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Methodological Reflections on the Use of Online Focus Groups

Abstract

The internet is increasingly used as a tool in qualitative research. In particular, asynchronous online focus groups are used when factors such as cost, time or access to participants can make conducting face-to-face research difficult. In this article we consider key methodological issues involved in using asynchronous online focus groups to explore experiences of health and illness. The written nature of internet communication, the lack of physical presence and the asynchronous, longitudinal aspects enable participants who might not normally contribute to research studies to reflect on their personal stories before disclosing them to the researcher. Implications for study design, recruitment strategies and ethics should be considered when deciding whether to use this method.

With the internet becoming a significant part of many people's daily lives, qualitative researchers are recognizing its potential for data collection. Traditional qualitative research methods such as ethnographic or observational techniques, interviewing and focus groups have been successfully adapted for use online (Kozinets, 2010; Murray & Sixsmith, 1998; Murray, 1997). In particular, researchers have used online focus groups for a broad range of topics in social science and health research including investigations into the experience of self-harm (Adams, Gavin & Rodham, 2005), intervention delivery in occupational therapy (Boshoff, Alant & May, 2005) and the perspectives of those who use pro-anorexia websites ("Author1", 2010).

An online focus group can be defined as "a selected group of individuals who have volunteered to participate in a moderated, structured, online discussion in order to explore a particular topic for the purpose of research" ("Authors1-4", 2009, p. 119). Online focus groups can be conducted synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous focus groups occur in real-time and require participants and researchers to contribute at the same pre-arranged time. These typically use 'chat' tools such as messenger systems or chat rooms. In contrast, asynchronous focus groups normally use online discussion boards or forums and allow participants and researchers to read and reply to each other's postings at times of their own choosing.

The online focus group method is considered a viable, and in some instances preferable, alternative to traditional offline methods ("Author4", 2006; Turney & Pocknee, 2005). For instance, Murray's (1997) investigation into the practicalities of this method (exploring sample size, timescale, recruitment and structure) concluded that:

> The use of VFGs [virtual focus groups] has provided valuable research data that could have not been readily obtained using other methods and from participants whom I could not have otherwise hoped to gather together for discussions without considerable expense.
>
> (Murray, 1997, p.548)

This review aims to build on Murray's work by drawing on the growing literature and our own experiences to reflect on current knowledge about online focus group research. Fox, Morris and Rumsey (2007) discussed their experience of conducting synchronous online focus groups with young people with chronic skin conditions. They recognised a need for qualitative researchers to reflect on their experience of using novel methods "to make transparent the experience and demonstrate the viability of the method" (p. 539). Their review highlighted the benefits of synchronous online focus groups for engaging young people who are already familiar with instant messaging. However, Fox et al.'s (2007) reflections also highlighted two important limitations. First, arranging a mutually suitable time for their study was just as problematic as for a face-to-face focus group. Second, the synchronicity made the experience *"fast, furious and chaotic"* (p.543), which suggests it may not be suitable for those with slower keyboard skills or less familiarity with this type of online environment.

This article addresses the related method of asynchronous online focus groups. We consider six main areas: i) the written nature of communication; ii) anonymity and the lack of physical presence; iii) the asynchronicity of online research; iv) the role of the researcher; v) implications for study design and recruitment; and vi) ethical implications. We have chosen these areas as we believe from our own experiences of conducting asynchronous online focus groups that these have important implications for the practical application of the method.

i) The Written Nature of Communication

Whether online or offline, linguistic features of both oral and written communication will reflect personal attributes of the people who are talking or writing, such as age, gender, ethnicity and the social context in which they are presenting (aspects of) themselves. Online communication uses informal representations of written language such as abbreviations and phonetic spellings (e.g. BTW r u gonna go?) whilst also allowing more formal features, including the ability to edit messages before sharing. This written language is often combined with conversational aspects of language by incorporating interactive questions and interjections ("Phew! Are you okay?) resulting in a "hybrid of both spoken and written language" (James & Busher, 2009, p. 107). Furthermore, online conventions exist that allow communicators to inject a sense of emotion into their writing. These include the use of capital letters (I AM SHOUTING), punctuation marks (!), emoticons (☺), and popular acronyms such as LOL to mean laugh out loud (Fox et al., 2007; Kenny, 2005; Stewart & Williams, 2005).

Expressing and interpreting emotion.

In qualitative research, body language and a range of non-verbal cues can provide researchers with further insight into the experience that their participants are describing (Finlay, 2006) but in online focus groups these cues are notably absent. This has led some researchers to question the expression and interpretation of emotion in online research (Illingworth, 2001; Stewart & Williams, 2005). For example, some qualitative researchers claim that online

discussions could never achieve the level of dialogue and "meaningful discourse" of a face-to-face context (Mann & Stewart, 2000) but others counterbalance this with the view that written communication "should not be underestimated in its capacity to induce strong feelings and reactions" ("Author3", 2006, p552; "Authors1-4", 2009).

Langdridge (2007) has acknowledged how the spoken conversation shared by the researcher and participant in offline research differs in intention from the written transcription, which becomes fixed and detached from the speaker. In contrast, data collected online begins in written form so there is no need to transcribe. This increases the accuracy of the transcripts and removes the potential for error (Adler & Zarchin, 2002; Oringderff, 2004). It may also enhance interpretation. Participants may compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues by ensuring that their descriptions portray the level of meaning and emotion that they wish to communicate. It may be argued that this explicit expression of emotion in written language is more easily interpreted and incorporated into analyses than the implicit emotional nuances offered in spoken communication. Aspects related to interpreting meanings in online research will be further explored later in this paper.

Some research suggests that writing about experience can have a cathartic effect allowing authors to understand and work through their own emotions (Etherington, 2003; Pennebaker, 1993). Recent research has also shown that the increase in technologies that use written communication (text-messaging, instant messaging, online forums and social networking website) mean that many people prefer this method of communicating their experiences (Turkle, 2011). Adolescents in Turkle's ethnographic study of communication technologies reported that texting about their experiences was the only way that they could understand, communicate about and even feel their emotions. Written language can also open up communication for those who can find it difficult to express themselves verbally, such as those who have speech or hearing difficulties or those who have cognitive disabilities, thus providing wider, equal opportunities for participation (Tanis, 2007). Of course, the written nature of online research is not for everyone; some participants (and researchers) feel more comfortable communicating their experiences verbally. These preferences should be borne in mind by researchers when considering the design of their qualitative work.

ii) Anonymity and the Lack of Physical Presence

Online research can be conducted with people who the researcher has already met offline , but more often than not online participants are recruited from online settings and there is no face-to-face contact at any stage of the research. This level of anonymity can affect a person's self-presentation, self-disclosure and the relationships that they form (Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimmons, 2002) and this has important implications for online qualitative research.

Relationships in online communication.

The physical distance between the researcher and participants in virtual research can serve to equalise power relations that might arise from such visible differences as race, age and gender and encourage participant interaction (Illingworth, 2001). Equal power relations amongst participants can allow less confident participants to feel comfortable about contributing to discussions, enabling voices that might normally be silenced to be present (Illingworth, 2001; Kenny, 2005; Oringderff, 2004; Stewart & Williams, 2005). Although early researchers may have questioned the ability to build rapport online (Illingworth, 2001), research into online relationships demonstrates how without visual and aural cues influencing personal impressions, people are better able to form closer relationships with one another,

and more quickly, than in offline situations (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna, 2007; Whitty & Carr, 2006). In online research, this has the potential for quickly creating a comfortable and permissible environment for sharing personal experiences.

Self-presentation and self-disclosure.

Early online researchers questioned the data generated in online research studies suggesting that it was more difficult to validate the details obtained and that individuals were more likely to disclose negative views (Chen & Hinton, 1999). However, some researchers argue that the unique features of the internet actually facilitate the expression of a true self. First, the anonymity of the internet allows people to express aspects of the self that they perhaps are unable to do offline because of others' expectations and the social risks involved. Thus, if people are more likely to express negative views this might be because these views are true opinions that individuals feel unable to express in offline interaction. Second, expressing aspects of the self that might be taboo or stigmatised often has negative social consequences and so it is unsurprising that these can remain hidden in offline settings (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna, 2007). Bargh et al. (2002) relates this to the "strangers on the train" phenomenon whereby people are more likely to share intimate information with an anonymous stranger than someone close. This has been termed the "online disinhibition effect" by Suler (2004). However, Suler (2004) argues that the idea of a true self is "too ambiguous, arbitrary and rudimentary to serve as a useful concept". Instead, he suggests that this disinhibition effect gives "more chances to convey thoughts and emotions that go "deeper" than the seemingly superficial persona of everyday living."

Whether or not the internet allows expression of a "true self", it has the potential to create a more permissive atmosphere for research participants to disclose their experience. This can be especially advantageous when the topic is of a sensitive or stigmatised nature (Chen & Hinton, 1999; Joinson, 2003; Oringderff, 2004; Tates et al., 2009). As Adams et al. (2005, p.1294) express, "[i]f we are protected by the anonymity of the internet, it is easier to tell another about ourselves, find common group, and express usually inhibited parts of ourselves".

Mann and Stewart (2000) provide extracts from their Young People and Health Risk project where they asked young adolescent men about their opinions on alcohol use and sex. Participants were first asked to talk about their experiences in a face-to-face focus group before moving onto online discussions. Offline discussions consisted of short, mumbled answers, silent responses to questions and giggling with no admission of alcohol use or sex. In contrast, a very different picture emerged in the online discussions where the young men disclosed experiences of one night stands and getting drunk. Online focus groups therefore can allow researchers to collect rich and candid accounts.

Body Image Online.

People with body image issues can find the physical anonymity of online communication beneficial and sometimes preferable to offline communication (Fox et al., 2007; Walstrom, 2000; "Author1", accepted). As Walstrom (2000, p.761) explains, "[t]he 'bodiless' nature of online support groups helps ensure participants' sense of safety, because judgments relating to physical appearances are largely decreased" (Walstrom, 2000, p.761). Participants in "Author1"'s(2009) online focus group study that explored the experience of anorexia nervosa

expressed their ease about sharing their experiences in an anonymous format. As one participant explained:

> It was so much easier to be honest about things without worrying about what the "skinny" person across the room was thinking about me or what I had to say. […] you are much more likely to get an honest answer out of me if I feel safely hidden (even baggy jeans and sweatshirts aren't enough to hide me if I'm face-to-face with someone).
>
> (Extract from "Author1", 2009)

For participants in Fox et al.'s (2007) study with young people with chronic skin conditions, the online setting "offer[ed] a veil of privacy" (p. 545), providing a more comfortable environment for participants who might feel unconfident discussing their experiences face-to-face. This suggests that the lack of bodily presence and physical anonymity might be particularly desired by populations with appearance-related concerns and that online approaches can be a beneficial tool for research in this field.

iii) The Asynchronicity of Online Research

Implications for reflexivity.

Asynchronous research removes time pressures for participants to respond to a question allowing them to give more considered and detailed responses (Mann & Stewart, 2000; Murray, 2004; Tates et al., 2009). Indeed, as Joinson (2003, p.22) states, "once the pressure to reply immediately is removed, the person has the opportunity to move scarce cognitive resources from the management of the conversation to the actual message". We agree that an asynchronous approach usually ensures that participants' answers are carefully constructed accounts of the story they wish to share. This is particularly advantageous when researching sensitive issues because it allows the participants to choose those aspects of their experience that they are comfortable disclosing. However, asynchronicity also affects the impulsiveness of responses (Oringderff, 2004) and researchers may want to consider how important participant spontaneity is to their research question before choosing to use this method.

Similarly, with asynchronous qualitative methods the researcher has more time to consider participants' responses during the data collection process. For example they can reflect on a previous response before asking the next question. This allows greater opportunity to check participants' meanings throughout the study, which has potential for reducing misinterpretation of participants' experiences. Thus, the researcher could also learn more about the participant and their experience before conducting any formal analysis, helping them to build rapport and understanding whilst opening up opportunities for further self-disclosure. This will inevitably affect the interpretations that can be made during the analysis. However, we suggest this increases opportunities for moving iteratively between data collection and data interpretation throughout the research process and allows for rich, robust qualitative findings.

Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative methods acknowledge the individual meanings that both the participants and the researcher bring to a study topic. If a participant can check their meanings before offering it to the researcher and a researcher can check meanings throughout the data collection process what does this mean for the meaning-making process in asynchronous research? This is an important methodological question and it could be argued

that the asynchronous approach allows for a greater co-research process than more traditional methods that rely on a one-off synchronous meeting.

Studying experience over time.

Asynchronous focus groups can be compared to virtual ethnographic studies of naturally occurring online forums (and even offline ethnographic data), which enable researchers to study experiences as they occur (Seale, Charteris-Black, MacFarlane & McPherson, 2010). Thus, asynchronous, longitudinal research has important implications for understanding participants' everyday experiences and how they make sense of these as they occur and over time. Researchers might wish to consider this when deciding the appropriateness of an asynchronous approach.

iv) The Researcher as Moderator

Turney and Pocknee (2005) report that the role of the researcher in online research is less dominant than in face-to-face research; however, little else has been written about this. Linguistically it is interesting to consider how both traditional face-to-face focus groups and peer-led online support groups (online communities for discussing a shared interest) employ a 'moderator' to oversee the discussion process. How far the moderator and researcher roles differ is not yet clear. The role of the researcher seems to centre on ensuring an interactive discussion based on the research questions through maintaining a comfortable and conducive environment. As with offline focus groups, the researcher must, therefore, ensure the research questions are addressed by introducing discussion topics, using prompts and initiating follow-up questions at appropriate times. Im et al. (2007) used a number of methods to ensure adequate participation such as asking participants to visit the forum at least twice a month, e-mailing those who had not contributed and not getting too involved in the content of the focus group discussions yet also ensuring interactions stayed focused on the study topics. The researcher's role when conducting online focus groups, and in particular their intrusiveness, warrants further attention in future research.

v) Implications for Study Design and Recruitment

It has been thirteen years since Murray (1997) questioned the practical issues in conducting online focus groups and yet still there are no recommendations for study design. A review of existing studies can help us to advise on such issues as sample size, length and number of topics that can be covered. These studies have been predominantly drawn from the health and social science fields as these are the areas where the use of online focus groups has been most prominent.

Sample size.

Online focus groups have the potential to use larger sample sizes than face-to-face studies (Stewart & Williams, 2005). Despite this many researchers have chosen to replicate sample sizes recommended for face-to-face focus groups (Boshoff et al., 2005; Im et al., 2007). For example, Murray (1997) used a sample size of between 6-8 participants in his studies but he warns that *"the off-line group size may not be appropriate in all circumstances, and a larger group may be needed to promote the level of discussion and interaction the researcher seeks"* (p.545). In contrast, researchers need to be aware that smaller group sizes could be more

constructive for enabling a comfortable environment that will encourage self-disclosure (Mann & Stewart, 2000). "Author1" (2009) conducted a review of 21 different asynchronous studies and found a mean number of 12 participants per group with some studies successfully using higher numbers of around 12-14 participants per group (e.g. Adams et al., 2005; Im et al., 2007; "Author1", 2010, accepted). The sample sizes for asynchronous focus groups range from three participants in Dickerson and Feitshans (2003) study of everyday experiences of the internet and 57 people in Robson's (1999, cited in Stewart & Williams, 2005) study of inflammatory bowel disease sufferers.

Study length.

"Author1"'s (2009) review identified studies ranging in length from one to twenty-four weeks (mean study length was nine weeks). However, twenty-four week studies were only used by one group of researchers (Im and colleagues, 2006, 2007) and removing these studies from the review resulted in a mean length of four weeks, which is probably a better indicator of average study length. However, study length can also be dependent on how many question topics the researcher wishes to cover and whether a researcher takes the opportunity to ask further questions as a result of on-going discussions. Moreover, participants can post their own questions outside of the researcher's topic schedule (Kenny, 2005), which could impact on the timescale.

It appears that the design of asynchronous online focus group studies can be dependent on the research question, structure of the focus group and the sensitive nature of the research. For example, a study exploring opinions about a training programme will be less sensitive and might use more structured questions and allow for a larger group size. Conversely, a phenomenological study exploring sensitive issues about the lived experiences of illness would likely entail a smaller group size to ensure an appropriate environment for self-disclosure. Such a study might also include fewer, more open-ended discussion topics but might last longer to give participants more chance to build rapport and become familiar with the topics before posting. Therefore, when developing an online focus group study, researchers must remain pragmatic about their research design.

Recruiting for Online Studies.

The internet permits research with potentially wider and geographically dispersed samples at little cost. The convenience of being able to log in to a study at a suitable time and place can facilitate research with those who lead busy professional lives (Boshoff et al., 2005). Online research can therefore include participants who are typically difficult to reach or who cannot normally participate in research for geographical or mobility reasons. For example, Turney and Pocknee (2005) chose an online method because their samples were geographically dispersed whilst Adler and Zarchin (2002) were able to conduct research with women on bed rest for preterm labor and who therefore would not have been able to participate in a face-to-face focus group.

It is also important to consider the impact that physical or psychological difficulties could have on participation in a focus group. For example, in "Author3"'s (2008) pilot asynchronous online focus groups with participants who suffered from back pain, pain flairs and episodes of extreme tiredness made it difficult for some participants to use their computers. This effected the group interaction for those who were able to contribute.

Working with the participants, "Author3" (2008) concluded that for this study individual email interviewing would be a preferable alternative.

Participants need to have access to and appropriate skills in using the internet (Adler & Zarchin, 2002; Im et al., 2007; Kenny, 2005; Tates et al., 2009) which, according to Im et al (2007, p867) could lead to participant biases including being "educated, middle class, healthy, married, white". Although, with increased access to the internet in schools and libraries (Kenny, 2005) these biases may be reduced. Nonetheless, researchers might want to consider these possible biases when considering recruitment. For example, recent research exploring the characteristics of online health information seekers shows that those who are less educated and have lower incomes are less likely to use the internet for health purposes (Atkinson, Saperstein & Pleis, 2009). Similarly, while online research may allow greater geographical reach, it is important to consider that global access to the internet is highly variable (Internet World Statistics, 2011).

Sample bias may also not be problematic for online focus group studies that aim to explore experiences of online behavior such as the use of pro-anorexia websites or self-harm support groups (Adams et al., 2005; "Author1", 2010). Bringing virtual communities into real world contexts removes the participants from their natural space and place. As we turn to the ethical issues of online research we can see that the online environment is often the platform of choice for many groups and it could therefore be argued that it is more ethical and naturalistic to engage these people in research in their chosen environment.

vi) Ethical Considerations

In the early 1990s, it was maintained by some that any research on the internet was "fair game" as long as it was legal (Gaiser, 1997, p. 136). However, more recently, guidelines for conducting ethical online research have been published (e.g., British Psychological Society [BPS], 2007; Ess and the AOIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002). These guidelines are useful but not exhaustive. For example, the BPS (2007) guidelines list the types of research that could be conducted online but fail to mention online focus groups or e-mail interviews.

Many researchers have highlighted the need to re-think ethical issues when research is conducted in the online environment (e.g. Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff & Cui, 2009). However, many of the issues concern non-participant virtual ethnography and the download and analysis of naturally occurring communication in existing online forums without the consent of the people who posted it (King, 1996; Garcia et al., 2009). However, because focus group participants are actively engaged in the research rather than being watched from afar, we would argue that online focus group research carries much the same ethical considerations (e.g. the role of informed consent) as offline research. It is therefore suggested that a pragmatic attitude is taken to online study ethics; what is ethical in the online environment and the offline environment is likely to be broadly similar (Rodham & Gavin, 2006).

Participant Safety.

Careful consideration of where the online focus group is hosted is essential in ensuring safety and confidentiality of participants. For example, maintaining privacy or obtaining informed consent might be more difficult if the study site is merely a separate area on an existing online resource. Adams et al. (2005) used existing public discussion boards for conducting

their online focus group with people who self-harm and their participants experienced unfavourable interactions and hostile comments from non-participants. Online research exploring personal and sensitive experiences therefore needs to be conducted in a carefully controlled environment that allows researchers to exert the same control over participant safety as they would in offline situations. Researchers can use existing Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs – originally designed for educational purposes) to successfully collect research data (Kenny, 2005; "Authors1-4", 2009). VLEs enable a researcher to host their focus group on their own custom-made site, which is a secure, confidential and safe environment for research participants ("Authors1-4", 2009).

The net etiquette guide.

Although online researchers report how participants do not feel as much pressure to answer questions and therefore might find it easier to withdraw from studies than their offline counterparts (Kenny, 2005), this does not negate researchers' duty to provide a safe research environment. The anonymity of the online environment can also mean that participants have a greater likelihood of expressing negative views and/or communicate with "less discretion and tact" (Oringderff, 2004). As with offline focus groups, it is important to set out ground rules or 'a net etiquette guide' to detail what style, tone and content of messages would be appropriate for discussions (Oringderff, 2004; "Authors1-4", 2009). However, researchers need to consider the appropriate strategies for managing the impact of inappropriate contributions if they had been read by participants prior to removal by the researcher/moderator.

Physicality and Anonymity.

As noted above, the anonymous nature of the internet makes it an ideal environment for investigating sensitive experiences. However, researchers should be aware that online research does not necessarily guarantee anonymity, and this should be borne in mind when considering ethical approval and the provision of study information to research participants. It has become common practice to encourage participants to select an anonymous username to use in the online study. However, even though the use of a username might appear to be protecting participants' anonymity, if this is a username the person uses in other online interactions their virtual identity might be exposed. Therefore, in the reporting of results researchers should be encouraged to change this to a participant identifier or pseudonym in much the same way as they would change participant names in offline studies.

Undoubtedly, a key concern about online research is the lack of physical cues available to the participant and the researcher, which "restricts the researcher's capacity to monitor, support, or even terminate the study if adverse reactions become apparent" (BPS, 2007, p1). When researching sensitive issues, it is recommended that researchers provide details of how to obtain support and ensure that they do not provide advice where they do not have the appropriate professional knowledge to do so (Wood & Griffiths, 2007). It is also important to note that simply providing details of support agencies does not negate the duty of care of the researcher. For example, it would be inappropriate for a researcher to refer a participant who had had a negative experience specific to the research to another agency that had no knowledge of the research itself. Consequently, similar to offline research, contact details of a member of the ethical committee where the research is undertaken, independent from the study, should be provided with information prior to the study.

Participant authenticity.

This lack of physicality can also have important implications for the verification of online participants' identity because it is difficult to confirm that an online participant is who they say they are (BPS, 2007; Ess et al., 2002; Wood & Griffiths, 2007). This issue is especially apparent when considering studies that require the participation of specific groups (e.g., adults more than 18 years old). It is acknowledged that the actual age of a participant cannot be verified but this is, of course, often also the case in offline research. Wood and Griffiths (2007) recognize that although researchers can never be sure their participants are who they say they are, it is still important for them to ask about age and to bear in mind any implications of inadvertently having minors in their study.

Conclusion

Online research has the potential to tap into the experiences of groups who normally would not or could not take part in traditional studies. The written, anonymous and asynchronous nature of the online focus group can facilitate greater self-disclosure, increased reflexivity and an opportunity to collect details of participant experiences over time. Thus, this method can provide a rich and meaningful dataset, making it a useful alternative to offline focus groups. Nonetheless, the appropriateness of using an online focus group approach with a specific research sample to address a particular research question must be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis. This includes the consideration of participants' familiarity and comfort with written, online communication to express their views and experiences; otherwise there is a danger that the phenomenon being investigated might be overshadowed by the meaning-making of being online. In a similar vein, the familiarity and comfort of the researcher should also be taken into account. Furthermore, the research topic and purpose of the research will also affect both the suitability and the design of an online focus group study. Drawing on the literature and our own experiences of conducting online focus groups, we conclude that these are a valuable addition to the qualitative researcher's methodological options.

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