

Chapter XIV

Toward a Theory of Technique for Online Focus Groups

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ABSTRACT

Starting from a review of current dominant points of view about online focus groups, the authors outline the results of a research project in which they compared face-to-face discussion groups with different formats of online focus groups (forum; chat; forum plus chat) in order to identify their methodological specificities. The comparison was conducted with young adults on three health-related topics with different levels of social sensitivity. Systematic analysis of the conversational and thematic characteristics of all discussion transcripts revealed interesting characteristics of the four focus group techniques considered. The results corroborate the view that the research setting influences the findings production process in qualitative research, and might be the basis for a theory of online focus group techniques that can orient the researcher in choosing the online focus group technique best suited to his or her study aims and topics.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research, as it is conceived today, is the result of both theoretical–methodological

positions and technological developments that influence research practices (Bosio, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Gergen & Gergen, 2000). The importance of considering how theoretical and

methodological choices frame research design and the process of data construction is widely acknowledged in qualitative research (Morse & Richards, 2001). However, less attention has been paid to how tactical choices related to data collection and findings influence the study results. From our perspective, the researcher must acknowledge the influences of all contingent choices that he or she makes in the research process (from data collection to transcription and data analysis) on his or her results not only to achieve broader researcher reflexivity (Atkinson, 1990; Hertz, 1997; Steiner, 1991) but also to make the choices that are best suited to the research process. We call this need to analyze the specific influences of all the tactical choices embedded in or alternatively supporting the findings production strategies in qualitative research a *theory of technique* (Bosio, Graffigna, & Lozza, 2006; Graffigna & Bosio, 2006).

The need for a *theory of technique* approach has become even more urgent since the introduction of multimedia technologies in the research process. Multimedia are undoubtedly useful for qualitative researchers in their work, but they are also a challenge to the researcher's flexibility and sensitivity. They change the way we do research and, thus, the meaning of "constructed data" (Brown, 2002; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Dicks, Mason, Coffey, & Atkinson, 2006).

In this regard, we consider the increasing use of online qualitative research as a challenging opportunity to study the influence of the situational context of data collection (i.e., the medium and the way in which it is used) on the results achieved. In particular, online focus groups are a suitable observatory for this phenomenon, not only because researchers seek to reproduce face-to-face focus groups using a different medium (the Internet) but also because the same technique (online focus groups) can be realized through different forms of computer-mediated communication: this can lead to important variations in the data-gathering process itself and can influence the knowledge construction process.

In the light of this premise, and since online focus groups can be considered a new speech context, we believe it important to reflect on how the resources and inner limitations of the Internet-mediated research setting frame the social exchange, which forms the basis of the data construction process in focus groups.

BACKGROUND

The use of online qualitative research (particularly online focus groups) has gained increasing consensus in recent years, not only in the marketing sector (Botagelj, Korenini, & Vehovar, 2002; Cheyne, 2000; Eke & Comely, 1999; Sweet, 2001) but also in the fields of health (Im & Chee, 2003, 2004; Seymour, 2001; Strickland, Moloney, Dietrich, Myerburg, Cotsonis, & Johnson, 2003) and educational research (Henson, Koinu-Rybicki, Madigan, & Muchmore, 2000; Russell & Bullock, 1999). This trend seems to be based primarily on the pragmatic advantages that the Internet brings to research design. Scholars commonly acknowledge that the decrease in time and costs of fieldwork (see Zinchiak, 2001), the possibility of bringing together people who are geographically dispersed (see Underhill & Olmstead, 2003), the speed and availability of a complete verbatim transcript of the discussion without the need for transcription (Chen & Hinton, 1999), and the anonymity guaranteed by the Internet research setting are the most appealing plus factors of online focus groups. However, these pragmatic considerations often lead to an a-critical use of online techniques and to a failure to acknowledge the impact of the Internet setting on the psychosocial and interpersonal dynamics of the discussion group.

As a result, even though the first studies to use online focus groups were carried out in the United States in the 1990s (Miller & Walkowski, 2004), the methodological and technical reflections in this field, more than 15 years later, are

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