

Online Focus Groups for SARTs



What is an Online Focus Group?

An online focus group is a group interview done on a digital platform to gather information regarding specific information. The interview is topic-specific and facilitated with intention and purpose. The individuals that make up the group tend to have similar experiences and identities. Online focus groups can be useful for SARTs because they can be used to explain themes in victim/survivor experiences with the criminal justice systems. They can also be used to gather information that cannot be explained in statistical information.

To decide if Online Focus Groups are right for your SART, consider the strength and limitations:

Strengths	Limitations
Low Cost	Technology Gaps (access to Wifi, age, etc.)
Small Time Commitment	Technology Issues (loss of power, batteries die)
Recording of Information	Smaller Groups
Further Reach	Miss Non-Verbal Cues
More Anonymity	More Experienced Facilitator

Methods for Online Focus Groups

There are numerous methods for SARTs to conduct online focus groups. The three main methods include chat groups, conference calls, and video chats.

Chat groups work by having the facilitator and participants enter into a secured chat room to type in questions and responses. Chat groups can be useful when a second facilitator or note taker is not available because the content can be saved. However, there is lack of non-verbal cues to know the extent and severity of the comments being made. Chat groups can also get off topic quickly, so it's important to keep these small.

Conference calls are when the facilitator and participants call in and talk virtually. Conference calls are useful for getting a lot of information while still remaining anonymous. Facilitators can also hear emotion and intensity behind comments and phrases, which allows facilitators to know when to ask follow up questions. A draw back to conference calls is the work someone must do to convert the conversation to text following the call.

Video chat is the last method for doing online focus groups. This methods allows facilitators and participants to use a camera to record their face and conversation. This allows facilitators to not only hear emotion in conversation but also see reactions and non-verbal cues. However, video chats make remaining anonymous more difficult because participants can see each other.

	Facilitator	Participants	Benefits	Challenges
Chat Groups	Type or Talk	Type	No need for note taker	Lack of non-verbal cues
Conference Calls	Talk	Talk	Anonymity with motion	Convert conversation to text
Video Chat	Talk or Video	Video	Emotions, reactions, & non-verbal cues	Lack of anonymity

Tips for Online Focus Groups

Online focus groups are unique and preparation for them may look different than in-person focus groups. On the next page, you will find a few tips for implementing online focus groups.

Recruit in Advance

The farther in advance you schedule the online focus group, the more time you have to recruit participants. It also gives the participants more time to prepare for the focus group. Two to four weeks is the recommended timeframe.

Check Participants

Before you allow someone to enroll in the online focus group, SARTs might consider setting minimum requirements before letting someone in. If a participant meets the minimum requirements, this would be a good place to also get the Informed Consent signed.

Online Reimbursement

Due to the fact that a majority of the communication between SARTs and participants will be occurring online, it might be a good idea to also offer digital reimbursement. Digital reimbursement is when gift cards or gift certificates are sent to email addresses with redemption codes. It is recommended that reimbursement be given at the beginning of the online focus group so participants don't feel coerced into participating

Small Groups

Online focus groups work best with three to five participants per group. It is also beneficial to keep the participants as similar as possible. For example, if looking at how law enforcement interacts with victim services, you will want to make sure the victim service participants in the focus group have all interacted with law enforcement during their experience. Setting minimum requirements for participation will also help with this.

Pretest the Platform

If you are using an online platform that you or the participants have not utilized before, it is advised that you do a pretest. Testing out how to mute/unmute participants, changing the volume, and saving any of the recorded material can save you headache and time afterward.

Loosely Follow a Script

Having a script and questions prepared by the SART ahead of time will ensure efficient use of time. It will also help to create a safe and open atmosphere, and remind participants of the purpose of the online focus group. We say "loosely" follow a script because conversations within focus groups can start to go in different directions than originally intended, but the information may still be important.

Have Resources Available

The conversation in online focus group may be triggering or traumatic to hear. It is recommended that resources, such as crisis lines, are made available during and after the focus group to allow participants to debrief or process the information (ex: <https://www.rainn.org/> ; <https://www.nsvrc.org/>).

Who Can Help?

The Sexual Violence Justice Institute at the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (SVJI@MNCASA) is here to help. SVJI focuses on helping communities improve the response to sexual violence. SVJI is able to provide training and technical assistance to help communities in the development and implementation of systems change work.

Visit <https://www.mncasa.org/sexual-violence-justice-institute/> to learn more.

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