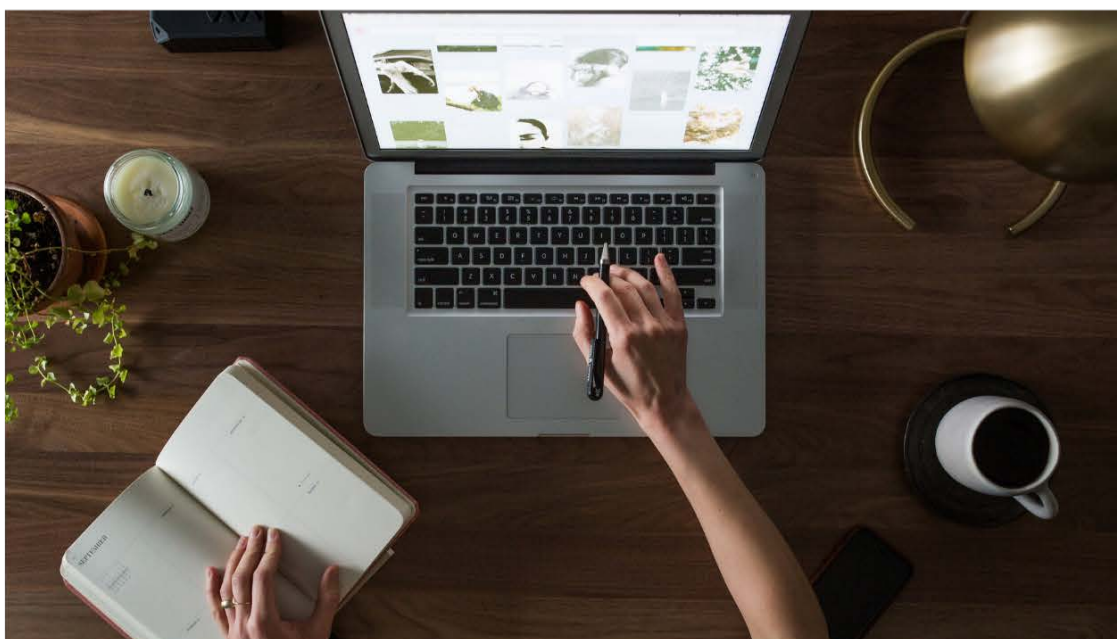


QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AT A DISTANCE



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Spark:
a centre for social
research innovation

Spark connects researchers to the people, skills and tools needed to stand at the forefront of social research innovation. It is our mission to engage with researchers and community organizations to harness the full power of social research to build a brighter world.

Covid-19



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The Covid-19 pandemic has altered all of our lives — with immense tragedy, and rapid, major changes in how we work, learn and interact with one another. The pandemic shrunk our spatial experience, disrupted our notions of time, decreased in-person social interaction, and moved our social existence online, both personally and professionally.

The pandemic also changed the structure and capacity of research. Isolation measures either limited or stopped social research that involves in-person interactions for the duration of the epidemic. Therefore, many existing qualitative research methods became popular during the pandemic as a way to continue important work while keeping everyone safe. As we begin to imagine the world post-covid, many of the approaches to qualitative methods that have become so popular during this time will likely endure and expand.

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research focuses on the collection and interpretation of linguistic and visual data. It is used to investigate and analyze the meanings, interpretations, and symbols people attribute to their behavior, actions and interactions with others.

Purpose

This toolkit is a starting point for academic and non-academic communities to explore approaches to socially-distanced but deeply engaged qualitative research methods. Each method described has its own benefits and shortcomings, and place in the qualitative methodological toolkit. Our goal is to provide a practical foundation for imagining the range of what is possible in social research during lockdown, and then point to resources to more fully engage in learning these methods.



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About Spark: a centre for social research innovation



New technology, broader recognition of the dynamics of power and oppression, and multiple inter-connected social crises are converging and amplifying each other. Spark: a centre for social research innovation builds a brighter world by bridging social research communities both inside and outside McMaster with the methods and technologies essential to engaging with these changes and innovating research.

Spark offers tools and training in relevant topics, methods and software; methods consultation with researchers and community leaders; and support in building multi- disciplinary and community engaged partnerships. We also lead by doing: building and implementing innovative applied research projects with partner researchers and organizations, and engaging students to learn with us as we work.

Discourse Analysis

Most qualitative research is focused on interpreting the meaning behind people's words and actions. Discourse analysis focuses on the language itself and what it reveals about the speaker and their broader context. The method involves looking at who uses particular language, when they use it, how they deploy it, and why.

For instance, an analysis by Jovan Byford (2006) examined modern language about a venerated, but profoundly anti-semitic, Serbian bishop, Nikolaj Velimirović (1880–1956). Byford examines the language those who admired him used in different contexts to dismiss or deny any controversy about his identity.

Discourse analysis is pandemic-friendly because communities often have deep wells of online text, videos and conversations. Once the researcher has defined the issue they are exploring, large bodies of existing materials, including speeches by company executives, press releases, internal memos, advertisements, diaries and letters can be found online. Interviews can also be important sources for capturing people's language choices.



Photo by Sharon McCutcheon on Unsplash

Discourse analysis emerged out of competing traditions, including conversation analysis (focused on patterns rather than interpretation of intent of language), interactional sociolinguistics (how interpretations of language are a method of dominance), discursive psychology (focused on the way seemingly fixed traits like identity shift, alter and adapt) and critical discourse analysis (focused on how dominant discourses develop and the role of power in spreading them).

Strengths of the Method

- Can reveal often unspoken and unacknowledged aspects of human behaviour, making salient either hidden or dominant discourses that maintain marginalized positions in society.
- Can reveal or help to construct a variety of new and alternative ways of understanding narratives, which can be empowering to vulnerable individuals.
- While the practice of focusing in detail on language is different from focusing on meaning or theme, qualitative coding functions in the same way and the same analysis tools (e.g., NVivo, MaxQDA, Dedoose) are used. So the qualitative researchers does not need to learn new tools.
- For those that do a lot of direct data collection, it is a way to go through your existing materials with a new focus or add context by examining the different public discourses on the issue relative to the experiences shared with you as a researcher.



Photo by Jukka Aalho on Unsplash

Challenges and notes

- Everything is always open to interpretation and negotiation. This concept can be challenging, as the “door is never closed” on any analysis, and each new interpretation gives rise to further critique.
- This technique focuses solely on language. While language can be important, it rarely tells the whole story. For this reason, it often gets combined with other methods.

Resources to learn more

Taylor, S. (2013). *What is Discourse Analysis?*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved January 21, 2021, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472545213>.

Available free online.

This book is an accessible introduction to discourse analysis. From finding the right starting point, processing and interpreting data through to building an argument, the challenges of discourse analysis are outlined, as well as helpful ways to approach them.

Nonhoff, M. (2017). "Discourse analysis as critique." *Palgrave Communications*, Vol. 3, pp. 1-11. Retrieved January 28, 2021, from <https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms201774>.

Available free online.

This paper examines the relationship between discourse analysis and critique. It posits that discourse analysis can be a useful structured approach to forming critique.

Rogers, R. et al. (2005). "Critical Discourse Analysis in Education: A Review of the Literature." *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 75, No. 3, pp. 365-416. Retrieved January 29, 2021, from <https://doi.org/10.3102%2F00346543075003365>.

Available free online.

In this journal article, the authors review how Critical Discourse Analysis can be used to trace changes in discourse patterns over time and across contexts— changes we might refer to as learning.

Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography is an emerging qualitative method, where the researcher carries out ethnographic research in an online space. The digital ethnographer immerses themselves in the virtual world that participants have created in order to understand the social interactions and regulation of social order in that space.



Illustration by smartboy10 on iStockPhoto

Digital ethnography takes on a variety of forms, appearing within different disciplines and under several different labels, including virtual ethnography, cyber-ethnography, internet ethnography, internet-related ethnography, and netnography.

A variety of digital platforms have been used for digital ethnographies, including:

- **YouTube** is increasingly used by scholars carrying out digital observational studies. It can be used as a means to access phenomena that are otherwise hard to access.
- **Podcasts** are audio broadcasts produced for public consumption and they are increasing in popularity daily. They are valuable resources to collect data on digital social interactions.
- Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and other **social media**. Communities, from very small, niche groups, to large and organized networks entirely built online, use these networks to find, engage with, learn from, and sometimes act with others.

Strengths of the Method

- It is cost-effective, as it eliminates the need for travel. Digital ethnographers do not need to leave the confines of their home.
- Many communities and identity groups that do not have the population size to gather and interact in person are able to find each other online. These online communities can be more significant to some than the communities they live in.
- Generally, few people are open to making room for researchers in their home or workplace. Online techniques minimize the researcher's presence, potentially helping participants more accurately portray their daily activities and outlooks.
- Well suited to study unpredictable situations and relationships or emerging phenomena.
- Using social and digital search tools, digital ethnographers have access to years of historical data from participant pools numbering from dozens to billions of people, limited only by their data processing and interpretation capabilities. There is an immense scale of data available to digital researchers.

Challenges and notes

- Virtual communities are not stable environments and are constantly being redefined as members enter and leave such communities.
- Opens up the possibility of identity deception both by participants and by the researcher.
- Creating a "safe environment" is not always easy. For the results of digital ethnography to be valid, participants in the community have to feel safe with the researcher's presence.
- By definition, digital ethnography does not focus on the offline, non-digital portion of peoples' lives.
- Requires a similar investment of participation as field ethnography, and can be time-consuming.



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Resources to learn more

Abidin, C. (2020). "Somewhere between here and there." *Journal of Digital Social Research*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 56-76. <https://jdsr.se/ojs/index.php/jdsr/article/view/20>.

Available free online.

Despite preparing copiously for fieldwork, a majority of what ethnographers actually do in the field is based on 'gut-feeling,' 'sensing,' and 'whim.' This paper is a piece of reflexive ethnography detailing a series of minor, yet important methodological decisions in a digital community of social media influencers.

Abidin, C & de Seta, G. (eds.) (2020). "Doing Digital Ethnography: Private Messages from the Field." *Journal of Digital Social Research*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 1-100.

<https://jdsr.se/ojs/index.php/jdsr/issue/view/3>.

Available free online.

This is a collection of confessions by five digital ethnographers, laying bare their methodological failures, disciplinary posturing and ethical dilemmas. These are meant to serve as a "counseling station" for fellow researchers approaching digital media ethnographically.

Evans, A. (2017). "Tinder as a Methodological Tool." AllegraLab. Retrieved January 29, 2021, from <https://allegralaboratory.net/tinder-as-a-methodological-tool/>.

Available free online.

This is an example of a digital ethnographic project that allows the researcher to conduct research among both Palestinians and Israeli settlers, despite the occupation's enforced ethnic separation.

Varis, Piia. (2014). "Digital Ethnography." *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Digital Communication*. Tilbury Papers in Culture Studies.

https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/sites/default/files/download/TPCS_104_Varis_2.pdf

Available free online.

This chapter explores how socio-technological developments have transformed, for some, the ethnographic fieldsite. It focuses on the increasing popularity of big data and the opportunities for digital ethnography in digital environments.

Interviewing

Online interviews are unstructured or semi-structured digital conversations, consisting of the question set, interviewer and interviewee. While there is a predetermined list of questions for discussion, the interviewer can allow the conversation to evolve based on how the interviewee responds. Other times, the researcher has identified certain topics of interest but does not have a formal guide for the conversation, instead allowing the participant to guide it.

There are a variety of types of interviews that can be conducted online, including:

- **Live video** is similar to face-to-face interviews, but has the advantage of allowing a researcher to include remote candidates. This interview can take place over a multitude of platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Webex, WhatsApp, Skype, Google Hangouts, and GoToMeeting. All have recording and some have live transcription capabilities.
- **Pre-recorded video**, also known as a one-way interview, typically includes a time frame in which a response can be recorded, and can be curated to add a certain number of re-do recordings. Essentially, respondents get a few minutes to read over interview questions and then record (with audio or video) their answers.
- **Epistolary (asynchronous)** is an overarching term for interviews conducted “by letter”. These allow respondents to choose when to respond. They have time to consider their answers and can, if they choose, make reference to supporting materials. The method allows researchers to conduct several interviews at the same time, eliminates the need for transcription, and addresses internet reliability issues. Common approaches include email, custom apps, letters, and private message boards/instant messaging services.
- **Any of the above with arts-based elements** are available on platforms like ittracks, 2020/Research, Civicom, and Discuss.io. These include participant recruitment, observation rooms for co-researchers or transcribers, and in-discussion elements like having participants do illustrations or create collages.



iStockphoto

Strengths of the Method

- Online interviews can be cost-effective, eliminating the need for travel.
- Expands geographical access to participants worldwide, including those living in dangerous or politically sensitive sites. By telephone or via online platform, interviewers can interview people living or working in war zones or sites where disease is widespread, without needing to grapple with the danger, ethics and bureaucracy of visiting the area.
- Can address challenges associated with finding enough interviewees in your geographic area to get a strong sample size.
- Expanding the time available for responding can enable more thoughtful exchanges with opportunities to consider, clarify, and expand upon what they mean.
- Epistolary interviews can protect the researcher and respondent by offering a degree of anonymity through the adoption of a pseudonym. With anonymity, some respondents may disclose much more intimate details about their lives.

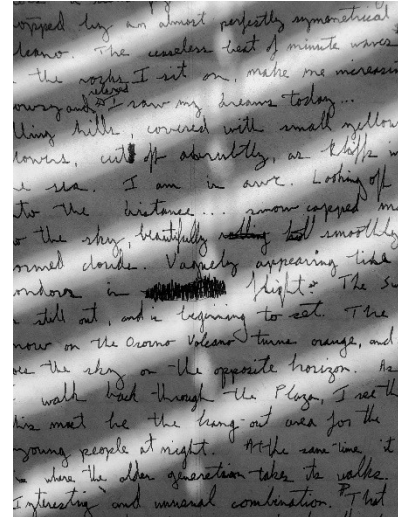


Photo by Micah Boswell on Unsplash

Challenges and notes

- The researcher has limited or no view on the situation in which the interviewee is situated. As a result, the researcher has less opportunity to create a good interview ambience and encourage focus and engagement.
- While face-to-face interviews capture verbal and non-verbal responses, online interviews are less able to translate body language/social cues.
- The researcher has no view on the situation While face-to-face interviews capture verbal and non-verbal responses, online interviews provide less body language and social cues.in which the interviewee is situated. As a result, the researcher has lesser possibilities to create a good interview ambience.

Resources to learn more

O'Connor, H., C. Madge, R. Shaw & J. Wellens. (2008). "Internet-based Interviewing." *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*.

https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/sites/default/files/download/TPCS_104_Varis_2.pdf

Available free online.

This chapter explores affordances and shortcomings of Internet-based interviewing, as well as the different types of online interview using frameworks of asynchronous and synchronous interviews.

Salmons, Janet. (2014). "Chapter 1: Designing and Conducting Research With Online

Interviews." *Qualitative Online Interviews: Strategies, Design and Skills*, 2nd ed. SAGE

Publishing, pp. 1-30. https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/43888_1.pdf.

Available free online.

As this chapter explores a variety of online synchronous, textual and multi- channel communications methods, it is a good starting point for developing a greater understanding of online interviewing.

Stieger, S. & A. Göritz (2006). "Using Instant Messaging for Internet-based Interviews."

CyberPsychology & Behavior, Vol. 9, No. 5, pp. 552-559.

<https://www.goeritz.net/Cyberpsych.pdf>.

Available free online.

This chapter explores a method of online interviewing that is becoming more popular: Instant Messaging. As the quality of obtainable data, the contact rate, the response rate and retention rate are quite high, it might be worth considering using this method in your research.

Surveys



A **survey** is a qualitative research method used for collecting data from a predefined group of respondents about a particular topic. Surveys can generate quantitative (numeric answers, scales, counts) and qualitative data (open-ended questions). For example, a survey might ask which political candidates voters chose, but also why they chose them, in their own words.

Online distribution of surveys has been a norm for decades and so most researchers are familiar with developing and analyzing online surveys and many respondents are experienced in taking them.

Strengths of the Method

- There are plenty of websites and platforms that make creating surveys fast and affordable. Some help improve your questions and estimate how long the survey will take.
- Anyone with an internet connection can participate in surveys. It increases the number of participants, as they can choose a suitable time and place, according to their own convenience, to register their responses.
- Since respondents are not disclosing their answers directly to another person, it may be easier for them to open up.
- There are a wide variety of ways you can ask questions (open-ended, likert scales, ranking, choose all that apply, pictures) allowing for different kinds of insights and data and means of understanding a particular question from multiple vantage points.

Challenges and notes

- Some populations are less likely to have internet access and respond to online surveys.
- Online surveys could be deleted and ignored.

Resources to learn more

Mathers, N., N. Fox & A. Hunn. (2009). "Surveys and Questionnaires." National Institute for Health Research, pp. 1-48. https://wp-portail.med.umontreal.ca/cpass/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/07/2002_Eysenbach-G.pdf.

Available free online.

This report details what surveys are, what kinds of surveys exist, as well as their advantages and limitations in collecting and analyzing survey data.

Saleh, A. & K. Bista. (2017). "Examining Factors Impacting Online Survey Response Rates in Educational Research: Perceptions of Graduate Students." *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, Vol. 13, No. 29, pp. 63-74.

Available free online.

Online surveys have become one of the most popular methods of data collection. In this paper, the authors examine a wide range of factors related to survey response rates in academic research. Examples include email checking habits, survey design, and attitudes towards research.

Online Focus Groups

Focus groups typically consist of 5 to 15 participants who are led by a moderator in an in-depth discussion of one particular topic or concept. The goal of the focus group is to learn and understand what people have to say and why. The emphasis is on getting people to talk at length and in detail about a particular subject with the intention of uncovering how they feel about a product, concept, idea, or organization.

Online focus groups are different from traditional focus groups only in that they are conducted online. Nonetheless, there are a variety of focus groups that could be used online, including:

- **Single focus group** is a collection of all participants and a moderator in one place. This is the most common type of focus group discussion. This could be done online synchronously by using a digital video platform like Zoom.
- **Dual moderator** focus group involves two moderators working together, each performing a different role within the same focus group, ensuring a smooth progression of the session.
- **Duelling moderator** focus group involves two moderators who purposefully take opposing sides on the issue or topic. Introducing contrary views to the discussion by moderators has the potential to achieve more in-depth disclosure of data and information.
- **Respondent moderator** focus group are led by one of the participants, which can improve the dynamics of the group by influencing participants' answers. This increases the chances of varied and more honest responses.
- **Mini focus group** involves a small pool of participants, usually two to five people, that are experts on the topic, or leaders within the community of study.



Photo by Pixabay on Pexels

Strengths of the Method

- Focus groups can be costly, with expenses including the rental of a suitable facility, catering, incentive payments, transcripts, and video or audio recordings. Online focus groups can reduce these expenses. Facility costs are non-existent, catering is not required, and transcripts of discussions are available within minutes of completing the session if using videoconferencing tools like Zoom.
- From recruitment to data output, the entire online focus group process can be conducted in a short period of time. Screening and scheduling by email reduces field time.
- Participants can be recruited from diverse geographical locations, as well as from different social and demographic groups.
- Lack of face-to-face contact may lead respondents to express true feelings in writing. Traditional focus groups often include natural talkers, who can dominate the discussion, despite a moderator's attempt to equalize participant contributions. Other participants may then be less comfortable to express themselves. Conversely, an online setting where participants are not face-to-face with their peers may have a leveling effect.

Challenges and notes

- Online, it is difficult to create real group dynamics, particularly when participants are reading from computer screens rather than interacting verbally.
- Experienced moderators use non-verbal inputs from participants, while moderating and analyzing sessions. It is not possible to duplicate the non-verbal cues online.
- In traditional focus groups, researchers can expose participants to external stimuli (i.e. new product concepts, prototypes, printed images, etc.). However, in an online environment, it is difficult and perhaps impossible to duplicate external stimuli.



*Photo by Chris Montgomery on
Unsplash*

Resources to Learn More

Lijadi, A.A. & van Schalkwyk, G. J. (2015). "Online Facebook Focus Group Research of Hard-to-Reach Participants." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1-9 [Online Facebook Focus Group Research of Hard-to-Reach ...cyberleninka.org › article](#).

Available free online.

This article explores the benefits of using social media platforms such as Facebook to recruit participants and conduct online, asynchronous focus groups.

Hansen, K. & R. Hansen. (2006). "Using An Asynchronous Discussion Board for Online Focus Groups: A Protocol and Lessons Learned." http://katharinehansenphd.com/ABR_2006.pdf.

Available free online.

This article examines existing literature regarding online focus groups and their use in qualitative research, including their pros and cons. It also reports on a protocol and methodology for conducting online focus groups using an asynchronous discussion board. The article includes the results of an initial test in asynchronous discussions for online focus groups.

Hubspot. "Online Focus Groups: Advantages & Strategies.." http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hub/55403/file-316491316-pdf/docs/Online_Focus_Group.pdf.

Available free online.

This report discusses what online focus groups are, as well as what the advantages and disadvantages are of conducting them in cyberspace.

Stancanelli, J. (2010). "Conducting An Online Focus Group." *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 761-765. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/29199936.pdf>.

Available free online.

This article explores how traditional focus group methodologies should be incorporated into online focus group methodologies.

Conclusion

It is our hope here at *Spark: a centre for social research innovation* that this toolkit has demonstrated some ways qualitative research methods can be effectively implemented in cyberspace. We hope it will inspire you to explore other innovative ways to adapt, transform and re-imagine your research methods.

If you have a socially-distanced approach to qualitative research that you would like to share, please contact us at talk.to.spark@mcmaster.ca. We would be delighted to add approaches reflecting your work.

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