

Chapter 43

Online Focus Groups: Lessons Learned from 15 Years of Implementation

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ABSTRACT

The overall aim of this chapter is to provide a better understanding of how a specific technique of online research methodology, online focus groups, has been theoretically conceptualized and practically utilized in order to examine its advantages and disadvantages to improve future applications of this technique in qualitative and mixed methods research. The chapter offers an overview of qualitative and mixed methods empirical research using online focus groups in different disciplines and outlines the strengths and weaknesses of this data collection technique. In addition, based on the review of empirical and theoretical research, the current and emerging practices in and characteristics of using online focus groups for data collection are outlined and used to suggest future trends in using this data collection technique in qualitative and mixed methods research.

INTRODUCTION

As a research medium, the Internet has become widely used in the recent decades. Not only did the Internet provide the base for enhanced secondary research (e.g., online databases, repositories, etc.), it also offered a new ground for primary research (e.g., adapting traditional methods and developing new methods to capture data for original research) to be carried out in a virtual environment (Hewson & Laurent, 2008). Known as online research, web-based research, or Internet-mediated research (Hewson, Yule, Laurent, & Vogel, 2003), it is a

relatively new direction that is quickly growing in popularity and applications.

The innovations in technology allow researchers to consider new types of data collection, analysis, and preservation, thus pushing the boundaries of what research process has meant traditionally. In addition to new forms and directions in conducting research, the Internet medium offers significant advantages for researchers (e.g., decreased cost and data collection time; reduced geographical limitations: the ability to reach more participants and remote populations; and higher methodological rigor and data accuracy) and for

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participants (e.g., higher participant anonymity and control over the input, convenience, easy to use format) (Ahern, 2005). Along with the advantages, researchers point out new challenges and methodological considerations pertaining to web-based research, emphasizing the need to review and adapt traditional research approaches to be effective in the online environment (Duffy, 2002; Cantrell & Lupinacci, 2007). In addition, researching online necessitates the revision of research ethics and related concerns such as anonymity, privacy, and data protection (Eynon, Fry, & Schroeder, 2008). Therefore, researchers have developed guidelines for conducting research online that accounted for peculiarities in participant recruitment, obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity, data collection, and data storage and retrieval while conducting online research (e.g., Klein, 2002; Lakeman, 1997).

In spite of the concerns and shortcomings, web-based research is here to stay. Even though it is hard to make predictions about the future directions and developments in research, it is safe to assert that with time, the use of the Internet medium in research will be increasing, taking new forms, and adapting traditional approaches. Therefore, a “strong grasp of the technologies, techniques, and procedures of online research methodology is one means within our reach to ensure that, whatever the state of the online world in general, its research dimension will be as securely founded as possible” (Lee, Fielding, & Blank, 2008, p. 19). Thus, the overall aim of this book chapter is to provide a better understanding of how a specific technique of online research methodology (i.e., online focus group) has been theoretically conceptualized and practically utilized in order to examine its advantages and disadvantages to improve future applications of online focus groups in qualitative and mixed methods research.

Specifically, this book chapter examines online focus groups as a technology-enabled method of data collection for qualitative and mixed methods studies. Even though online focus groups were

first used in research in the mid-1990s (Miller & Walkowski, 2004), now, almost 20 years later, there is still little consensus among researchers about this technique (e.g., Graffigna & Bosio, 2006). Furthermore, a broad search for empirical studies across major databases not limited to a specific discipline yielded surprisingly low number of studies that used online focus groups (more details provided later in the chapter). These findings suggest the need to further examine the literature on online focus groups, paying special attention to how online focus groups have been used in recently published empirical research. Specific purposes of the chapter are threefold:

1. To provide a brief overview of the history and uses of online focus groups;
2. To report the results of a systematic review of research on online focus groups (both theoretical/methodological articles and empirical studies); and based on the literature and research review,
3. To outline advantages and disadvantages of online focus groups and to provide recommendations for using this form of data collection.

BACKGROUND

Since its introduction in the middle of the 20th century, focus groups have been frequently used in qualitative and mixed methods research in different disciplines. Traditionally, face-to-face focus groups bring together 6-8 people for 30 minutes to 2 hours to discuss or debate the topic of interest and can be used at different stages of the research process (Patton, 2002). Focus group discussions are typically guided by a question guide (interview guide) developed in advance based on the literature and researcher experience (Krueger, 2000).

As a data collection method, focus group is a versatile instrument that can be used individu-

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