

# Online focus groups

## Overview

Online focus groups are a collection of interacting individuals, with common characteristics or interests, holding an online discussion (verbal or text-based) on a particular topic that is introduced and led by a moderator. This can be through live chat rooms, video interaction, web cams, text-based forums, instant messaging or bulletin boards, for example. It is also possible to conduct focus groups in virtual worlds (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017). Online focus groups are used as a research method within a variety of qualitative methodologies, including action research, grounded theory and ethnography, and in mixed methods approaches to help explain statistics that have been gathered in survey research, for example. Online focus groups can be used in the preliminary or planning stages of a research project, perhaps to help inform and develop a questionnaire, or they can be used as the sole data collection method in a research project (de Lange et al., 2018 and Fox et al., 2007 provide examples of research projects that use online focus groups as their only data collection method). The aim of an online focus group is not to reach consensus: instead, it is to gain a greater understanding of attitudes, opinions, beliefs, behaviour, perceptions and/or reactions to stimuli.

There are two types of online focus group: synchronous online focus groups take place in real-time by video, web conferencing or in a chat room, for example. Participants are able to communicate with each other, and with the moderator, listening, reacting, commenting and adding to the discussion as it unfolds (Fox et al., 2007). Asynchronous online focus groups (or bulletin board focus groups), on the other hand, take place over several days. Questions are posted at intervals and participants can log in over a period of time

to answer questions and contribute to the discussion. The moderator does not have to be online for the duration of the focus group. Instead the discussion is reviewed and encouraged through further questioning and discussion at timed or periodic intervals (Williams et al., 2012).

Online focus groups are used in a wide variety of disciplines including education, sociology, politics, health and medicine, business and marketing. Examples of projects that have used online focus groups as a research method for data collection include a project on dementia case management (de Lange et al., 2018); research into young people with chronic skin conditions (Fox et al., 2007); research into young people's engagement with health resources online (Boydell et al., 2014); a study into the experiences of gay and bisexual men diagnosed with prostate cancer (Thomas et al., 2013); and research into the experiences of travel nurses (Tuttas, 2015). These projects illustrate that one of the main advantages of online focus group research is that it enables people to join an online group when they may be unwilling or unable to join a face-to-face group (due to the sensitive nature of the project, for example). Another advantage is that online focus groups can reach hard to access participants and enable researchers to include participants from a variety of locations across geographical boundaries with very few costs involved.

If you are interested in using online focus groups as a research method, it is important that you understand more about the focus group method in general. Barbour (2007), Kruegar and Casey (2015) and Liamputtong (2011) all provide valuable information for those interested in focus group research (Chapter 11 of Kruegar and Casey, 2015 discusses 'telephone and internet focus group interviewing'). Chapter 3 in Coulson (2015) also provides information about running online focus groups, along with chapters on other online methods. You can also visit You Tube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) to search for online focus group demonstrations and tutorials. Software and online tools are available to help you to run focus groups and maximise group engagement including whiteboards, video sharing, demos, web browser sharing, desktop sharing, app sharing, drawing tools and polling tools, for example. Tools enable you to send open and closed ended questions, upload and present video clips, track time and monitor participation levels, annotate and receive instant transcriptions. There are also apps available for mobile devices that enable participants to take part in online focus groups at a place of their choosing or while on the move. It is useful to read about some of the software and tools available, if you are intending to use online focus groups as a research method. Some are simple to use and free, whereas others are more complex with significant costs attached. Examples are given below. You may also find it useful to obtain more information about

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qualitative data analysis software (Chapter 9) and video and audio analysis (Chapters 2 and 55).

## **Questions for reflection**

### **Epistemology, theoretical perspective and methodology**

- How will you ensure compatibility of method with underlying epistemological, theoretical and methodological standpoint? As we have seen above, online focus groups can be used within a variety of methodological and theoretical frameworks, but you must ensure that they are compatible.
- What sampling techniques do you intend to use? What about people who do not have computers or mobile devices, those who cannot read or write (or who type very slowly), or do not speak English, for example? Boydell et al. (2014) provide a useful discussion on sampling and recruitment strategies (and difficulties) for online focus groups.
- What analysis methods do you intend to use? This could include, for example, content analysis, grounded theory analysis, discourse analysis or narrative analysis. The method(s) that you choose is guided by epistemology, theoretical perspective and methodology: these will also guide your decisions about appropriate data analysis software (Chapter 9).

### **Ethics, morals and legal issues**

- How might conventional power dynamics exist within the virtual or online environment? How might this have an influence on your focus group participants, outcomes and analyses?
- Have you identified a suitable and secure online venue for your focus group? Will you use an existing venue or create your own? How can you ensure that it is secure (password-protected access, for example)?
- Have you thought about developing a code of ethics or a code of behaviour and, if so, what is to be included (respecting each other, avoiding negative or derogatory comments, taking note of what others say/write and respecting confidentiality, for example)?
- How will you maintain a duty of care to participants? See Williams et al. (2012) for an enlightening discussion on participant safety, netiquette, anonymity and participant authentication.

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- Are you going to provide incentives to encourage participants to take part? If so, what are they, are they appropriate and what costs are involved? What influence might incentives have on participant behaviour? Boydell et al. (2014) provide interesting reflections on recruitment and incentives for online focus groups.
- Is it possible that written communication can provide emotive detail that may cause strong emotive reactions in others (Williams et al., 2012)? Reflection on your research topic and methodology is important, in particular, in cases where online focus groups are seen to be a way to reach people who are unwilling to meet face-to-face, where there is a possibility that sensitive issues will be written about or discussed.

## Practicalities

- The successful running and completion of online focus groups depend, in part, on the skill of the moderator. What skills are important, and how will you develop these skills? For example, in online focus groups you need experience with the required style of real-time discussion and the ability to react and type quickly, if your focus group is text-based (Fox et al., 2007). You will also need to develop an understanding of online group dynamics.
- How do you intend to recruit participants (online or offline, via websites, apps, or social media, for example)? How might your recruitment strategy influence participation rates? Stewart and Shamdasani (2017: 55) note that online commitments may not be as compelling as verbal commitments, for example.
- How many participants will you recruit, and how many will you over-recruit, assuming that all will not take part? Fox et al. (2007) found that they had an average attendance of three participants in each group after dropout, which meant that discussions were manageable, whereas de Lange et al. (2018) had an attendance of four to eleven over a total of thirteen online focus groups. You should ensure that you have enough participants to make data meaningful, but not too many that the group is difficult to run and control: seven to eleven participants is a good number for synchronous online focus groups, whereas it is possible to recruit up to thirty for asynchronous online focus groups.
- How will you deal with digressions, break-away conversations, insulting or derogatory comments or arguments, for example? It is important that

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you develop good skills as a moderator and that you understand how to deal with these problems.

- How can you minimise disturbances and distractions? In a face-to-face focus group these can be controlled, but in an online focus group you have no control over what happens in the physical location of the online participant (especially when participants may be on the move or in public spaces). Problems can be reduced by offering guidelines about choosing a suitable location and asking participants to ask others not to disturb them, for example.
- If you intend to use focus group software and data analysis software, what costs are involved and what type and level of support is offered by the provider? What features are available and do they meet your needs?

## Useful resources

Examples of tools and software that are available for online focus groups at time of writing include (in alphabetical order):

- AdobeConnect ([www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html](http://www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html));
- e-FocusGroups (<https://e-focusgroups.com/online.html>);
- FocusGroupIt ([www.focusgroupit.com](http://www.focusgroupit.com));
- Google Hangouts (<https://hangouts.google.com>);
- GroupQuality (<http://groupquality.com>);
- itracks ([www.itracks.com](http://www.itracks.com));
- Skype ([www.skype.com/en/](http://www.skype.com/en/));
- TeamViewer ([www.teamviewer.com/en/](http://www.teamviewer.com/en/));
- VisionsLive ([www.visionslive.com/platform/online-focus-groups](http://www.visionslive.com/platform/online-focus-groups));
- Zoom (<https://zoom.us>).

## Key texts

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# Online interviews

## Overview

Online interviews (or e-interviews) are structured, semi-structured or unstructured interviews that are carried out over the internet. These can be synchronous interviews that take place in real-time (e.g. by video, webcam, web conferencing, live chats, text, or instant messaging) or asynchronous interviews that are not in real-time and can take place over an extended period of time (e.g. email, pre-recorded video, microblogs, blogs, wikis or discussion boards). Within these two categories online interviews can be:

- video-based, enabling a full verbal and non-verbal exchange, including eye contact, facial expressions, posture, gestures and body movement;
- audio-based, enabling a full verbal and audio exchange, including pacing and timing of speech, length of silence, pitch, tone and emotion in speech;
- text-based, enabling a full written exchange that can also include emoticons, fonts, text size and colour;
- image-based, enabling a full visual exchange, including the generation and viewing of images, charts, graphs, diagrams, slides, maps, visual artefacts and virtual worlds and environments;
- multichannel-based, using a combination of some or all of the above.

Online interviews can be used as a method of data collection by researchers from a variety of epistemological and methodological standpoints. For example, structured and semi-structured online interviews can be used by those approaching their work from an objectivist standpoint: the questions are grouped into pre-determined categories that will help to answer the research

question, or confirm/disconfirm the hypothesis. The assumption is that the respondent has experiential knowledge that can be transmitted to the interviewer. Data can be quantified and compared and contrasted with data from other interviews and, if correct procedures have been followed, generalizations can be made to the target population. Discursive, conversational and unstructured online interviews, on the other hand, can be employed by those approaching their work from a subjectivist standpoint: participants are free to tell their life stories in a way that they wish, with the researcher helping to keep the narrative moving forward. The emphasis is on finding meanings and acquiring a deep understanding of people's life experiences. This type of interview can take place in real-time or over a period of time with both the researcher and interviewee returning to the interview when they wish to probe for, or provide, further information.

Examples of research projects that have used, assessed or critiqued online interviews include a discussion about the experiences of two PhD researchers using Skype to interview participants (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014); a discussion on how to make meaning from thin data, based on email interviews with teachers (Kitto and Barnett, 2007); an evaluation of the use of conferencing software for synchronous online interviewing in relation to a project on 'cyberparents' (O'Connor and Madge, 2004); an assessment of the potential sexualisation of the online interview encounter when researching the users of a Nazi fetish Internet site (Beusch, 2007); and an evaluation into using the internet to conduct online synchronous interviews on gay men's experiences of internet sex-seeking (Ayling and Mewse, 2009).

If you are interested in using online interviews for your research, and you are new to interviewing, you might find it useful to obtain more information about interviewing techniques in social research. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) provide a comprehensive guide, covering epistemological, ethical and practical issues, whereas Seidman (2013) provides a practical guide for those interested in phenomenological interviewing. Information specifically about online interviewing can be obtained from Salmons (2012). This book provides some interesting case studies, along with a useful first chapter that includes information about the different ways in which online interviews can be conducted, sampling and recruitment methods, the position of the researcher, selecting the right technology, conducting the interview and ethical issues. You may also find it useful to increase your understanding of technology available for online interviewing, some examples of which are listed in useful resources, below. Information about mobile phone interviewing can be found

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in Chapter 33, including a discussion on structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Details of mobile phone survey methodology can be found in Chapter 34. Information about other types of computer-assisted interviewing is provided in Chapter 8 and details of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software that can be used to analyse interview data is provided in Chapter 9.

## Questions for reflection

### Epistemology, theoretical perspective and methodology

- What type of online interview do you intend to conduct? This will depend on epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and topic, all of which will have an influence on the type of interview, the focus of the interview and the method. For example:
  - Positivists seek to understand and describe a particular phenomenon: structured online interviews can be used as part of a large scale survey to obtain attitudes and beliefs about a particular topic. Emphasis is placed on neutrality, technical detail and ensuring that experiential knowledge is transmitted from the interviewee to the interviewer.
  - Phenomenologists are interested in finding out how participants experience life-world phenomena: life-world online interviews (unstructured, in-depth interviews) can be used to obtain a detailed description of the lived world in a person's own words. The interview is reciprocal and informal.
  - Postmodernists focus on the construction of social meaning through language and discursive practices. Postmodern online interviewing is a conversation with diverse purposes, where interview roles are flexible and ever-changing. Different techniques are adopted, depending on postmodernist standpoint.
  - Feminists aim to conduct online interviews in a co-constructive, non-hierarchical, reciprocal and reflexive manner, although methods vary, depending on feminist standpoint. Women are encouraged to provide their own accounts in their own words with the interviewer only serving as a guide (or as a partner). Issues of rapport, trust, empathy and respect are highlighted. An awareness of gender relations is important during data collection and analysis.

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- Do you intend to use online interviews as your only data collection method, or will you use other methods such as offline interviews or online questionnaires?
- Are you intending to interview participants about their online behaviour in an online setting, or are you intending to interview participants about real-life events, using online communication technologies? Salmons (2012) will help you to address these questions.
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of conducting synchronous online interviews for qualitative research? This question is discussed by Davis et al. (2004) in relation to their research on gay/bisexual men living in London.
- What sampling technique do you intend to use? Salmons (2012: 14–15) discusses this issue in relation to nomination (the identity of a participant is verified by another person), existing sampling frame (existing records such as membership lists) and constructed sample frames (created by the researcher).

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- How do you intend to obtain informed consent? Do all participants understand what is meant by informed consent? How can you ensure that participants understand the purpose, benefits and potential risks of taking part in your research and that they are given time to make their decision? What information do you need to provide (the goals of the research, the length and degree of commitment required, opt-in and opt-out clauses and issues of anonymity and confidentiality, for example)? This should encompass the whole research process including data collection, analysis and dissemination of results.
- How do you intend to protect data and keep data secure? Do you have a good understanding of relevant data protection legislation (such as the Data Protection Act 2018 in the UK)?
- Is the interview to take place in a public or private online space? If private, can you guarantee privacy? What happens about privacy when the interviewee chooses to undertake the interview in a physical public space on a mobile device, for example (Chapter 33)?
- How can you establish trustworthiness and credibility in online interviews? James and Busher (2006) provide a detailed discussion on this topic.

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### Practicalities

- Do you need to send equipment to participants, or will they use their own equipment (webcams, mobiles or laptops, for example).
- Are interviewers and interviewees competent in the use of equipment and software, or is training required? Have you (or other interviewers) practised with the equipment? This can include ensuring that you get the correct camera angle and are able to make 'eye contact' with your interviewee, or ensuring that speakers and microphones are placed in the right location and working correctly, for example.
- How can you ensure that both interviewer and interviewee have reliable technology that will not disrupt the interview process (good broadband connection, reliable recording and good sound and video quality, for example)? This is of particular importance when conducting synchronous interviews.
- What misunderstandings might occur in your online interviews (social, cultural, organisational or language-based misunderstandings, for example)? How can these be addressed?
- What issues are important when compiling an interview schedule? Chapter 34 lists pertinent issues on structure, length, relevance and wording of questions.
- How do you intend to establish rapport when you introduce yourself and begin the interviews? This can include issues of courtesy, respect, honesty, politeness, empathy and appropriate choice of communication technologies, for example.

### Useful resources

There are a wide variety of digital tools and software packages available that can be used for different types of online interviewing. Some are free and are aimed at the general market, whereas others are aimed at businesses, market researchers and those interested in qualitative research. Some of these have significant costs attached. Examples available at time of writing include (in alphabetical order):

- BlogNog ([www.blognog.com](http://www.blognog.com));
- Dub InterViewer ([www.nebu.com/dub-interviewer-data-collection-software](http://www.nebu.com/dub-interviewer-data-collection-software));
- FreeConference ([www.freeconference.com](http://www.freeconference.com));
- Google Hangouts (<https://hangouts.google.com>);

- GoToMeeting ([www.gotomeeting.com/en-gb](http://www.gotomeeting.com/en-gb));
- Group Quality (<http://groupquality.com/products/online-interviews>);
- Isurus In-depth Interviews (<http://isurusmrc.com/research-tools/qualitative-research-tools>);
- ReadyTalk ([www.readytalk.com](http://www.readytalk.com));
- Skype ([www.skype.com/en](http://www.skype.com/en));
- VisionsLive V+ Online In-Depth Interviews ([www.visionslive.com/platform/online-in-depth-interviews](http://www.visionslive.com/platform/online-in-depth-interviews)).

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