Using web forums for qualitative inquiries. Empirical findings on the conditions and techniques for asynchronous online group discussions

Daniela Schiek¹, Carsten G. Ullrich¹

¹University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany. daniela.schiek@uni-due.de; carsten.ullrich@uni-due.de

Social interaction can hardly be imagined without screens nowadays. Nevertheless, internet-based research methods are little methodologically well-founded. This is even true for asynchronous group discussions via e-mail programmes and message boards, which are not only the earliest forms of online inquiry but are also specifically presuppositional methods: Due to its huge contrast with qualitative interviews (usually conducted face to face), the use of asynchronous online communication is the most challenging method of qualitative online inquiry. While the literature mainly deals with focus groups and/or synchronous chat procedures, unstructured written group discussions are seldom the subject of systematic methodological investigations. Therefore, one has to conjecture some basic principles for conducting forum discussions. Indications of the duration of online group discussions range from a few days to a year. In the same way, the number of debaters varies. Occasionally this is a single-digit number; at other times there are discussion groups with 15-20 members; and experiences with unlimited numbers of group members also exist. Finally, one can find hardly any instructions on moderation techniques for unstructured asynchronous group discussions on the internet. Most advice refers to focus groups and implies strongly structured procedures, or else it concerns e-therapies rather than research investigations. The same is also true regarding the fundamental question: whether or not online communication needs face-to-face contact or not. While some authors report face-to-face-meetings (but without giving further reasons, there are also indications of increasing self-disclosure by respondents because the persons involved are only literally new acquaintances.

In our research project, which was conducted in 2015-2017 and funded by the German Research Foundation, we systematically study these features with a varying experimental design. The paper presents the central findings to the question: Under which conditions and using which techniques do qualitative group discussions using a web forum work successfully? Three aspects of running such discussions can be clarified: a surprisingly modest group size, a duration of two or three months and thematically reserved moderation but very ‘active reading’ by the researcher produce positive results. Further research should study the function of multithreading, which was observed being used by the debaters.

The paper is structured in the following way: First, a definition of asynchronous online written group discussions is provided in Section 2. At the same time, we also discuss why we focus on unstructured asynchronous written communication instead of synchronous video or text chats and focus groups. Section 3 presents the research project and its essential findings concerning the above-mentioned features. Section 4 briefly draws some conclusions and proposes some further research questions.

**Keywords:** Qualitative Methods, Online Research, Group Discussions, Web Forums, Written Inquiries.