Resilience In Qualitative Research During Covid-19: The Case Of Online Focus Groups

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Abstract

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face academic research was suspended. Qualitative researchers were exploring alternative ways to conduct meaningful research and develop resilience during a global health crisis. This paper discusses the strategic design of the research protocol as well as the benefits and challenges of conducting online focus groups during COVID-19, contributing to the growing amount of literature on the lessons learnt from this emergency mode of conducting fieldwork and its implications on the data.

Beyond the use of online focus groups as a practical intervention during the pandemic, this article reflects on the distinct benefits online focus groups present and the ways these inform qualitative research practice involving young people. Online focus groups offered plenty of opportunities for dynamic discussions and active engagement, promoted participants' agency and empowerment in the discussion and indicated suitability to research young people due to their familiarity with internet technologies and the representativeness of their daily social interactions (especially during the pandemic). The data used stems from my doctoral research investigating young people's attitudes towards 'Brexit and Europe'.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face fieldwork was suspended and replaced by online research. Despite having initially planned to conduct in-person research, I had to reshape my methods design to ensure safe, rigorous, and meaningful qualitative data while completing the research process during the pandemic. In the first section, I discuss the resilient strategy I developed to conduct Online Focus Groups (OFGs) during a time of crisis by adapting the research protocol and planning group activities using the ZOOM platform. In the second section, I critically analyse the use of OFGs, the benefits and challenges these offer and finally, I provide practical recommendations for future research involving young people.

Conducting OFGs was underestimated in the past and was mostly chosen to reach participants in geographically disperse locations (Han et al., 2019) or members of online communities (Steward & Shamdasani, 2017). Although OFGs are limited to potential participants who can reliably use Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs), most young people are competent and confident web users and as video conferencing software improves the opportunity to conduct OFGs steadily increases (Rezabek, 2000). OFGs can therefore complement, but also replicate and at times improve (Braun et al., 2017) traditional Focus Groups (FGs), especially when this concerns research with young people.

The research

In this paper, I am reflecting on the data I collected for my doctoral study exploring young people's attitudes towards 'Brexit and Europe' based on 20 OFGs with young Europeans (18-30 years old), conducted during 2020. Each discussion involved approximately 5 participants, who were recruited online through social media and student forums following a snowball/referral process upon ethics clearance and GDPR compliance. Due to the pandemic, gaining face-to-face access to student communities and universities was unfeasible and the opportunity to advertise the study online using 'chain referral' (Guest et al., 2013) proved invaluable in the recruitment process, given that young people have strong, digital social networks (Steward & Shamdasani, 2017). Moreover, e-recruiting was compatible with the remote data-collection and suitable for the target population (Boydell et al., 2014) as participation required viability of engaging online (Rezabek, 2000) and utilising ZOOM (Archibald et al., 2019). FGs are helpful to explore attitudes, perceptions, feelings, and ideas about a specific topic (Krueger, 1994), and therefore were chosen for my research investigating young voters' views on 'EU membership and referenda' and their (political) identities' construction. ZOOM was selected as it quickly became popular during the lockdown and could securely record and save live sessions (Archibald et al., 2019).

Developing a OFGs protocol

FGs can be seen and used as simulations of everyday discourses and conversations (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Due to the lack of face-to-face interaction, I built resilience to design and conduct OFGs in ways that encouraged participants' interaction and benefited from mediated communication. Thus, I decided to incorporate the ZOOM features at the heart of the OFGs protocol in line with the principles and purposes of traditional FGs. Below I am reflecting on the adaptation of OFGs lifecycle using the ZOOM features to make the participants feel comfortable and actively participate in the discussion.

The Welcome & logistics

Prior to the OFGs, I had frequent email communication with the participants to inform them about the study, the meeting arrangements and provide instructions on how to use ZOOM. When the participants joined the meeting, they were placed in a digital waiting room so I could allow each participant to enter individually and greet them personally. This was particularly helpful to briefly meet the participants and make them feel comfortable, ask questions, or raise concerns. Moreover, during this time we had the chance to check the audio-visual equipment and resolve technical issues. Each participant was then placed in a private breakout room until the start of the OFG to complete the required documentation and allow them time to familiarise themselves with ZOOM. Participants could ask me to join their room if any queries came up, and I could broadcast a message to all participants in different rooms regarding the remaining time for the discussion. This procedure was particularly beneficial to establish a friendly and comfortable environment for the participants.

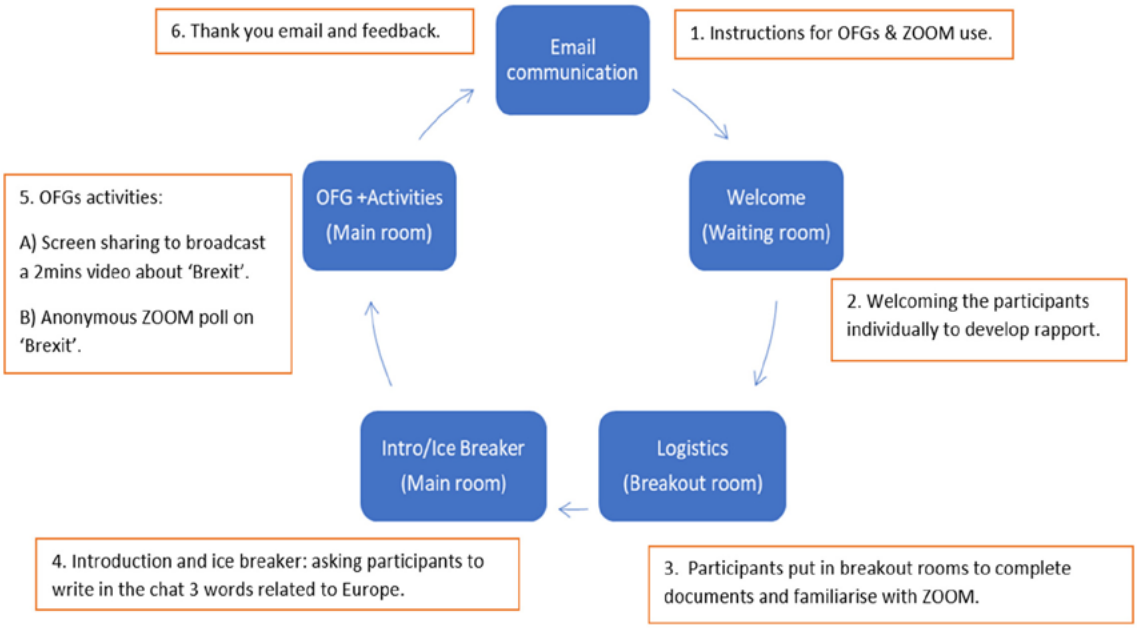

Figure 1: OFGs life cycle using ZOOM features

Stimulating activities online

The OFGs guide included open-ended questions to motivate participants' engagement, but also incorporated activities to inspire creative participation and stimulating discussion. The OFGs started with an ice-breaking activity inviting participants to describe what 'Europe' means to them by writing three words in the chat. The icebreaker gave the participants time to self-reflect on how they see 'Europe' and read others' answers. Then I invited them to further elaborate on their choices, introducing the main discussion. In one of the OFGs someone listed: 'EU', 'institutions', 'Angela Merkel' and when I asked them to explain why, they responded:

> *U.: I don't know. You mentioned the EU and just suddenly, I just thought 'Angela Merkel' because that's kind of who you think about, right? ((laughs and 'like' reactions))*

This example shows how participants spontaneously, nevertheless purposively, chose a representative figure of the 'EU institutions', which generates interesting areas to explore and offers a smooth transition to the group discussion. Ice-breaking activities can be more creative in a digital context and allow the members to share their views and create rapport (Lathen & Laestadius, 2021).

Another activity to promote interaction was sharing my screen to broadcast a 2minute video depicting the removal of the UK flag from the European Council in Brussels after the official 'Brexit' (January 2020). The participants then reflected on the video, conveying their emotions and perceptions, which enriched the group discussion. The following example illustrates how strong feelings of sadness and embarrassment were expressed with humour:

J.: I agree with S., it made me feel sad seeing that flag being taken down and removed from all of the other flags, like there was sort of a sense of solidarity left with the other flags. I suppose at least they had the courtesy to fold it up! ((laughs))

((Everyone laughs loudly and use of 'like' emoticons))

J.: Just throw it across the room! ((laughs)) (...) But now, I don't know. Yeah, a mixture of feelings and sort of an embarrassment of being part of the United Kingdom and a bit also of sadness.

Evidently, stimulating activities inspire the participants to divulge their views but also elements of their personality, contributing to the group dynamics and motivating members to chat informally about the topic.

The last activity was a ZOOM poll about 'Brexit', asking what the participants would vote in a second referendum and whether 'Brexit' should be reconsidered due to the pandemic. These activities were designated and launched to provide more opportunities for reflections on 'Brexit and Europe'. For instance, the poll towards the end of the OFGs was an entertaining activity that reminded the participants of the actual referendum and led them to negotiate their understanding of 'European memberships and referenda' in spontaneous ways.

H: I think... it's funny, actually, because I wasn't expecting a poll. I don't think we shoul have had a second referendum. I wanted to remain, but I'd be disrespecting the views of people who really believed in what they voted for in 2016. I think if I was offered the chance, I'd say we should remain, but I don't think we should reconsider.

This example discloses a great deal about the participant's internal conflicts and arbitration of identity and allowed me to witness the language used to articulate their world view.

Planning OFGs activities is extremely useful in observing digital interactions, social norms, and power play within the group, especially among young people who interact comfortably in digital contexts. These interactions would be more difficult, disruptive and time consuming in a face-to-face setting but were practically feasible and efficient in the online environment. Furthermore, utilising ZOOM features was a resilient strategy to establish rapport with the participants and collect rich data despite the lack of in-person interaction. Nevertheless, some of the ZOOM features could be improved to facilitate OFGs. For example, the poll results and use of emoticons/reactions button were not captured in the recording, which hindered me to visualise this data. Additionally, participants who used their phone to join the OFGs reported difficulties using the chat function and voting in the poll. Ensuring that ZOOM users can access the platform features regardless of the device they utilize is another issue that could be resolved.

OFGs merits and shortcomings

OFGs Benefits	OFGs Challenges
Flexibility, time, and cost efficiency	Dependence on ICTs
Multi-modal, creative, and dynamic interaction	Lacking in-person interaction
Agency and empowerment of participants	Limited control of the moderator
Representativeness of social interaction during the pandemic/young peoples' socialisation	Appropriate for specific groups/individuals in the post-pandemic era

Figure 2: OFGs Benefits and challenges

Conducting OFGs offers opportunities to qualitative researchers that should survive going forward and inform methodological literature in the post-pandemic era. However, it is important to consider the challenges that come with this mode of data collection. Recent research has emphasized the increased flexibility and convenience of OFGs, as well as the time and cost efficiency for both researchers and participants (Archibald et al., 2019). However, relying on ICTs is challenging as internet/technology failure might disrupt the data collection process (Lathen & Laestadius, 2021). Moreover, it requires the moderator's ability to trouble shoot and provide technical support to participants (Falter, et al., 2022). The key advantages of OFGs were the participants' multi-modal interaction, increased empowerment, and the representativeness of their social interaction during the pandemic and beyond.

1. Multi-modal and creative participation

Studies that compared the quality of data generated face-to-face and online reported few differences in the richness of data (Daniels et al. 2019). Platforms like ZOOM facilitate multi-modal interaction among the participants (using their mic and video, using the chat, raising hand for turn-taking etc.) as well as inclusion of visual cues and nonverbal communication (use of emoticons and video). These interactions are invaluable as they mimic real life and provide insight into participants' vocabularies, ideas, and reflections. Although lacking in-person interaction, the use of technology is helpful to capture the group dynamics.

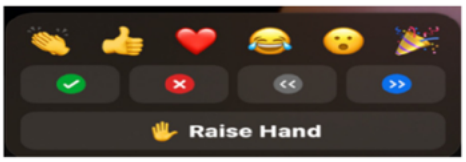

Figure 3: Zoom reaction buttons for participants interaction during the online focus group.

During OFGs, the participants could add points in the chat and use emoji reactions to demonstrate agreement, enthusiasm, or hesitation, without interrupting. This was a helpful interactive procedure which allowed participants to communicate their views, build solidarity

and signal me who would like to talk next, especially for participants who were not using their camera during the discussion. The group consensus was (in)formed by the use of emoticons which signified the discursive (re)production of social realities among the group members and encouraged further explanations.

B.: I feel that the UK has always been Euro-sceptic and distant (...)

R.: I can see that you got 'likes' and 'claps' from everyone! M., you clapped; would you like to add anything?

M. (Audio contribution): Yes, I 100% agree with everything said but wanted to offer some further examples (...)

While missing the face-to-face communication which would provide rich data from the participants' facial expressions and body language, the use of digital visual cues complemented the synchronous discussion by indicating the participants' reaction to what was being said. This practice not only mimicked face to face interaction, but for young people who extensively communicate via social media, this might be a more natural, familiar, and spontaneous way to respond to the messages they receive and process.

1. Participants' agency and control

Synchronous OFGs present a democratic potential for flattening the traditional power-structure and increasing the participants' agency and control. This empowerment is proposed by the status of participants' contribution; essentially by using the same platform and tools with the moderator, who holds only few extra tools (ending the meeting or placing participants in the breakout/waiting room). The mode of interaction is also similar to the moderator and the participants can choose to use their mic, camera, chat, or reactions. Of course, the researcher's authority still exists but admits the participants' enhanced sense of involvement and control. This non-threatening and supportive environment helped in the participants' unconstrained engagement and made them feel not only contributors but also collaborators in the research process. The following examples illustrate that participants recognised their impact on the produced data and communicated their contribution in a confident manner, which generated a sense of power and community among them.

T.: For me it was important that I helped with your research; I had a role and impact in the data collection process, and I enjoyed having the chance to discuss things I care about.

S.: We are the best of the best (participants) (...), the team was great!

However, OFGs decrease the control of the researcher in moderating the discussion given the multiple ways participants contribute and navigate the conversation, which would often stray from the key planned topics. This was often the case by the intervention of participants to bring topics that concerned them such as the 'Brexit campaign' allowing them to reframe the discussion. This change of power play in OFGs influences the data collected, the participants' role and increase the opportunities for collaboration among researchers and participants.

2. Representativeness & appropriateness

The FGs location is important as some places, like university settings, represent power and authority (Fox, et al. 2007). A digital setting serves as a neutral space for interaction and deconstructs the traditional FGs hierarchy. According to Kitchin (1998), ICTs offer new, informal social spaces unlike the formality of geographical spaces. Especially with young participants, the digital environment might serve as a more comfortable space for them to interact and discuss their views (Fox, et al. 2007). Young people's ease, familiarity, and preference for mediated communication suggest that mediated modes of research participation might be more suitable for young adults (Han, et al., 2019).

During the pandemic, most social activities were forced to take place online (Falter, et al., 2022). Recent studies suggest that online communication almost replaced face-to-face social interaction (Grech, 2021) and even older generations that might lack familiarity, skills, and enthusiasm for mediated communication, used a variety of online communication modes as a coping strategy to avoid isolation (Xie et al., 2021). Also, it has been argued that COVID-19 developed a new social norm with the use of social media and ICTs to promote public resilience, solidarity, and emotional wellbeing (Bukar, et al., 2021). Focus groups aim to mimic real life and capture semi-naturalistic, daily discussions and social norms. Thus, in the COVID-19 context, OFGs almost fully replicated (mediated) social life, as this was taking place during that period.

In other studies using OFGs during COVID-19, participants reported challenges, such as the disruption of the discussion flow and awkwardness of online conversations (Falter et al., 2022). However, this was not the case in my OFGs as the participants were actively participating in the conversation and shared positive feedback afterwards emphasising their enthusiasm about the discussion and the different views offered. This manifests that young people feel comfortable and intrigued taking part in online conversations unlike '' ZOOM fatigue'' incidents that were reported in other studies (Falter, et al., 2022).

K.: I have participated in research before, but this is the first time I took part in an online discussion, and it was a very positive experience!

A.: Thanks, I really enjoyed participating in your study. I think the discussion was great, it wasn't too long or too short and it was very interactive.

This also suggests that mediated communication and online research participation might be more suitable and preferable for young individuals and groups. Furthermore, the discussion would often go overtime (5-15minutes) as participants were concerned about the topic and wanted to continue the conversation or were asking questions about the study outcomes, the researcher's view, and experience of Brexit etc., which demonstrates that participants were genuinely interested in my research and enjoyed the discussion.

X.: Could you tell us what are other participants' views on Brexit? How do you feel about it?

Conclusion

In this article I have discussed the resilient strategy I developed to respond, adapt, and conduct OFGs, via ZOOM, during the pandemic and offered evidence to illustrate how this produced rich data. Moreover, I explored the benefits and challenges of OFGs drawing upon 20 synchronous OFGs with young Europeans to investigate their attitudes towards 'Brexit and Europe'. I have highlighted three distinct ways in which OFGs benefit research concerning young people emphasizing on the participants' multimodal and creative participation, their increased agency, and control over the discussion, but also the suitability and representativeness of this social group's interaction during the pandemic and beyond. Planning activities and manipulating the platform features worked as a resilient response to conduct OFGs, generate rich data while reflecting the principles and aims of face-to-face FGs and informing future remote qualitative research and youth studies. Consequently, OFGs despite lacking in-person communication, is a research method that should survive going forward as it seems to be preferable for younger individuals and communities, diligently representing their social interaction during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic era.

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