Author's response to reviews

Title: Online focus groups as a tool to collect data in hard-to-include populations: Examples from paediatric oncology

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Author's response to reviews:

Dear editor and reviewers,

We appreciate the reviewers' suggestions and the opportunity to submit the revised paper.

We added the names of the ethics committees on page 8 and edited the revised manuscript conform the journal style. Please find below our point-by-point response to the reviewers' comments.

Please let us know if we need to provide further information or more detail about the revisions.

Kind regards,

Kiek Tates

Referee # 1

We adjusted the grammatical error on page 7 and thank the referee for acknowledging the importance of our study.

Referee # 2

The main comment was that the paper had two modalities: both a review and an empirical paper.
We acknowledge that our elaborate discussion of the research literature on the pros and cons of conducting focus groups online could erroneously have suggested that the paper is a review. As proposed by the referee, we abridged the discussion of the literature in the Introduction. In addition, we removed our first research aim (discussing the relative advantages and disadvantages of conducting online focus groups). Finally, we removed table 1 on the pros and cons of online focus groups. We do hope that the revised paper is more balanced and convincing.

The referee criticized the indistinct focus of the study and questioned the overlap with our previously published paper.

Our aim is to illustrate the merits of using online focus groups in hard-to-reach populations by discussing the process of online group discussions in the setting of paediatric oncology, and by showing empirical data on participants’ evaluations of joining these groups. As stated in the manuscript, our previous paper merely focused on the results of the separate focus groups. Therefore, the two papers are complementary by focus and nature. Our previously published paper is listed as reference # 48 in the manuscript reviewed.

We disagree with the referee’s comment that sampling and generalizability are not really issues authors have to deal with in qualitative research.

Although the identification of a sound sampling frame is far more critical in large-scale survey research than it is in focus group research, the sample needs to be a good approximation of the population of interest. However, we acknowledge that in the original manuscript, sampling and recruitment issues received too much emphasis. In the revised paper, we only address this topic shortly in the discussion.

The referee questioned the difference between the numbers of participants joining and evaluating the online focus groups.

As described in the method section, after closing of the online focus groups, all participants were invited to evaluate the process of joining the online discussion groups. The response from parents and survivors of childhood cancer was very high, but response from child patients was lower. These response rates account for the observed difference.

Finally, the referee raised the issue of conducting more than one focus group per population.

In our study, we offered participants the opportunity to participate in the online group discussions during one week, and posed them a new question during the
first five days. All three participant groups started the group discussion on the basis of the same basic questions. Many participants returned to previously answered questions and discussions and made new comments. All respondents who were initially involved were still accessing the website at the end of the week. In a way, one could look upon this format as a series of consecutive focus groups. At the end of the week, saturation of the data was accomplished and therefore we saw no reason for starting a new series of focus groups.