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# Young people's engagement in online research: challenges and lessons from conducting focus groups with young people online

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## ABSTRACT

Online qualitative focus groups are a method which has been increasingly used, especially since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, including in research with young people. Studies have reflected upon the challenges of conducting online qualitative research with young people, often drawing on experiences from the pandemic's earlier stages [e.g. Smithson et al. 2021; Woodrow et al. 2021]. This article reflects upon the challenges faced, and choices made, when conducting online focus groups with 80 young people aged 14–18 to study their democratic engagement during the later 2021 wave of the pandemic. It highlights specific issues around the method's effectiveness in engaging young people who face different kinds of marginalisation from democratic processes. While online modes of delivery were positive for engaging some, including groups of geographically dispersed young people, they exacerbated existing inequalities for others: young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, from remote or rural areas and those with certain disabilities. Such inequalities in research participation can lead to variation in data quality, and therefore in the types of knowledge produced. Using these insights we outline a range of methodological and research design considerations for researchers when choosing whether to conduct online focus group research with young people.

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Youth; online methods; focus groups; participation; inequalities

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, online methods have been increasingly used in research with young people. While initially a necessity due to widespread Covid-19 restrictions internationally, online methods of research are recognised for their cost-effectiveness (Roberts et al. 2021) and relative convenience for researchers

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(Dodds and Hess 2021). This article assesses the implications of conducting focus groups online with young people.

Assertions are often made about the internet being a young person's space (Ralph et al. 2011) and the positive effectiveness of online methods in engaging so-called 'hard-to-reach' young people (McDermott, Roen, and Piela 2013). Reflecting upon the methodological choices and challenges of conducting online focus groups with young people in a study of their democratic engagement, we challenge this assumption by highlighting the implications that online focus groups can have for exacerbating (in)equalities in participation among young people. The 'Making Votes-at-16 Work in Wales'-project explored young people's experiences of the 2021 Senedd election, the first election in Wales in which 16- and 17-year-olds were allowed to vote, to extend the evidence base on electoral participation at ages 16 and 17. A specific aim of the project was to engage with young people from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in Welsh democracy, in particular those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minorities, from remote or rural areas in Wales. This provided a good opportunity to assess the (in)equalities implications of conducting focus groups with young people online.

Previous studies have highlighted a range of opportunities and challenges when conducting focus groups and other forms of qualitative research online with young people (e.g. Dodds and Hess 2021; Smithson et al. 2021; Woodrow et al. 2021). Many of these studies draw on research from earlier stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, where participating in online qualitative research was often still novel and relationship-building had commonly taken place before the pandemic. By contrast, this article reflects on experiences from online focus groups with young people in 2021, where the pandemic context provided a different set of circumstances: young people and professionals had already endured a period of engaging with a variety of services online, without the initial novelty of online interactions.

This article assesses (1) how effective are online focus group methods in conducting research with young people?, and (2) what are the implications of online focus group research for engaging with marginalised groups of young people? It first explores the existing literature on conducting focus groups online with young people, before introducing the research project, and summarising the reflections of our project team on recruiting participants and working with organisational gatekeepers, on establishing rapport with as well as trust and consent from young people, and on producing knowledge from the interactions between participants. We outline implications of conducting focus groups with young people for equality and participation, which researchers should be aware of when looking to undertake this type of research.

## Conducting focus groups with young people online

Focus groups are a prominent method for researching collective understandings of social phenomena. A wide body of literature has assessed the benefits and challenges of conducting focus groups in different research scenarios. Kitzinger (1994) highlights the importance of participant interaction as a distinguishing feature; a principal benefit of conducting focus group research includes access to data from group interactions, although attention must be paid to ensuring these interactions are effectively generated (Acocella 2012). Some scholars caution how much interactions are performative within

socially constructed situations, thus dissimilar to what would be ‘naturally occurring’ (Smithson 2000). Focus group research is a suitable technique for gathering socially constructed understandings of social phenomena from groups of participants who can reflect upon their direct experiences, and is particularly effective in elucidating unexpected aspects of social phenomena (Acocella 2012). Nevertheless, the focus group method is characterised as ‘not an easy tool to use’ (Acocella 2012, 1135), with its success depending on factors including the quality of the interaction between participants, the ability to minimise facilitator bias, and the skill and flexibility of the facilitator in responding to the unpredictability of discussions.

Given the importance of interaction, there is a need to pay attention to diversity and homogeneity in focus groups as there is a tension between the recruitment of homogenous or diverse groups of participants. While some diversity of opinion is required in order to prompt discussion, Smithson (2000) highlights the challenges of bringing marginalised voices to the forefront of discussion in focus groups, including the observations that some participants may tend to dominate the group and that data will lack reflection upon experiences of marginalisation where not shared across the group. It is noted that, where possible, researchers should select participants where characteristics of marginalisation are shared, as this creates an environment where such topics can be discussed openly. Overall, understanding the distinguishing features and key components of focus groups are important considerations when assessing the effectiveness of their translation to the online context and the impact of this upon (in)equalities in participation.

Focus groups with young people require specific considerations. Bagnoli and Clark (2010) argue that focus groups provide participatory opportunities with the potential to empower participants, which are particularly important when working with groups who have lower levels of influence in wider society, including marginalised groups and children and young people. Importantly, where focus groups are conducted with young people, Krueger and Casey (2015) recommend that facilitators pay attention to factors that enable a positive experience for young participants and that ensure the quality of data gathered. These include providing a non-intimidating environment, building trust and rapport, asking age-appropriate questions, and ensuring appropriate consent.

With technological advancements, focus groups have made their way into the online context. A great deal of literature on this topic has drawn upon the experiences of projects which took place in the first stages of the pandemic in early 2020, where many people in the UK and internationally were in full-scale lockdown. Conducting focus groups with young people online in this context comes with a distinct set of advantages and drawbacks. Dodds and Hess (2021, 204) argue that the introduction of videocall technology is beneficial for ‘investigat[ing] vulnerable people in a non-intrusive, sensitive and overall more effective way’. They note that participants speak more openly on topics when the researcher has not entered their physical environment. This idea has also been discussed by others in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, pointing specifically to the opportunities and challenges of conducting research online with young people and of experiences in the contexts of statutory or community youth service engagement. Smithson et al. (2021), in their summary of youth justice services’ responses to working with young people in the pandemic, state that some young people were ‘more open’ when engaging online (Smithson et al. 2021, 10). Similarly, Woodrow et al. (2021) argue

that research in the online environment can engage young people to talk about ‘tricky topics’, including health and other potentially stigmatised topics. Overall, it is recognised that the best location or context for focus group research will differ among different groups of young people (Adler, Salantera, and Zumstein-Shaha 2019) and that considering a variety of young people’s needs is an important factor when conducting research online.

There are operational considerations of conducting focus groups online, in particular when working with young people. Dodds and Hess (2021) highlight that in some cases recruitment of participants is easier online. Assuming the availability of willing participants, it is easy to see the convenience of a videocall compared to travelling to the group. However, Moore, McKee, and McLoughlin (2015) note how while online recruitment may be efficient, and especially suitable for working with geographically-dispersed young people or to make adjustments for certain disabilities, recruitment online takes place under conditions where we access less participant information or indicators of target demographic, than we would face-to-face (e.g. visual or spoken indicators of social class). Further drawbacks of online research include lower degrees of participant engagement resulting from a greater physical distance between researcher and participant, and greater challenges for researchers in picking up on non-verbal cues which would be visible to researchers if face-to-face (Arya and Henn 2021; Dodds and Hess 2021). While a sense of distance can sometimes be considered a benefit, building rapport with participants across digital platforms, which alter and somewhat reduce communications, presents another challenge (Woodrow et al. 2021). Moore, McKee, and McLoughlin (2015, 17) summarise that the methodological challenges of conducting focus groups lead to issues concerning ‘the depth and insight of knowledge produced’.

Much of the literature has so far focussed upon the research environment and the effects of conducting online research upon young people’s engagement, in particular on building trust and rapport, as highlighted by Krueger and Casey (2015). Some authors have outlined the ease of moving existing research relationships with young people online—relationships which often began in person prior to the start of the pandemic. Arya and Henn (2021, 17) for example argued that they were ‘able to engage more deeply with participants where there is a pre-existing relationship’ (see also Smithson et al. 2021). Nevertheless, it is recognised that developing *new* relationships and rapport with young people at a distance is considerably more challenging, especially in a group setting (Woodrow et al. 2021). Woodrow et al. (2021) also highlight how this distance can create an issue with identifying support needs. Whereas in face-to-face scenarios researchers may notice if a young person has a negative experience, and be able to speak with them afterwards or refer to support, this is a challenge in the online environment where researchers cannot have the same sort of informal interactions with participants after the videocall.

A major operational and (in)equalities consideration when conducting focus groups with young people is the issue of access to digital equipment and quality wireless internet networks. Access to equipment and networks require a financial investment and are also impacted by geographical inequalities with many rural areas still encountering substandard wireless internet in the United Kingdom (Farrington et al. 2015; Mohideen et al. 2018). Termed by many as the ‘digital divide’, the consequences of this to equality of access to research participation online had been cautioned by a number of scholars

(Lijadi and Van Schalkwyk 2015; Smithson et al. 2021). As a cross-generational issue, the potential for participatory inequalities among between young people with high-quality stable internet access and those without this therefore remains a significant concern. Despite often-made generalisations about the suitability of digital participation to younger generations, research shows that the idea of ‘digital natives’ or the ‘prevailing image of digitally savvy youth’ are not accurate (Eynon and Geniets 2016, 464). Young people’s ability to access the internet and their capabilities to use the internet vary considerably, with 15% of 9–16-year-olds in one study not confident in their skills to use the internet (Oxford Internet Institute 2015). Indeed, from a participatory perspective, there is legitimate concern over inequalities in participation of young people without stable internet access, most commonly these are young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those living in rural areas with poor broadband infrastructure (Cuevas-Parra 2020).

## Background of the project

This article reflects upon the methodological benefits and challenges of conducting focus group research online with young people based upon our experiences of working online with young people in Wales in 2021 in the context of the research project ‘Making Votes-at-16 Work in Wales’ (Huebner et al. 2021). The substantive aim of the research was to understand young people’s experiences of the first election in Wales in which 16- and 17-year-olds were allowed to vote: the 2021 Senedd election. In order to learn about the experiences of and elicit shared understandings among young people, we conducted focus groups with a total of 80 14- to 18-year-olds from across Wales. An overview of participants’ gender, age groups, region and ethnicities can be viewed in the Appendix. With the extension of the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds, the 2021 Senedd election further highlighted the role of devolved institutions in driving forward the policy of Votes-at-16 in the UK (Mycock et al. 2021), as well as bringing renewed attention to asymmetric voting rights for 16- and 17-year-olds in UK devolved nations (Pickard 2019; Tonge, Loughran, and Mycock 2021).

A specific focus of the research was to ensure the inclusion of young people who would be traditionally recognised as marginalised from political participation in Wales and less likely to engage in elections. This included young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (Grasso and Giugni 2022), ethnic minorities as well as diversity on urban/rural geographies to take account of such spatial inequalities in political participation (Cramer Walsh 2012). Learning about young people’s choices to vote or not as well as their perceived barriers and motivations in engaging with the democratic process was crucial to research that is concerned with policies impacting the functioning and inclusiveness of the democratic system.

Despite our plans to conduct focus groups face-to-face across Wales, our work was impacted by renewed restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic in late 2020. Due to the focus on young people’s experiences of this specific election –the 2021 Senedd election– postponing our research until restrictions eased was not an option, and we had to conduct the research online. In contrast to others reporting on online focus groups with young people in the first stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, our project took place in early to mid 2021. At this time, the move online was no longer a novelty and the world had opened up to an extent– albeit not sufficiently to allow our research to be conducted face-to-face.



We recruited participants via organisational gatekeepers, primarily teachers and youth workers, for three reasons: first, as a means of engaging with professionals who could paint a wider picture of participant backgrounds; second, to engage young people where they had existing relationships and where characteristics of marginalisation were often shared, thus enabling greater possibility of discussion of these factors within focus groups (Smithson 2000), and thirdly, as an additional layer of institutional consent in addition to that of the participating young people. Conducting research with under-18s, while possible without parental consent in the British context when participants are aged at least 16, entailed consideration of greater participant vulnerabilities, for example when seeking and reaffirming voluntary consent. Ethical approval was granted by the lead researcher's faculty ethics committee<sup>1</sup> as well as, where we worked via gatekeepers, by their organisations. We sought parental consent from participants who were under the age of 16 and offered participants a £10 shopping voucher as a 'thank you'. While debates exist surrounding potential 'inducement' of participants (Afkinich and Blachman-Demner 2020), we broadly followed Seymour (2012) in that emphasising voluntary consent at all levels as key to the ethical use of vouchers or payments in research with young people. While the requirement to move to online research was disappointing, it presented us with an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of online focus group research in this specific context, to document the impact of our methodological choices, and to question whether conducting online focus groups with young people helped or hindered us in reaching our research aims.

This article is based on our experiences of planning and conducting the online focus groups as well as reflective exercises by the researchers around different stages of planning and delivery. The experiences of our team in delivering online focus groups fall into four areas: recruitment of participants, initial communication and establishing rapport, communication and interaction during the focus group and additional tech-specific issues.

### **Recruitment: participants and gatekeepers**

We turn first to the initial stage of recruiting young people to focus groups, which primarily took place via gatekeepers, with a very small amount of direct recruitment of individual young people. Recruitment did not ostensibly seem hampered by the move online, with emails a relatively efficient way of contacting teachers and youth workers. Early on within the project, researchers on the team committed substantial time to building relationships within a variety of networks, including practitioner networks and networks associated with our funder, which worked well using online tools. However, despite initial interest from a number of organisations, and despite the advantages of an (initial) recruitment strategy of engaging with networks and professional relationships that had been established from a previous project, we nevertheless encountered greater barriers to translating this into engagement of young people in focus groups. As recognised within the literature, a substantial degree of effort to learn about and, depending upon the research approach, to become embedded within communities and networks, is required, both to understand the contexts in which research will take place, and in order to build trust and rapport within networks (Roberts et al. 2021). To reach the number of participants we envisaged (we engaged 80 young people, having initially envisaged 80–100), it took us



a much greater number of attempts to get in touch and to engage, for example in quantity of email exchanges, with gatekeepers than we expected based on initial interest and email responses. Over six months, we made and followed up on introductions to at least 40 unique gatekeepers (all with at least 3 trials to make contact and often various months of emailing back and forth), for 7 of those to eventually translate into focus groups with a total of 70 participants in total. 10 young people signed up outside of our efforts to organise sessions through gatekeepers after hearing about the research from parents or friends.

The recruitment experiences of our research team here are not a singular case; they pertain to a wider point: that receiving indications of interest online is often easy, yet translating this into substantial research opportunities (in our case, focus groups conducted) is difficult when solely relying on online interaction, especially when resources are strained by restrictions on social interactions. In 2021, the circumstances of the pandemic created an environment where both schools and youth organisations were highly constrained in enabling the engagement of young people in research. The fresh Covid-19 restrictions introduced in the UK in December 2020 led to the second major period of closures of schools and youth clubs, with varying degrees of provision moving online in the first months of the year. In our engagement with networks, we found that many schools were unable to find the capacity to work with us, neither when teaching took place online, nor when schools returned in-person. Where we were able to engage with schools, we often found that interactions were last-minute, and on a couple of occasions focus groups were organised with 1–2 days' notice in response to a need for an end-of-term extra-curricular activity. Our communications with teachers indicated that the issues with engagement with research were firstly due to the pressures of online teaching and secondly, due to the additional demands upon teachers to 'catch up' when schools returned to in-person learning (Kim et al. 2021).

A further feature of online recruitment which was hampered by the online environment pertained to the logistics of setting up focus groups. Conducting the research online required additional effort by gatekeepers to set up technology for online calls, and to manage the technical requirements of online focus groups in their classrooms. This largely took away any advantage to a teacher of relieving them temporarily of lesson planning duties. This involved overcoming technical challenges of organising videocall software (Roberts et al. 2021), including finding places for each focus group to take place without noise affecting parallel groups, ensuring the correct IT equipment, and ensuring no feedback loops with the audio technology when several devices were connected in the same room. We found a similar picture with youth groups: despite an interest in participating, the circumstances of the pandemic entailed that most youth provision in Wales remained closed at the time of our research. On the one hand, this was due to young people losing interest in attending youth clubs online throughout the pandemic; on the other, it was due to lack of online access among groups of socioeconomically disadvantaged young people and young people in rural areas.

These difficulties with recruitment pose questions regarding whose input we missed out on as a result of the need to work online, and whether inequalities (especially socio-economic and rural-urban) were exacerbated as a result of the online nature of the research, as a result of inequalities in wireless internet connections, devices and digital skills (Arya and Henn 2021; Cuevas Parra 2020; Eynon and Geniets 2016). Indeed, by

contrast, through a small amount of direct participant recruitment, we were pro-actively contacted by individual young people who wished to take part, most of them with a pre-existing interest in politics and thus not part of the group of young people traditionally underrepresented in political decision-making that we were aiming to recruit. This reinforces the need to strive to recruit participants from different marginalised backgrounds, due to the overlap between people underrepresented in research participation and people underrepresented in political participation that we observed.

A further recruitment challenge related to the effectiveness of snowball sampling, which we undertook via gatekeepers (e.g. teachers, youth workers) while operating online, with the aim of referral to further groups. We found that online engagement did not give us the same opportunities and quality of interaction to allow for effective snowballing; the conversations that a researcher would naturally have with young people and gatekeepers after a focus group did not take place in the online environment, and had to be replaced by email. It was the experience of the team that snowball sampling was more challenging via email, especially considering the outlined consequences of the Covid-19 context and the strained capacities of gatekeepers. In contrast to these difficulties, the online delivery of the research had a specific advantage over face-to-face focus groups. In one case, it allowed us to bring together young people from different parts of Wales, an opportunity which led to some interesting discussions between young people about regional variations in the salience of political issues which would not have taken place if focus groups had only been conducted in person.

Overall, it is worth noting that we were satisfied with the recruitment that we were able to achieve eventually and that the online environment offered us the opportunity to bring young people from different parts of Wales together, but this came at a high cost. While participant recruitment was not entirely hindered by online methods of communication, our reflections point to greater challenges than benefits of online working with respect to engagement in the recruitment phase. Our reflections differ somewhat to those of others, from the early stages of the pandemic (Dodds and Hess 2021; Arya and Henn 2021; Smithson et al. 2021; Woodrow et al. 2021). Their discussions of the opportunities and challenges of online research, while indeed critical of many aspects of online work, placed a greater emphasis on the opportunities of online focus groups than we are able to reflect upon here. While we do not attempt to make a precise comparison, our efforts to recruit young people indicated a sense that by early 2021 the initial novelty of working online in the early stages of the pandemic and the resulting opportunities for recruiting young people to participate in online focus group research, had faded. Furthermore, there always remain questions about possible further characteristics of marginalisation of young people who we did not manage to engage in the research, and the question of who will have dropped off the map due to the nature of online engagement and the Covid-19 context. We can reflect that this is likely the case as we observed that many young people entirely unwilling to engage with online research within this project.

### **Initial engagement: establishing rapport, trust, and consent**

Building trust and rapport is an especially important consideration when conducting research with young people (Krueger and Casey 2015), in particular when they are

marginalised. Therefore, aspects of initial engagement with young people are a crucial feature to reflect upon in our experiences of conducting online focus groups. Our research was conducted using online video communication technology including Zoom and MS Teams, yet the specific software adopted and how this technology was used varied. In some circumstances we spoke with participants who each individually joined the videocall and spoke to each other and to the facilitator each using their own devices (for simplicity, we will call this an ‘all-online’ focus group). In other circumstances, young people were together in a location such as a classroom, with all participants joining the videocall through the same or a small number of devices. In these cases, participants spoke with each other in-person and with the facilitator via the videocall (‘quasi-online’ focus groups).

The reflections of the research team surrounding initial engagement and establishing rapport and trust indicated that overall, whether an all-online or quasi-online focus group, this was a challenging and sometimes awkward process via online platforms. While building trust and rapport with young people one has not previously met always required significant effort, the reduced level of communication via the online platform entailed greater challenges for building rapport with groups of young people, as recognised by Woodrow et al. (2021). Furthermore, building trust presents an even greater challenge for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds who are more likely to be associated with higher levels of distrust (Ross, Mirowsky, and Pribesh 2001) and who may indeed have less reason to trust adults. To give examples of challenges, it was difficult to conduct icebreaker activities online without the possibility of activities that include movement within a physical space and we experienced additional time pressures due to the need to keep videocalls to a fixed time and, generally, screen time to a minimum. The use of emojis for ice breaker activities was also explored by the project in its earlier stages. While there was some potential in this as an accessible activity, we found challenges in enacting this consistently due to time pressures, and the sense that it did not replace subtle in-person forms of body language.

These challenges also varied depending on whether groups were ‘all-online’ or ‘quasi-online’. In quasi-online focus groups, where young people were in the same physical location, some researchers struggled with young people’s faces being smaller or not visible on the screen and with a lack of opportunity to read facial expressions and to establish a personal connection. By contrast, in all-online focus groups, in many cases participants’ faces were more visible on the screen, offering a greater degree of ‘naturalness’ and closeness to face-to-face communication (Adom, Osei, and Adu-Agyem 2020) between the facilitator and participants, which aided this element of communication to some extent. Conversely, a benefit of quasi-online focus groups, at least in comparison with all-online focus groups, was that it was more possible to encourage free-flowing conversation among young people who were located in the same room in icebreaker activities.

In addition to initial engagement, obtaining consent was also more challenging remotely. Without problem, we replaced physical consent forms with online questionnaires which included the same information as a physical form and was approved for use. However, the reduced nature of communication ultimately has an impact. It is advised practice to ensure understanding of consent forms and give participants the opportunity to ask questions (Parsons, Sherwood, and Abbott 2016). Although part of our process was to ensure that all participants had the opportunity to ask questions and consented verbally at the start of the discussion, this proved difficult in practice, in part because visual

cues which would have aided our understandings of consent (e.g. nodding) were less available in the online environment.

Overall, we found initial engagement more challenging online due to the fact that communication in the online space is an impaired communication with reduced access to non-verbal cues (as also recognised by Arya and Henn 2021; Dodds and Hess 2021), and the fact that many activities that are well established through practice in physical spaces (e.g. icebreaker activities) do not transfer fully online. With the present state of videocall technology, the process of establishing rapport, trust and consent is a significant challenge for conducting research with young people, with consequences for the data produced as well as on (in)equalities in focus group participation.

### **The focus group: communication and interaction**

We next turn to our reflections of engaging with young people during online focus groups and the resulting quality and quantity of data collected from interactions between young participants, and young people and facilitators. As explored above, scholarly discussion exists surrounding whether focus groups reflect ‘naturally occurring’ conversations (Smithson 2000). The reflections on our research include that spoken communication was somewhat altered in an online environment, with a sense that ‘Zoom etiquette’ differs from regular face-to-face communication, with somewhat greater levels of formality due to less free-flowing conversation.

While good quality data can be produced using online focus groups, it is likely to be somewhat different to what would be collected face-to-face. Members of the research team who acted as facilitators reflected that in-depth discussions were achieved on many occasions, albeit with a somewhat altered dynamic. The online environment altered the quantity and quality of interactions between young people, something Kitzinger (1994) considers a distinguishing feature of focus group research. Facilitators reflected that asking questions in online focus groups often felt more like a ‘serial interview’ than a group discussion, with responses directed more towards the facilitator than to others in the group. As a consequence, there was reduced interaction and discussion between participants in the online context. However, this can be influenced by research design decisions; interaction between participants was less impaired when either the young people knew each other prior to the online focus group, or if the focus group was ‘quasi-online’, with young people together in one room only interacting with the facilitator via the videocall. Familiarity among the participating young people helped cut down the communication barriers put in place by the videocall, and having young people in the same location (in the case of ‘quasi-online’ focus groups) meant a lessened impairment of communication between participants.

In line with what was observed in the initial engagement stage (and as also recognised by other scholars e.g. Arya and Henn 2021; Dodds and Hess 2021), communication challenges caused by the much-reduced ability to read body language and the general lack of non-verbal cues had an effect on the substantive conversations. In one example, one participant had a declared disability that we understood could lead to increased anxiety about attending the group. Despite a conscious effort on the part of the facilitator to reassure participants about not needing to answer any question if not comfortable, mid-way through the session this participant stated that they wanted to leave the session due to

feeling uncomfortable about taking part in any discussion. While we cannot say for certain whether this would still happen in an in-person context, it remains likely that the facilitator would have been able to visually pick up on cues of discomfort among participants, and taken mitigating actions to help reassure them. This observation draws upon a similar theme to that of Woodrow et al. (2021), who identified issues in identifying follow-up support when working online.

The online space can also alter the experience for and input of young people with some shyness or anxiety about participating in group discussions. Our observations were that in a 'quasi-online' focus group, such as some of the classroom-based sessions we ran with schools, young people who were more shy, anxious, or less confident to speak up tended to relay their responses via a friend who would speak to the camera. By contrast, in an 'all-online' focus group, this would be more likely to be communicated via the chat function in the videocall, with these participants often choosing to turn off their video and microphone and communicating solely via the chat.

These reflections add to the observations of others, including Moore, McKee, and McLoughlin (2015), with regards to the quality of data collected through online focus groups. They indicate that varying experiences depending on the participating young people and on whether an online focus group is set up 'quasi-online' or 'all-online' cause variation in data quality, and therefore in the types of knowledge produced. Crucially, despite advantages for working with young people with mobility impairments (Roberts et al. 2021), our experiences indicate that online focus groups may not work well for young people with certain disabilities, especially where these entail a need for clear and unaltered communication between the facilitator and the participants. This raises (in)equality issues in relation to the participation of some marginalised young people in research that relies on online focus groups.

### Considerations relating to the use of technology

Recruitment, initial engagement, communication, and interaction during online focus groups are each influenced by the technology used, but two aspects of conducting online focus groups that impacted our project throughout require additional attention: the availability and quality of wireless internet connections and the use of cameras and microphones.

The availability of reliable wireless internet connections, whether to the facilitators or the participants, had an impact on the delivery of the research online. Where facilitators' wireless internet was poor, this led to great challenges with building rapport and with keeping to the timings of the online focus group. Where participants' wireless internet was poor, facilitators reflected upon truncated responses. Despite efforts to clarify where speech was cut off, the level of understanding gained of young people's experiences and views was poorer (as also noted by others e.g. Roberts et al. 2021). It was noticeable that poor wireless internet was a factor for some young people in rural areas of our research: in parts of Gwynedd, Pembrokeshire, and the South Wales Valleys. Despite common conceptions of young people as being 'always online' and accessing the latest devices with superior digital skill to older generations, our reflections upon delivering online focus groups substantiate the claims of Eynon and Geniets (2016), that this is a simplified picture. Indeed, our experiences suggest that underrepresented young people with socioeconomic disadvantage and/or

from rural areas experience exclusion from online spaces and that online delivery of research is not the 'magic bullet' for engaging with young people.

A further technology consideration surrounds the use of cameras and microphones during online focus groups, raising a dilemma which has also been highlighted in the field of learning technologies by Rojabi et al. (2022). We offered young people the choice to switch cameras and microphones off and to use the chat function if they preferred. This was enabling to some young people who may not have otherwise contributed due to not wanting their image seen or their voice heard. However, it impaired visual and/or oral communication further and facilitators struggled to know to what extent young people were engaging in the discussion and whether their reactions in a chat were to the questions and prompts discussed at the time. The lack of visual or audio created challenges especially in cases where facilitators would aim to bring lesser-heard young people's voices into the discussion, to counter the dominance of other voices in focus groups (Smithson 2000). In these cases, the lack of audio or visual input can make it difficult to understand the impact of asking a direct question on an individual participant.

These challenges created by and through the use of technology highlight how we need to support young research participants by creating participation opportunities that are inclusive, intuitive, and suit the research question at hand. There has been some discussion in the literature of the circumstances in which online participation can be beneficial in cases where young people are less likely to take part in research; some scholars have suggested that young people can be more likely to participate in online research or more open to discuss sensitive and/or stigmatising topics online, suggesting a non-intrusive nature of online communications (Dodds and Hess 2021; Smithson et al. 2021). However, this is highly dependent upon the circumstances of individual research projects, and individual young people. We know that not all young people are tech-experts. The focus should therefore be on making participation in online focus groups as intuitive as possible for young people and to plan ways to support them when things go wrong.

## Conclusion

Overall, our reflections indicate that conducting online focus groups with young people has implications for the inclusion of young people in research, particularly in research concerning democratic engagement where adequate knowledge production hinges on equal opportunities to participate. In our research, this was especially problematic for young people from backgrounds of socioeconomic deprivation while having a mixed impact on disabled young people and young people in rural areas where high quality internet is not consistent. While there are circumstances in which online focus groups better meet the needs of young people, for example, when bringing together young people with mobility challenges or from different geographic locations, there are many other circumstances in which they do not. Despite the online environment being commonly asserted as a young person's space (Ralph et al. 2011), it is important to note that taking your research online does not provide a magic bullet for engagement of different kinds of young people.

In the right circumstances, conducting focus group research with young people should be empowering (Bagnoli and Clark 2010), in particular in research on democratic engagement, but a range of challenges when working online can make this difficult to achieve. As Smithson (2000) describes, there are already challenges to ensuring that marginalised

voices are at the forefront of focus group discussions. Our reflections indicate that if there are further barriers to young people joining the research, that this can impact the careful balance of ensuring the inclusion of diverse groups of young people in focus group research on democratic engagement.

Researchers who choose to conduct online focus groups with young people with the aim to engage a wide range of young people to an equal extent should be aware of and consider the implications the online environment has upon recruitment, rapport building and ensuring informed consent, knowledge production during the focus group itself, as well as of technological challenges. We find that methodological choices that are unique to doing online qualitative research with young people, such as whether to work through gatekeepers, or not, how to build trust and rapport with young people, and whether to conduct group discussions 'all-online', 'quasi-online', or both can lead to substantial variation in data quality, and therefore in the types of knowledge produced.

### *Recruitment*

- Recruitment can take more time/resources and flexibility in accommodating participants' / gatekeepers' needs
- Consider recruitment methods other than snowball sampling

### *Rapport, trust, and consent*

- Employ processes to ensure informed consent that do not rely on visual or spoken feedback
- Trial how proven measures to build trust and rapport translate to a virtual space

### *Knowledge production*

- Consider how the research topic has methodological implications, for example how online research has implications in reaching different marginalised groups (in the case of research relating to democratic processes) or equally how other topics can be aided by the online environment.
- Construct research instruments taking into account different modes of focus groups, e.g. those that are 'quasi-online' or 'all-online'
- Plan data analysis that considers the different modes of engagement with the focus group discussion and variation in the knowledge produced

### *Technology*

- Be aware of inequalities in access to and stability of wireless internet connections among participants
- Be prepared to support participants through a variety of technological issues and engagement preferences (with/without visual and/or audio)



Our observations differ from those of literature which draws on experiences from the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Often taking place in early 2020, much previous literature reflects upon circumstances that are unlikely to be replicated, including the ability to draw upon existing relationships and rapport that had been established with young people offline, and a context where many people in the UK were in full-scale lockdown. By contrast, the 2021 pandemic context was very different; with the 'honeymoon period' and novelty of regular online interactions over, there was a much-reduced willingness among young people and professionals to engage in online focus groups.

Outside of this unique early-pandemic context and in light of the equalities implications that this article has outlined, researchers should carefully consider the rationale for choosing online focus groups as a research method with young people, and be ready to make informed choices on questions of research design that are unique to online focus groups with young people. Ultimately, we suggest that, where possible, that researchers should afford young people a choice in the mode of participation (online or face-to-face) to best suit their needs.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Overview of key characteristics of the 80 participating young people.

	Characteristic	Number of participants	Percent of total
Gender	Female	46	58
	Male	33	41
	Non-binary	1	1
Age	14–15	2	2
	16–17	71	89
	18	7	9
Region	North Wales	38	48
	Mid and West Wales	27	34
	South Wales Central, incl. Cardiff	11	14
	South Wales West	2	2
	South Wales East	1	1
	Undisclosed	1	1
Ethnicity	White	71	89
	Minority ethnic groups	9	11
Language of education	English-language	48	60
	Welsh-medium	32	40