Qualitative Health Research

Doing Synchronous Online Focus Groups With Young People : Methodological Reflections
Fiona E. Fox, Marianne Morris and Nichola Rumsey

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

$SAGE

Additional services and information for *Qualitative Health Research* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://qhr.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://qhr.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://qhr.sagepub.com/content/17/4/539.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Apr 6, 2007

What is This?

Doing Synchronous Online Focus Groups With Young People: Methodological Reflections

Fiona E. Fox
Marianne Morris
Nichola Rumsey
*The University of the West of England, Bristol,
United Kingdom*

Although online focus groups are emerging as a worthwhile methodological approach for qualitative researchers, reporting has been constrained in several ways. The majority of studies report asynchronous groups, whereas others employ synchronous exchanges, the efficacy of which with young people has seldom been explored. Considering the popularity of the Internet as a communication tool for young people, this missed opportunity is surprising. Based on a series of synchronous online focus groups with young people, the authors explore why this approach might be an effective way of engaging young people with appearance-related concerns in research. In this article, they discuss the process of hosting and moderating synchronous online focus groups, highlighting some of the ethical, pragmatic, and personal challenges that might face researchers using this method. Through a reflexive approach, they intend to inform and encourage qualitative researchers to consider alternative ways of engaging young people in research.

Keywords: *online focus group; synchronous online chat; young people; appearance; reflexivity*

Doing focus groups online represents attempts within the research community to adapt conventional methodological approaches to keep pace with advances in communication technology. It also provides an alternative way of conducting research with individuals who are unable or unwilling to engage in conventional face-to-face focus groups. In recent years, online focus groups have become increasingly visible in psychological literature (O'Connor & Madge, 2003; F. Stewart, Eckerman, & Zhou, 1998; Williams, 2003). However, the majority of published studies have used asynchronous, or non–real-time groups (Gaiser, 1997; Robson, 1999; Ward, 1999). Asynchronous exchanges include bulletin boards and discussion groups, where messages posted in a folder are viewed and responded to by other participants. This format might be advantageous in embracing slow typists, overcoming time zone differences, and generating detailed and reflective answers, but whether this actually constitutes a focus group has been debated (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Researchers who use synchronous, or real-time, exchanges commonly conclude that group interactions are characterized by dynamism and immediacy (O'Connor & Madge, 2003; F. Stewart et al., 1998; Williams, 2003). The immediacy experienced by participants can lead to greater expression of emotion, contributing to a form of communication which has been described as more oral than literate (K. Stewart & Williams, 2005). In this article, I (the first author) will identify why I chose real-time exchanges for my research with young people and will describe the experience of using this form of communication for research purposes.

Qualitative researchers who use novel methodological approaches should be prepared to engage in a process of reflection and reflexivity to make transparent the experience and demonstrate the viability of the method. It has been suggested that demonstrating rigor in online focus groups can best be achieved through transparency of decision-making processes at every stage (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Although the

539

majority of published articles have concentrated on the methodological costs and benefits of doing synchronous focus groups online, few have covered in depth the reflexive experience of researchers who host and moderate these groups. To increase understanding about this relatively novel method, I will devote the first part of this article to the practical, ethical, and personal aspects involved in organizing, hosting, and moderating these virtual discussions.

Finlay (2002) located reflection and reflexivity on a continuum, acknowledging that both are integral to the process of qualitative research. A reflective approach is useful for identifying key stages and challenges associated with this methodological approach and should enable me to provide a useful pragmatic account. However, reflexivity is also a central part of this reflection providing a more "immediate, continuing, dynamic and subjective self-awareness" (Finlay, 2002, p. 533). In the second part of this article, I will explore how the dynamics of my relationship with my participants shaped the research process, paying particular attention to the way in which synchronous online communication affects group dynamics and power relations. The process of reflecting about the methodology through reflexive self-awareness should contribute to the goal of demonstrating that online focus groups are an important and valid data collection method for qualitative researchers. Through this article, I intend to inform and encourage qualitative researchers who are considering doing focus groups online and also demonstrate the potential of synchronous online communication as an alternative way of engaging young people in research.

Background to the Study

The aims of this study were to explore the appearance-related concerns of young people who have chronic skin conditions. A wealth of literature exists documenting the negative psychosocial impact of chronic skin conditions in adults (Ginsburg & Link, 1989; Hill & Kennedy, 2002; Yasuda, Kobayashi, & Ohkawara, 1990). Although some studies refer to the potential for these effects to be more severe for young people, they tend to be based on the reports of caregivers and health care professionals (Ferrandiz, Pujol, Garcia-Patos, Bordas, & Smandia, 2002; Koo, 1996; Perrott, Murray, Lowe, & Mathieson, 2000). Furthermore, the tendency to quantify experiences has resulted in a lack of qualitative work with young people, increasing the need to capture the depth,

breadth, and diversity of individual experiences. This research was activated as a response to the lack of studies that directly ask young people with chronic skin conditions to articulate their experiences.

Focus groups were chosen for this study to facilitate group discussions among young people and as a way of initially exploring their experience of chronic skin conditions. I ran seven synchronous online focus groups with young people aged between 11 and 18 years. The subsequent section explores my rationale for hosting the groups online.

Doing Synchronous Online Focus Groups

Choosing the Online Environment

Conventional face-to-face focus groups can present inherent challenges for young people, including personal organization, access to transport, and the confidence to meet strangers in an unfamiliar location. Research suggests that this last concern might constitute an insurmountable obstacle to the participation of individuals with a visible difference (Ginsburg & Link, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Wahl, Gjengedal, & Hanestad, 2002). The realization that the appearance-related concerns of my participants might prohibit their participation prompted me to consider an alternative venue in which to host focus groups. As the appeal of computers and their potential for engaging young people in research has been recognized for some time (Zimmerman, 1987), I began to consider this as a less threatening way of encouraging participation. The Internet pervades the domains of home and school (Department for Education and Employment, 2000) and is a popular source of information, entertainment, and communication among young people. Evidence suggests that in terms of young people's lives, the Internet can be viewed as both an important social domain and a powerful communication tool (Pastore, 2002). It might even be useful to conceptualize and measure the Internet as a social context for adolescent development that, like other social environments, can be analyzed in terms of its constraints and affordances for social interactions and peer relationships (Gross, 2004). Adapting research methods to appeal to and suit young people might, therefore, require engaging with their online activities.

As I investigated young people's use of the Internet for communication purposes, I discovered that synchronous communication is prolific, through tools such as instant messaging and chat rooms (Subrahmanyam,

Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004). As a user group, young people might be in the vanguard of developments in information technology (IT), and their exploitation of online communication could contribute to radical changes in social and linguistic interaction (Merchant, 2001). These synchronous interactions are commonly littered with shared cultural abbreviations and emoticons. I felt that synchronous chat might appeal to my participants and facilitate discussions that might be comparable to face-to-face exchanges. I ruminated about whether, by meeting my participants in an environment that was familiar and interesting to them, I would gain some insight into a previously hidden aspect of their social world. However, I was aware that the research situation was essentially engineered by me and that conventional power dynamics were likely to persist within the virtual environment.

Recruitment

As young people use the Internet as a source of health-related information (Borzekowski & Rickert, 2001) and are familiar with synchronous online chat, I considered that recruiting through health Web sites might facilitate participation in research. I chose to recruit young people online to increase the likelihood that participants had access to and some experience of using the Internet. Skin care charities and support organizations advertised a link to my Web site on their pages designed for young people. In effect, young people sought further information about the study and chose to participate at their own discretion. Buchanan (2000) has suggested that participants who seek out a study might have an increased sense of control of their experiences and, as a result, might take part more fully by giving feedback or asking for a summary of the findings. Their participation might involve a shift from being a subject of experimentation to being an active participant, and I considered this central to the generation of child-centered data.

Ethics as a Process

Opinion is divided as to whether doing research online presents unique ethical risks. Although the impossibility of guaranteeing confidentiality online has been stressed, the ethical issues might be no more hazardous than those associated with conventional methods (Pittenger, 2003). Consensus seems to be that many of the ethical questions posed by the rapidly developing virtual environment can be resolved by examining reactions to past research and by refining

the definitions of concepts used in ethical discussions (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Although ethical approval for this study was granted by The Ethics Committee at The University of the West of England, Bristol, the ethical aspect of my research was a continuous and organic process, which required the approval of several amendments to the original application. This is best exemplified by the trial-and-error process of informed consent and parental consent for participants. Initially, participants were required to print out a consent form from the Web site, sign it, and return it by post. Although the registration form was filled out by an average of 3 young people per week, very few adhered to the process of returning the consent form. The procedure might have been hampered by the requisite organizational skills, access to a printer, and postage costs. Once ethical approval had been obtained, I began sending participants consent forms embedded in an e-mail. A better response was achieved through this method, but it seemed to require too many stages before I could get young people to a focus group. Subsequently, an online consent form was linked to the registration page on the research Web site. Those who registered could choose whether to provide their consent. The data were captured and stored on the faculty drive and were accessible only to me, my director of studies, and the IT technician supporting the project. Those who registered were directed to a link providing guidelines for safe use of the Internet.

The Online Venue

Hosting a real-time focus group requires a virtual venue such as a chat room. Public perceptions of chat rooms have been influenced by media reports of predatory adults exploiting vulnerable young people. However, research suggests that young people often feel that adults overreact to the risks of online interaction (Tapscott, 1998) and that they are well able to protect themselves online (Wallace, 1999). Despite this, I wanted to assure the parents of potential participants of their child's safety and this drove my search for a suitable and secure online venue. The literature offers little advice on this aspect of the method other than to suggest hiring a virtual facility or using costly conferencing software packages (Mann & Stewart, 2000). The online venues offered by external providers proved to be inflexible and expensive. I felt that Networked Virtual Reality, or Graphical MUDs, which offer both synchronous text communication and a graphical representation of the environment (K. Stewart & Williams, 2005), would be too distracting for the

purposes of this study. My decision was influenced by Krueger's (1988) principle for face-to-face focus groups, that the venue should be free of distraction, easy to find, and relaxed. Eventually, it was decided that a faculty IT technician would create an online forum hosted by the University. The intention was to reassure participants and their parents that the research was linked to a reputable institution rather than to an unknown source. Security was achieved by the installation of password-protected access for both moderator and participants. The forum was tested first informally and then through a pilot focus group with faculty postgraduates. Feedback identified areas for alteration, including a scroll-back feature to allow participants to look back at previous threads of conversation. In the following section, I outline the pragmatic issues associated with real-time online focus groups from planning to moderating.

Setting Up the Focus Group

Organizing a date and time to suit a group of young people proved challenging and indicated how much harder it might have been to organize a face-to-face meeting. Some participants who had given their consent ceased contact before the date, and I could only assume that they had withdrawn from the study. Unique to Internet-based recruitment is the likelihood of having participants from a variety of countries. In terms of synchronous communication, time zone differences can be problematic. Suitable times to run the groups were limited by the participants' school or college commitments. In this study, I chose to separate U.K. and international groups. This choice was based on a series of frustrating attempts at the time to organize a mutually convenient time to host a mixed group. On reflection, it seems that separating the groups has allowed for some tentative cross-cultural comparisons to be made and these are discussed in a subsequent section. Of the seven online focus groups, four were with U.K. participants and three with participants from outside the United Kingdom.

Hosting the Online Focus Group

The development of an online environment relies exclusively on textual communication. As moderators are unable to create a comfortable physical environment, it is necessary to be proactive in establishing a permissive and friendly atmosphere (Mann & Stewart, 2000). A welcome page, where participants wait between logging in and starting the discussion, offers a space for researchers to identify the purposes and expected conduct of the group and encourage active participation. The forum designed for this study allowed me, as moderator, to see the participants' names on screen as they logged in. After checking their password and accepting them, participants were directed to the welcome page. I found that once the first participant logged in, the wait for others was an extremely anxious time. This might be due to a sense of obligation that I should provide participants with at least two others to talk to, so that they find the experience interesting. Reasons for not attending were not immediately evident but might be attributable to forgetting, a deliberate choice not to participate, or problems getting online or connecting to the online forum. Attendance numbers were lowest in the international groups, which might have been due to the time that the focus groups were held. On one occasion only, 1 participant attended a focus group and my disappointment was compounded by the fact that he had made an effort to attend in the hope of finding someone else with the same skin condition to talk to. The participant did then attend a subsequent group, where he met with 2 other young people, but the responsibility for engineering this second attempt caused me personal anxiety and the sense that I lacked ultimate control in ensuring attendance.

Moderating

Moderating synchronous focus groups requires relatively fast typing skills and some experience with the style of real-time discussion. The dynamics of synchronous online chat can be fast, furious, and chaotic; "in the real time chat of an online focus group, the distinction between replying and sending becomes blurred as the interactivity defies conversational turn-taking" (Mann & Stewart 2000, p. 102). My initial concerns that my typing speed would hamper my ability to moderate the discussions were dispelled by the pilot focus group. I found that adapting to the pace and style of synchronous communication was a relatively fast and surprisingly enjoyable process. The complexity of participant interactions can result in a chaotic transcript, characterized by real-time "threading," which can be frustrating for the novice researcher to interpret. Containing the group size and increasing moderating experience can attenuate this difficulty. In terms of conversational coherence I would suggest that experience facilitates a process of adapting to the unique features of synchronous online chat.

It is important to note that the number of participants can be crucial to the moderator's sense of control.

Based on my pilot group, I planned to have an average of 5 young people in each focus group. In reality, participant numbers were low and although I recruited at least 6 young people for each discussion, the average attendance was 3. It seems sensible always to over recruit and to assume no more than a 50% attendance rate. However, synchronous online discussion with 3 people proved to be manageable for me to moderate and provided enough input for lively exchanges. This confirms the suggestion of Mann and Stewart (2000) that finding a suitable number of participants depends on the aims and nature of the study and perhaps a trial-and-error process. Too many participants can result in such a high speed of dialogue that important issues are skimmed over (Horn, 1998). Groups with more than 5 participants, on the other hand, might require a second moderator to type, while the first moderator concentrates on the content and flow of the discussion.

Although the pace can be fast and furious, there can equally be periods where no one contributes. Silences take on an added poignancy for moderators and might be a result of participants' thinking, typing, or declining to answer (O'Connor & Madge, 2003). I found it challenging to decide whether a contribution from the moderator was required to move the discussion forward or whether to wait in case participants were busy typing a long answer. Having the confidence to allow extended periods of silence developed with experience. I found that the common experience of simultaneous submissions caused participants to overlook the moderator's comment, question, or probe in favor of responding to another thread of conversation. In this case the moderator might need to refocus the group as he or she would in a face-to-face group.

Although textual data are considered to lack nonverbal cues, participants in synchronous online communication commonly express emotions through abbreviations or emoticons (Murphy & Collins, 1997), allowing moderators some insight into the emotional mood of the group. The young people in the present study used a range of symbols to signify the tone with which their contribution was made, including emoticons such as :) and abbreviations such as "lol" (laughing out loud). Their comfortable use of emoticons and abbreviations took me a while to adjust to but was insightful and demonstrated the young people's familiarity with the world of synchronous communication. A few times, after the discussion, I consulted a Web-based dictionary of emoticons to appreciate fully the tone of a participant's contribution. This has implications for development of misunderstandings during the discussion, and post hoc reading of transcripts indicates a few incidences when I misinterpreted emotional moods, which might have influenced the coconstruction of experiences. However, in cases where the spelling was incomprehensible, I followed the lead of my participants, who were comfortable with explicitly asking each other to clarify their meaning.

Considering the lack of visual and verbal clues, moderators should take a vigilant approach to detecting distress in the participants. I developed strategies for dealing with both distress and disclosure of being at risk of significant harm and these gained ethical approval. During the focus groups, I used a combination of comments and probes to provide encouraging feedback and reassure participants that their contribution was valuable. When I sensed that participants were becoming distressed, I explicitly offered them opportunities to discuss any concerns. Toward the end of the discussion, I ensured that participants were provided with contact details of relevant support organizations. I was encouraged by feedback from participants and their parents that the potential risk of distress caused by participation was offset by the positive experience of meeting others in a similar situation to theirs. Data analysis indicated that this type of communication has the potential to relieve isolation and improve the confidence of those who take part.

Feedback indicated that the discussions had given participants a unique opportunity to articulate their experiences in a way that they might not do at home. One parent communicated that she and her daughter were able to have a more honest discussion as a result of her participation.

Discussion

Synchronous Online Chat and Group Dynamics

Synchronous online communication can influence power dynamics that are associated with conventional research methods. Relations between participants as a group and between individuals and the researcher can be altered as a result of the perceived anonymity afforded by the online environment. In this section, I will explore group interactions in synchronous online communication and then investigate its potential to address power dynamics between researchers and young people.

Research suggests that computer-mediated discussions have the potential to produce more ideas, a

higher equality of participation, and more outspoken advocacy than face-to-face group exchanges (Bordia, 1997; Keisler & Sproull, 1992). In this study, it was interesting to note how age and gender did not seem to affect the content or pace of communication between young people. In one U.K. group, the combination of two girls aged 12 and 15 and a boy aged 18 produced an engaging, dynamic discussion characterized by disclosure, sharing of information, and the offering of advice. The speed with which this group bonded illustrates the potentially unique properties of synchronous online communication. The exchange was not hampered by appearance-related clues, and their style of interaction might not be characteristic of face-to-face encounters. This sense of anonymity might alter the rules of discourse (Michaelson, 1996), and in effect, participants in virtual interactions "often express themselves with little inhibition and dialogues flourish and develop quickly" (Poster, 1995, p. 90). The virtual environment might encourage young people to contribute candidly and without fear of reprisal.

Although participants have an equal opportunity to respond and contribute, the participant who is most proficient at typing has the power to say the most. In conventional focus groups, the moderator would be aware of the emerging dynamics between participants and should encourage contributions from the quieter members of the group. In this study, the moderator's screen noted the number of contributions that each participant had made. Although this function is useful for groups with 5 or more participants, I rarely referred to these figures, as the small numbers in each group meant that I was aware of how interactive individual participants were.

The race to type and send responses might limit a participant's presubmission deliberation. As the pace of synchronous exchanges might not foster reflective responses, contributions might be superficial (Gaiser, 1997). Although participants in my groups rarely typed long submissions, their exchanges were characterized by informal chat. Their grammatically incorrect contributions served to keep written discourse moving at the pace of oral conversation (Subrahmanyam et al., 2004). The tension between the value of data resulting from written and from oral discourse has been documented (Hodder, 1994). Although the data from online communication have been viewed as a less accurate reflection of thoughts than verbal data, Hodder (1994) has argued that written data benefit from endurance and

convenience of spatial and temporal distance between participants and researchers. I would suggest that synchronous online communication crosses boundaries between oral and written chat, integrating features of both. This unique and dynamic form of communication might enable participants to coconstruct features of discourse, including characteristics and identity (Marks Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003).

As previously discussed, I chose to run separate focus groups with U.K. and international participants and noted several interesting differences. I found that the international groups, which included participants from the United States and Europe, used far fewer abbreviations or emoticons than their U.K. counterparts did. Their contributions tended to be more formal and the pace of conversation slower and less dynamic. As the moderator, I felt increased responsibility for the flow of conversation with U.S. participants, whereas the U.K. groups required less encouragement to interact. It felt as though the international participants were talking to me, but, by contrast, the U.K. participants were predominantly talking to each other. Like Finlay (1998), I was aware that my interviewing style became more directive and active as a result of participants' failing to disclose or engage with each other. At the time, I blamed the more stilted group interactions on my moderating but later reflected that I had been more actively involved in the coconstruction of accounts than in the U.K. groups, where a strong group identity emerged with less input from me. I wondered whether their more formal communication style was a reflection or a result of their feeling less comfortable with synchronous communication. Although this might be related to the participation of young people for whom English was not a first language, the reasons remain unclear and could form the basis of future research.

Researcher–Participant Power Relations

Enabling young people to feel relaxed during participation in research is a goal that many researchers have struggled to achieve. Power differentials between researchers and young participants, who are not typically socialized to be assertive with unfamiliar adults (Eiser & Twamley, 1999), might influence rapport and disclosure significantly. In effect, this might compromise the quality of the data and negatively affect their experiences of participation. If the online environment represents a social space within which young people feel comfortable and confident, then adapting methods to suit this preference surely represents a child-centered

approach. Kitchin (1998) has suggested that cyberspace technologies are "creating new social spaces that lack the formal qualities of geographic spaces" (p. 386). In this sense, the Internet might have the potential to facilitate research situations that challenge some of the inherent power dynamics associated with conventional methods. In these focus groups, I was struck by the participants' confidence when meeting both me and a group of unfamiliar others. This confidence might have been linked to a variety of factors, including their familiarity with, or enjoyment of, engaging in synchronous chat; a heightened sense of anonymity; and the convenience of taking part from home. Suzuki and Calzo (2004) have suggested that the perceived anonymity afforded by the Internet might be valuable for teenagers, allowing them to explore sensitive topics that they might not feel comfortable discussing with friends or family. Researchers have suggested that the perceived anonymity of the online environment allows individuals to experiment with personal communication styles that might not be salient in face-to-face encounters. Although many of the young people in this study disclosed that they lack the confidence to speak to friends or family about their appearance-related concerns, they rapidly began disclosing to each other. The majority of participants said that they would prefer to meet online rather than face-to-face because of increased confidence in the online environment, which supports the findings of Suzuki and Calzo.

Advantages and Limitations

As well as the potential of the Internet to address issues of disclosure and rapport, well-documented advantages exist, including speed and cost efficacy, international scope, and the ability to reach hidden populations (Rhodes, Bowie, & Hergenrather, 2003). My experience with synchronous online communication revealed similar benefits, including reduced time and cost in terms of venues and traveling. It is also beneficial in eliminating transcription time and error, as transcripts are generated. However, it is important to be aware of the potential for technical errors both before and during the discussion. The most common problem that I experienced was participants' losing their connection to the online forum during the discussion. When this problem occurred, participants' names changed color on the moderator's screen. In most cases, they were then able to log back in and continue participating. However, during one of the international focus groups, the entire forum shut down, and the focus group had to be rescheduled.

It is important to note that issues of Internet access seriously compromise the chance of achieving a "representative" research sample (Selwyn & Robson, 1998). The concern for the broader use of this environment is that it is exclusive on the basis of socioeconomic status. Although access is increasing among the youth population, a broadband facility is a prerequisite to participation in synchronous discussions. In this study, some young people stated that this factor prevented their participation.

Conclusion

Kitchin (1998) proposed that communication on the Internet is typified by an unrestricted freedom that is considered to be less hierarchical than real-world interactions. This has two important implications for research with young people. First, the sense of freedom might be linked to the enhanced sense of control and ease facilitated by the online environment. Research with adults suggests that this might increase disclosure related to sensitive issues (Fawcett & Buhle, 1995; Joinson, 2001), and my experiences suggest that this might also be the case for young people. Further research is needed to explore this phenomenon. Second, evidence from this study suggests that this freedom might have a positive impact on group dynamics and the researcher–participant relationship. For young people whose social confidence might be compromised by appearance-related concerns, the online environment could offer a veil of privacy, and this anonymity might contribute to an enjoyable participation experience. Minimizing the risk of young people's having an uncomfortable social experience was central to my attempts to do child-centered research, and synchronous online communication facilitated this. Furthermore, using synchronous online communication provided me with insight into a social space that is familiar to many young people but often inaccessible to adults. I gained a powerful sense of their confidence with this medium, demonstrated by the mutually understood symbols and abbreviations. I felt that using synchronous communication fostered a sense of ease and enjoyment, which, in turn, facilitated candid and insightful dialogue.

With respect to the study's implications for qualitative health research, the online environment might also be a facilitative one for individuals who have other appearance-related concerns or restricted mobility, or who lack the social confidence to participate in face-to-face research methods.

In this article, I have demonstrated that online focus groups are an important development in the focus group tradition. K. Stewart and Williams (2005) have argued that "the survivability of traditional methods within a computer-mediated setting is dependent upon their capacity to be utilized and adapted to the technology that mediates human interaction online" (p. 396). In this study, synchronous communication was successful in fostering insightful and engaging exchanges. If the challenge for those who host focus groups online is to ensure that the online environment facilitates group interaction in a way that is comparable to traditional, face-to-face focus groups, synchronous communication might meet this challenge. In this article, I have illustrated that the unique linguistic characteristics of synchronous online chat might constitute an important new domain for communication broadly, with implications for qualitative research specifically.

References

Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M., & Robson, K. (2001). *Focus groups in social research.* London: Sage.

Bordia, P. (1997). Face-to-face versus computer-mediated communication: A synthesis of the experimental literature. *Journal of Business Communication*, *34*(10), 99-120.

Borzekowski, D. L. G., & Rickert, V. I. (2001). Adolescents cybersurfing for health information: A new resource that crosses barriers. *Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine*, *155*(7), 813-817.

Buchanan, T. (2000). Potential of the Internet for personality research. In M. H. Birnbaum (Ed.), *Psychological experiments on the Internet* (pp. 121-140). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Department for Education and Employment. (2000). *Survey of information and communications technology in schools 2000.* London: HMSO/Department for Education and Employment. Retrieved January 28, 2005, from http://censusatschool.ntu.ac.uk/table2-1.asp

Eiser, C., & Twamley, S. (1999). Talking to children about health and illness. In M. Murray & K. Chamberlain (Eds.), *Qualitative health psychology: Theories and methods* (pp. 133-147). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fawcett, J., & Buhle, E. L (1995). Using the Internet for data collection: An innovative electronic strategy. *Computers in Nursing*, *13*, 273-279.

Ferrandiz, C., Pujol, R. M., Garcia-Patos, V., Bordas, X., & Smandia, J. A. (2002). Psoriasis of early and late onset: A clinical and epidemiologic study from Spain. *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*, *46*(6), 867-873.

Finlay, L. (1998). *The life world of the occupational therapist: Meaning and motive in an uncertain world.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom.

Finlay, L. (2002). "Outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research*, *12*, 531-545.

Gaiser, T. (1997). Conducting online focus groups: A methodological discussion. *Social Science Computer Review*, *15*(2), 135-144.

Ginsburg, J. H., & Link, B. G. (1989). Feelings of stigmatisation in patients with psoriasis. *Journal of American Academy in Dermatology*, *20*, 53-63.

Gross, E. F. (2004). Adolescent Internet use: What we expect, what teens report. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *25*(6), 633-649.

Hill, L., & Kennedy, P. (2002). The role of coping strategies in mediating subjective disability in people who have psoriasis. *Psychology, Health and Medicine*, *7*(3), 261-269.

Hodder, I. (1994). The interpretation of documents and material culture. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 393-402). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Horn, S. (1998). *Cyberville: Clicks, culture and the creation of an online town.* New York: Warner.

Joinson, A. N. (2001). Self-disclosure in computer-mediated communication: The role of self awareness and visual anonymity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *31*, 177-192.

Keisler, S., & Sproull, L. (1992). Group decision making and communication technology. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *52*, 96-123.

Kitchin, R. (1998). *Cyberspace: The world in the wires.* Chichester, UK: Wiley.

Koo, J. (1996). Population based epidemiological study of psoriasis with emphasis on quality of life assessment. *Psychodermatology*, *14*(3), 485-496.

Krueger, R. A. (1988). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal and coping.* New York: Springer.

Mann, C., & Stewart, F. (2000). *Internet communication and qualitative research: A handbook for researching online.* London: Sage.

Marks Greenfield, P., & Subrahmanyam, K. (2003). Online discourse in a teen chatroom: New codes and new modes of coherence in a visual medium. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *24*(6), 713-738.

Merchant, G. (2001). Teenagers in cyberspace: An investigation of language use and language change in Internet chatrooms. *Journal of Research in Reading*, *24*(3), 293-306.

Michaelson, K. L. (1996). Information, community and access. *Social Science Computer Review*, *14*(1), 57-59.

Murphy, K., & Collins, M. (1997). Communication conventions in instructional electronic chats. *First Monday; A Peer Reviewed Journal on the Internet*, *2*(11). Retrieved February, 12, 2005, from http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue2_11/index.html

O'Connor, H., & Madge, C. (2003). Focus groups in cyberspace: Using the Internet for qualitative research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, *6*(2), 133-143.

Pastore, M. (2002). *Internet key to communication among youth.* Retrieved February 20, 2005, from http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/demographics/article/0,5901_961881,00.html

Perrott, S. B., Murray, A. H., Lowe, J., & Mathieson, C. M. (2000). The psychosocial impact of psoriasis: Physical severity, quality of life, and stigmatisation. *Physiology & Behaviour*, *70*(5), 567-571.

Pittenger, D. J. (2003). Internet research: An opportunity to revisit classical ethical problems in behavioural research. *Ethics and Behaviour*, *13*(1), 45-60.

Poster, M. (1995). Postmodern virtualities. In M. Featherstone & R. Burrows (Eds.), *Cyberspace/cyberbodies/cyberpunk: Cultures of technological embodiment* (pp. 79-95). London: Sage.

Rhodes, S. D., Bowie, D. A., & Hergenrather, K. C. (2003). Collecting behavioral data using the World Wide Web: Considerations for researchers. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, *57*, 68-73.

Robson, K. (1999). *Employment experiences of ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease sufferers*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wales, Cardiff, United Kingdom.

Selwyn, N., & Robson, K. (1998). Using e-mail as a research tool. *Social Research Update*, *21*. Retrieved November 29, 2006, from http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/sru21.html

Stewart, F., Eckerman, E., & Zhou, K. (1998). Using the Internet in qualitative public health research: A comparison of Chinese and Australian young women's perceptions of tobacco use. *Internet Journal of Health Promotion*. Retrieved January 21, 2005, from http://www.rhpeo.org/ijhp-articles/1998/12/

Stewart, K., & Williams, M. (2005). Researching online populations: The use of online focus groups for social research. *Qualitative Research*, *5*(4), 395-416.

Subrahmanyam, K., Greenfield, P. M., & Tynes, B. (2004). Constructing sexuality and identity in an online teen chat room. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *25*(6), 651-666.

Suzuki, L. K., & Calzo, J. P. (2004). The search for peer advice in cyberspace: An examination of online teen bulletin boards about health and sexuality. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *25*(6), 685-698.

Tapscott, D. (1998). *Growing up digital: The rise of the net generation*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Wahl, A. K., Gjengedal, E., & Hanestad, B. R. (2002). The bodily suffering of living with severe psoriasis: In-depth interviews with 22 hospitalized patients with psoriasis. *Qualitative Health Research*, *12*, 250-261.

Wallace, P. (1999). *The psychology of the Internet*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ward, K. J. (1999). The cyber-ethnographic (re)construction of two feminist online communities. *Sociological Research Online*, *4*(1). Retrieved February 12, 2005, from http://www.socresonline.org.uk/4/1/contents.html

Williams, M. (2003). *Virtually criminal: Deviance and harm within online environments*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wales, Cardiff, United Kingdom.

Yasuda, H., Kobayashi, H., & Ohkawara, A. (1990). A survey of the social and psychological affects of psoriasis. *Japanese Journal of Dermatology*, *100*(11), 1167-1171.

Zimmerman, D. P. (1987). Effects of computer conferencing on the language use of emotionally disturbed adolescents. *Behaviour Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers*, *19*, 224-230.

Fiona E. Fox, BSc, is a doctoral research student at The University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom.

Marianne Morris, PhD, is a principal lecturer in health psychology at The University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom.

Nichola Rumsey, BA, MSc, PhD, is a professor of Appearance and Health Psychology at The University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom.