®

The WordPress® site is free; however, the free site is limited in how the site can be developed. Advertising banners are common with the free site which may add confusion to research participants. For an additional annual fee, the WordPress® site can be customized, advertisement free, and the site domain name registered providing the opportunity for future research. For the purposes of this study, the latter was chosen. Customization included theme, or color scheme, font, font size, and font color.

Security

As with any website, security is a concern. WordPress®'s security is outsourced to Automattic, a security firm providing security for online websites. Per the company's privacy policy:

- Personal information is not obtained unless needed.

- Personal information and Internet Protocol (IP) addresses are not shared with anyone except to comply with the law, develop products, or protect the company's rights.
- Personal information is not stored on the company's servers unless required for the ongoing operation of specific services.
- For blogging products, the administrator of the site controls what is visible to the public, seen by search engines, kept private, and permanently deleted (Automattic, n.d.).

For this study, the researcher was the WordPress® site administrator. The researcher's name, email, and billing information was stored in the company's server. Based on feedback from the pilot study, participant accounts were set up by the researcher; therefore, no personally identifiable information (PII) of participants was stored at WordPress®. However, the research participant's IP addresses are logged and stored in the server. This information is not shared unless the company is legally obligated to do so per the privacy policy statement. Because the researcher provided the research participants with a nonspecific username and password, linking the research participant to responses on the WordPress® site would be extremely challenging.

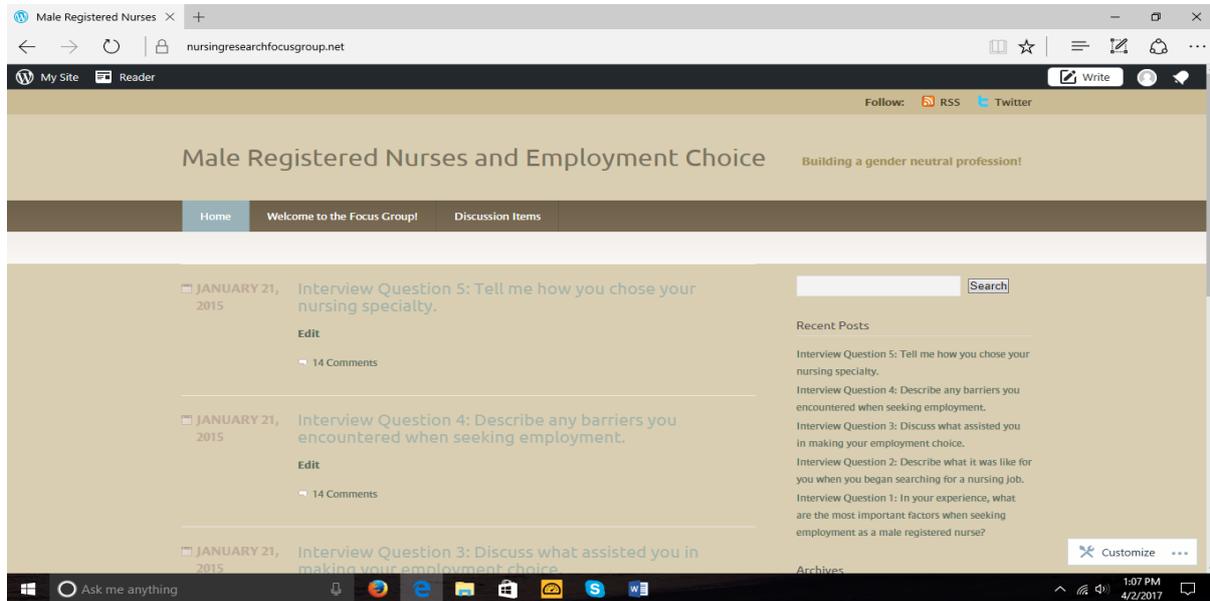
The privacy setting menu provides three options (a) allowing the blog to be visible to anyone, (b) allow normal visitors, but block search engines and (c) allowing the blog to be visible to users chosen by the owner of the blog, or in this case, the researcher (Sabin-Wilson, 2010). For the research study, option three was used by paying a one-time fee for the premium plan. The website was not visible to crawlers or other indexing services. Because WordPress® is a hosting service that does not require software, downloads, installation, or server configuration, research participants could easily access the website to participate in an online focus group. Servers are geographically located throughout the United States guaranteeing availability and redundancy to research participants. Access to the website at any time enhances the asynchronous research design. If any problems were encountered, technical support was available.

Developing the WordPress Website

Because the blogging site was used for research purposes, a domain name unique to the study's purpose was essential. The domain was also a direct link to the study site bypassing the WordPress® site reducing confusion for the study participants. The WordPress® site was marked private to ensure only those participating in the study were allowed to access the site. Research study participants were provided a general username, such as "studyfocusgroup001" to provide anonymity.

Purchasing the premium plan provided the opportunity to customize the site. WordPress® provides a wide variety of color schemes, themes, and patterns allowing for creativity and eye-catching results. Photos can be uploaded adding a sense of individuality to the site. Because the site was used for research, reducing distractions such as font and color scheme, was essential in providing a professional appearance. A neutral color scheme without patterns or photos was chosen. The theme, or font, chosen was clean and straightforward promoting ease of site navigation. Reducing distractions allowed the participants to focus on the research study. Table 1 is a screenshot from the actual study.

Table 1. Home Screen Screenshot



Customizing the headings in the site was necessary to provide ease of use for the participants. Three headings were developed (a) home, (b) welcome to the focus group, and (c) discussion items. A welcome paragraph was developed for study participants on the site’s homepage. The “Welcome to the Focus Group” message reinforced the study’s purpose and the researcher’s role. The “Home” tab and the “Discussion Items” tab listed the interview questions. The “Home” tab listed the interview questions in a larger, easy-to-read font size whereas the “Discussion Items” tab listed the interview questions in a smaller font size. Both tabs provided a link to the discussion on the same web page so participants could access the interview questions from either tab. Tables 2 and 3 are screenshots from the study demonstrating how the custom headings were organized.

Table 2. Welcome to the Focus Group Screenshot

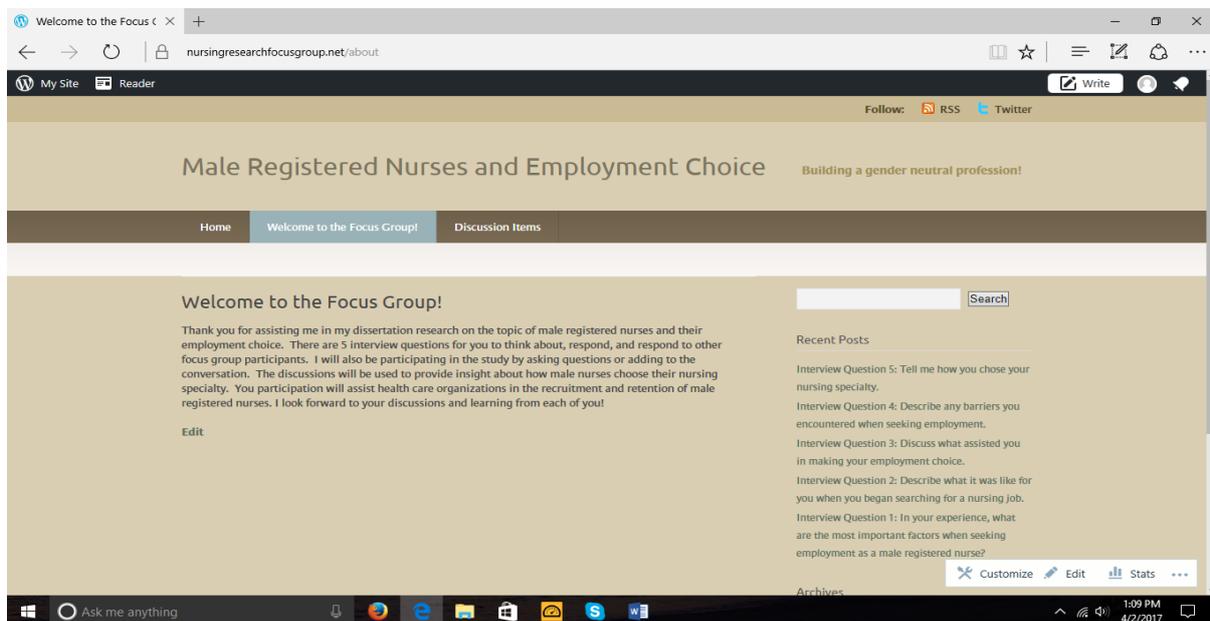
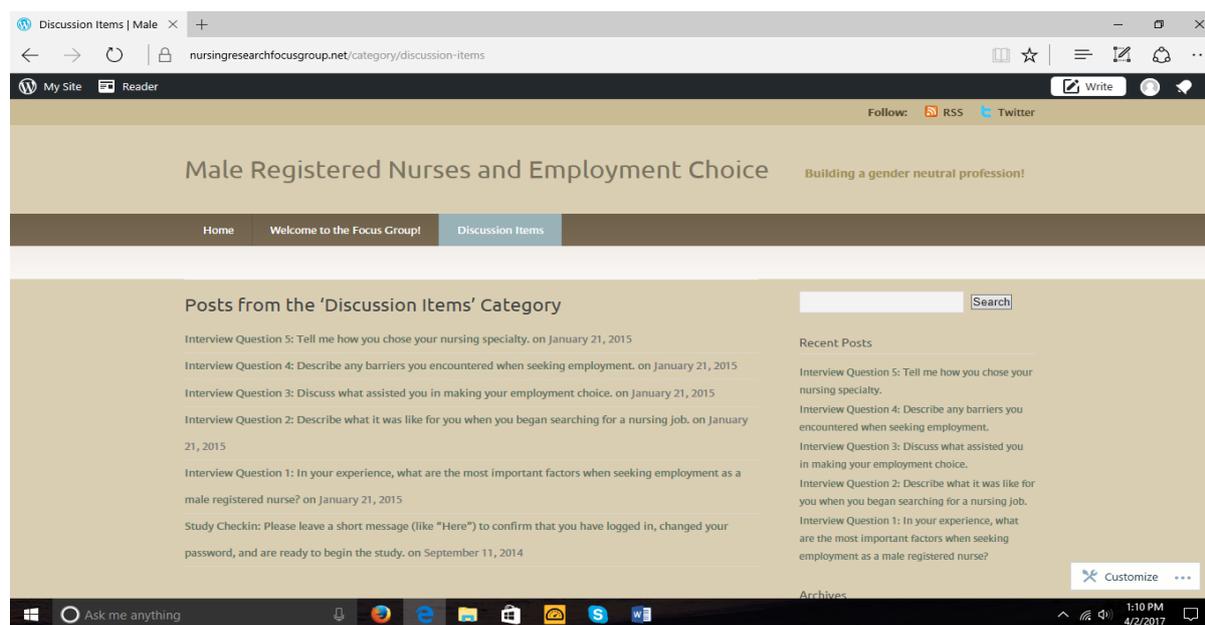


Table 3: Discussion Items Screenshot



Pilot Study

A pilot study was implemented to ensure the technical aspects of the WordPress® site worked as planned. Initially, pilot study participants were given a username, password and registration code to the WordPress® site. After logging into the WordPress® site, the pilot study participants were required to set up their account. After the participants had created their account, an email invitation to join the WordPress® focus group website was sent. This process proved to be confusing and cumbersome to the participants. Changing the process by pre-registering each pilot study participant in WordPress® with a username and password provided a more user-friendly procedure. A registration code was not necessary because pre-registering each participant directly linked the participants to the focus group site. The participants were asked to access the WordPress® site via the created account. Each participant logged into the WordPress® site and change their password. Each participant agreed the established account streamlined access to the WordPress® site.

Pilot study participants were asked three interview questions on the WordPress® site. One question was simply to check in. This procedure confirmed the participant was ready to participate in the study. Question two asked participants to provide feedback regarding the consent and log-in process. The participants stated the log-in procedure was easier once accounts were created by the researcher. Consent procedures were changed to streamline the process. Question three asked for feedback regarding the WordPress® site. The participants liked the color scheme and ease of threading question responses. One participant stated the site was similar to the learning management system Blackboard® with which she had experience.

Performing the pilot study uncovered several logistical issues before the main study. Electronic consent form instructions were revised to ensure clarity. Access to the WordPress® site via created accounts provided smooth access to the site without the need for a registration code. Pilot study participants agreed changes to the informed consent and access to the WordPress® site were positive. The website's color scheme, theme, and headings were not changed per pilot study participant feedback.

Research Study

Study participants were required to log into the WordPress® site and change their password 24 hours before the study beginning. A reminder email was sent to the participants. The study was open for 10 days, including Saturday and Sunday. The interview questions were posted to allow the participants to enter and exit the study at their convenience. Per the informed consent, study participants were required to respond to two fellow participants to facilitate discussion on the research topic. Email reminders were sent during the study time-frame to ensure the participants met the study guidelines. At the conclusion of the study, ten participants began the study and eight completed the study. One participant did not change his password. An additional participant who changed his password did not participate in the study. Both participants were excluded from the study.

As the research participants posted their responses, moderation and member-checking occurred. The discussion was encouraged by the researcher by eliciting detailed responses and clarification questions. For example, a participant discussed how male RNs should have an experienced male RN assist them in the transition from undergraduate education to practice. The moderator asked the participant if mentoring was essential. This simple question developed into a lively discussion among the participants leading to the subtheme of mentoring. The research study participants had no issues with access to the site, answering the interview questions, or responding to their fellow participants. Emails or phone calls asking for information regarding how to use the WordPress® site were nonexistent. Technical issues did not arise. At the end of the study, an email was sent to each participant thanking them for their participation in the study. The participant's responses were downloaded into a Word® document allowing for ease of uploading into a qualitative data analysis software program such as NVivo 10, thereby eliminating the need for transcription.

Conclusion

With the explosive use of the Internet, implementing an online focus group is a natural progression for qualitative research. WordPress® is an easy-to-use blogging site with applications to research. Novice and technology-challenged researchers can quickly set up a professional site to conduct their research. Automatic updates ensure security of the research. Participants can navigate the site without difficulty. Pre-registering the participants proved to be advantageous allowing for a streamlined process to access the research site. For a nominal fee, the WordPress® site was provided additional security ensuring the confidentiality of the participants. Once the research study was complete, the participant's typed responses were easily downloaded into a Word® document allowing for use in a qualitative data analysis software program eliminating transcription time and errors. Qualitative researchers should consider using WordPress® as a viable alternative to the traditional focus group.

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