Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Deborah Bowen

Reviewer's report:

This paper presents data on the use of online focus groups for data collection in hard to reach groups. The comments below try to help the ms fit better the standard manuscript format.

Overall, the paper is trying to fit into two modalities, a review paper and an empirical paper. It needs to decide which way to go and to support that direction better. If the review paper is the direction, then the authors need to conduct a review of studies using this technique, and report on the results of that review in a systematic way. Right now we do not know if the authors are citing favorable work, negative work, their preferred work or what exactly. If the direction is empirical, then the “review” part of the paper needs to be cut down to a rationale for the empirical work and the paper must showcase the empirical work. I think trying to do both in a single paper is too much, too long, and leads to a hybrid of a sort, which is what we have now.

Specific comments

The data in the abstract do not lead to any conclusions. Its hard without reading the entire paper to figure out what was really found in the empirical portion of the paper. So the abstract must set up and summarize better what was expected and what was actually found if the empirical path is kept.

In qualitative research sampling and generalizability are not really issues in the same sense that the authors attempt to deal with. One does not need to. So trying to is off the mark. If these were traditioanal format focus groups then one would not need to deal so much with them. The authors are encouraged to consult a qualitative researcher for this type of argument.

If the empirical path is chosen, then some of the points in the intro will stay but be shortened, some will go away, and some will move to the discussion. But the review attempt would not be part of the empirically focused paper introduction.

The paper needs to earlier cite the previously published paper of the same data, and let us know what the overlap is. There could be considerable overlap. In fact, the reference should be provided for reviewing this ms.

In traditional focus group research, more than one focus group per population and topic is conducted. This seems not to be the case here. Can the authors
speak to the rationale for this and how it might impact results?

The differences between the numbers at T2 and the numbers participation are confusing. Why is this, and what does it do to the data?