



Your guide to online qualitative research

Online qualitative research is now an established methodology that is widely practiced around the world by researchers, planners and strategists.

In fact, it's used to great effect by anyone who needs to understand what people (consumers) think, feel and do. It's an exciting area to be involved in. [New technologies](#) are making it easier to get consumer insights at a pace that modern businesses demand.

Most notably, online qualitative research allows researchers to "be with" consumers almost 24/7 without having to physically be there – thanks to the advent of smartphones and other connected devices.

Contrary to common beliefs, online qualitative research is complementary (rather than alternative) to traditional in-person or offline qualitative research.



Why would you do online qualitative research?

Online qualitative research lets you immerse yourself in your target audiences lives, observe their rituals and habits first-hand. You can witness how people feel and react in the moment. It allows you to conduct a range of one-time and multiple-response activities such as retail safaris, concept testing and journals. It's also ideal when you want to encourage independent interaction between respondents. Often the most fascinating discussions start when participants ask each other questions – questions you might not think to ask as a moderator or observer.

When to use online qualitative research?

You should consider running online qualitative research when:

- You have a geographically spread sample
- You need to give respondents time to consider and reflect on their experiences
- You want to encourage open, expressive and creative thought and response
- You want to capture pictures and videos in the moment
- The service / product / problem to be researched is also based online
- You need to track shifting attitudes and behaviours over time
- You need a balance between the individual's story and group reactions
- The topic is extremely personal or complex, in which case respondents might struggle to express themselves in a face-to-face environment





Which online qualitative research methods should you use?

When deciding which method to select, first understand which of the following categories your research objectives fit under:

DISCUSSION

OLFG, BBFG,
In-depth Interviews

OBSERVATION

Diaries & blogs

COLLABORATION

Research community

OTHER

Facial coding,
social listening,
eye tracking

ONLINE LIVE FOCUS GROUPS (OLFG)

These take place in real time, with several consumers – typically up to 8 per group – coming together to chat online via text or voice. Sometimes, participants will be shown stimulus and asked to respond to a series of questions about it, or asked to mark up the stimulus highlighting what areas are of interest.

BULLETIN BOARD FOCUS GROUPS (BBFG)

BBFGs are asynchronous focus groups or discussion forums that tend to last just a few days, with moderators posting new topic-related questions each day. They typically involve up to 30 participants (per country) who log on via a private, invite-only website.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

These are usually run over an hour or two and are one-to-one. Participants do not see each others responses. Very often an online qualitative research study may involve some interview questions and some group questions.

DIARIES AND BLOGS

This method asks participants to keep an online diary (possibly a video diary) according to researchers' instructions. It's used during exploration and product development phases to uncover habits and motivations. Because participants record their experiences in their natural environment, they are more likely to capture influential external factors such as time, location, or social triggers.





RESEARCH COMMUNITIES

Lasting for weeks, months or even years, research communities deliver long-term value, supporting a more sustained and structured collaboration with consumers. Often referred to as research communities or MROCs (Market Research Online Communities), these mean different things to different people. Some people use the term 'community' interchangeably with bulletin board groups or forums. However, what really makes a community different is that it's designed to include un-moderated dialogue, so community members can create their own discussion threads.

FACIAL CODING

When an emotional response occurs in the brain in response to a visual stimulus, it can trigger tiny changes in facial expression. Facial coding can be used to understand the nature of emotional response to advertising and the way this varies and builds as an ad progresses. We can record and run facial expressions through sophisticated software to code and classify the responses into specific emotions. The online and webcam-based technology is unobtrusive, scalable and executable anywhere an online survey can be conducted.

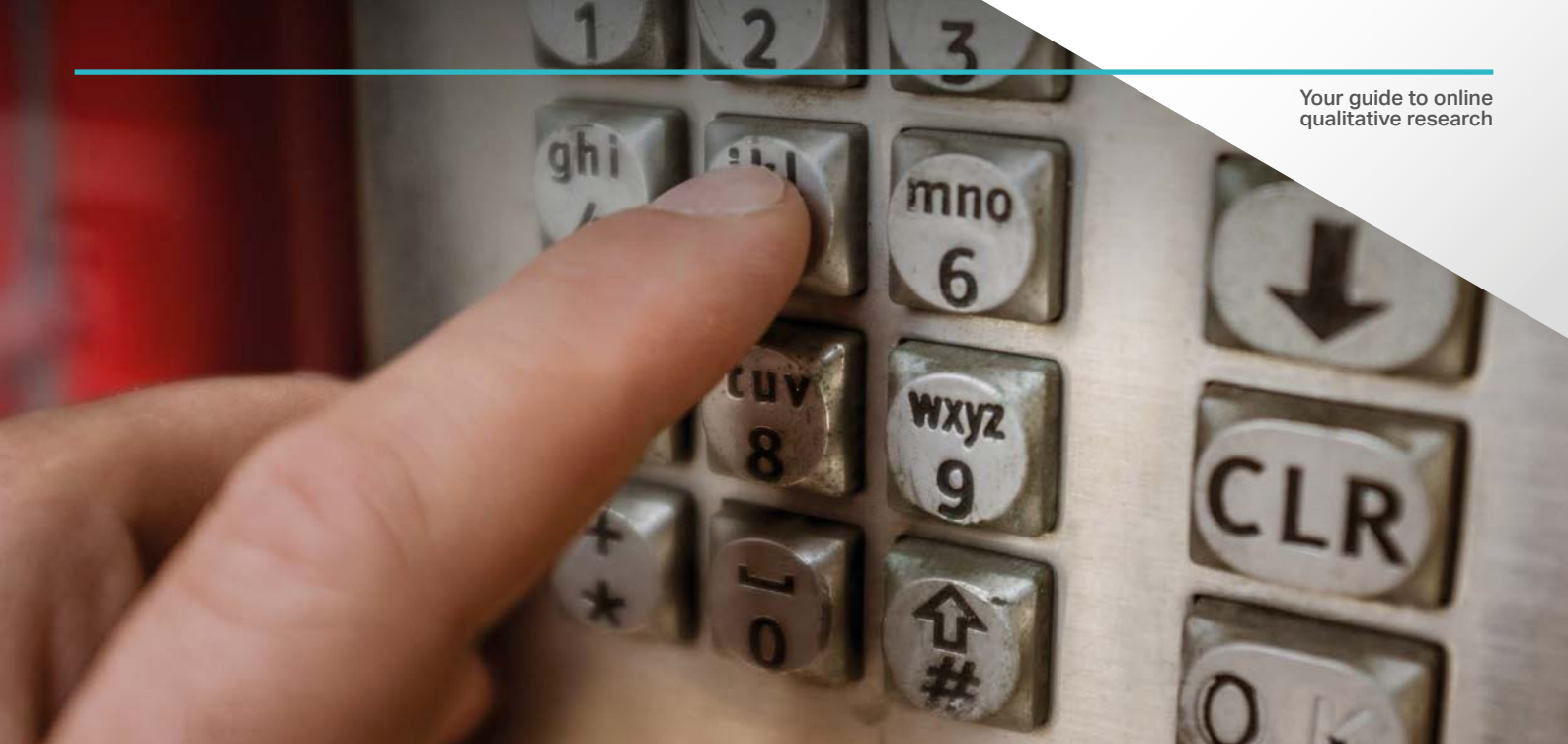
SOCIAL LISTENING

Researchers use social listening to identify themes and trends among millions of conversations. Social data is aggregated using tools and analytics conducted via platforms such as *Brandwatch* or *Sysomos*. The researcher deciphers which conversations to listen to and applies a series of filters to remove noise. Social listening campaigns might focus on new product development or sentiment analysis, among other things.

EYE-TRACKING

Eye-tracking is the process of measuring either the point of gaze or the motion of an eye relative to the head. Video-based eye trackers are currently the most widely-used design for measuring eye positions and eye movement. A camera focuses on one or both eyes and records their movement as the viewer looks at some kind of stimulus.





In conclusion

So, there is your introduction to online qual. Which method you adopt will depend on your time, budget, participant profile and available resources.

Next up is recruitment which is fundamental. If you recruit the wrong people you'll get misleading data that leads to misguided decisions. If you need some help with this, download our guide to recruiting for online qual from the resources page.

Contact us

For further information and to find out how *Further's* pioneering online qual research software and support services can help you do better online research, call us on the following numbers.

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