

Shifting Focus: Collecting Focus Group Data Online¹

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly brought about many transitions in the world. Researchers and marketers alike were faced with the challenge of collecting data from stakeholders from afar. While people were not able to gather in person to participate in focus groups, methods of online engagement were adopted. Online focus groups have been an option for years; however, people were not always equipped or comfortable with the technology required to facilitate them (Robinson et al., 2015). In the COVID-19 pandemic era, 81% of US adults say they talked with others via video calls, and 40% of adults acknowledged using internet technologies in new or different ways since the onset of the pandemic (McClain et al., 2021). This has provided a transitional period for people to adopt technologies previously unused, making online focus groups a more viable and practical option and effective even after the pandemic ends. Since the start of the pandemic, we, the author group, have conducted more than 50 online focus groups. Using that expertise, we created this publication to briefly present what focus groups are, the differences between in-person and online focus groups, potential platforms for hosting online focus groups, advantages and disadvantages to online focus groups, and best practices for conducting your own online focus groups. Researchers and practitioners alike can use this document to guide their

process of conducting online focus groups. For the purpose of this article, we will only discuss conducting *online* focus groups through online videoconferencing software.

What is a focus group?

A focus group is a group of people gathered to discuss a specific topic guided by a pre-established set of questions asked by an unbiased moderator. The goal of focus groups is to gain insight into participants' experiences, perceptions, and views of a specific topic. Traditionally, focus groups are conducted in person because the interaction among participants during discussion is important (Galindo-Gonzalez & Israel, 2020; Kitzing, 1994; Krueger, 1998).

Focus groups have a long history and can be dated back to the 1920s (Basch, 1987). Today, this research method is widely used in many disciplines, such as social science (Smithson, 2000). This method can be used to test marketing materials, gather opinions, brainstorm ideas, and gather extensive insights on messages, products, or other points of interest (Galindo-Gonzalez & Israel, 2020). In the EDIS publication *Using Focus Group Interviews for Planning or Evaluating Extension Programs*, Galindo-Gonzalez and Israel (2020) go into rich detail on what focus groups offer, how they can be used, how to prepare for data collection, selecting and recruiting participants, site selection and

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equipment, best practices during discussion, data analysis, and the limitations of the method.

In-Person versus Online Focus Groups

Oftentimes, in-person focus groups have limitations that inhibit data collection. The process of conducting in-person focus groups requires the coordination of many moving pieces, such as securing a meeting location, providing refreshments or incentive for participant attendance, recruiting potential participants, and finding trained assistant moderators. Moreover, in-person focus groups require participants to assemble in a physical location, which presents prominent barriers related to time, scheduling conflicts, location constraints, and transportation constraints (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017).

Past research and examination of online focus groups have previously found online focus groups to be less desirable than in-person focus groups (Liamputtong, 2011; Schneider et al., 2002; Stewart & Williams, 2005). However, with the increase in internet access and bandwidth, more and more studies are showing that interactions that would occur during in-person focus groups are also present in online settings (Eastwick & Gardner, 2008; Hoffman et al., 2012; Richard et al., 2021; Slater et al., 2006; Yee et al., 2007). Online focus groups provide the potential to gather demographically and geographically diverse participants (Halliday et al., 2021), all while maintaining a low-investment cost to gathering data (Pope et al., 2011). More importantly, research comparing in-person focus group data to data gathered in an online focus group format is found to be similar in number of ideas and thematic responses (Halliday et al., 2021; Richard et al., 2021).

Potential Platforms

Many videoconferencing platforms are available to virtually connect people in a focus group setting. It is recommended to consider your participant pool and what technology and capabilities they have available to them. Some potential platforms to facilitate online focus groups are [Zoom](#), [Microsoft Teams](#), [GoToMeeting](#), and [Skype](#). For a full and robust list of potential videoconferencing platforms and capabilities, see Table 1 in the EDIS publication *Don't Fake It, Make It! Technology and Tools for Virtual Hosts* (Shellhouse et al., 2021).

How To and Best Practices of Online Focus Groups

It is essential to have a team in place that is prepared to gather data effectively. We suggest hosting a training session for team members beforehand, preferably on the online platform you will be using. Be sure every team member understands their roles and functions during the meeting, including letting participants in, muting participants if they are disruptive, managing chat function, and so on. Remember to have a person in charge of recording the session. It may also be prudent to use a separate device to record the sessions as a backup.

It is suggested that online focus groups use fewer participants than traditional focus groups, which typically involve 10–12 people (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017). To give participants adequate time to share their thoughts, three to eight participants is the recommended size for online focus groups (Poynter, 2010).

When thinking about recruiting for an online focus group, an ethical issue that should be considered is the authenticity of the participant (Boydell et al., 2014). Recruitment processes can allow for participants to be disingenuous about their qualifications for the group. It is very important for the researcher to develop a verification process to ensure the participant is qualified. Rodham and Gavin (2006) suggested that the researcher should reach out to the participants to verify their identity and qualifications before conducting the group. This verification process can be done through email or by having participants complete an informational survey form. When verifying through email, it is important to monitor for ongoing misused punctuation, spelling, grammar, and repetitive answers used by the participant, because these could be an indicator of a bot or spam account and not a real person. Many of the same questions asked in an email verification process can be asked through an informational survey form. This process often allows for the recruiter to see the latitude and longitude of where the participant completed the survey and serves as another layer of verification. Participant recruitment best practices suggest using proper logos and branding elements of the organization you represent when communicating and recruiting participants for the group to help inspire participant trust in the researcher (Boydell et al., 2014).

The online format enables moderators to regulate their facial expressions much more closely than in person. However, it is more difficult to limit distractions for yourself and participants. As a moderator, be sure to mute notifications

on your computer and phone. It is also necessary to limit the distractions in your background. It is ideal to be in a room by yourself, rather than a shared office space. To create an environment where people are comfortable and can easily discuss with each other, note people joining from phone and change their name so it is more personal and easier for that person to be a part of the group.

A full checklist for moderators before, during, and after an online focus group can be found at the end of this publication in the Appendix.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Focus Groups

As with in-person focus groups, online focus groups have both advantages and disadvantages to the format. Some advantages follow:

- The cost is significantly lower when conducting online focus groups because there is no meeting space rental, refreshment cost, and reimbursements for travel.
- Some platforms available have a cloud recording option that offers a free transcription process. This can be especially helpful for situations where an additional team member is not available to take detailed notes or transcribe later.
- In times when being together is not an option due to health or safety restrictions, online focus groups are an excellent way to bring people together without having to be physically “together.”
- Participants in online focus groups are far less likely to talk over one another or have side conversations, which can frequently occur in in-person settings. Additionally, participants can contribute comments that stem from current discussion through the chat feature of some videoconferencing platforms.
- Online focus groups can better involve hard-to-reach audiences because of decreased barriers associated with in-person focus groups. For example, participants could join by phone only, if necessary. It is important to mention that having multiple phone-only participants can create a different dynamic in the group. It should also be noted that other digital inequalities may exist for participants, such as access for lower socioeconomic status participants, usage and skills for older participants, and self-perceptions and privacy of participants to other group members (Lathen & Laestadius, 2021; Robinson et al., 2015).

Although online focus groups have been underused in the past, there are already some known disadvantages to this up-and-coming method. Some disadvantages follow:

- It is impossible to limit all distractions for your participants in an online setting. This should be taken into consideration when planning the time frame and time length of your focus group participants.
- Smaller groups are preferred for online settings. Contrary to in-person groups that recommend having 10–12 people, online focus groups should be limited to a maximum of eight participants (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017).
- In online settings, there is a potential tendency for participants to interact less through body language and facial expressions. To combat this, it can be helpful to have a team member assigned to take note of the group’s nonverbal cues, perceived comfort level, and any noteworthy moments.
- Everyone joining from a computer must have a high-speed internet connection to fully and actively participate in group discussion. This can be a problem for focus groups that target rural audiences, where broadband and bandwidth can be lacking (Dornauer & Bryce, 2020). Oftentimes, participants with these barriers may keep their cameras turned off to save bandwidth, which can take away from group interaction and discussion. If high-speed internet access is unavailable or limited, a participant could also join via phone, though it would be important for the participant to be aware of their cell phone signal coverage area during the focus group.

Conclusion

Online focus groups can offer a low-cost solution to gathering data whether you are a researcher, marketer, communicator, or entrepreneur. By engaging participants online, you can gather opinions from people of varying backgrounds and geographic locations. Online focus groups may be an easier and more effective way for you to gather data now and in the future.

Appendix

Moderator Checklist

BEFORE

- Identify and assemble team that will assist with online focus groups.
- Host a training session for the team, where the group can run through a practice session of the focus group in the platform you will be using.

- This would be the time to confirm each team member is aware of their roles and functions during the meeting (i.e., letting participants in, muting participants if they are disruptive, managing chat function, recording the session in the platform, recording the session using a backup recorder, etc.).
- Ensure the participant list is capped at three to eight participants.
- Carry out recruitment verification processes for participants (i.e., reach out to participants to verify identify and qualifications through email or a survey).
- Make sure the moderator's guide is easily accessible in preparation for the session (i.e., hard copy, online format).

DURING

- Mute all phone and computer notifications to limit distractions while conducting the focus group.
- Check the background of your video screen to make sure there are no distractions.
- Remember to regulate facial expressions through your video screen.
- Make sure participants that are present are on the preregistered list of participants gathered during the recruitment verification process.
- Change all phone participants' names from phone numbers to actual names.
- If you are providing a consent form for the focus group, drop it in the chat during the beginning of the session.

AFTER

- Send any follow-up information to participants (e.g., thank-yous, incentive details, etc.).

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