



## Editorial

### Online focus group discussions: An attractive approach to data collection for qualitative health research

Mozhgan Rivaz<sup>1\*</sup>, Paymaneh Shokrollahi<sup>2</sup>, Abbas Ebadi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Community Based Psychiatric Care Research Center, Department of Medical Surgical Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

<sup>2</sup> School of Medical Sciences, Islamic Azad University, Firozabad Branch, Firozabad, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Behavioral Sciences Research Center, Life Style Institute, School of Nursing, Baqiyatallah University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

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#### ABSTRACT

Data collection is a centerpiece in qualitative research. The use of multiple sources in data collection can improve conceptual interest of a qualitative inquiry and make it interesting. Online focus groups (OFGs) as a complementary choice to make the research project easier and engaging. Selection of the most appropriate method of data collection is essential for ensuring the trustworthiness.

This commentary is noted to important issues involved in using OFG discussions for data collection in qualitative health research. In order to determine the suitability of data collection techniques, qualitative researchers are recommended for analysis the question, the research context, the preference of participants, technical issues, the advantages and disadvantages of each method, and provide authentic data to enrich their project by applying innovative approaches.

## Introduction

Data collection is a centerpiece in qualitative research. The use of multiple sources in data collection can improve the trustworthiness of a qualitative inquiry. Traditionally, focus groups interviews are a common qualitative data collection strategy in health research and conducted in person using the face-to-face format (1). Despite the benefits of focus groups in data collection, it is important to consider the following critical challenges: maximizing health research funding and resource allocated to data collection, limited access to health-care professionals due to busy

clinical environments, lack of time, lack of convenient place for conducting interviews, vast geographical distance and, cost (2). However, advancements in technology have offered qualitative data collection more feasible and popular through Internet-based communications (i.e., Skype, Twitter, Facebook, Google+, Instagram, chat rooms and, Videoconferencing). Online focus group (OFG) discussions is an appealing option for collecting data in qualitative health researches, particularly while there is geographically dispersed. The synergistic nature of focus groups and social interactions motivates individuals to speak up, which eventually leads to data promotion (1, 3). An online focus group can be defined as “a selected group of individuals who have volunteered to participate in a moderated, structured,

\* Corresponding Author: Mozhgan Rivaz, Postal Address: Community Based Psychiatric Care Research Center, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. Email: [mrivaz@sums.ac.ir](mailto:mrivaz@sums.ac.ir)

online discussion in order to explore a particular topic for the purpose of research”(4). OFG can be conducted as synchronously (in real time) and asynchronously (non-real time). Emails, bulletin boards and posts are the most common alternatives for online asynchronous discussions (5).

Asynchronous OFG allow participants and researchers to read and reply to each other’s posting at times of their own choosing. In contrast, *synchronous* focus groups have focused on *innovative communication technologies, such as Skype, video calls, video conferences, text-based chat rooms, and instant messenger protocols (IM)*. It provides live and simultaneous communication for the researcher and participants.

Instant messenger services are faster, cheaper, easier, and more attractive to conduct synchronous interviews. It is useful even for those are unwilling to engage in a one-on-one interview (6, 7). participant convenience, cost and time- savings, access to a wide range of perspective, lack of physical presence and anonymity (especially when the topic is sensitive, stigmatized nature or people with body image issues), more engagement of participants, transcript comments, decrease in transcriber errors, brief comments, better capture of codes, and a chance to think about subjects during offline time are important *advantages* of online qualitative research (8, 9). Despite the benefits of Internet-based approaches in qualitative data generation, there are some executive barriers which cause some challenges, including restricted perception of body language, the necessity of high-speed Internet, technical skills, communication irregularity, lack of environmental control, timing difficulties, privacy, ethical issues like written informed consent and data confidentiality. However, such hindrances are mitigated by the existence of developed applications such as Skype and Face Time (3, 10).

In synchronous OFGs via Skype, The ethical aspects of online data collection are considered the same as in one-on-one interviews. All participants are fully aware of audio or video recordings before online

interviews. Researchers obtain informed consent by online, email, or posted forms (11). An important aspect of the informed consent is the voluntary nature of their participation in the interview process that allows them to withdraw from it at any time, just by clicking a button or ‘Silence’ of any obvious signal (12).

On the other hand, accurate, acceptable, and valid data which reflect the participants’ experience is essential in qualitative studies. Trustworthiness in qualitative research means sound and adequate methodology (13). Qualitative researchers through developing credibility, dependability, confirmed ability, transferability, and authenticity can demonstrate to the readers whether the research is trustworthy (14). "Authenticity refers to the extent to which researchers, fairly and faithfully, show a range of realitie "(15). One significant strategy to establish trustworthy is to adopt data triangulation from different perspectives. Intra-method (within-method) triangulation of data collection makes more confidence in achieving trustworthiness than a single (13). The trustworthiness of data taken through online interviews is a main issue that has been less argued in studies. From the perspective of trustworthiness, it is significant to report how data collection and the results were created (16).

### **Sharing an experience regard to online focus group**

The authors adopted a triangulation method of data collection in the qualitative section of a sequential exploratory mixed methods inquiry, which aimed to design a survey instrument. After twelve one-on-one interviews, developing codes and primary categories, data collection was extended through held OFG interviews with eight participants. A list of codes and categories which extracted from individual interviews were prepared and sent for them via an instant messenger service to verification trustworthiness of prior data by use of member check strategy.

Participants started to discuss freely by shearing their opinions, minded missing

issues, and added concepts and experiences there were not included.

Although the OFG is commonly used in data generation, in this innovated approach we used them for establishing of credibility of the data. With regards to the researcher's experience, the combination of this strategy with one-on-one interviews led to a comprehensive interpretation about study issues.

## Conclusion

Selection of the most appropriate method of data collection is essential for ensuring the trustworthiness. Although OFG cannot be a perfect substitute for one-on-one interviews, it can be addressed not only as a complementary method to make the research project easier and engaging, but also by triangulation intra methods aimed to enhance the quality and authenticity of a qualitative inquiry. In addition, despite the time-consuming nature of qualitative inquiry, this approach can lead to generating data in a shorter time. OFGs can allow investigators to gain access to a wider range of opinions at little cost by larger sample sizes than traditionally interviews. Increasing the credibility of studies by technology advancement needs both time, and further studies. Therefore, in order to determine the suitability of data collection techniques, qualitative researchers are recommended for analysis the question, the research context, the preference of participants, technical issues, the advantages and disadvantages of each technique and, provide authentic data to enrich their project by applying innovative approaches.

**Conflicts of Interest:** None declare

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