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Online asynchronous focus groups: Insights on participants' opinions

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Abstract

The countermeasures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic forced researchers to look for alternative and innovative research methods to collect their data. As a result, the interest in using online research methods increased. In this study, we focused on one of these online research methods, being asynchronous online focus groups (AOFG). There is a growing body of research about AOFGs but little attention has been paid to the participants' opinions about AOFGs. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the participants' opinions about participating in an AOFG. Six AOFG's were organized using the platform FocusGroupIt, for which 72 participants registered. 28 of the participants completed a short anonymous survey about participating in an AOFG. The answers to the questions of this survey were analysed using descriptive statistics and inductive thematic analysis. The results indicated the participants were rather positive about the AOFG format. However, the results revealed some difficulties, including limited participant interaction, the platform's failure to deliver email alerts to participants, and unclarity about what was expected from the participants. The research protocol and findings from this study may assist other researchers interested in AOFGs, and contribute to the new and evolving field of online research methods.

Extended summary

Aims

The emergence of the Internet and increased digitalisation have opened the door to online research methods (ORM). The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced a widespread interest in this way of collecting data as researchers were confronted with numerous practical and methodological challenges. The countermeasures to COVID-19 forced researchers to look for alternatives in order to carry out their research activities. The use of asynchronous online focus groups (AOFG) was one of the ORMs that provided an answer to the demand for alternative ways of conducting traditional research methods. AOFGs are built on similar principles as in-person focus groups, with an emphasis on open-ended questions and discussions among participants, facilitated by a moderator. A growing body of research documents the advantages and disadvantages of AOFGs and the quality of the produced data. However, participants' opinions about AOFGs have remained underexposed. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the participants' opinions about participating in an AOFG.

Methodology

We used the AOFG method to investigate ePortfolio use and other aspects of workplace learning in higher healthcare education. Participants were eligible to participate if they were students, mentors or teachers in the educational program of specialist medicine or family medicine, and had experience with using an ePortfolio that supports workplace learning. We recruited participants by sending emails to the general administration of the educational programs asking them to forward the call to students, mentors and teachers. This call explained the research aim, outlined the process (e.g. duration of each

focus group, relevant topics, incentives, etc.) and included a survey link where participants could register and actively give consent before engaging in a focus group.

Six AOFGs were organised between May 2020 and July 2020. The platform FocusGroupIt was used (www.focusgroupit.com). A data processing agreement was drawn up and signed by the university and the FocusGroupIt company. FocusGroupIt allowed a text-based discussion among the participants. Participants could read each other's comments, and participate at time and place of convenience. When participants accessed the platform for the first time, they were asked to register and choose an anonymous username. Three moderators regulated the flow of each focus group. They followed a pre-defined structured focus group guide consisting of a list of topics and related questions about ePortfolio use, ePortfolio user training, workplace learning, interprofessional collaboration, and workplace-based assessment. To enable participation in times of COVID-19, we decided to give an incentive to participants based on percentage of responsiveness.

Every focus group started with welcoming the participants and posting the first question. For a period of two weeks, a topic with one to five questions was posted every two to three days. In total, six topics with underlying questions were posted. The moderators asked follow-up questions and encouraged engagement by responding to every post with an affirming or thanking comment. Participants received a notification email when a moderator posted a new topic or when another participant responded or liked their post. The last post encouraged participants to give any feedback about their experience and share any additional thoughts. A week after the last topic was posted, an email was sent to the participants thanking them for their participation, informing them about their incentive and inviting them to take part in a short anonymous survey about participating in an AOFG. The survey was modified and translated into Dutch from Reid & Reid (2005) and included eight closed-ended (5-point Likert scale) and one open-ended question. The answers to the closed-ended questions were reported using descriptive statistics. The answers to the open-ended questions were analysed using inductive thematic analysis.

Findings

Overall, 72 participants registered and created an anonymous username. The group size per focus group ranged from 6 to 21 participants. 66 of the registered participants (92%) replied to at least one post of a moderator or another participant. On average, participants replied nine times to posts of moderators and/or other participants. 28 of the registered participants (39%) completed the survey. In general, the participants showed to have enjoyed the experience of participating in an AOFG ($M=3.79$). They felt involved in the discussion ($M=3.53$) and were satisfied with the outcome ($M=3.68$). Furthermore, the participants did not feel inhibited participating in the discussion ($M=3.75$) and felt comfortable communicating with each other ($M=3.79$). The participants indicated they were more focused on the moderators' contributions ($M=3.68$) than on the contributions made by other participants ($M=3.18$). When looking at the practical aspects of the AOFGs, participants were satisfied with the frequency with which topics were posted ($M=3.86$), the number of follow-up questions ($M=3.75$), and the duration of the focus group ($M=3.96$). Twelve participants answered the open-ended question at the end of the survey. The content of these answers varied. Five comments explicitly expressed the participant's satisfaction ($n=3$) or dissatisfaction ($n=2$) with the AOFG format. Three participants indicated they did not receive the email alerts when a moderator posted a new topic or when another participant reacted to their posts. Two comments included suggestions on how to improve the AOFG format: one participant suggested an in-person focus group could be a valuable addition to the AOFG and one participant suggested to post all topics at the beginning of the focus group (instead of posting them gradually). Other comments were related to the limited interaction between the participants ($n=2$), a lack of clarity about what was expected from the

participants (n=1), and the moderators being insufficiently informed about the job content of the participants (n=1).

Theoretical and educational relevance

In our increasingly digitized world, AOFGs are an innovative qualitative data collection method with growing usefulness. In this study, the participants were rather positive about the AOFG format. However, the results of the survey also revealed some drawbacks related to the limited interaction among participants, the platform not sending email alerts to the participants, and the information provided to the participants. The research protocol and findings from this study may assist other researchers interested in AOFGs, and contribute to the new and evolving field of online research methods.

Keywords

asynchronous online focus groups, text-based, ePortfolio, healthcare education