

Using Online Focus Group Interview Via Whatsapp to Identify Literacy Needs and Religious Coping of Refugees

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ABSTRACT

Online interview method in qualitative research is considered relatively new in Malaysia. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, the use of this online method has become more common as it provides an alternative to researchers in collecting data. The purpose of this paper is to describe reflections and gain insights from the experience of using WhatsApp as a tool in conducting online focus group interviews with a vulnerable population. Reflecting on a study into identifying refugees' literacy needs and religious coping, the research team comprising three (3) researchers and six (6) student enumerators unfolds the advantages and challenges of engaging in online focus group interviews using WhatsApp. The participants in this study were sixteen (16) male and female Rohingya refugees recruited from a non-governmental organization (NGO). This NGO promotes human rights specifically of women, children, refugees, and migrants. Informed consent for the study was gained obtained with the help of the refugee's community leader. The use of the major justifications WhatsApp platform for the online focus group interview was deemed appropriate for three reasons. First, the familiarity of all participants with using WhatsApp compared to other types of online platforms. Secondly, the research participants were refugees who were geographically dispersed throughout the state, where the research was conducted; and finally, the participants were mostly adults who are working and have families, and therefore, using an online platform helped to accommodate the participants' busy schedules. Audio-visual tool via WhatsApp video call was used for the focus group sessions as this mirrors closely the experience of a face-to-face focus group. Additionally, the text-based format was also applied through WhatsApp chat to communicate rules and build rapport during pre-group sessions. On the other hand, the text-based format during the focus group sessions was used to gather information on literacy needs using interactive stimulus. A total of four (4) focus groups were conducted (three groups with five participants in each group). The focus group focus groups interviews conducted via video call ran proceeded for approximately ninety (90) minutes, but communication with the participants through text have already begun two days before the video call sessions. In addition, individual interviews were subsequently also conducted after the focus groups to gather more data. The interviews were conducted in a mixed language (Malay and English) based on the participants' verbal ability and preference. The analysis of the participants' interviews and researcher reflections reveals three key advantages and challenges of using the WhatsApp platform in conducting online group interviews with refugees. The advantages are familiarity with use, engaging and convenience, as well as safety and comfort. On the other hand, the challenges include uncertainty of language/vocabulary, platform limitations, and network issues. This study showed that with careful planning, it is possible to conduct online focus group interviewing via WhatsApp successfully with minimal technological issues. This study also provides a possible route to increasing opportunities for engaging refugees in research. Online focus groups offer an alternative to face-to-face sessions as technology facilitates enhances the speed of data collection. In addition, it helps researchers in reducing the costs and hassle of preparing a specific location to host the focus groups interviews. There is also the potential to recruit more diverse participants despite whether in terms of geography or demographic limitations as they can be connected online. It is evident that further research is warranted since this fully online approach enables uninterrupted data collection to the research process, particularly when working with vulnerable populations.

Keywords: online focus group, qualitative, literacy, religious coping, refugees