

# Innovation in Focus Group Research

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**Abstract** For more than 30 years, the Focus Group methodology has been used for numerous types of research on the most varied topics. Until very recently, the Focus Groups were considered a mature methodology with just a few genuine innovations. But in the last decade, innovations have started to emerge, such as the Focus Group integration with other techniques such as projective mapping and projective and creative techniques to improve data generation and for co-creation of ideas and product development. Moreover, a key limitation of the Focus Groups is the need to identify, recruit and gather a group of people in only one place for discussion. Technology has reduced, if not completely eliminated, this limitation and has allowed a wider use of Focus Groups in a world available for the internet.

**Keywords:** *creative focus group, consumers in product development, digital platforms, projective mapping, projective techniques*

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## 1. Introduction

Since Merton and Kendall's (1946) [1] original studies, and its introduction in social sciences [2], Focus Group's (FG) technique has traveled a long way. Nowadays, it has become the widely adopted qualitative investigation technique. Qualitative research tools involve stimulus to obtain in-depth answers that are not readily revealed, which makes consumers express their opinions, points of view, and motivations more easily [3]. These methods also help identify market opportunities, generate ideas and hypotheses, explore and develop new concepts, and understand consumer perspectives [4]. Advertising researchers, advertising agencies, and other marketing organizations have used the FGs for a long time, to develop knowledge of consumers' motivations to purchase and use various products and services. It is seldom questioned the adequate use of the FGs to quickly explore issues on which there is little knowledge [5].

The FGs have been used to study a great variety of topics. For instance, the lifestyles of participants with hypertension or type 2 diabetes [6], group sex in the time of COVID [7], and nursing students' experience in nursing homes [8] and perception of Physiotherapy students towards Focus Group as a teaching-learning methodology [9].

In the food field, the investigation using the FG technique in the last years has mainly focused on the study of increasing acceptance of meat substitutes among consumers [10,11,12], functional foods [13,14,15], dietary behaviors and healthy diets [16-21], plastic waste [22] and

novel foods as craft chocolate [23], African wild meat [24] and eggs from insect-fed hens [25], among others.

Until very recently, the FGs were considered a mature methodology with just a few genuine innovations. In the last decade, innovations have started to emerge, for instance, the use of repeated/reconvened FG, that are called so, due to the focus groups in which the participants gather during more than one session [26,27], mini FGs with 4 participants and FGs with 2 participants, called "didactic interviews [28], FGs with a great number of participants, based in meetings known as World Cafés or Knowledge Cafés [29], heterogeneity in the group conformation [30] and non-linear research and non-predetermined designs, with new FGs adaptation from previous results to solve problems that are beyond what was previously foreseen in the original design [30].

To develop this paper, the authors have selected what they consider as the innovations which have gained more strength in the last years: the FG combination with other techniques and online FGs.

## 2. Combination with Other Techniques

### 2.1. Projective Mapping (Napping®)

One of the concerns of FG researchers is to create ways of group interactions that are likewise interesting not only for the researchers but also for the participants. This objective is essential for focus groups' success due to the data depends on a lively and well-focused discussion among participants. Therefore, there is a particular value for the techniques that create an attractive interaction.

Nowadays, various stimuli are being included as a way of obtaining active and lively discussions to improve data generation [31].

Even though in 1994 Risvik et al. [32] suggested the use of a focus group combined with a projective mapping activity, in which the activity of quantitative mapping can be discussed during the FG and used to validate findings, it is not until recent years when these combinations of techniques started to be popular.

Projective Mapping (PM) or Napping® is a holistic method based on the individual perception of the assessors regarding general similarities and differences among the products. PM is held in one session where all the products are presented simultaneously. The assessors are invited to distribute the products on a big sheet generally of 60 cm × 60 cm according to the similarities and differences among them. According to each assessor criterion, the products must be placed near one another if they are perceived as similar and far from one another if they are perceived as different. In such representation, the euclidian distance between each pair of samples will be a measure of its difference [33,34].

Collier et al. (2021) [10] made participants of all groups complete a Napping® task before Focus Groups (FG) discussions to identify barriers to decreasing meat consumption and increasing acceptance of meat substitutes. Participants had to manipulate (without tasting) 19 packages of meat substitute products commercially available in Sweden. The objective was to stimulate the discussion about the acceptance of meat substitutes, as well as offer the participants the possibility to explore a variety of meat substitutes with those that otherwise they would not be familiar with. During FGs, the packing of 19 products was also shown to participants to stimulate further discussion.

To explore consumers' beliefs, attitudes, and barriers or boosters towards the consumption of plant-based foods, Varela et al. (2021) [12] made participants of an FG complete a Projective Mapping with 34 pre-selected images of foods rich in animal-based and vegetable-based proteins. They were asked to build an individual map with the closest images on the map, as the most similar to each other contrary to the farthest images, which were the most different. The discussion among participants after this task was centered on the different maps and individual focuses and was used to understand the consumers' perceptions regarding these types of novel products.

To study how Premium chocolate consumers perceive the crafted chocolate, Brown et al. (2020) [23] held an activity of projective mapping previous to the FG and used it as a visual help during the topic introduction. With this study, they sought to demonstrate that consumers can map chocolate products and that the map can be used during the FG as an introductory visual help. The map can be later analyzed and used as a tool to improve the findings of focus groups.

## 2.2. Projective Techniques

One of the limitations of FGs is that the participants sometimes cannot express their honest and private opinions regarding the subject in question, especially when their thoughts are opposed to the opinions of the

other members of the group. When people are directly asked about their opinions, feelings, and motivations, the results obtained can be inexact. These imprecise results can occur because the participants are not able to explain and expose some aspects due to social barriers or the fear to be considered irrational or unintelligent [35].

Projective techniques are a type of qualitative methodology of indirect quest that through the presentation of a stimulus, an individual "projects" thoughts and feelings [36,37]. According to the type of response that is generated, the methods can be subdivided into five categories: association, construction, completion, choice ordering, and expressive. Association tasks are a commonly used projective technique that requires subjects to indicate the first word, image, or thought when a stimulus is presented. In the construction category, subjects have to make a story or image on a given stimulus. In the choice ordering task, respondents classify or rate factors associated with a product, brand, or service, explaining why certain things are more or less critical. When expressive techniques are applied, participants have to dramatize, act, draw or paint a specific concept or situation. Finally, in the completion task, the participant receives a sentence, a story, an argument, or an incomplete conversation and is required to complete it [33].

Varela et al. (2021) [12] introduced the term "creative focus group" when incorporating projective techniques into the Focus Group. Within the FG technique, a series of creative tasks were designed to boost the discussion on food consumption of vegetable sources rich in proteins:

- a) Photo collage. Participants were asked to take four photos of their family dishes during the previous week to submit them ahead of time. A photo collage poster for each participant was created as a stimulus for discussion.
- b) Story completion. This work was carried out in a team with the following assignment: "*Imagine a future where there was no meat available and you had to eat products 100% based on plants, try to come up with ideas of products that you would be tempted to consume*".
- c) Third-person technique. Images of stereotyped people were selected to represent different focuses on food, sustainability, political opinions, and lifestyle. Moreover, three posters were presented with representative images of products from vegetable sources (meat substitutes, vegetable products with added protein and vegetable products naturally rich in proteins). Participants were asked to choose one of the stereotyped people and hence describe what kind of food based on plants they would choose from the posters and why.

The authors reported that the story completion task was less informative than the others because the participants did not think about new ideas and some of them even denied doing the task. Some of the reasons suggested can be that they were unable to execute the task, a lack of necessity to replace the meat, lack of cooking skills, and lack of ability to generate ideas to replace the meat, or just because the participants could have felt that this question had already been discussed during the previous tasks.

As a resource for introducing participants to the product under study, Roascio-Albistur and Gámbaro (2018) [38]

used the technique of text completion in FG sessions as a way to discuss dishes elaborated with sous-vide technology. The stimulus was “Look at this dish cooked and vacuum-packed. It is all ready to heat, what do you think?” This task application allowed to evaluate the consumers’ reactions to the idea of a novel product, obtaining valuable information for the development and future introduction of a product with sous-vide technology in the Uruguayan market.

In several works carried out by the food industry, these authors have applied numerous projective techniques during FGs as stimuli for discussion (no published data). For instance, in an FG upon vegan ice cream carried out with neither vegan nor vegetarian participants, they were asked to draw a picture of one vegetarian person and one vegan person, as a way to stimulate conversation about the products they consume and how prone they might be to try/buy them. In another FG about cold cuts, the Word Association technique was used to explore the perception of different brands on the market. Each participant had to write on a sheet the first four images, associations, thoughts or feelings the name of each brand first evoked in them. Afterward, each participant commented on the written words to generate a group discussion.

### 3. Focus Group Online

In recent years, videoconferencing platforms have changed the course of qualitative investigation from a traditional way to a digitalized, modern, and widely adaptable one. The digital platforms of videoconferencing are a good alternative for interviews or research held face-to-face. They allow a real-time interaction that includes sound and image, they are easy to use, and also effective and safe [39]. Regularly, FGs have been based on face-to-face interactions, but as technology became more accessible, researchers have started to try out and refine options of remote communication to be able to deal with all kinds of topics [40].

There are various software options available to carry out FGs on line. Therefore, it is very important to assess which one to use according to the objectives and the practical, methodologic and ethical requisites of the investigation. It must be a safe software, reliable, in which audio and video recordings are possible. In addition, the platform does not require high levels of competence by the user and is cost-free [41]. Barone & Aschemann-Witzel (2022) [42] used Focus Vision Revelation platform, whose format imitates social networks and blogs to study the perception of smart labels.

Aligato et al. (2021) [40], decided to give Philippine participants the option to choose among a variety of platforms: Facebook Messenger, Zoom, Skype and Google Meet, choosing Facebook Messenger for the study. In a research done by Powell et al. (2021) [43] in the USA, the Zoom platform was used to study the food choices of university students during COVID-19 confinement. Dos Santos et al. (2021) [44], decided to use the Zoom platform due to it is widely used since pandemics began. Other authors, used WhatsApp, because it is a widely available platform in Android, iOS or KaiOS smartphones

which have a desk version called WhatsApp Web that can be used on the computer [45,46].

There are many advantages of virtual FGs. They are more accessible and participants can join them from the comfort of their homes and any region without traveling. In addition, an increasing percentage of the population work from their homes with rotating shift schedules hence group sessions can be programmed at times in which participants are calmer and commitment-free. Material and informed consent can be sent by email ahead of time. In addition, some material can be created to share on-screen group sessions. Meetings can be protected with a password and an invitation sent to each participant [44].

When accessing the meeting, each participant will need to activate the camera, microphone and write their name. This will ease the interaction between the moderator and participants. The request to participate can also be sent by email. The moderator role is similar to the role when leading a face-to-face FG. The moderator is the one who sets the context, leads the discussion and involves participants in an interactive conversation. It is important to remind the participants to be alone in a room during the session, to disconnect other Wi-Fi devices and avoid external distractions [44].

Among the disadvantages that these digital videoconferencing platforms can have when holding FGs [39,40,44,46]:

- The technological inexperience of some of the participants. The co-moderator, in these cases, can act as technical support to solve possible issues during the session.
- The responsibility that the chosen platform works effectively in the devices.
- Due to possible technical issues and the difficulty of virtual interactions, the number of participants that is used is slightly lower than in face-to-face FGs (4-5 people).
- The technological requisites that the use of these platforms implies can affect the ability to recruit older people.
- The inability of reading nonverbal signals.
- The chosen platform cannot be ideal for FG target on line.
- Since internet quality may have some issues such as poor connectivity, audio and video quality would be also affected.

For instance, to recruit participants for a virtual Focus group with older adults in the U.S., Kavanaugh et al. (2022) selected subjects who had reliable access to the Internet or had a device with a camera that worked well so they could attend a meeting online and felt comfortable while being recorded in audio and video [15].

In our experience, we can also indicate that the number of participants who forget the appointment or who do not attend the meeting on line is much higher than that which occurs in face-to-face FGs.

### 4. Conclusion

FGs are a practical technique in the market investigation and development of new products. Although

they have limitations, they provide substantial data for research. The complementation of the FG with other techniques such as projective mapping or projective techniques allows improving data generation and obtaining valuable information for the co-creation of ideas and product development.

Today, the ways of communication and the use of technology have been and are quickly changing hence the emergence of FGs on line in recent years. Researchers must adapt just as quickly to maximize the benefits and ease what the digital world offers, thus working with more and better resources. Given the evolution in communication, digital platforms show promise when it comes to working on qualitative research with young and/or digitally fluent people.

All the cited studies regarding the FGs association with projective techniques were done in face-to-face sessions, therefore they are associated with a key limitation of the FGs which is the necessity to identify, recruit and gather a group of people in only one place for discussion. The technology has reduced, if not eliminated this limitation which implies a challenge and future work on the implementation of projective techniques in FG online.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests.

## List of Abbreviations

FG: focus group

PM: projective mapping

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