



Online Focus Groups

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Introduction to Online Focus Groups

The purpose of a focus group is to enable a researcher to evaluate ideas in a group setting. The environment of a focus group is often thought of as a more natural setting for gathering data, as opposed to a one-on-one interview, and enables researchers to gain additional insights from the dialog and interaction between participants. Focus groups can be employed for many diverse purposes. Politicians use the technique to assess public opinion and develop policy. Marketers assess many aspects of public opinion, from specific consumer preferences to test marketing new products. For social scientists, a focus group often represents an inexpensive means for gathering qualitative data and exploring social phenomena.

Much of the seminal literature describing the focus group method was developed with face-to-face communication in mind. Focus group methods are designed to create a group environment in which typically six to eight participants who have some commonality feel comfortable sharing a wide variety of ideas on a specific topic or focus with facilitation by a trained moderator. Since many texts offer details on the method in general and its validity, reliability and generalizability (see, for example, Krueger and Casey, 2014), this chapter will focus on the unique aspects of those conducted online. Although many of the same fundamentals of the method apply, the online medium has some nuances.

Online focus groups are distinguished from face-to-face or in-person focus groups in that they take place in a networked computer environment. They can be categorized into asynchronous (participants contribute during different times, e.g. emails, forums) or synchronous (participants contribute during the same time, e.g. chat, conference) group interactions. Online focus groups may seem like the natural choice to study online social groups or topics related to the Internet; however, they are also useful to study a variety of topics and populations. Given the extent to which people are communicating over the Internet, the medium seems even more suitable to facilitating focus groups than in years past. Specialized applications are also now available to enhance group communication, as will be discussed in a later section.

There are many benefits to conducting focus groups in an online setting: they are relatively inexpensive, provide greater and easier access to a broad range of research participants, and can take less time to collect data. Video communication online via webcams can offer researchers rich data similar to face-to-face focus groups (Abrams *et al.*, 2015). In addition, the technique allows for more specific framing of research topics and issues by participants, limiting researcher bias. These and other benefits, along with the challenges presented by the online environment, will be developed later in the chapter.

Considerations for the Online Setting

Before choosing to conduct focus groups online, thinking through the topic, questions, and any tasks the researcher seeks to do is important to determining whether offline techniques are more suitable. Poytner (2010) provides a starting point for consideration (Table 25.1). Wilkerson and colleagues (2014: 569–70) provide a more detailed checklist that can also be used to decide whether online or offline focus groups are worthwhile.

Table 25.1 Focus groups tasks' suitability to online medium

Opinion	Description
Better online	Factual lists, e.g. what is in your refrigerator, what products do you use? Polling*
Same online	Word associations Lists of ideas
Needs changes online	Brainstorming Annotating images
Less good online	Picture or product sorts Paired tasks

Source: Poytner (2010: 120); *Addition.

Some other broad considerations are useful as well, particularly those relating to participants. Most researchers suggest online focus groups use fewer participants than face-to-face. Recommendations vary depending on whether the focus group will be conducted asynchronously (10 to 30 participants) or synchronously (3 to 8 participants) (Poytner, 2010). Besides size of the focus groups, the possibilities for the heterogeneity or homogeneity of participants are also more expansive when they are facilitated online. Researchers seeking data that would be enhanced with heterogeneous groups can have participants from different geographic locations using online methods, which could also add additional variance of other demographic variables (e.g. rural/urban, ethnicities, occupation, socioeconomic status, and so on). With location removed as a barrier for participation, forming homogeneous groups can also be easier. For example, those who share a unique experience, such as being brought up in a military family, are not bound by geographic area. In fact, the sample may be more limited if location were a factor as it is with face-to-face focus groups. The ability to acquire diverse opinions with relative ease is a considerable strength of the method. Participants can be recruited from various locations globally, from diverse life experiences, etc. Although this is true, it is important to bear in mind that online access is not yet universal. As such, a sample will most likely reflect the perspective of a more educated and higher socially located population that has the resources for access either through work or home environments. That said, however, the focus group method still allows for a diversity of participation from within that particular group of people that have access to the technology.

An additional consideration that researchers should make with regard to location is participants' Internet connection speeds (although location is not the only influence on this). The United States Federal

Communication Commission (n.d.) states 1 megabit per second (Mbps) is the minimum required for basic video conferencing or interactive web pages (perhaps most similar to a web chat interface) and 5 Mbps for high definition video conferencing, but that is if no other networked devices or applications are simultaneously accessing the participant's Internet connection. Akamai's State of the Internet (Belson, 2016) report shows global broadband adoption at 73 percent. It also reports average connection speed of 116 countries at 4.5 Mbps (4 Mbps constitutes broadband speed). Several countries have so little connectivity (e.g. Iran, Pakistan, Croatia, El Salvador) that they are not registered by Akamai's methods. Notably, some of these countries do show up in their report on mobile connectivity, which only includes 54 countries, showing that connectivity to the Internet in some countries is dominated by mobile connections. Mobile connectivity is slower, especially for countries that do not have much standard connectivity (~0.9–2.5 Mbps). Mobile connections are worth noting because some people may use their cell phone data plans to connect to the Internet with computers or laptops. A more useful reason is that many Internet communication tools suitable for conducting focus groups offer a mobile device interface, as will be discussed later in the chapter. Researchers should consult available data on connectivity speeds of their potential participants and capacity requirements of the chosen application to facilitate focus groups. Using a screening questionnaire asking potential participants for the type of connection they have (dial-up, satellite, digital subscriber line (DSL), cable, cell phone service data connection, etc.) is helpful. It may be best to choose an online facilitation medium for the lowest common denominator of participants' connection speeds. Otherwise, those in the focus group who have the slower or less reliable network connection may not participate as much due to lag time and/or missing parts of the discussion.

Moderating

To begin organizing an online focus group, it is important to determine whether or not a mix of individuals across many boundaries of space and time is preferred as well as the depth of data desired. This decision may drive which type of group and which technology will be used. For example, including international participants will probably necessitate an asynchronous focus group scheduled to span several days simply because of time differences. As a result, the discussion will probably be facilitated by the use of some kind of email and/or listserv environment. This type of focus group is relatively easy to coordinate, has limited technology requirements, is easily captured in email file storage or digest form for analysis purposes, and requires little to no technical training and support for participants. In addition, this type of focus group can be started quickly and is likely to be the least expensive option. However, given the time span and fact that the moderator will not always be 'present', it can be a significant challenge to manage the group, limiting the moderator's control of discussion threads and requiring a high level of flexibility.

An introduction exercise is useful for helping the group begin to bond. Face-to-face groups are likely to use a different approach, enabling participants to informally interact prior to the start of a discussion. There might be a beverage and snack, for example, over which participants see each other, engage in small talk, ask questions about each other's participation, etc. This opportunity may be unavailable online, thus requiring

some type of replacement.

The intention with an introduction exercise is to enable trust and to set participants at ease so they feel comfortable participating in the focus group. The exercise can also be designed to compensate for the lack of a face-to-face context in which people would see the moderator, the space, and one another, and establish a tone for what will follow. An introduction exercise enables the researcher to establish a spatial tone for the new environment. It also humanizes the members, helping to create a safe space for interacting. In conventional settings this can often be achieved by the environment, the way participants are greeted, and the way researchers present themselves.

One of the keys to successful focus groups is appropriate care in moderating. It is difficult and demands a great deal of reflection. Stewart and Williams (2005) found that for synchronous online focus groups the scripts and conversations are often more complex and interweaving because participants can speak/type simultaneously. They concluded, therefore, that moderators in online focus groups require the skills of not only conventional moderators, but also competence in the technology that is used for the focus group in order to organize chaotic discussions.

It can, however, be problematic at any time during the research effort to limit the moderator's involvement because this could be experienced by participants as a lack of guidance and facilitation. Confusion can ensue, derailing discussion and limiting the overall effectiveness of the focus group. Lacking visual and verbal cues such as nods, smiles, and vocal acknowledgments may leave participants confused about what they are supposed to do. Online group moderating therefore needs a delicate balance between influence that could increase moderator bias and sustaining the work of the group by providing adequate leadership (Gaiser, 1997).

Approaches

Synchronous versus Asynchronous

One unique feature to conducting focus groups online is the ability to do them with participants and moderator at the same time (synchronous) or at different times (asynchronous). Whether asynchronous methods using bulletin boards, email, social media, or online research communities are truly focus groups has been questioned in the literature, especially when interaction among participants becomes more limited or is non-existent (Bloor *et al.*, 2001). A foundation component of focus groups is the interaction and dialogue among participants to elicit fuller dimensions of the discussion topic (Kitzinger, 1994). What makes the asynchronous online focus group different from interviews in these instances of low group interaction is that participants are likely aware of others' contributions; however, empirical research examining the extent to which others' responses are considered by participants in asynchronous techniques is currently absent from the literature. Still, researchers using this approach do describe their procedures as focus group methodology and, as will be elaborated on later, asynchronous communication over the Internet is the norm.

Conducted synchronously, online focus groups more closely approximate the face-to-face medium because everyone is online at the same time in the chosen communication application (e.g. video conference platform, chat room), just as they would be physically for a live focus group. If researchers are conducting some focus groups face-to-face, but must conduct others online due to geographic constraints of participants or researchers, then a synchronous approach can help produce similar data between online and offline collection methods, particularly if webcams or integrated cameras (such as those in cell phones, laptops, and tablets) are used (Abrams *et al.*, 2015). This approach is also desirable for researchers seeking to have the live interaction among participants that may reveal important and unanticipated data on the topic. On the other hand, it can also lead to only a few people or one person dominating the discussion. It can happen as a result of personalities in the group but also because the limited time leads discussion to move quickly (Sweet, 2001). Synchronous online focus groups overcome a major downside of asynchronous modes: they create better focus on questions throughout the discussion because participants generally avoid talking (if using audiovisual) at the same time. It is also suitable for gathering more immediate or top-of-mind responses, which, depending on the topic, are more similar to people's natural thought processing of the issue (Poynter, 2010). Gathering first impressions and reactions to communication and marketing materials or food products, for example, are topics in which researchers may not want participants to think deeply about, reflect upon, and/or conduct their own research before responding. The tools available for conducting synchronous focus groups, especially if video communication is desired, can be more costly. Although free applications are available, they are more prone to technical problems largely due to the network capacity required to facilitate live communication and lack of technical support. Applications will be discussed later in greater detail.

Another consideration for the synchronous approach is the time factor. From the researcher's perspective, conducting it synchronously means he/she will have data in the amount of time the focus group lasts (one to two hours). However, from the participants' perspective, this approach may mean it takes more of their time, even if it is only a perceptual assumption rather than what actually happens. Despite increased synchronous communication over the Internet, the approach may still seem less natural to participants in the online environment. Poynter (2010) highlights how asynchronicity is a cornerstone of modern society, thanks largely to the Internet. 'It underpins 24-hour shopping, disintermediation (for example, the way ATMs have replaced bank tellers, and websites have replaced travel agents), time-shifted TV viewing, and the shift from broadcast to podcast' (Poynter, 2010: 111). Empirical research has shown adults and adolescents perceive participating when most convenient for them as a key advantage of asynchronous focus groups (Zwaanswijk and van Dulmen, 2014). In a synchronous online focus group, participants are essentially confined (but perhaps not as much as with face-to-face groups) to the full length of the focus group. Although they presumably have the right to leave/log out at any time, social pressure makes it unlikely. The time commitment may dissuade some people from participating, but for the researcher, it is not only more efficient, but also means fewer participants drop out. Organizing the synchronous online focus group can be more difficult because everyone has to be available at the same time (Poynter, 2010). Time differences between participants and between participants and researchers can also pose challenges in communicating exactly when it will take place and simply identifying a convenient block of time for all.

Asynchronous online focus groups are much more distinctive, especially compared to face-to-face groups. A key feature of this technique is that it allows participants and the moderator 'time to think about answers, to be reflective and introspective, and for views and reactions to mature' (Poytner, 2010: 133). Moderators can more thoroughly review responses and probe more participants (Turner, 2008). Some of the earliest online focus groups were conducted asynchronously using email or bulletin boards. These discussions take place over time and can range from a few days to a few months. The moderator sends or posts questions to participants and allows them to respond. Responses can happen in sequence or participants can also go back to earlier threads to add comments later as they are perhaps spurred by additional thought and/or discussion. Online tools like email, bulletin boards or discussion forums, and social media, offer features and communication conventions that add special context to the data as well as participation. Participants could share pictures or short videos, given the time and encouragement to do so. In a marketing research context, for example, it might be useful for participants to take photos or a video of a product in use. (Additional features not unique to asynchronicity are discussed in the following section).

An important consideration is the potential for reduced interaction among participants, especially in larger groups. Participants may instead focus on only responding to the moderator's posts (Turner, 2008). When the group is too large, some may feel their contributions are insignificant, demotivating levels of participation and perhaps leading to drop-outs (Poytner, 2010). Having the large group to begin with may leave the researcher with a sufficient number of active participants, but they could be excluding an important segment of their population who simply may not find this method suitable to their communication preferences. The moderator must make additional effort to encourage participants to read and react to one another's contributions and use other collaborative tasks; this is especially important if benefits from the group interactions are helpful to the research.

Text, Video and Virtual Environments Communication Mediums

Much of the literature on online focus groups was centered on those conducted using primarily text-based communication through chat applications, email, or bulletin board/forums. Only since 2011 has the prevalence of online video communication and its usage increased due to integration of cameras into computer monitors, laptops, and other devices (e.g. smartphones, tablets) and the advent of low-cost or free technology to use it (e.g. Google Hangouts, Skype; see also 'Webcam penetration and adoption rates', 2011). Online, multi-user virtual environment applications (e.g. Second Life) in which people are embodied in avatars, meet in a virtual space, and communicate via typing or audio from networked microphones offer an additional avenue for conducting focus groups despite not being used by the mainstream population. This section discusses the three forms of communication mediums for conducting online focus groups.

Text-based facilitation mediums have several advantages: no transcription is required, likelihood of a participant dominating discussion is reduced, participants can remain anonymous to the group, it accommodates multiple languages, and has a lower technological barrier. Some of these advantages also have disadvantages.

Not having to transcribe data is appealing, but researchers will still have to make some decisions about what data to include in analysis or whether to edit. For example, side conversations irrelevant to the topic can occur among participants, and misspellings, grammatical errors, and abbreviations are common. With abbreviations or confusing misspellings, moderators should ask participants to clarify ambiguous meanings, both for other participants and data analysis. Intentional misspellings and punctuation are used to communicate tone of voice or non-verbal information. Examples include 'repeating vowels ('Noooo way'), repeating punctuation (!!!! or ???), and all capital letters (That was GREAT!)' (Liamputtong, 2011: 156). Text-based communication can also be augmented by emoticons, emojis, and hashtags to convey sentiment that might normally be communicated in tone of voice or non-verbal body language. Emoticons are much more established, while emojis (graphical icons) and hashtags have become more commonplace since communication via social media increased. Although hashtags were originally designed to help users identify social media posts as pertaining to a particular topic through hyperlinking the hashtag to a separate feed, people began using them to communicate underlying sentiment or to serve as a form of metacommunication (Daer *et al.*, 2014). This phenomenon has transferred into people's communication in other environments like text messaging, web page and blog commenting, and even face-to-face (Daer *et al.*, 2014). Although methodological research has not yet noted the use of hashtags in text-based online focus groups, researchers should be prepared to see them as a part of their data, especially among adolescent and young adult participants.

In synchronous focus groups, because participants can be typing responses at the same time, dominant participants cannot 'silence' others through the required turn-taking in communication and the moderator having to move discussion forward due to time constraints. Dominant participants still emerge in a different way by being faster typists (contributing more frequently or more text/information) (Mann and Stewart, 2000). In fact, text-only, synchronous focus groups can be overwhelming for participants who are not accustomed to communicating in this manner (Campbell *et al.*, 2001). After some time, group dynamics do emerge, even in this type of online communication, and traditional dominant personalities may need to be controlled by the moderator if it seems to be inhibiting others' participation.

Participants' ability to remain anonymous is particularly beneficial for discussing certain topics that are associated with social stigma, sensitive in nature, or taboo. Perceptions of anonymity increase participants' self-disclosure (Joinson, 2001; Wilkerson *et al.*, 2014). The asynchronous, online text-only focus group medium produces fewer socially desirable and dishonest responses from participants compared to face-to-face approaches (Tates *et al.*, 2009). Even if the topic is not sensitive in nature, participants also tend to feel more open to disagreeing with others, presumably due to the perceptions of anonymity and also because of the lack of additional communicative factors like tone of voice and non-verbal expression (Reid and Reid, 2005). Participant anonymity may pose other challenges though because it 'allows individuals to conceal all or parts of their identity, or in fact allows them to adopt an alternative identity' (Rodham and Gavin, 2006: 94). There is no way to guarantee participants are truly part of the target population. Arguably, this is not unique to online research methods because all human subjects research relies heavily on people's honesty and integrity.

When researchers require participants whose preferred language is different from their own or participants in a single group with different languages, text-based mediums offer a unique solution to enhance communication. Auto-text-translators can help with this issue. Browser plug-ins like Google Translate and translate features built into specialized, paid applications are not perfect, but they can at least convey important information.

Finally, in some respects, the technological barrier is lower with text-based facilitation mediums because most people are more equipped for and accustomed to communicating online by typing. Slower connection speeds are amenable to text-based communication and participants do not have to have webcams or microphones. Audiovisual communication online often requires some sort of download of additional application(s) or web browser plug-in to work, whereas most text-based communication tools (particularly asynchronous collection tools) do not. With less hardware and software, set-up instructions are not as lengthy. Even though people are more experienced with face-to-face communication, most are not yet used to talking to others through a computer or interfaces designed for video communication online (Abrams *et al.*, 2015). It is still not truly a face-to-face environment. Communicating online via text is simply more established, although audio and visual communication online is catching up.

Many have argued the main limitation to text-based focus groups is the lack of verbal and visual interaction (Liamputtong, 2011), and that is the key advantage to using video-based focus groups. Video focus groups use people's webcams and online video conferencing applications to conduct them synchronously. They can also be done asynchronously by using platforms that allow researchers to create groups and participants to upload videos, but research or mention of this technique in other literature does not yet exist. Besides potentially enhancing communication among participants and between moderator and participants, video techniques are useful to researchers wanting to gain deeper insights than verbal constructs allow. 'As participants use visual images and metaphors to help describe their identities, experiences, and practices, researchers are able to obtain more detailed narratives' (Wilkerson *et al.*, 2014: 567). During the transcription process, researchers can also denote tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language to enhance understanding of the data for the analysis phase.

Literature discussing the potential of video mediums for conducting focus groups is limited to passing mentions of its potential. Seemingly, the first study is one I (Abrams) conducted with colleagues comparing data between face-to-face, online text-only, and online video (Abrams *et al.*, 2015); those findings are presented in the data quality section below. Although not in the 2015 publication, we also reflected on the logistics between the three approaches, and so I will present some of that analysis here in the form of recommendations for preparing for online, video-based focus groups.

- When the online video conferencing/meeting software caps the number of video feeds allowed at one time, turning off the moderator's feed (when not needed) is one solution and can encourage more naturalistic group interaction.
- The moderator requires additional training on the tools being used to facilitate the focus group to ensure he/she can focus on moderating.

- Send participants set-up instructions in advance to ensure they have the required software, browser plug-ins, and hardware working properly. Include these set-up instructions in two reminders about the focus group.
- Account for technical difficulties, especially in the beginning of the focus groups, and schedule about 10–15 minutes of extra time to help participants assimilate to the interface and video-based discussion process.
- The moderator should not jump in at every silence in the discussion. More silences in between participants' contributions may be encountered due to more careful turn-taking in the video-based focus group compared to other mediums. Participants seem to hesitate before speaking more frequently perhaps because they worry they missed a verbal or auditory cue that someone else was or is trying to speak.

Online virtual environments are another avenue for conducting focus groups. Second Life is one of the most popular tools and it has about 41.8 million total users (Voyager, 2015); however, the number of active users may only be around 400,000 to 500,000 based on login statistics (Nino, 2015). Compare that to the social media site of Facebook with 936 million daily active users (Facebook, 2015) and you can see Second Life is not used by the mainstream population. Still, these tools offer some advantages over webcam and text-based mediums. Participants embody themselves through an avatar, which is a graphical version of the user, but it does not have to look anything like them if they desire. Participants could choose to make their avatar appear older or younger, male/female/androgynous, or even have non-human features, among other alterations. This allows participants to remain more anonymous to the group, similar to text-only mediums. Like video tools, virtual reality tools also require participants to download software and have a computer graphics card fast enough to handle the graphical interface. Unlike text and webcam mediums, virtual reality gives participants a space in which they can move about and 'be' in a space together. Although participants can do some non-verbal communication through their avatars, it has to be intentional/purposeful and is more limited than what is conveyed face-to-face (webcam or in-person) (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2014). These tools can be set up to allow participants to communicate through microphones or text. Stewart and Williams (2005) reported that focus groups conducted in an online virtual reality setting produced more engaging discussion and interaction among participants than text-only settings. Nonetheless, the learning curve for virtual reality interfaces poses an issue if the population is not already adept at interacting in such spaces. Other questions relating to how group dynamics and discussion is affected by physical features of participants' avatars are also important to consider especially when the topic relates to such factors as race, gender, age, ethnicity, etc.

Tools

The range of tools available to conduct online focus groups is as wide as you can imagine with the number of Internet communication platforms in existence. This section focuses on three types: specialized focus group software, paid online meeting applications, and free applications. The specific tools mentioned are listed in [Table 25.2](#).

Table 25.2 Online focus groups tools

Type	Name
Specialized focus group software ¹	iTracks, QualBoard
Paid, online meeting applications	Adobe Connect, Citrix GoToMeeting, Cisco WebEx, Zoom, Google Hangouts for Work, Microsoft Skype for Business
Online learning platforms	Blackboard, Desire to Learn, Moodle
Free online meeting applications	Google Hangouts, Skype
Free forum tools	ProBoards, Lefora
Multi-user virtual environments	Meshmoon, Second Life
Social media	Facebook Groups

Notes: ¹ Many more can be found in GreenBook (2015).

As research conducted over the Internet has taken off, so has the marketplace for specialized applications and support for doing so. Researchers will find a number of options depending on their interests, needs, and budget. Finished packages offer dedicated technical support and were designed specifically to meet researchers' and participants' needs. As such, they come with a range of options to aid researchers and most are user-friendly, even for novices. Itracks is one company among many that offers researchers the ability to conduct focus groups using a chat tool (synchronous), bulletin board (asynchronous), and video (synchronous). Another company, 2020, offers QualBoard for conducting asynchronous online focus groups using a bulletin board-type tool with the option of enabling participants to contribute via webcam. Some of these tools even help participants set up their camera and audio for ideal clarity with positioning and lighting. This is very important to achieve the full benefit of the audiovisual data and for recording purposes. Specialized, paid tools also automatically record and save all data transmitted during the discussions. These two companies are among many available – a detailed list can be found in GreenBook (2015). Other unique tools are often built into the interface of these paid packages, like virtual white boards that both researchers and participants can use, multimedia sharing (static documents like PDFs and PowerPoints, websites, audio, images, video), emojis, and polls. An important feature to check for is whether their interface adapts well to mobile devices or if they have a separate mobile device application.

Paid, online meeting or conference applications are another option to help facilitate focus groups. Since they are designed to facilitate meetings and group communication online, conducting focus groups with them is also possible. Several have similar features to specialized focus group applications, like white boards and multimedia sharing. Most also typically have mobile device applications making it easy for participants to

join from their preferred device. Being paid, they also have dedicated technical support and most people will find them user-friendly. Recording features may need to be activated, but typically, this is an available function. Some may already be familiar with the tool and interface because they are increasingly used in education and workplaces. The technical support may not be as dedicated during your focus group time as with a company providing a specialized focus group application, but it is likely to be better than support from free applications. Adobe Connect, Citrix GoToMeeting, Cisco WebEx, Zoom, Google Hangouts for Work, and Microsoft Skype for Business are a few of the popular online meeting applications. Hangouts and Skype also have free versions. If your company or institution already pays for a license for such a tool, you may be able to use it for your focus groups, avoiding additional cost. I will mention distance education or online learning platforms as another option in this section because they are similar to online meeting applications in that they are often fee-based (except for Moodle, which is open source), have dedicated support, and were designed to facilitate group interaction. The cost of these tools is often greater; however, researchers in education may already have access to them through their institution's license. Online learning platforms offer multiple tools to conduct focus groups asynchronously (discussion boards) or synchronously (chats, audio, and video). These platforms would allow focus groups to continue over time and in multiple modes through a single interface. For example, you could conduct a synchronous focus group and continue it or conduct a second one with the same participants asynchronously. Such an approach could help overcome some issues with group interaction in asynchronous modes. Because online learning platforms include so many tools to facilitate learning, the interface, if not edited or designed properly, may be overwhelming to some novices.

For online multi-user virtual environments, there are paid tools available. One is Meshmoon (<http://www.meshmoon.com>) in which users can easily create their desired 3D space and invite participants. Participants do not have to pay or even create accounts. Not having to create an account is a benefit over free tools.

There are numerous free tools available to facilitate group communication. The most useful tools are ones that are used by many people and have text, audio, and audiovisual capabilities. In 2013, Skype had about 300 million users worldwide (Steele, 2013). Google Hangouts has not released usage statistics, but anyone with a Google account (2.2 billion people) has access to the tool (Ahmad, 2015). Google Hangouts and Skype support chat, voice, and video with the download of their application or browser plug-in. Google Hangouts includes tools to share visuals (emojis, stickers, and photos) and allows up to nine people on video calls. Skype lets users share their device screens, photos, and files, and includes emojis, and allows up to ten people on video calls. Both of these tools have mobile device applications as well. For asynchronous group communication, forum tools are an option. ProBoards (<https://www.proboards.com>) and Lefora (<http://www.lefora.com>) are two of many options available. Features to look for are privacy (to keep non-research participants out), data exportation possibilities, mobile device compatibility, intuitiveness of user interface, and account creation and set-up requirements for participants.

As mentioned in the previous section, Second Life is the most popular online multi-user virtual environment that can be used entirely free of charge. Creating spaces to conduct focus groups, however, requires some

skill and expertise. Some universities and institutions have already created virtual space in Second Life that researchers may be able to access.

Probably the biggest disadvantage of the free tools is the lack of built-in recording or saving features. Text-based tools often reserve data export features for their paid versions, and so saving the transcripts will have to be a more tedious job for the researcher. Recording video and audio requires additional software and technical set-up on the researcher's computer. Tech bloggers offer instructions and tips on how to do this if you conduct a Web search for 'how to record [insert name of free tool here]'. It seems the simplest options for recording are not free. For example, Evaer (<http://www.evaer.com>) is US\$19.95. With video-based focus groups, video and audio quality is not that good (pixelated, echoes, static) and lag or dropped signals are also quite possible, even on high-speed Internet connections. By default, Google Hangouts and Skype save group chats, but this does mean the data is also saved on participants' accounts, possibly posing confidentiality problems. Additionally, advertisements may display on free versions and these ads are often customized to match the content shared in the tool. This means if the group is discussing skin conditions, skin care products may be advertised, which could pose concerns to participants over the confidentiality of their information.

Researchers might also consider the possibility of using social media tools to conduct focus groups because many of them are free to use and, depending on the population, participants may already be familiar with using them. Facebook Groups offers the most viable means for conducting an asynchronous focus group. It would even allow participants to share images, videos, and use emojis. A Facebook Group can be set to 'secret' so that it does not show up in searches and only those who are invited can join. The posts are only viewable by those in the group. The biggest disadvantage is privacy and it poses an ethical dilemma for researchers. Social media companies do not own the content but typically, under the terms of agreement, users grant permission for the company to use, distribute and share the content subject to applicable privacy settings. However, even once content is deleted, companies often retain it (Scherker, 2014). What participants share in a focus group over social media could be used to sell them products as well.

With free tools, support is limited to their help Web pages or databases, community forums, and maybe email. This likely means the researcher will be responsible for helping participants get the application and hardware ready for the focus group. Keep in mind that if a researcher has to write or download instructions for participants to configure an application to operate on a computer, he/she will probably have a difficult time maintaining participants. It is one thing to commit your time to participate in an interesting discussion; it is yet another to have to spend time configuring your computer (which may also be against company policy if a participant is joining the discussion while at work). The other dilemma of needing to instruct participants to configure an application is that the moderator, by default, becomes the technical support staff.

Setting Effects

Bloor *et al.* (2001) offer a critical point to ponder: a neutral venue for conducting a focus group does not exist so no matter the setting, recognizing the impact of the venue itself on the data is crucial. Online focus group

settings have different effects on data, and understanding those effects is paramount to planning studies and ensuring positive outcomes.

Much of the research comparing data between online and face-to-face focus group settings has focused on synchronous, text-based online approaches. Specifically, word count (measured as words per participant and total word count) and the number of ideas generated have been the focus. Although word count is not a direct measure of richness, its strong associations with the other variables that indicate richness (more personal response and response with more specific knowledge) make it a good indicator of data quality and richness. Several studies have concluded that online synchronous text-based focus groups might have their place in research for their ability to capture the same amount of unique ideas as face-to-face focus groups with fewer words, but do not offer the same level of depth. Underhill and Olmsted (2003) found that participants in online text-based synchronous and also face-to-face focus groups produced similar amounts of topic-related comments and unique ideas. Schneider *et al.* (2002) found online text-based synchronous focus groups led to shorter responses (interpreted as less elaboration) than face-to-face focus groups. Finally, Brügger and Willems (2009) asserted that online text-only focus group data have less depth because participants do not provide comments as lengthy as those in face-to-face focus groups.

Our study comparing online video, online text-only, and face-to-face settings examined (a) the amount of topic-related data, (b) the amount of unrelated data – no theme, socializing, medium-related, (c) researcher ratings of data richness, and (d) word count and linguistic characteristics of data (Abrams *et al.*, 2015). Results showed that face-to-face focus groups yielded the most topic-related data and least distractions (e.g. socializing and technology distractions). Online video focus groups yielded the lowest percentage of topic-related data due to technology distractions and socializing, but the average participant contributions were much longer. In addition, the richness of data generated in online video focus groups was similar to that produced in face-to-face focus groups. Online text-only focus groups yielded the greatest percentage of unrelated as well as socializing data, the least number of words, and less richness compared with face-to-face and online video focus groups (Abrams *et al.*, 2015). Online text-only focus groups therefore seem better suited to generating ideas rather than depth on a topic, while online video can provide data similar in richness to face-to-face settings resulting from better interaction among participants and richer communication.

Recruiting and Informed Consent

The issues of recruitment and informed consent are intricately linked. The typical rule of thumb for acquiring informed consent is when there is potential for some form of risk in relation to one's participation in a study. However, it should be noted that 'the risks to human subjects in social science research are often vague and difficult to define; they may involve less physical harm than psychological distress, invasion of privacy, or social embarrassment' (Nelkin, 1994: 363).

Online risk is somewhat different from risk in a traditional focus group. In person, identification, for example, is physical and how others perceive an individual's specific contributions to a discussion is much more obvious.

In fact, that type of interaction is one of the benefits of a face-to-face focus group. A flinch, a smile or chuckle may impact further participation or alter the revelation of certain personal details. Online, however, the loss of self-presentation – a perceived anonymity – may lead naïve participants to overly reveal potentially embarrassing details, etc. In this way, vulnerability and risk is slightly different online from in person.

There will be few, if any, known risks involved in many online studies; however, informed consent is still warranted. There is a possibility that others could gain access to study data, or that a participant might self-disclose data that could be damaging to him or herself, and in some environments individuals might access traceable information such as an IP address. A good informed consent document offers the opportunity for the researcher to clarify expectations and provides a basis for the researcher's obligation to participants. There should be details included in the informed consent regarding the technology, how it may and may not impact such things as anonymity and expectations.

It is important to remember that the electronic environment lends itself to a unique ethical dilemma: others' access to the data (Williams *et al.*, 1988). As such, this concern should be clearly identified in the informed consent process. In the online environment, researchers cannot control who saves the data or how they use it. Although others' access to the data is frequently not of concern, it needs to be appreciated that by virtue of asking someone to participate in a discussion a researcher is also exposing that participant to potential misrepresentation of their contribution in someone else's research or other context. Recognizing how futile and naïve it would be to think individuals can be prevented from keeping log files of group discussions, and also appreciating that making it a concern with the group might drive those storing the data into the recesses, researchers are encouraged to be direct about the issue in the consent form. It might be helpful, for example, to indicate in the informed consent that participants should not record the focus group for any purpose.

Once there is clarity regarding the specifics of consent, recruitment can commence. Recruitment should be driven by a given study's sampling requirements. As in offline research techniques, if a researcher is considering sampling, he/she has a sense of a sampling need based on intuition and a set of assumptions about what sample will yield the most significant understanding of the subject matter. In this way, the researcher is using purposive sampling (Babbie, 2015).

Researchers are encouraged to recruit in different locations on the Internet. They might review and post on community spaces such as LinkedIn and Facebook, post in newsgroups and listserv discussion lists, and seek out spaces where a particular study sample might frequent online, such as gaming environments, male and female community sites, and forums, as a way of pursuing potential participants. When participants indicate an interest, researchers should create a distribution list, and mail appropriate personal information, details about the study, and expectations of participants. They should also include a more detailed statement about the project and what people are agreeing to when they agree to participate.

Recruiting in this manner is not unlike recruiting offline. Researchers often post notices on bulletin boards, in publications, and so forth, as well as telephoning or emailing past participants, members of organizations, etc., who are in some type of listing.

One of the challenges for most research is the best and most appropriate means by which to recruit. The most significant challenge is being intrusive in online locations, not unlike the telemarketing recruitment call during the family dinner hour. Being respectful of online groups and virtual communities requires researchers to seriously consider the means by which to recruit. For example, is it necessary to secure the approval of the management, most often a group administrator, prior to posting? In most cases, it might be best to request that the administrator or host post the recruitment notice. This may minimize misunderstandings and limit the potential for people to feel as though they have been 'spammed', the Internet term for annoying advertisements and general information messages (Fahey, 1994).

In addition, the researcher has a responsibility to be clear on the nature, or lack thereof, of anonymity online. Participants may be naïve, believing that a simple promise of anonymity means just that: that they are anonymous. However, email addresses, IP addresses, message content, and chat dialogs may all be traceable and accessible at various times during, and after, the research effort. As such, it's important that participants be dissuaded of their delusion of online anonymity prior to participating in a discussion. Researchers are still obliged to make attempts at enabling anonymity, but need to be clear with participants that best attempts do not directly equate with actual anonymity.

Future Potentials

The Internet has played a foundational part in advances and innovations in all parts of our lives and will continue along this trajectory. It is evidenced by the digitization and networking of so many aspects of our lives, like physical activity, public and private transit, healthcare, energy use, and commerce, to name just a few. Focus group research could be paired with participants' digital data for deeper insight that could drastically improve our understanding of a variety of social phenomena and human behavior.

To conduct focus groups, video and virtual reality will continue to expand as powerful tools. Video conferencing technology has established itself as viable, especially as Internet speed and audiovisual compression improves. The possibility of communicating in real-time with people of different languages is also not far off. Skype is beta testing live translation of voice and text chat with current users (Skype, 2015). As people become more accustomed to communicating with video online, the novelty of it will be less of a distraction.

At the time of the first edition of this chapter, virtual environments were mentioned as simply a space online where people embody an avatar and meet in a constructed world, as in Second Life. Today, virtual reality technology is far more advanced. The possibility of people interacting in virtual environments is not through their home computer and an avatar but through immersing the individual in the environment with a portable headset or something along the lines of Google Glass. The possibility of this technology becoming mainstream is evidenced by Facebook's US\$2.3 billion purchase of Oculus Rift for its immersive virtual reality technology. 'The Rift – a pair of goggles with an in-built screen that uses software to create a 3D artificial environment – has become so sophisticated it allows the wearer to suspend belief and accept what they are

seeing as real' (Ensor, 2015). In 2015, the Oculus Rift CEO announced the headset will come to market at a price of US\$1,500, but that includes the cost of a computer that can give the user the richest experience. A near-term goal for the company is to bring the cost down to US\$200–US\$400 (Murphy, 2015). Researchers on a tighter budget may find potential in bringing people together in a virtual reality-type experience by using Google Cardboard, which promises to deliver immersive experiences to everyone. It is a folded cardboard apparatus usable with most smartphones. With Cardboard, Google aims to encourage development of virtual reality applications and technology.

Given Facebook's investment in virtual reality technology and continued advancement of group communication features, social media also shows future promise for conducting focus groups online. Although it can be done today, as discussed earlier, it is not ideal. The ubiquitous use of social media already makes it possible for people to use other applications without having to create separate accounts; they just login with their social media account. This takes away one common barrier with free tools. In 2016, most social media tools only offer one-to-one live video chats/calls (e.g. Facebook Messenger) or one-to-many (e.g. Facebook Live, Twitter Periscope). Given these current capabilities, live group video chat features through social media may be here before we know it.

References

Further Reading

Krueger, R.A. and Casey, M.A. (2014) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. 5th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Helps researchers think through all parts of focus group research, including those conducted online.

Poynter, R. (2010) *The Handbook of Online and Social Media Research: Tools and Techniques for Market Researchers*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons. Despite being oriented more toward market research, it provides a practical guide to planning and conducting research online.

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