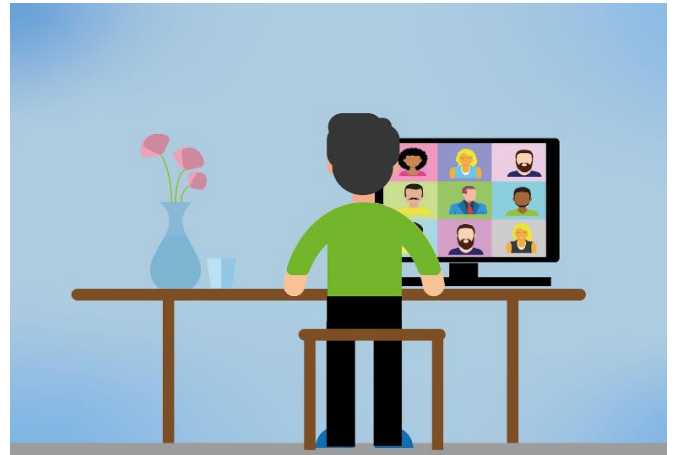# Running virtual focus groups and interviews

Conducting focus groups and interviews electronically (virtually) is now common in research. There are many benefits to virtual research activities, however there are several issues to consider when deciding how to undertake this type of research method. The issues listed below apply to focus groups and interviews.

Why use virtual research techniques?

There are a number of benefits to using virtual data collection for interviews and focus groups. These include:

- Researchers can access a more diverse potential pool of participants including a geographically diverse sample.
- Improves access to research participation for those unable to leave their homes, e.g. carers or parents.
- Reduced costs of running focus groups as travel time is not required, no venue hire or refreshment costs.
- Participants can join from home or wherever they feel most comfortable.
- Participants can save time as they do not have to travel to attend.
- Some scope for anonymity if participants use a pseudonym.
- Relatively easy to organise.

What do you need to consider when deciding whether to use virtual research techniques?

- Does this approach work with your methodology and research question? E.g., do you need to capture body language as part of your data collection?
- Do your participant group have access to the technology and are they comfortable using it?
- Could using this technology limit and bias your research?
- You will need to use a web conferencing platform that is approved by your organisation - will this platform suit your participant population.

There are also some general challenges to virtual data collection.

Below we outline some of these challenges and propose some solutions:

Challenge	Solution(s)
Less natural interactions, especially a lack of non-verbal cues, leading to stilted conversation	• Limit participant numbers to 4-6, and research team members to 2-3. Having a maximum of 9 people in the Zoom room total (9 screens) is a good goal to allow everyone to be easily visible. • Focus group facilitators may need to ask participants to use the 'raise hand' function. This ensures that all participants have a chance to have their say, and that participants don't speak over the top of one another. • Recommend having two facilitators running a focus group. One can keep an eye around the "room" and chat messages and remind the other facilitator when action is required. • Encourage participants to keep their camera on if they feel comfortable to do so. Advise participants that they can blur their background during the meeting and use a pseudonym.
Some participants may feel uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the technology and this may limit the recruitment pool	• Ensure there is a statement in your Participant Information sheet that tutorials are available if the web-conferencing platform is unfamiliar to participants. • Preparation is key! Provide some written tips and practice opportunities prior to the interview/focus group for those unfamiliar with the technology and have a team member present specifically to assist those with technology issues. • Ensure you are using an approved platform that allows participants to join via their phone. • When possible, make sure support is available to participants before the focus group if they need a tutorial or have question about using web-conferencing platforms.
Internet connectivity issues can disrupt the flow of the session	• Ask participants in advance to ensure they will have stable internet during the focus groups. • At the beginning of the focus group, tell participants to use the same link to log in again if they are logged out for any reason (this will save time and avoid the confusion, especially for those who are not familiar with web-conferencing platforms) • Try asking participants who are having connectivity issues to turn their camera off.
Participants can become distracted, particularly if children or other people are present in the room	• Provide instructions to participants prior to the focus group/interview to make sure they are in a quiet space. • Ask participants to turn their phones off (and do so yourself!) to minimise distractions.
Possibility of "Zoom" fatigue	• Run shorter focus groups (1-1.5 hours maximum) or include a break if longer than 1.5 hours.

No shows at the focus group/interview as it is easier to not attend when you don't need to travel	• Send one or more reminders ahead of the focus group time. • Provide an incentive for participants to join and communicate about it clearly in the Participant Information Sheet and correspondence prior to the focus groups
Participant concerns about privacy, including the recording of visual images	Anticipate privacy concerns and address them ahead of time: • Clearly detail the specific web conferencing platform with a link to the terms and conditions in participant information statements. • Sending the link for the focus group/interview only after written consent has been confirmed. • Use a waiting room to confirm participant entry into the focus group/interview. • Allow participants to use a pseudonym and/or turn their camera off for the recorded part of the focus group/interview. • Remind participants that recordings of the visual display will be deleted immediately after the session is over or after transcription. • Limit the use of names to first names only after recording has started. • Verbal consent should again be sought prior to the recorded starting. Do not record until after consent has been taken if using the names in verbal consent process. • If conducting a focus group or group interview ask participants to keep the discussion private.

Some other tips and tricks

- Be familiar with the platform you are using. For example, Zoom allows you to adjust the settings prior to a meeting (interview/focus group). Some particular settings we have found useful include:
    - Turning on the waiting room.
    - Limiting screen sharing and chat functions to co-hosts only (allowing participants to send a message only to the co-host(s), not other participants).
    - Turn on 'Allow participants to rename themselves' AND 'Allow host or co-host to rename participants.
    - Choose audio but not video recording function.

- Zoom polls and quizzes can be a good tool to stimulate discussion, as well as break up a long focus group. You can also consider other forms of polling technology, like Poll Everywhere or Mentimeter. If using a poll, do a test run and seek feedback from the research team or someone independent.
- White board discussion (such as built in function on Zoom or Miro board) can be an informative and helpful tool during focus groups with participants who are quite confident and have already had experience using web-conferencing platforms.
- You and your co-researchers should join the Zoom meeting 10-15 minutes ahead of time to ensure the technology and

your desired settings are working correctly.

- Allow time at the beginning of your interview/focus group to run through some basic housekeeping with your participant(s) – turn off your phone, make sure to raise your hand, try not to speak over each other, what to do if you get disconnected, etc.

Virtual focus groups and interviews have many benefits. When planning whether this is appropriate for your project there are several issues to be considered and addressed.