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Reflecting on asynchronous internet mediated focus groups for researching culturally sensitive issues

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ABSTRACT

Internet-mediated focus groups (FGs) have become a feature of qualitative research over the last decade; however, their use within social sciences has been adopted at a slower pace than other disciplines. This paper considers the advantages and disadvantages of internet-mediated FGs and reflects on their use for researching culturally sensitive issues. It reports on an innovative study, which utilised text-based asynchronous internet-mediated FGs to explore attitudes to abortion, and abortion as a workplace issue. The authors identify three key elements of text-based asynchronous online FGs as particularly helpful in researching culturally sensitive issues - safety, time and pace. The authors demonstrate how these elements, integral to the actual process, contributed to 'opinion change/evolution' and challenged processes of stigmatisation centred on over-simplification, misinformation as to the incidence of a culturally sensitive issue in a population, and discrimination.

KEYWORDS

Abortion; online focus groups; qualitative methods; sensitive research

Introduction

The development in information technology (IT) has heralded opportunities for researchers to adapt traditional research methods and develop new and innovative ways of engaging with research participants, especially those from 'hidden', 'hard-to-reach' or vulnerable populations (Bryman, 2015; Tates et al., 2009). Quantitative methods, such as surveys have been developed, refined and tested, and the use of IT is now commonplace. This includes face-to-face computer-assisted personal interview methods or online methods using internet-mediated technologies. In contrast, the use of such technology in qualitative methodologies has developed at a slower pace, with uptake across disciplines varying. Although the use of internet-mediated technologies in the social sciences dates back to the 1990s (Rezabek, 2000), adoption has been slower on the whole in contrast to the domains of health, engineering and computer sciences (Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2013). This article reflects on the innovative use of an internet-mediated approach, text-based online focus groups (FGs), to conduct research on abortion.

Traditional FGs, conducted on a face-to-face basis, have long been recognised as a reliable and valid method of data collection, particularly for exploring people's views and experiences on an issue (Bryman, 2015). Online FGs operate on similar principles in relation to an emphasis on open-ended questions and discussions amongst participants, with a moderator guiding the discussion. While research may be conducted with already existing public online forums (Jamison et al., 2018), where the researcher may choose to maintain both insider/outsider positions simultaneously (Paechter, 2012), online FGs may also be created purposely for a specific time-limited study, as in the present case. Typically, online FGs are conducted in one of two ways: asynchronous groups

where participants contribute at different times or synchronous groups where participants contribute at the same time. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, for example, asynchronous groups allow participants to provide responses at a time and pace that is conducive to their own needs, but the immediacy of synchronous groups is lost (Biedermann, 2018). This article will focus on the efficacy of an asynchronous text-based online FG when researching abortion.

Abortion as a 'sensitive' issue

The way in which abortion is discursively constructed in specific settings is deeply connected to constructions of gender, the role of women, the sanctity of life and the role of the state in supposedly private matters and it is often highly stigmatised (Bloomer et al., 2017a). In Northern Ireland (NI) for example, where legislation on abortion has been extremely restrictive until recently, there is a consistent effort by anti-abortion politicians and campaigners to argue that it is necessary to balance and safeguard the 'rights' of the foetus and of pregnant people. In this discourse, women are positioned as vulnerable and incapable of making rational decisions (Pierson & Bloomer, 2017). The construction of abortion as a moral issue (rather than a healthcare issue) enables its stigmatisation and this arguably constitutes its 'sensitive' character, particularly in religious and conservative societies. The discursive positioning of the foetus as a separable being with its own 'rights' in anti-abortion discourse has no acknowledgement of its dependence on a pregnant person to reach a stage where it is 'separable' (Bloomer et al., 2018; Pierson & Bloomer, 2018).

Globally, three processes of abortion stigma have been identified. Firstly, although the decision to have an abortion is complex, and context- and individual-specific, it is over-simplified and its frequency denied through under-reporting and misclassification. Secondly, given this simplification and under-reporting, it is presented as exceptional and women who have abortions can be constructed as deviant and selfish, irresponsible, a murderer, or vulnerable and misguided. Discrimination is the final process of abortion stigma. This can include financial and emotional penalties such as high healthcare fees, loss of employment and verbal or physical abuse (Kumar et al., 2009: 630). Abortion stigma manifests and is perpetuated through media, governmental and institutional discourses and processes, and at community and individual levels.

The research objective was to explore attitudes to abortion and identify experiences of abortion as a workplace issue in NI and the Republic of Ireland (ROI) (Bloomer et al., 2017b). Due to logistical factors, we decided to conduct this research online. However, upon reflection, we concluded that the use of asynchronous text-based FGs to research culturally sensitive issues can challenge their so-called sensitivity for three key reasons. Participants are firstly relatively anonymous, and secondly they can spend considerably longer discussing the research questions. They can scroll back through previous contributions and respond to multiple participants at their convenience. This allows them to engage in a multi-layered manner. Thirdly, the relatively slow pace of a text-based online asynchronous FG arguably enables the self-reflective construction of meaning. Participants can move beyond the use of stigmatised, stereotypical perspectives, taking time to reflect and then reply, possibly challenging some of their own or others views on abortion. An unintended consequence of the study was participants acknowledging that this allowed for deeper nuance to be considered, from a range of different perspectives. This enabled, for instance, one strident anti-abortion perspective to be modified by the lived experience of those who had needed abortions.

Researching sensitive topics with 'hidden', 'hard-to-reach' or vulnerable populations

It is generally understood that research on culturally sensitive topics and with hidden, hard-to-reach or vulnerable populations requires special care in planning the methodologies used (Klein et al., 2010). Topics such as abortion, rape, HIV and drug abuse, for example, all carry high levels of stigmatisation for those affected, due to the politicisation and polarisation of views and negative

portrayals in the media. Avoiding culturally sensitive research topics is not advocated, however, as it amounts to an evasion of researcher responsibility and risks disempowering populations in society whose voices might otherwise remain unheard (Dempsey et al., 2016). Researchers can both incorporate critical perspectives on the 'sensitivity' of the topic, and prioritise the welfare of the study participants. The goals of the research can be balanced with reduced risk for participants by ensuring confidentiality, enabling respectful interaction and providing supportive interventions. However, regardless of the imposition of external criteria – in this case concerning the politicisation of abortion – which could imply vulnerability on the part of the respondents to this study – the researchers did not wish to make any blanket assumptions that could suggest passivity, lack of agency or patronise individuals (Marsh et al., 2017). The research team acknowledged that respondents came to the study with a range of experiences and emotions: that some individuals assumed to be at risk may not appreciate being labelled as such and might indeed feel empowered by their participation, that others could be vulnerable but not appear so, while still others could be vulnerable due to undisclosed factors unrelated to the topic of research.

Nevertheless, researchers cannot predict in what ways individual participants might be affected, both positively and negatively, during and following research. In our study on abortion, it was evident that the process of disclosing traumatic memories could be risky for some of the participants. However, some may actually have been drawn to participate precisely because it allowed them to revisit and re-evaluate such difficult experiences (McAdams, 2006). Writing or talking about socially negative experiences is particularly associated with well-being as negative emotion from the original experience tends to be lessened in the retelling (Pasupathi et al., 2009), while socially negative experiences that remain untold may be harmful as they 'do not have the opportunity to be integrated into the self' (McLean et al., 2007:274). The opportunity to create positive meaning from a negative experience (Merrill et al., 2016) was, therefore, a potential unintended positive outcome to the participants of the current study, notwithstanding the inherent risks of such research. Whilst the stigmatisation of abortion was evident in the study, this by no means translated to a blanket negative assessment of abortion per se. As evidenced within the study, for many, abortion was regarded as a normal part of a woman/pregnant person's life and stigmatisation was often associated with criminalisation, religiosity and moral conservatism (Bloomer et al., 2017b).

In the literature more broadly, a series of advantages and disadvantages of online FGs have been identified and are reviewed in the next section.

Advantages

For the researcher the use of text-based online FGs or a discussion forum, provides a series of advantages. Administration tasks and associated costs of arranging and hosting traditional FGs are diminished. Social distancing rules observed during the Covid-19 pandemic can be adhered to. Online groups tend to be more 'geographically diverse' (Nicholas et al., 2010:110) and participants and researchers will not require travel expenses. The text-based nature negates the need for transcription, speeding up the process of analysis and also reduces human error in the transcription process (Boydell et al., 2014:208). The reduced costs of data collection are thus commonly identified as a key advantage, as well as high levels of data quality (Tates et al., 2009). However, online groups may take longer to conduct, increasing the time required for moderation (Rupert et al., 2017).

From the participant perspective, online FGs remove the need to allow travel time to the venue, anxiety about meeting new people is reduced, and with regard to asynchronous groups they can choose when to contribute and for how long (Fox et al., 2007:539; Nicholas et al., 2010). The ability to participate from a location of their choosing may be appealing, particularly if they are geographically isolated, or have restricted mobility due to other commitments, health issues or disability (Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2013; Madge & O'Connor, 2002). Furthermore, the participant has more control over the process; they can withdraw at any stage without having to explain or make visible their withdrawal (Tates et al., 2009).

In terms of the level of content from participants, studies indicate that the level of anonymity provided via online FGs may lead to increased self-disclosure (Tates et al., 2009). In studies where visual anonymity is used, social desirability may be reduced, allowing participants to feel more comfortable voicing their viewpoints (Fox et al., 2007; Zwaanswijk & van Dulmen, 2014). Participants also have the freedom to offer their views without the risk of being interrupted (Stewart & Williams, 2005). For example, Woodyatt et al. (2016) used both traditional and online FGs to explore intimate partner violence in gay and bisexual relationships. The researchers determined that whilst there was similarity in the themes between the two types of FGs, the online format yielded one additional theme on a sensitive topic insofar as it generated more sharing of in-depth stories. The authors conclude that this format may have provided a safer space for participants; allowing participants to be more open with others and to express their disagreements more freely than face-to-face, traditional FGs. These disagreements also led to new topics of conversation and allowed the moderator to take a quiet role, with the discussion flowing more organically (Woodyatt et al., 2016:746).

The process of asynchronous written communication has the advantage of 'the absence of communication partners' (Schiek & Ullrich, 2017:593), who in face-to-face interaction, may react with surprise, shock, hostility, laughter, boredom, or appear not to listen, which can inhibit further communication. In addition, written communication encourages the self-reflective construction of meaning in relation to experiences that are only partially understood and may be fragmentary (ibid.). Online asynchronous FGs provide the opportunity for participants to reflect on what they have contributed, without immediate time pressures from the moderator or other participants and to contribute again to the issue, adding more nuance if desired (Fox et al., 2007:539; Tates et al., 2009). If group members have full access to the text from the online focus group they can assess the clarity of their statements, helping them to evaluate if their views have been sufficiently captured (Nicholas et al., 2010). The textual contributions easily lend themselves to forms of narrative analysis (including use of software) that may reveal deeper structures of thought and behaviour linked to recovery or continuing negative health impacts of emotional or traumatic experiences (Badger et al., 2011).

Asynchronous text-based online FGs therefore arguably offer participants a safer space and more time, and they progress at a slower pace. These key elements – safety, time, and pace – are well suited to critical reflection and the evolution of positions in relation to culturally sensitive topics.

Disadvantages

The primary limitations of online FGs cited in the literature are centred on IT: lack of internet access, lack of familiarity with the format; inaccessible formats for people with diverse needs; and IT problems, either with the participant's own IT system or with the platform used. In text-based online FGs, poor typing skills may hinder participation and the format also removes the possibility of assessing non-verbal behaviour and tone, although participants may use emoticons or abbreviations instead (Fox et al., 2007).

The online nature also carries the risk of security breaches (Nicholas et al., 2010). Confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed. In text-based online FGs participants could, for instance, take screenshots of conversations or copy text and share it outside of the focus group (Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2013:45).

A particular challenge of text-based online FGs is that distress or disengagement cannot be identified using visible or audible cues. However, silence or distinct changes in tone can alert the moderator of the need to intervene and provide additional support to the participant (Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2013). The moderator thus must be aware of such signs and take action if needed. Dominant participants also require intervention from the moderator (Young et al., 2009).

Requirements of online focus groups

The nature of interaction between moderator and participant in online FGs, whilst mediated by technology, requires many of the conditions necessary for traditional groups. Efforts to establish trust at the outset are paramount and guidelines for participation are required, emphasising confidentiality of what is discussed within the group (Boydell et al., 2014: 210).

Verifying demographic details such as age, gender and race present a particular challenge for online FGs (Boydell et al., 2014; Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2013). The risk of participants providing false information may be minimised by the approach used to recruit participants. For instance, a mailing list of members of an organisation/staff or client users may provide access, with invitation to the online group being provided via the institution. Alternatively, the researcher may study an already existing online forum. Caution is required if an existing online forum is very open and susceptible to manipulation (e.g., through the use of bots). Not only will such interference invalidate the research results, they may also cause undue distress to other research participants. Such forums are not well suited to research on culturally sensitive topics.

Description of study

The study reported in this article explored the views of trade union members on abortion, on legal reform and on abortion as a workplace issue in NI and the ROI. Whilst there is a breadth of material on attitudes to abortion and legal reform (Altshuler et al., 2015; Francome & Savage, 2011), the consideration of abortion as a workplace issue is under-researched. Studies on attitudes to abortion and legal reform have ranged from quantitative surveys, to qualitative explorations, typically using face-to-face interviews or FGs. This study was unique in several respects. Firstly, it focused on the views of trade union members on abortion, a distinctly under-researched population. Secondly, it explored abortion as a workplace issue, on which there is a dearth of research. Thirdly and of particular relevance to this article, it made use of asynchronous text-based online FGs to discuss abortion and its associated experiences in two highly restricted legal jurisdictions, NI and ROI. Notably, following the study, both jurisdictions underwent significant legal change resulting in widening access to abortion.

The study was mixed methods in design, comprising a quantitative survey of union members and then a series of asynchronous online FGs. Participants for the survey were recruited through the membership lists of five trade unions: Unite the Union, Unison, GMB, CWU Ireland and Mandate, each of which provided funding for the study. Those participants with direct experience of abortion were asked if they wanted to take part in an online focus group. Direct experience was defined as having had, or having known of, or supported someone who had an abortion.

The research team determined an online method to be most appropriate for logistical reasons as the vast majority of potential participants had access to IT facilities, were spread out geographically and worked a range of different shift patterns (Fox et al., 2007:539; Nicholas et al., 2010). An online method was also appropriate as the topic under discussion was culturally sensitive. The group discussion format was chosen as the research team were particularly interested in how abortion was talked about from a range of perspectives in group settings (Bryman, 2015). The accuracy of demographic information collected was dependent on the honesty of participants and this is a recognised disadvantage of all survey research, including online methods, where participants are not personally known to the researchers (Boydell et al., 2014). Lastly, in terms of participation, the research team deemed it highly unlikely that multiple participations by one individual occurred as the project invitation was directly linked to an email address that participants provided once they completed the survey and no duplicate email addresses were present. Completion of the survey itself occurred via a direct link that had been issued to individual trade union members, with the link allowing only one instance of survey completion.

Ethics

Prior to commencing the study ethical approval was sought from Ulster University. This entailed producing a comprehensive project plan; consideration of the design of the study; aims and objectives; and the questions to be used in the FGs. A risk analysis was conducted, and procedures developed should participants disclose information that required an intervention. The research team moderated discussions, and any posts deemed to have used inappropriate terms were removed, their author was contacted, and they were given the opportunity to post again without offensive or inappropriate terms. Throughout the study, the research team were mindful not to make blanket assumptions that could suggest passivity, lack of agency or patronise individuals (Marsh et al., 2017). We were careful not to label particular participants as being at risk, and acknowledged too that we were not able to assess vulnerability of participants if no information on this was disclosed.

As argued by Blair (2016) regarding the labelling of the LGBT+ population as 'vulnerable', context is significant when planning research studies on abortion. Whilst the stigmatisation of abortion was evident in wider society, the immediate institutional environment in which the study was planned mediated the degree of sensitivity attributed to the study. The research team sought ethical approval within an environment which was resistant to viewing abortion in and of itself as a sensitive issue. The commissioners of the study took a similar position. This allowed the research team to approach the ethical process being mindful of the context but not being overly cautious. In addition, the institutional policy of positioning ethics as a process and not merely a procedural matter, combined with a feminist ethos in the research team provided ongoing opportunities to consider ethical issues as they arose.

Signing on

Upon completing the survey and agreeing to take part in the FG, the survey platform sent email addresses of participants to the research team. Those signing up to the FG received an email from the project team explaining its purpose, the aims and objectives and the signing on instructions for the platform to be used (<https://www.discourse.org>).

As the survey was separate to the FG the research team sought to gather demographic details on participants. Initial questions included age range, gender, and the jurisdiction that they lived in. Around two-thirds of participants provided this information. The demographic information was stored in a spreadsheet maintained by the research team alongside the username for each participant.

Guidelines

As part of the signing on process, a series of guidelines were provided to participants explaining the role of the moderators and how the FGs would be managed. These included the emphasis that the research team wanted to create a safe place for discussions to occur (Bryman, 2015). Participants were asked to be respectful of the multiplicity of experiences and to remain courteous and advised that if disagreements occurred participants should focus on the issue and not on an individual and use appropriate language.

In instances of inappropriate behaviour, moderators adopted the same guidelines as the platform provider, emphasising the importance of not engaging with bad behaviour and that moderators would intervene if needed. The guidance stated that possible actions following inappropriate behaviour could include removing content or a user's account.

Participants were also advised that if they were not comfortable sharing their perspective in a group setting they could contact a moderator, all of whom were members of the research team, via a private message on the forum, or by email. The overall principles of the online FGs matched those

of face to face groups in terms of setting out boundaries, moderator intervention and confidentiality (Bryman, 2015).

Platform

The research team chose the platform Discourse (an open-source discussion platform) as it provided key components required for the study, specifically that:

- Its security settings are high.
- The design is user-friendly and accessible – allowing for instance, for assistive screen reader technology to ‘read’ the content.
- It allowed the moderating team options such as sending private messages to participants.
- It allowed users to interact with one another via their user handle (@username1), sending specific notifications via email to the person they were in conversation with.
- It allowed the moderators to address the group (@group1) who would all be notified via email of the post the moderators wished them to see.
- It had an alert system for posts that may be problematic which participants could use.
- It could be accessed on a range of devices including desktop computers, laptops, tablets, and mobile phones.

Although the platform’s security settings are high, its default settings were not configured to enable self-contained groups and complete user anonymity. For this reason the researchers modified many of the default settings to ensure that groups were self-contained, that users’ anonymity was maintained, and to ensure effective moderation. The platform was then tested amongst the research team over a two-week period and further settings were modified as required to ensure instructions were clear and the functionality met the study requirements.

Focus group structure

Having signed on to the focus group, participants were asked to discuss a series of open-ended questions. Participants were organised into five self-enclosed groups of 7–11 members on a staggered basis as participants signed in. In terms of frequency of participation, the moderators suggested participants could log in once a day to contribute. Participants could also return to earlier questions, expand on their thoughts and view contributions from other group members. If desired, participants could choose a ‘Tracking’ option to receive notifications if others replied to their comment or mentioned them in a conversation.

After posting the engagement guidelines in the common area of the forum the moderating team (MacNamara, Bloomer, Pierson) each took responsibility for leading one/two groups. To build rapport each moderator introduced themselves, provided a brief career history and personal interests. This also served to communicate that the research team were highly experienced in qualitative research methods and knowledgeable about the subject area. Again, this spoke to the practice used in face to face groups in building rapport between the research team and participants (Bryman, 2015).

To begin discussions, moderators posted a vignette related to a case of a woman in NI who had been denied an abortion on grounds of fatal foetal abnormality. The case had attracted significant attention regionally and nationally and also bore resemblance to cases in the ROI. Due to the profile of the case the research team felt this would be an appropriate way to begin the discussion. Participants were provided with a brief overview of the case and asked:

What are your views on this case? Should individual cases be used to change the law? Was this case more welcome to politicians because it was seen as a ‘deserving’ case?

The first question prompted input from participants expressing a spectrum of views on abortion although two of the five groups needed a reminder post before discussion started. On occasion the moderator intervened to draw out views on comments, asking participants to expand on particular points. When discussions appeared to come to a natural conclusion, a moderator intervened to reflect back on the discussions. This served to summarise the issues raised and to assess if any further points could be added (Rupert et al., 2017).

The forum functionality meant that each group member could only see the common area and their own group's posts. The moderators could view and manage each group that they were assigned to, and the common area. Only moderators could private message participants, i.e. participants did not have the option to private message other participants.

The moderators had no indication of the views of group members on abortion before allocating them to groups. Once the initial five groups were established any further latecomers were added to one of the pre-existing five groups. This meant that they could 'catch up' on discussion by reading the previous posts. When new members were added to a pre-existing group a moderator would post a general welcome to new member(s) and a request to contribute, as and when the new members felt able. This ability to add members to pre-existing groups was a distinct advantage of the asynchronous online method. New members that joined after the initial week were added to the groups that had been established most recently to ensure that they were not joining groups whose discussions were already well developed.

Although the quantitative section of the survey had requested that only those with direct experience of abortion proceed to the online focus group section, the discussion of the initial case made clear that some participants may not have had direct experience of abortion. The moderators decided, therefore, to focus on general discussion points in the initial groups and to transfer members into subsequent experience/no experience groups once more general discussion points had been covered. The moderators also took extra care with people who discussed direct experience in the initial groups. This extra care took the form of moderator posts thanking individuals for their contribution and, if necessary, private messages to individuals thanking them for their contributions and checking in on their wellbeing.

For those in the subsequent groups without direct experience, the moderators decided to ask about their views on the role of trade unions. This included providing preliminary findings from the survey and asking for views on these. For those with direct experience, the questions were more specifically related to their own experiences, asking for instance, if they had disclosed in the workplace, the workplace response, and if it could have been handled differently.

As the study progressed it was evident that the dynamic in the direct experience group was markedly different from the five mixed initial groups. It was extremely supportive, with participants displaying real willingness to engage with the nuance of each other's experiences.

Interaction patterns

In terms of the pace of discussion and involvement of participants, the timeframe for the FGs extended over several days per question. Within each initial group the same format was followed which included the following interventions from moderators with gaps of 1-4 days depending on group dynamics:

- Posting the initial case study and asking for participants' views on same
- Posting a reminder if necessary
- Responding to initial individual posts by thanking them and asking a follow up question if necessary
- Allowing any participant interactions to evolve and run their course, only intervening if someone used inappropriate language or if the 'mood' turned from discussion of the issues to making issues personal, e.g.,, telling someone their viewpoint was 'clichéd'

- Using @username tags to thank those who had contributed and to directly ask those who had not contributed thus far if they had any thoughts
- Using the @groupname tag to address the group as a whole – for example, to summarize key issues raised during the initial stage and asking if anyone had further issues they would like to raise
- Finishing by thanking all the participants and reminding them to answer the experience/no experience question posted to the common area.

The ability to tag individual participants and to tag the group name, which generated email alerts to participants, was a key advantage. As with face to face FGs three key dynamics could be observed. Firstly, some participants did not contribute to the focus group or contributed very little whereas others dominated the discussion. Moderators could see login times, views and time spent on the forum by various users and therefore could identify and engage with those who were logging in but not posting, as well as those who were not logging in. Secondly, once participants became aware of each other's viewpoints they would either 'boost' one another or very clearly disagree with one another. Finally, as participants moved from simply addressing one another by username to tagging one another (triggering a notification), a separate interesting dynamic emerged where a user would tag a moderator and request that the discussion move on from its current direction to also consider a thus far unexplored aspect, e.g., how socioeconomic inequalities affect access to abortion and healthcare. Moderators read this as instances of when a participant perhaps felt they wanted 'out' of the current interactions without offending other participants. This was a welcome development and indicated that efforts by moderators to establish and maintain good rapport with participants were working.

As noted above, one particular concern with using online FGs to research culturally sensitive topics relates to how researchers should engage with a participant who is clearly distressed. A criticism of online methods is that it is difficult to read non-verbal cues and sufficiently gauge the mood of the group (Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2013). This certainly has merit insofar as someone may be very distressed and decide not to post, therefore giving no indication to the moderator of their distress. Each group's moderator took care to remind participants, as appropriate, that they could be contacted via private message and also provided individual email addresses as means of contact. The moderating team assert that this was a useful function, although it may not have captured all of those in distress.

That said, contributions to the forum also clearly featured some non-verbal cues through symbols and various textual methods. Examples include the use of caps to indicate anger or importance, inverted quotation marks " often used to indicate disbelief or a lack of faith in a term, a dotted line to indicate a pause or a degree of uncertainty, an exclamation mark used for a wide variety of reasons, and brackets to indicate a related but perhaps less relevant point. To interpret their meaning, each of these has to be read in the context of the overall post, with some remaining fairly ambiguous but others clearer. For example, one participant, who moderators named participant R, used caps in a way which clearly indicated anger and distress. Their posts were lengthy, detailing their negative direct experience of abortion, and at times they misinterpreted or did not take account of the context of the preceding discussion. This clearly confused or irritated some participants though on the whole the other participants were very considerate.

The private message function was a distinct advantage of the online method. It allowed moderators to offer support to those who needed it and to explain to other participants, who contravened the appropriate language policy of the forum, why a particular post had been removed. The private message function allowed for these difficult interactions, away from the group setting, which caused less embarrassment and thus less jeopardized the researcher-participant relationship. The moderating team posted general reminders that inappropriate posts had been removed, sending a clear signal to all participants that action had been taken to deal with such posts.

Using an online method to research a culturally sensitive topic can therefore be advantageous insofar as participants may take some time before responding to a post which irritates them and they may be more considerate as a result. On the flip side, as was the case with two participants in this study, people who hold quite strong views on culturally sensitive topics exhibited behaviour which could be interpreted as an unwillingness to listen to others or practice self-restraint.

Conclusion

To summarise, in this study we found that the advantages of using an asynchronous text-based online focus group to research culturally sensitive topics were numerous. Many of these may be relevant for the challenges presented in conducting primary research during the Covid-19 pandemic. In general terms, we identified that geographical distances are overcome; different work schedules can be accommodated; the private message function allows moderators to manage difficult interactions in a private space; and remedial strategies can be employed if the initial sample is not what is expected e.g., the subsequent divide between direct and no direct experience in this study.

In terms of the requirements for researching culturally sensitive topics, the anonymity afforded by the forum can facilitate self-disclosure in a safer space, relatively speaking. The longer time period for text-based asynchronous online FGs means that latecomers can be added to pre-existing groups and users can take the time to read previous posts and engage in a multi-layered manner. Additionally, the relatively slow pace of an asynchronous forum means that the mood can be assessed and responded to as it evolves. The slower pace encourages the self-reflective construction of meaning on the part of participants, and possible 'opinion change/evolution'. This is particularly relevant for culturally sensitive issues such as abortion whose sensitivity is a result of processes of stigmatisation such as over-simplification, misinformation as to its incidence in a population, and discrimination (Kumar et al., 2009). By participating in a forum which allowed for open discussion of what is often perceived as a culturally sensitive topic, the study participants themselves, to some extent, normalised the experiences they recounted and possibly reduced associated stigma (Marsh et al., 2017). From a research perspective, in line with the conclusions of Tates et al. (2009), we concur that the textual data obtained from an online focus group is very layered and rich in both direct and indirect meaning and the internet can be employed to provide enhanced access to sensitive topics (Jamison et al., 2018).

Of the three participants who responded to the question regarding the usefulness of the forum, all unequivocally stated that they felt it was beneficial and contributed to the further development of nuanced viewpoints, thus supporting the view that such explorations of difficult topics may allow opportunities for personal growth (Merrill et al., 2016).

In terms of disadvantages, moderating tasks, although not particularly time-consuming in and of themselves, required a longer time period than had been anticipated. The combination of being 'on-call' and the culturally sensitive nature of the subject matter meant that the moderators experienced the process as quite tiring and at times emotionally draining. As noted in other studies (Dempsey et al., 2016; Klein et al., 2010), the potential of distress amongst participants was an ongoing concern throughout the present study, with moderators being mindful of how distress could be best identified, monitored and managed. Participants who held very strong views on the topic needed to be adequately cared for and supported. This online moderation process elongates the role of the researcher, moving the role away from the time limited focus group scenario to a lengthier time frame, in the case of this study, over a three week period. Moderation extended the emotional burden on the researchers and this issue will need to be factored in if other researchers consider using similar methods. If resources allow, it would be beneficial to spread out the moderation tasks to as many of the research team as possible to minimise researcher fatigue. Additionally, dealing with 'lurkers', participants logging in but not contributing, was absent in our moderator guidelines and should be addressed in future studies.

We conclude that the method of text-based asynchronous online FGs was appropriate for both the topic of the study and for the profile of the participants. Whilst limitations were identified several of these can be mediated by revision of moderator guidelines. We adopted this methodology largely due to logistical constraints. However, on reflection, we have concluded that three key elements, integral to the process itself – namely relative safety, longer time period, and slower pace – can contribute to opinion change/evolution. These are particularly pertinent where processes of stigmatisation regarding an issue are centred on over-simplification, misinformation as to the incidence of the issue in a population, and discrimination.

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