

Commentary on Englund *et al.*: The advantages and downsides of online focus groups for conducting research on addictive online behaviours

As the coronavirus disease (COVID)-19 pandemic prompted new ways of doing research, Englund et al. [1] highlight the benefits and challenges that online experiments bring to the scientific investigation of addictive behaviours. Likewise, this commentary further reflects on how online focus groups may constitute particularly sound opportunities for studying addictive online behaviours.

Over the past decade, addiction research has been marked by increasing interest in examining the potentially harmful effects of excessive involvement in new forms of online activities (e.g. video gaming, cybersexual activities, social networking and streaming of TV series) [2–4]. There have been growing calls to conduct qualitative research to better understand maladaptive involvement in online behaviours [5–9]. Qualitative research is indeed needed to avoid perpetuating a ‘confirmatory approach’ that consists in focusing merely on the similarities between online addictive disorders and substance use disorders [5–7]. Such research is about exploring the unique characteristics pertaining to these emerging and possible disorders, thereby ensuring an appropriate understanding of their genuine phenomenological nature.

Given its well-established proficiency at delivering rich qualitative insights into phenomena [10–12], the focus group method can be a valuable data collection strategy for this purpose, which, in our opinion, can be strategically implemented in a remote context. Specifically, online focus groups imply that, instead of gathering participants around a table with a focus group moderator and co-moderator as in a traditional in-person discussion session, everyone meets online on video-conferencing platforms, several of which (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Webex) are still widely used for professional purposes in the post-COVID era. As in a typical face-to-face setting, participants are invited to share their thoughts and opinions on a number of topics.

The advantages of performing online over in-person focus groups overlap with those of online experiments depicted by Englund *et al.* [1]. Specifically, they involve three main areas of benefit: money savings, time savings and increased research accessibility. Conducting online

focus groups is indeed cost-effective. Because participants are asked to simply login on the video-conferencing platforms, common barriers associated with transportation and accessibility are removed, thereby resulting in notable cost savings on facility rental, travel fees and food and beverage for participants. Free from such logistical and budgetary constraints, online focus group studies can be implemented in a more flexible and efficient manner, and therefore, completed under more optimal time periods [13]. The time saved may allow researchers to relocate their energy to maximize the added value of the study. The lack of geographical limitations to recruit online focus groups can also greatly facilitate the process of involving niche audiences, such as those generally targeted by addiction research.

A more specific benefit of online focus groups lays in the way the moderator and co-moderator can take advantage of various built-in functions in the online platform to optimize data gathering. Relevant examples include the easier audio/video recording of the group discussion, which is directly manageable through the interface; the possibility of using two screens or a split screen to take notes without disrupting the simultaneous observation of participants; and the availability of time-tracking monitors that could allow the moderator to check each participant's speaking time and number of times he or she entered the debate [13]. Of particular interest is the opportunity for the moderator and co-moderator to communicate through private chat during the online group discussion. The co-moderator, who is in charge of carefully observing participants' nonverbal reactions, can, therefore, directly assist the moderator in managing the group discussion most efficiently by sharing with him or her relevant live observations about participants, which is generally not feasible in a traditional face-to-face context. Finally, the potential anonymity of online focus groups allowed by the technical possibility for participants to turn their video off is another significant advantage, because it can make them feel more comfortable and more willing to take part in discussions on topics as sensitive as problematic online behaviours.

Despite these merits, performing online focus groups has two notable downsides. As in online experiments [1], one disadvantage of conducting research remotely is that the participants' environment (e.g. home, office) may not be distraction-free, which can

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discourage engaged discussion among focus group members. A second disadvantage is that participants' body language (i.e. gestures, eye contact) is inevitably less easy to observe in an online context than in a face-to-face one [13, 14].

KEYWORDS

Addictive online behaviours, COVID-19, online focus group, problematic online behaviours, qualitative research, remote research

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DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

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