Block 4: Qualitative research - focus group discussions and projective techniques

(Activity solutions can be found at the end of the document.)

We consider how to *classify qualitative research techniques*, in particular **focus groups**. We will *focus*(!) on:

- focus group characteristics
- planning and conducting focus groups
- advantages and disadvantages of focus groups
- projective techniques.

Learning Objectives

- describe focus groups in detail, with an emphasis on planning and conducting focus groups
- evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups
- understand the differences between online and traditional focus groups
- describe projective techniques in detail and compare association, completion, construction and expressive techniques.

Reading List

Malhotra, N.K., D. Nunan and D.F. Birks. Marketing Research: An Applied Approach. (Pearson, 2017) 5th edition [ISBN 9781292103129] Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 (excluding in-depth interviewing).

4.1 Qualitative research - focus group discussions and projective techniques

For each section of *Qualitative research - focus group discussions and projective techniques*, use the LSE ELearning resources to test your knowledge with the Key terms and concepts flip cards.

Focus group discussions

Focus groups form part of a direct approach to qualitative research. Figure 7.1 of the textbook provides a classification of qualitative research techniques. Note that in-depth interviews are non-examinable in this course.

Characteristics of focus groups are summarised below.

Characteristics of focus groups

Characteristic	Description
Key benefit	Group members 'feed' off each other and creatively reveal ideas which the researcher may not have thought of or dared to tackle
Key drawback	Group members may feel intimidated or shy and may not reveal anything of significance
Group size	6-10
Group composition	Homogeneous, participants pre-screened by questionnaire or through known characteristics
Physical setting	Relaxed, informal atmosphere, 'comfortable' from the perspective of the participants
Stimulating discussion	Use of storyboards, mood boards, products, advertisements, films, music, websites, brochures
Time duration	1.5 to 6 hours
Recording	Use of audiocassettes, videotapes and notes from observations
Moderator	Observational, interpersonal and communication skills

Qualities needed in the focus group moderator are:

- kindness with firmness
- permissiveness
- involvement
- incomplete understanding
- encouragement
- flexibility
- sensitivity
- observation.

outlines the stages in planning and conducting focus groups.

How many focus groups should be conducted? Factors to consider include the following.

- The extent to which *comparisons* are sought.

- The *different types of participant* to be targeted and how well they mix together.

- The *geographic spread* of participants.

- The *paradigm* which underpins the choice of a focus group.

- The *time* and *budget* available.

Mood boards and probing

A mood board is a collage created in a focus group setting. Focus group participants are asked to snip words and pictures from magazines which they see as representing the values a particular brand is perceived to have. In some circumstances, collages can also be made up from audio and videotapes.

The mood board has two main functions.

- **Reference point** - the moderator can use it to reflect upon the discussion, in which case issues can emerge which were not so apparent in the heat of a discussion.
- **Enabling device** - it can get participants to loosen up and talk more freely. The focus group is not to get participants to talk rationally, but to display what 'feels right' to them. It can help to express feelings they may not be able to put into words, or enable those words to have more clarity.

Probing the individual could be achieved by the following:

'Would you explain further?'

'Can you give me an example of what you mean?'

'Would you say more?'

'Is there anything else?'

'Please describe what you mean?'

'I don't understand.'

'Tell me more about that.'

'How does that work?'

Probing the whole group could be achieved by the following:

'Who else has something?'

'What about the rest of you?'

'I see people nodding their heads. Tell me about it.'

'We want to hear all the different points of view. Who else has something which might be a bit different?'

Focus group issues

There exist other variations of focus groups including:

- **two-way groups** - a target group listens to, and learns from, a related group

- **dual-moderator groups** - a focus group conducted by two moderators, one responsible for the smooth flow of the session, the other ensures specific issues are discussed

- **duelling-moderator groups** - a focus groups with two moderators who deliberately take opposite positions on the issues to be discussed

- **participant-moderator groups** - the moderator asks selected participants to play the role of moderator temporarily to improve group dynamics

- **client-participant groups** - client personnel are part of the discussion group to offer clarifications

- **mini groups** - smaller groups with four or five participants for when more extensive probing is required

- **telephone focus groups** - shorter focus groups conducted using telephone conferencing systems.

Focus groups have the advantages of:

- *synergy* - pooling of thoughts lead to greater insights than achieved individually

- *snowballing* - bandwagon effect, such that one person's comment triggers a chain reaction from other participants

- *stimulation* - greater engagement from the group as the general level of excitement over the topic increases in the group

- *security* - can safely 'open up' if participants are comfortable thinking other (homogeneous) participants hold similar views

- *spontaneity* - accurate idea of views when responses are spontaneous

- *serendipity* - group dynamics can generate new ideas unexpectedly

- *specialisation* - due to several participants being involved, the use of a highly-trained, but expensive, interviewer is justified

- *scientific scrutiny* - close scrutiny of the data collection process allowing validation and interpretation of the collected data

- *structure* - flexibility in the topics covered and the depth with which they are treated

- *speed* - since there are several participants, data collection and analysis can proceed relatively quickly.

Focus groups have the disadvantages of:

- *misjudgement* - moderator bias can affect the specific direction of questioning and the ultimate interpretation of findings

- *moderation* - if there is a lack of 'group chemistry' then the focus group may be ineffective

- *messiness* - the unstructured qualitative data collected leads to difficulty of coding, analysis and interpretation

- *misrepresentation* - generalisation of results to the wider population based on a homogeneous group is difficult

- *meeting* - organising a mutually-convenient time and place among all participants can be difficult.

Online focus groups

There are several advantages of running online focus groups. More potential participants can be recruited through the growing use of the internet, and the growing ease of conducting discussions online are key benefits. Participants can be made to feel that they have the ability to contribute, allowing their confidence to be quickly built up. Conflicts in face-to-face focus groups which may stem from participants taking a dislike to other participants due to their physical appearance can be avoided.

A great breadth of information may be collected, through the types and the geographic spread of participants. The practical difficulties of getting individuals together at the same time in the same location can be overcome. The nature of a discussion location which is 'comfortable' to the participant is largely overcome by each participant setting the conditions in which they feel comfortable.

Projective techniques

Projective techniques are an unstructured and indirect form of questioning which encourages participants to project their underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes or feelings regarding the issues of concern.

Types of projective technique include:

- **association technique**

- **completion technique**

- **construction technique**

- **expressive technique**.

Projective techniques are used because the required information *cannot* be accurately obtained by *direct questioning*. They are used in an exploratory manner to *elicit issues* which participants find difficult to conceive and express. These techniques engage participants in the subject by *having fun* in expressing themselves in interesting and novel ways. Participants are asked to interpret the behaviour of others rather than their own behaviour, hence *indirectly revealing* their own motivations, beliefs etc.

An association technique is a type of projective technique in which participants are presented with a stimulus and are asked to respond with the first thing which comes to mind. For example, word association is a projective technique in which participants are presented with a list of words, one at a time. After each word, they are asked to give the *first word which comes to mind*.

In a completion technique, participants are asked to *complete an incomplete stimulus situation*. Common completion techniques in market research are **sentence completion** and **story completion**.

Instructions: write in words to complete each of the sentences below.

For college students, credit cards are……

College students use credit cards to……

When a college freshman gets a new credit card application, he/she……

When a college student reaches the limit of his/her credit card, he/she……

When a college senior gets a new credit card application, he/she……

If parents of college students learned about their children's credit card situations, they would……

Examples of sentence completion

A construction technique is closely related to completion techniques. Construction techniques require the participants to *construct a response in the form of a story, dialogue or description*. In a construction technique, the researcher provides less initial structure to the participants than in a completion technique. The two main construction techniques are the **picture response technique** and **cartoon tests**.

In an expressive technique participants are presented with a verbal or visual situation and asked to *relate the feelings and attitudes of other people to the situation*. The participants express not their own feelings or attitudes, but those of others. The main expressive techniques are **role playing**, the **third-person technique** and the **personification technique**.

Comparisons of qualitative research techniques

Comparisons of focus groups and projective techniques are shown below:

Comparison of focus groups and projective techniques

Criteria	Focus groups	Projective techniques
Degree of structure	Can vary from highly to loosely structured	Tends to be loosely structured
Probing of individual participants	Low	Medium
Moderator bias	Medium	Low to high
Uncovering subconscious information	Low	High
Discovering innovative information	High	Low
Obtaining sensitive information	Low	High

Comparison of focus groups and projective techniques

Criteria	Focus groups	Projective techniques
Involving unusual behaviour or questioning	No	Yes

Questions, solutions and case study

To access the solutions to these questions and case study, click here to access the printable Word document or click here to go to LSE's Elearning resources.

Questions on the block's topics

1. Why may market researchers not wish to fully reveal the purpose of a focus group discussion with participants before it starts?

2. What determines the questions, issues and probes used in a focus group?

3. What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of being able to observe covertly a focus group discussion?

4. What is an online focus group? What are the distinct advantages and disadvantages of running online compared with traditional focus groups?

5. What are projective techniques? In what circumstances should projective techniques be used?

6. Describe the 'word association' technique. Give an example of a situation in which this technique is especially useful.

7. Describe the 'story completion' technique. Give an example of the type of participant and the context in which such a technique would work.

8. Describe the criteria by which market researchers may evaluate the relative worth of qualitative techniques.

Case study: Nike

Nike wishes to understand more about its 'Presto' product line.

For Nike, how could focus groups have helped in the development of the 'Presto' product line?

Learning outcomes checklist

Use this to assess your own understanding of the chapter. You can always go back and amend the checklist when it comes to revision!

o Describe focus groups in detail, with an emphasis on planning and conducting focus groups
o Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups
o Understand the differences between online and traditional focus groups
o Describe projective techniques in detail and compare association, completion, construction and expressive techniques.

Block 4: Qualitative research - focus group discussions and projective techniques

Solutions to Questions on the block's topics

1. The researcher must consider what frame of mind they want participants to be in at the start of the discussion, as a too narrow or set focus at the start can impede the thought processes and creativity of the participant and the success of the discussion. The extent to which the purpose of the research is revealed at the start of a focus group can vary. Suppose that the researcher wanted to understand how participants felt about the Benetton brand, what their views were of Benetton advertising campaigns, the style and quality of Benetton clothes, how 'cool' the brand was, the importance of it being an Italian company - to name but a few issues which could be tackled. Rather than stating these objectives or even that the study was for Benetton right at the start, the researcher may initially hide these issues. If revealed at the start, participants may focus straight onto these issues and not the surrounding contextual issues which may reveal the 'relative' impact of the Benetton brand. Therefore, the researcher may initially reveal that the discussion is going to be about 'what clothes mean to you'.

   The researcher may explore what participants feel to be good and poor examples of clothing advertisements and why. Which types of clothing and accessories do they see to be stylish, how important is it to wear stylish clothes, how important is it to wear 'cool' clothes - drawing out examples of brands to illustrate these views. 'Italy' as a country could be explored in terms of characteristics of Italians or Italian design and style. If participants bring up Benetton in the discussion, the researcher can then focus on specific questions about the brand, contrast it with other brands and clearly see which subjects generated positive or negative views of Benetton. Participants may deduce that the study is being conducted for Benetton as the discussion proceeds. This may be apparent by the end of the discussion, or the researcher makes it clear and explains why this was not revealed at the beginning.

2. The questions, issues and probes used in a focus group are pulled together into a topic guide. The topic guide is a list which a moderator uses to develop and maintain a focus group discussion. This list may be a series of specific questions but is more likely to be a set of broad issues which can be developed into questions or probes as the focus group actually takes place. Specific questions may be of help to the moderator who feels that a consistent set of points needs to be presented to different groups to allow clear comparisons to be made. Specific questions also act as a 'prop' when the discussion is failing, indeed some group participants may initially feel that their role is to react to specific questions. However, treating the whole discussion as a means to present set questions may stifle the creativity and spontaneity which are the hallmarks of a successful focus group.

   The moderator should open the discussion with a general question to make participants comfortable with the subject and the purpose of the research, and then present specific questions, issues and probes which can develop as the moderator tunes into the dynamics of the group. The emphasis should be on an evolution and learning process rather than administering a consistent set of questions. The nature of the questions, issues and probes is determined by the research objectives set for a project. The objectives can lead to theoretical sources, secondary data, intelligence sources and ideas which emerge from decision-makers

and researchers. As a number of focus groups unfold, new questions, issues and probes can emerge, which means that a major source of ideas is focus group participants themselves.

3. The advantages are the following:
   - A number of observers can be involved in the interpretation of the discussion without affecting the nature of the discussion.
   - When moderating an interview, one is preparing questions and probes and managing the dynamics of the group - there is little time to concentrate fully on particular individuals and ideas.

   The disadvantages are the following.

   - If participants have any notion that they are being observed in a covert manner, they may not be so comfortable and this can affect how open and cooperative they are.
   - There is the ethical issue of observing individuals without their knowledge and to what use those observations may be put.

4. There is no one generic format for an e-group. As with traditional focus groups, there are many variations and adaptations in e-groups. As in the case of traditional focus groups, e-group participation is by invitation only. The participants are pre-recruited and generally come from access panels or from lists of individuals who have expressed an interest in particular products, services or issues. A screening questionnaire can be administered online to qualify participants, even if access panel members have already been profiled. Those who qualify are invited to participate in the e-group and given clear benefits and a reward for their participation. They receive a time, a URL, a room name and a password via email. Participants are asked to always start their response with the question or issue number, so the moderator can quickly tie the response to the proper question. This makes it fast and easy to transcribe an e-group discussion.

   A raw transcript is available as soon as the discussion is completed and a formatted transcript can be available within 48 hours (the form of data used depends on whether the transcript is to be input into qualitative analysis software and is to be built up as the groups progress, and/or is to be read by the client). The whole process of conducting the discussions and uploading transcripts for analysis is much faster than traditional focus groups.

   Advantages of online focus groups are the following.
   - Participants from all over the world can take part, and with mobile advances, they can physically be anywhere that they are comfortable.
   - There is the opportunity to contact participants again at a later date, to revisit issues, or introduce them to modifications in material presented in the original focus group.
   - The internet and the use of profiled consumers via access panels enable the researcher to reach segments which are usually hard to interview: doctors, lawyers, professionals, working mothers and others who are leading busy lives and are not interested in taking part in traditional focus groups.
   - Moderators may also be able to carry on side conversations with individual participants, probing deeper into interesting areas.
   - Participants may be less inhibited in their responses and can be more likely to fully express their thoughts, especially if they have the facility to reflect and load up images, music or other forms of expression.
   - With no travel, video recording or facilities to arrange, the cost is much lower than traditional groups.

Disadvantages of online focus groups are the following.
- Only individuals that have access to and know how to use a computer can participate in e-groups.
- Since the name of a participant is often private, actually verifying who the participant is and hence whether they fit a target profile can be difficult.

- Body language, facial expressions, silences and the tone of voice cannot be observed and electronic emotions cannot capture as full a breadth of emotion as video recording.
- A general lack of control over the participant's environment and their potential exposure to distracting external stimuli. Since e-groups could potentially have participants scattered all over the world, researchers and moderators have no idea what else participants may be doing during the discussion.
- Only audio and visual stimuli can be tested. Products cannot be touched (for example, clothing) or smelled (for example, perfumes). It may be more difficult to get clients or decision-makers involved in e-groups as they can be in observing traditional groups.

5. Projective techniques are unstructured and indirect data collection techniques. They may be defined as a form of questioning which encourages the participant to project their underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes or feelings regarding the issues of concern. Participants are not directly asked about their own behaviour, but are asked to reflect on the behaviour of others, indirectly projecting their own motivations, beliefs, attitudes or feelings. Projective techniques should be employed when the required information cannot be accurately obtained by direct methods because the information is not part of conscious memory.

Participants may not be able to put into words, or even be aware of, why they behave in a particular manner or feel about an issue in a certain way. Direct questioning in these circumstances would generate shallow and meaningless responses. By using projective techniques, participants can express themselves in ways which can allow the researcher to access their underlying feelings.

6. In the word association technique, participants are presented with a list of words, one at a time. After each word they are asked to give the first word which comes to mind. The underlying assumption is that by freely associating with certain words, participants will reveal their inner feelings about the topic of interest. Word association is frequently used in testing brand names, and occasionally for measuring attitudes about particular products, services, brands, packages or advertisements. For example, imagine the airline KLM wishing to understand the inner feelings of customers about their service delivery. They could present a series of words which encapsulate different aspects of their service delivery such as 'check-in', 'seating' or 'cabin crew'. Presented to target participants, the first word which comes to mind for a participant could reveal their inner feelings which may not emerge if they were to be questioned directly or had time to think through and rationalise their response.

7. With the story completion technique, participants are given part of a story, enough to direct attention to a particular topic but not to hint at the ending. They are required to give the conclusion in their own words, to complete the story as they see it. The type of participant could be of any age or type, i.e. a business or consumer participant. One characteristic they would need is a willingness to let their imagination flow. As with the KLM service delivery example in Question 6, imagine interviewing travellers waiting to board a long-distance KLM flight. For example, a lone business traveller with a little time on their hands, not engaged with work on their mobile phone or laptop, could help. They would be part-way through their service experience so their expectations of the remainder of their flight would be much clearer

than at any other time. With the right introduction and motivation, they could be given the start of a story about an airline service experience, and then left alone to complete the story with the interviewer calling back to collect the details and perhaps ask a few other questions.

8. When choosing an appropriate qualitative research technique, the researcher has to start by examining the interrelationships among the issues to be questioned, the characteristics of the target participants and the context in which the questioning or observation will occur. They would then look in detail at the following criteria.
   1. Degree of structure - i.e. the extent to which an exploration of issues will be allowed to flow in unexpected directions.
   2. Probing of individual participants - i.e. the extent to which interesting individuals can be isolated and more detailed questioning and probing can occur.
   3. Moderator bias - i.e. the extent, benefits and limitations to which an interviewer may impose their own views on participants in the interview or observation process.
   4. Uncovering subconscious information - i.e. the extent to which issues which participants are unaware of, or unable to articulate, can be uncovered.
   5. Discovering innovative information - i.e. the extent to which participants can be imaginative and creative in their responses.
   6. Obtaining sensitive information - i.e. the extent to which participants feel they can trust researchers enough to explain issues which may be personally or commercially sensitive.
   7. Involving unusual behaviour or questioning - i.e. the extent to which the process of questioning is seen by participants to be unorthodox, and as such perhaps an interesting experience or alternatively a threatening or inappropriate experience.

Solution to Case Study Nike

The main purpose of focus groups is to gain insights by creating a forum where participants feel sufficiently relaxed to reflect and to portray their feelings and behaviour at their pace and using their language and logic. It has been argued that the single most compelling purpose of the focus group is to bridge social and cultural differences between researchers and their target participants. The value of the technique and its role in bridging social and cultural differences lies in discovering unexpected findings, often obtained from a free-flowing discussion which is respectful and not condescending to participants. Focus groups are the most important qualitative market research procedure accounting for 11% of all global market research expenditure in 2015. They are so popular that many market research practitioners consider this technique synonymous with qualitative research.

Focus groups are used extensively in new product development, advertising development and image studies. It is in these three areas that focus groups could help with the new Presto product line. There are issues which are highly interrelated in these three study areas, and it is through focus groups that these could be explored. For example:

- What do target consumers feel about the name 'Presto' - and its link to Nike?

- What are the distinctive features of its designs?

- What image do they convey about the brand?

- Which brand values do they possess?

- What would the consumer be buying into - in terms of how the brand fits their self-image and how they wish to portray their own image?

- How could different advertising messages, images and vehicles help in developing and targeting the brand?

- Which values and characteristics would a target market have?

As the design team, advertisers and marketers of Nike develop their plans for Presto, focus groups are the ideal forum to nurture the creativity of participants and to test out their innovative ideas.