8-10-2023

Designing Online Focus Groups with Children and Adolescents

Vasiliki Koniakou
Athens University of Economics & Business, koniakou@eltrun.gr

Vasiliki Chronaki
Athens University of Economics and Business, vxronaki@aueb.gr

Nancy Pouloudi
Athens University of Economics and Business, pouloudi@aueb.gr

Alvaro Arenas
Athens University of Economics and Business, alvaro.arenas@ie.edu

Designing Online Focus Groups with Children and Adolescents

TREO Talk Paper

Vasiliki Koniakou
Athens Univ. of Economics & Business
koniakou@eltrun.gr

Vasiliki Chronaki
Athens Univ. of Economics & Business
vxronaki@aueb.gr

Nancy Pouloudi
Athens Univ. of Economics & Business
pouloudi@aueb.gr

Alvaro Arenas
IE Business School
alvaro.arenas@ie.edu

Abstract

The pandemic led researchers to seek new ways to continue their work within the unprecedented conditions of lockdown and social distancing. Computer-mediated communication tools have significantly increased researchers' reach, allowing them to access a larger pool of potential participants, significantly contributing to making the sampling and, by extension the outcomes, more representative and pluralistic. Additionally, remote participation has offered the participants the opportunity to choose the location of their convenience. In this vein, online focus groups, despite their shortcomings, enable synchronous, remote communication without compromising visual contact, immediacy, and spontaneous responses. Participants can still see and hear each other through webcams, microphones, and speakers, which largely compensate for the lack of physical proximity, allowing researchers to gather data from non-verbal communication cues, regardless of the communication medium. These features help create an environment resembling traditional face-to-face focus groups.

In our recent study of children's and adolescents' digital maturity during the pandemic, we conducted online focus groups to understand children's and adolescents' uses and perceptions of digital devices. The literature on conducting focus groups with children is still relatively underdeveloped, although it is suggested that additional attention should be given to the role of the moderator, the phrasing of questions, the composition of the group and level of familiarity among participants. Translating such concerns to online focus groups presents additional practical and ethical challenges, such as ensuring the privacy of participants and their ability to express their opinions without being overheard or influenced by parents, guardians, or siblings, given that the moderator cannot physically verify if and how a child or adolescent is being supervised.

In designing and conducting such research, we found four participants to be a good number for allowing all voices to be heard, and noted that the familiarity of children with online conferencing tools, especially after the pandemic, coupled with familiarity of participants within the group (e.g., classmates) preserved most of the vital and research significant characteristics of an offline focus group in terms of interactions among participants and with the moderator. The online mode had practical advantages for participants (e.g., no need for transportation by parents with tight schedules, meeting while staying in a familiar and comfortable location). From our perspective, a key advantage was the opportunity to reach out to participants which would be otherwise difficult to recruit (e.g., children from rural areas), making our sample – and therefore the resulting insights – considerably more inclusive and representative. Building on our experience, careful planning and attention to ethical considerations when conducting online focus groups with children and adolescents provide an additional important channel for researching IS use with audiences that are often underrepresented in our field.

Acknowledgement

The paper is written building upon the research and with the financial contribution from the DIGYMATEX project (Grant agreement ID: 870578), funded by the European Commission H2020 within the call 'DT-TRANSFORMATIONS-07-2019 - The impact of technological transformations on children and youth.'