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Blogging into Retirement

Using Qualitative Online Research Methods to Understand Leisure among Baby Boomers

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Abstract

Leisure scholars have argued that Internet research can be used to reach a broader audience, particularly as seniors use the Internet to have fun (e.g., playing games, sharing stories). In this paper, we explore the challenges and opportunities afforded by online qualitative data collection to study leisure among baby boomers who participated in a multi-author blog. We review insights gained regarding participants' positive and negative experiences with blogging as part of a research project, the process of negotiating the researchers' roles in terms of participating in and managing the blog, and strengths and limitations of the process in generating quality data (e.g., varying levels of engagement and reflection). Recommendations regarding online qualitative research with older adults are also discussed.

Keywords: *Aging, Internet, older adults, multi-author blog, qualitative research*

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Introduction

In 2000, McGuire asked, "What do we know about leisure and aging?," and then answered his own question by suggesting, "Not much." Now, 15 years later, a wider range of theories and methodologies are used to better understand leisure and aging. Considering methodological and technological advancements, combined with increased numbers of older adults using the Internet, we wanted to determine to what degree qualitative online research methods may help to answer McGuire's call for deeper thought and improved research into leisure and aging research. For example, one of the challenges mentioned by McGuire to advancing research into leisure and aging is the need for strong research teams and the lack of a critical mass of leisure and aging scholars at any one university. Similarly, he described the challenge inherent in studying complex human experiences. Qualitative online research can allow teams of researchers at different universities to work together to understand the complex experiences of participants as they unfold. Specifically we chose to use this method to explore the transition to retirement, which Nimrod and Janke (2012) have described as one of the major life transitions related to leisure in later life. In this article we describe how we utilized qualitative online research methods to explore the transition to retirement among baby boomers and discuss the challenges and opportunities that resulted from this type of data collection.

As we can expect large numbers of baby boomers to draw on leisure services in the coming years, it is becoming increasingly relevant to understand how they perceive and experience retirement. To do so, finding alternative means of collecting data, moving away from the traditional qualitative interview, may be beneficial. Indeed, Stebbins (2010) argued that traditional qualitative methods (e.g., individual interviews, focus groups) are limiting when studying leisure activities because they are too labour intensive to address a broad range of data and because they limit the researcher to studying small samples of those who are geographically and temporally accessible. He suggested that Internet research could be used to reach a broader audience. Furthermore, Nimrod (2010, 2011) reported that seniors use the Internet to have fun (e.g., playing games, sharing stories) and older adults are increasingly using social networking sites (Lloyd, 2007). As such, we set out to better understand the transition to retirement among baby boomers through online qualitative research methods. This approach allowed us to study older adults who may not have otherwise been able to participate due to time, geography, or transportation constraints. This approach also allowed us to explore the experiences of participants in real time as they could describe their activities and thoughts as they happened rather than being limited to what they recalled at a scheduled time. Finally, this approach allowed us to explore the participants' affinity/preference for using online qualitative methods in order to improve future studies.

While the overall aim of this project was to understand leisure and the transition to retirement among baby boomers, a secondary goal was to explore the potential of online research methods with baby boomers. The purpose of this manuscript, therefore, is to describe our approach to online research methods and consider the benefits and drawbacks of using online research methods with the baby boom generation. Below, we present a brief review of the literature regarding baby boomers, retirement and leisure; baby boomer's use of the Internet; and an overview of online qualitative research methods.

Literature Review

Baby Boomers, Retirement, and Leisure

Several researchers have highlighted differences between baby boomers and their predecessors (Liechty & Genoe, 2013; Liechty, Yarnal, & Kerstetter, 2012; Nazareth, 2007; Sperazza & Banerjee, 2010a, 2010b). Baby boomers are more ethnically diverse, more highly educated, more likely to be employed in professional and managerial positions and spend more of their adult years working than previous generations (Frey, 2010; Pruchno, 2012). They also differ in their personal and social lives from other generations as they are less likely to be married (Frey, 2010), and to have an available spouse or adult children (Ryan, Smith, Antonucci, & Jackson, 2012). Baby boomers are healthier than previous generations and can anticipate longer life expectancies (Ryan et al., 2012).

Byles et al. (2013) noted that baby boomers are seeking work-life balance, self-fulfillment, and a focus on lifestyle change rather than "…the traditional gold watch model of retirement…" (p. 26), wherein individuals leave the workforce on a set date and do not return. Indeed, a survey of Australian baby boomers found that the majority of study participants intended to remain engaged in the work force, either full time, or part time (Taylor, Pilkington, Feist, Dal Grande, & Hugo, 2014). Although baby boomers are interested in remaining in the workforce post retirement, they also anticipate engagement in a variety of leisure pursuits, including physical activity and outdoor pursuits, volunteering, traveling, hobbies, spending time with others and self-improvement (Byles et al., 2013; Sperazza & Banerjee, 2010a; Winston & Barnes, 2007). Overall, baby boomers appear to desire active retirements with diverse leisure pursuits balanced with some participation in the workforce.

Older Adults and the Internet

Among a variety of leisure pursuits, Sperazza and Banerjee (2010b) state that baby boomers comprise "…a generation of people who are entering retirement with extensive knowledge of the Internet…" (p. 19–20). Tapping into knowledge of and interest in using the Internet may be a fruitful way to better understand the leisure interests and experiences of baby boomers. In fact, research demonstrates that older adults are the fastest growing group of Internet users (Perrin & Duggan, 2015). Eighty-one percent of Americans between 50 and 65 use the Internet (Perrin & Duggan, 2015) and 74% of Americans between 65 and 69 go online (Smith, 2014). Furthermore, 79% of American adults aged 50 to 65 and 71% of those aged 65 and above use the Internet daily or almost every day. Baby boomers go online to check email, use search engines, research products and travel, shop, obtain health information and news, bank online, and use social media (Rainie, 2010; Smith, 2014). Based on these statistics, it stands to reason that adults in the target age group of the study use the Internet, have access to the Internet at home, and are likely to go online daily. Because baby boomers utilize the Internet on a daily basis, we wanted to find out if online research methods are a feasible way to collect data to better understand this generation and their leisure as they transition to retirement.

Online Research Methods

Online research methods are varied, and can include Internet surveys, virtual ethnography, and using the Internet as an archival source (Lee, Fielding, & Blank, 2008). Qualitative online research may involve researchers as passive observers who collect data without interacting with online users. Alternatively, it may involve active engagement on the part of the researchers in generating data (Morison, Gibson, Wigginton, & Crabb, 2015). Online research methods are gaining traction for gathering qualitative data and it is likely that online research will continue to grow with technological advancements (Horrell, Stephens, & Breheny, 2015).

There are several benefits to using online research methods, such as reduced cost, quicker data collection, and ability to gather data from groups of participants that may be difficult to access (Castanos & Piercy, 2010; Comley & Beaumont, 2011; Holmes, 2009; Whitehead, 2007; Wilkerson, Iantaffi, Grey, Bockting, & Rosser, 2014). Online research methods afford the ability to include larger sample sizes (Comley & Beaumont, 2011) from a larger geographical area while reducing the need for transportation (Comley & Beaumont, 2011; Horrell et al., 2015; Im & Chee, 2006; Wilkerson et al., 2014). They allow for discussion of sensitive or personal issues that may be difficult to discuss in face-to-face contexts (Castanos & Piercy, 2010; Horrell et al., 2015; Im & Chee, 2006). Comley and Beaumont (2011) argue that collecting qualitative data online reduces inhibitions due to anonymity, leading to more openness from participants. They also argue that online research methods reduce the likelihood of domination by one particular participant, and that other participants are less likely to be influenced by the comments of others. Online data collection enables participants to respond at their convenience, which allows people time to consider their responses (Im & Chee, 2006; Horrell et al., 2015; O'Connor, Madge, Shaw, & Wellens, 2008). Furthermore, study participants can type their own comments, as well as respond to the comments of other participants. Participants can incorporate art work, photography, and audio recordings in online contexts as well (Comley & Beaumont, 2011; Wilkerson et al., 2014).

Wakeford and Cohen (2008) argued that blogging holds significant possibilities for qualitative research. A blog is a frequently updated online diary where people record activities, beliefs, and perspectives in dated entries. A blog can have a single author or multiple authors and can include textual, audio, and visual information, along with opportunities for others to comment (Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2008; Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). Blogging allows for people to participate whenever or wherever they like, which can facilitate immediate, reliable responses, particularly if participants choose to blog during or immediately following a particular experience (Comley & Beaumont, 2011). When participants have the opportunity to comment on each other's posts, they can share their experiences and opinions, leading to rich data (Castanos & Piercy, 2010).

Nimrod (2010, 2011, 2012, 2014) found existing online senior communities beneficial for participants and a valuable tool for understanding older adults' leisure. Leisure research has yet, however, to explore online communities as a means of collecting data proactively. O'Connor et al. (2008) noted that using a blog as a forum for data collection holds possibilities for lively discussion in ways that face-to-face interviews may not. We hoped that multi-author blogging, in which participants would share their thoughts and experiences regarding leisure and retirement and interact with each other by reading and commenting on each others' posts, would result in a community of baby boomers gathering online to discuss issues and concerns as well as opportunities afforded during the transition to retirement.

Methods

In order to collect qualitative online data, we opted to use a blog as it provides a "…straightforward interface for publishing multimedia content on the Internet and [has] acquired the reputation for being more interactive than the average web page, and for being able to generate a community of interlocutors" (Wakeford & Cohen, 2008, p. 307). We used a multi-author blog with posts from several authors. While most blogs have a single author and the opportunity for readers to comment on his or her posts, a multi-author blog (or group blog) allows all members of a group to post to the blog and comment on the posts of others, thus facilitating a more interactive type of communication (Hearst & Dumais, 2009; Nardi et al., 2004). Following completion of online data collection, we invited participants to attend a focus group to discuss their experiences with the blog. Below, we describe our participants and participant recruitment, the website developed for data collection, data collection through focus groups, and data management and analysis.

Participants

Participants were recruited within a Canadian prairie city, through email, online classified ads, and recruitment posters. We sent emails, via mailing lists with the assistance of gatekeepers, to employees of large organizations in the city, describing the research and inviting any interested volunteers to contact us. We also posted an advertisement on two local classified websites briefly describing the research and providing contact information for potential participants. Finally, we placed posters advertising the study around the city at various community leisure centers with our contact information. To be included in this research, participants were required to be baby boomers aged 50 to 65 who had recently retired or were planning to retire within the next five years. All participants contacted us by email or telephone. We recorded their contact information and then arranged a face-to-face meeting with each participant to describe the study in more detail, create an account for each participant to use the blog, and provide an orientation to using the blog. At this meeting we also collected informed consent, using a written consent form approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Regina. Informed consent covered participation in all three sessions of the blog. Participants received the list of guiding questions and an instruction booklet comprised of information about how to log on to, post, and add comments to the blog. Each participant was given a unique participant number to maintain confidentiality, and some participants selected a screen name to use while posting on the blog. Participants were requested to post on the blog at least seven times in each two-week blogging period. Participants who did not post about seven times were excluded from subsequent blogging sessions.

While 33 participants initially contacted us to participate in the study, 25 participants remained in the study for the duration of three data collection periods. The remaining eight participants did not post on the blog as required during the first session of data collection and were no longer eligible to participate. They did not provide us with an explanation for their lack of participation in the study.

Participants blogged in two separate groups. Our initial recruitment efforts yielded 12 participants between the ages of 60 and 65, who were placed in the first group of bloggers. As we were interested in a larger sample, we increased our age range to 50 to 65 for recruitment and reposted our advertisements, posters, and emails. This resulted in an additional 21 participants who were placed in the second group of bloggers. One of these volunteers was 47 years old, but asked to be allowed to participate because she was planning for her upcoming early retirement. Because the goal of the research was to study people who were nearing retirement or recently retired, after discussion as a research team we chose to allow her to participate.

Although we initially recruited 12 individuals who provided informed consent in group 1, 8 remained in the study for all three sessions. This included six women and two men ranging in age from 60 to 65. Income ranged from less than \$30,000/year to more than \$90,000/year. Education level ranged from high school (n = 3), bachelor's degree (n = 4), master's degree (n =

1) and PhD (n = 1). Careers included retail, trades, government employment, human resources, and academia. Four were retired and four were still in the workforce.

Twenty-one participants were initially recruited and provided informed consent in group 2, and 17 engaged in all three sessions of data collection. Group 2 participants ranged in age from 47 to 65. Fourteen participants were women and three were men. Income ranged from less than $30,000/year to more than $90,000/year. Education ranged from high school (n = 3), college diploma (n = 8) to a bachelor's degree (n = 6). Careers included social work, health care (e.g., registered nurse, licensed practical nurse), sales, office administration, and industrial mechanic. Eight were retired and nine were still in the workforce.

The Blog

With the help of a professional web developer, we created a secure blog using wordpress.org to collect data from participants regarding their transition to retirement. Our website included a home page, with a variety of photos of leisure activities, a place to log in, and information about the study and researchers. Once logged in, participants and researchers could view blog posts, create their own posts, and comment on already existing posts. The participants were asked to post for three, 2-week sessions at various times over the course of a year (see Table 1 for a timeline). Participants received honoraria of $50, $75, and $100 cash for participating in the first, second, and third session, respectively. A list of guiding questions was posted on the blog and provided to participants in advance for their consideration when writing on the blog, but participants were not restricted to these questions and often discussed topics beyond those posed by the researchers. Examples of the guiding questions include: Can you tell us about your experiences with retirement? What did you do with your free time today? Are any of these activities new? Why did you choose these activities? What did these activities mean to you? How has your leisure impacted your retirement? Researchers posted on the blog at the beginning of each session, at the halfway point, and at the end of each session. Occasionally, researchers posted additional questions or further prompts on the blog, but the vast majority of posts were generated by the participants.

Table 1

Timeline of Data Collection

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3
Group 1	October, 2013	February, 2014	June, 2014
Group 2	January, 2014	April, 2014	July, 2014

Throughout the process, the researchers monitored the blog carefully to ensure that blog entries were posted correctly to the blog and to ensure no inappropriate posts or comments were made, although we did not review what types of posts were or were not appropriate for the blog prior to data collection. We logged on approximately every two hours between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m. to read all posts and comments that had been added in that time frame. When necessary, we made adjustments to the settings of posts so that they would appear on the blog, but otherwise did not edit or alter the blog posts or comments in any way.

Blog security was of utmost importance throughout the data collection process. As such, the blog was not visible to people who were not part of the study; only researchers and participants had access to the blog. Each participant either selected or was assigned a participant number or screen name that could not be used to identify him or her and an account was created under the number or screen name. Each participant selected a password in order to log on to the website. Logging on was required in order to view the blog as well as create a new post or add a comment to a previous post.

Over the course of the project, 339 posts and 309 comments were published on the blog. This included 16 posts and 27 comments written by the researchers (see Table 2 for more information regarding the number of participant posts and comments). Common topics included, but were not limited to, physical activity and healthy lifestyle, use of time, leisure interests, community resources, caring for family members, downsizing, and finances.

Table 2

Blog Posts and Comments Per Session

	Group 1			Group 2		
	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3
Posts	31	19	22	88	75	72
Comments	44	32	37	47	44	46
Mean posts/participant	2.3	2.37	2.75	4.2	4.4	4.2
Mean comments/participant	3.7	4	4.6	2.2	2.6	2.7
Range posts	0-7	0-4	1-7	1-10	1-8	0-8
Range comments	2-17	0-14	1-12	0-8	0-9	0-8

As researchers, this was our first time conducting online research. As such, regular debriefing meetings throughout data collection and analysis occurred via online video conferencing. Notes were maintained in these meetings by each of the researchers. We also shared information and reflections on the process via email and instant messaging in order to systematically document our experiences and what we learned from the research process.

Focus Groups

Following data collection and preliminary analysis of the blog posts/comments of all six blog posting sessions, we conducted five face-to-face focus groups with participants and one individual interview with a participant who selected a focus group date and time that no other participants were available to attend. The purpose of the focus groups was to share preliminary findings with our participants and gather their feedback on our interpretations. We also used the focus groups as an opportunity to discuss emerging themes more fully. Additionally, focus groups provided an opportunity to gather information on the experience of using the blog, including opportunities and limitations to collecting data online in this manner from the perspectives of the participants. There were between three and five participants in each focus group, for a total of 17 focus group participants. The remaining eight participants were either unable to attend the focus group due to schedule conflicts or did not respond to our invitations to join a focus group. Focus groups ranged from 30 to 80 minutes in length. Participants completed informed consent forms and confidentiality forms prior to the start of each focus group/interview session. Participants were not required to attend a focus group in order to be part of the study. Furthermore, as participants selected or were assigned a screen name or participant number for the multi-author blog, they were not required to reveal their screen name in order to maintain confidentiality. Focus groups and the interview were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Management and Data Analysis

Upon the conclusion of each blogging session, we copied and pasted each blog post and its associated comments into a word document. Each blogging document was then hand coded independently and discussed collectively by the first three authors. Blog post documents were analyzed upon completion of each blogging session. This allowed us to present our initial findings to participants within the focus groups/interview and design our questions to gain more information about the themes emerging in the blog posts. Focus group/interview transcripts were analyzed once all focus groups and the interview were complete.

All data, including blog posts and comments, researchers' notes, and focus group and interview transcripts, were analyzed following Charmaz's (2006) flexible guidelines for grounded theory. Initial, focused, and theoretical coding were utilized (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Holton, 2004). In the initial coding, data were analyzed using line-by-line coding and constant comparison. We then engaged in focused coding to synthesize, explain, and categorize larger segments of data. In theoretical coding, we identified further relationships between categories emerging from the data. Data were read multiple times and codes were noted in the margins of the documents (e.g., all posts from group 1, session 1 were analyzed in one document). Constant comparison occurred throughout the process. The team met regularly to discuss emerging codes, themes, and definitions. For the purposes of this manuscript, we focused specifically on data related to the process of blogging that emerged mostly, but not exclusively, from the focus groups and researcher notes.

Results and Discussion

Since our focus here is methodological, a detailed discussion of the findings regarding the transition to retirement is beyond the scope of this article. We were able to gain insight into the participants' experiences with blogging and their suggestions for future online data collection. However, we faced challenges negotiating our own roles as researchers within the blog and managing the blog on a day-to-day basis. Finally, we explored both challenges and benefits emerging specifically from the process of online data collection. As researchers, we learned a great deal about the opportunities and concerns with developing a multi-author blog for research purposes.

Participants' Experiences

As we evaluated the benefits and challenges of online data collection for use with baby boomers, we found it particularly important to understand the participants' experiences with blogging and to document their suggestions for future research. The focus group data allowed us to better understand how the participants experienced using the blog. First, most participants expressed that they enjoyed participating in the blog saying "I looked forward to it," "It became a part of my day," and "I couldn't believe I was blogging (laughing)…I felt so cool!" They found it fun to share their stories and read about the experiences of others. One man in Group 1 posted "I am enjoying this blog tremendously. I feel that I know some of the bloggers and can relate to what is being discussed. Have a great weekend, everyone." Despite the indications that some participants were not as invested in the project (e.g., providing only the required seven posts/comments, writing short, general posts), many said that they followed the blog actively. In fact, during the focus groups, one participant explained that even while her group was not actively blogging, she read the discussion of the other group due to her genuine interest in the topics.

For those participants who were still working, the blog provided them an opportunity to ask questions and garner advice from those who had already retired. For example, one woman in Group 2 posted:

> I think its going to be intersting (sic) when I retire to have more time, work certainly fills a lot of that right now. I am finding my weekends too short to do other things I'm intersted in (sic)
>
> Did anyone ease into retirement, i.e. work shorter work weeks? Anyone thinking about this appraoch (sic)? If so how did that work for you?

For many participants, the blog provided an opportunity to share information related to a variety of topics including travel, finances, family relationships, and the daily reality of retirement. For example, a focus group participant noted that:

> I really liked seeing how other people's lives were progressing and knowing, you know, there would be people that would post, oh you know…we're either busy with helping the kids out or helping the parents out. Like feeling as though you're part of a community that's…that's going through the same as you are. Like my…my in-laws were in the process of moving and they're 85 and decrepit…and it was just a gong show helping them (laughing) and then you know the kids have issues and so on and just knowing that you have others out there you could read and you're like, oh, yah, they're having the same issues we are, that kind of thing.

Participants mentioned that if they had been involved with retirement planning workshops in the past, they usually focused on financial planning and participants appreciated the opportunity to discuss leisure and daily life through the blog. They discussed their perspectives on the general experience of retirement such as the constraint of caregiving for family members with medical needs or feeling freer to "be the boss" of their own time. Participants also shared specific leisure-related information and advice such as travel tips or events going on at the public library. For example, during a focus group, one participant commented that through the blog she learned about opportunities for retirees in the community that she was not previously aware of: "Different suggestions out there…for example, I didn't know that the university offered… classes for people that are retired…I had no idea…I thought, I can do that."

Participants also appreciated the process of blogging itself as it provided an opportunity to learn something new and improve their computer literacy: "Yah, I think the blog has helped me be more comfortable like with Facebook…I'm not afraid of it. Like I was terrified of it before the blog…one of my kids Skypes me. Oh my god, I can Skype! (laughing)…so, that's what the blog did for me." Several participants expressed apprehension when they initially met with the research assistant for their tutorial on using the blog and some struggled during the first session to overcome technological challenges. As the study progressed, though, participants seemed to become more comfortable using the program. After the first session participants did not create posts or comments to the blog related to technical problems and requests for technical help became increasingly less frequent.

In the focus groups, however, some participants suggested that changes could be made to better support those with less online experience prior to the study. For some participants, the dashboard view of a standard blog was a bit intimidating and they suggested that a format similar to ones they might have experience with such as Facebook® or LinkedIn® might help some people feel more comfortable. Similarly, participants mentioned that they would have preferred to get an email message when someone commented on one of their posts or posted on a topic of interest to them:

> I subscribed to LinkedIn, you know, and I can go in …and when there's a response, that pops up in my main email … because you've ticked off the little box that says you want to see when people are making comments to an area that you're interested in, right? So…I don't know whether that's a possibility or not but…

One final element that was of importance to some participants was related to confidentiality. On one hand, participating in a research project online can increase a sense of anonymity and allow participants to feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics (Castanos & Piercy, 2010; Comley & Beaumont, 2011). On the other hand, some participants particularly wanted to ensure that the blog was confidential and that only authorized people would be able to view their posts. For instance, at one point, a participant in Group 2 received an automated email and contacted the first author expressing concerns that other members of the blog might know her identity. It was, therefore, important to ensure that participants understood that the blog was confidential and we worked with the web developer to manage any automatic emails sent to participants. Morison et al. (2015) noted that ethical considerations may be challenging in online research, and consideration of how anonymity will be ensured is vital.

Researchers' Roles

Some researchers have begun to establish the value of analyzing existing user-generated online content to explore the leisure of older adults (e.g., Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2015; Nimrod, 2011; Nimrod, 2012). One unique element of this study, however, was that it was designed to be collected and monitored in real time with specific guiding questions. This approach brought with it inherent strengths and weaknesses. First and foremost was trying to find a balance between guiding the discussion to address the guiding questions posted on the blog and allowing the discussion to emerge naturally. We found that in comparison to in-person focus groups, participants seemed less likely to or interested in responding to involvement from researchers. Utilizing our own names rather than anonymous screen names, we occasionally posted probing type questions in response to posts. In some cases the participants responded, but in several instances, they did not. For example, following a participant's discussion of travel since retirement, a researcher posted, "Your European trip sounds interesting, where did you travel to…?", but received no response to her probes. This lack of response is in keeping with reports from other online qualitative researchers. Horrell et al. (2015) noted that their participants occasionally chose to ignore questions from the researchers in order to focus on what they found interesting rather than what the researcher asked. However, Castanos and Piercy (2010) suggested that researchers consider their level engagement with the participants, as requests for more information or additional probing questions may lead to richer responses. Some of our participants noted during the focus groups that increased involvement from the researchers would have been beneficial. For example, one participant said more "guidance" of the discussion from the researchers would have sparked more ideas for new posts. Some participants suggested having a question of the day, while others suggested more "feedback" from the researchers would have confirmed whether or not they were "on the right track."

Using a multi-author blog as a method of data collection, in a way, combined an asynchronous focus group with a netnography (e.g., Kozinets, 2015; Nimrod, 2011). Because this method was relatively new, a learning process was required for the researchers as well as the participants. As researchers, we found it helpful to meet regularly with each other (whether in-person, over the phone, or online) to discuss potential strategies, for example, how often we should ask follow up questions or whether additional guiding questions would be helpful to prompt participants. In order to allow participants to feel freedom within the blog we tended to err on the side of letting the discussions emerge naturally which could lead to a lack of focus on the topics of leisure and retirement. For example, for a handful of participants in the second group of bloggers, a discussion of physically active leisure lead to sharing recipes and weight loss tips. Although these discussions did not provide insights directly related to the research questions we did not attempt to re-direct them because it provided an opportunity to build rapport and a sense of community among bloggers.

Additionally, a challenge we experienced as researchers was the logistical process of managing the blog. While we hired a web developer for the basic set-up and management of the blog there were some minor day-to-day things that we had to take care of that required a learning process, such as creating and managing participant accounts, monitoring posts and comments, and ensuring posts appeared on the blog. Despite all project researchers having some prior experience with blogging and/or social media, we were occasionally challenged by the technical process of changing or updating aspects of the blog. For example, because we had two different groups using the blog intermittently, we had to switch the main discussion thread between each session of data collection. The web-developer had provided us with a guide that included step-by-step instructions on how to do this, but it was nevertheless a challenging process until we became more comfortable using the WordPress functions.

In addition, one of the most important aspects of monitoring the blog was to compensate for errors from participants in posting to the blog. For example, the blog set-up that we used required participants to tick a particular box in order for it to show up as part of the thread. Participants often forgot to tick the appropriate box and, if we did not monitor frequently, a post might remain unseen by other bloggers for several hours (e.g., overnight).

We found that many participants tended to view the blog and post in the evening hours; therefore, monitoring the blog and ensuring that all posts could be seen was particularly important during these times. As we collected data in two-week periods, we found it ideal to assign each day to a researcher in advance to ensure someone would be able to monitor the blog frequently throughout each day. We also monitored for appropriateness of posts. On rare occasions, participants posted about something that was questionable in terms of being appropriate, and in each case, the person monitoring brought the post to the attention of the research team. For example, one participant posted a story of a holiday experience with family and made disparaging comments about some of her relatives. As a team we discussed the potential that the level of negativity in the post might be uncomfortable for other participants. In each case we determined that the post should not be deleted as this would reduce the sense of freedom among the bloggers and because the post was not inappropriate enough to take action. Interestingly, in the case of the post about the holiday experience, the participants seemed to self-manage by generating a discussion about navigating family relationships and family leisure activities.

Conversely, collecting data online allowed for several benefits to us as a research team. Because the data collection was online and could be easily accessed, we were able to monitor the blog and make adjustments frequently without too much disruption to other work. Furthermore, we were able to collect data from whatever geographic location was convenient to us. Among the four researchers working on the project, we resided in three different countries and three different time zones, and yet were all able to be actively involved in the data collection and analysis process. By arranging a schedule, developing a routine, and utilizing online communication technology, we were able to increase comfort and involvement for all.

Benefits and Challenges for the Data Collection

In terms of the data collection, we found that the online process led to some unique benefits and challenges. First, the online medium eliminated a lot of the logistical challenges often associated with arranging in-person focus groups. As noted by Comley and Beaumont (2011), collecting qualitative data via blog posts enables participants to be involved from any location and at a time that suited their schedules. Some participants even posted while traveling. During the first session, one participant had to relocate unexpectedly to care for a daughter with health problems. Rather than having to withdraw from the study, he was able to share his daily experiences from a distance. Another logistical benefit was that no transcription was required, which reduced the cost and time delay that would be typically associated with in-person data collection (see Holmes, 2009; Horrell et al., 2015; Wilkerson et al., 2014). This may also lead to a reduction in error that can occur in the transcription process (Holmes, 2009). Overall, the ease of access allowed us to conduct a qualitative study with a larger sample size in a way that was time and cost effective and allowed participants who might typically have time or transportation constraints to participate. This was particularly valuable for those in our sample who were still working.

In some ways, the online data collection process was also beneficial for the quality of the data. For some participants, the fact that the blog felt anonymous was an important element, which allowed them to share ideas and insights more openly (see also Comley & Beaumont, 2011; Horrell et al., 2015). For instance, one participant commented, "it was good in a way [that participants were anonymous] because you're braver to just post whatever you're feeling at the time." Another participant remarked, "the blogging part was good because you're kind of anonymous…And so you might share a little more." Similarly, the online process allowed participants comfort to express themselves because they had time to consider and compose their thoughts before posting (although this may also be considered a disadvantage as data may be less authentic). One participant commented,

> It was nice just putting [pause] fingers to keyboard, putting your thoughts down. It was easy to edit and… stuff. Like you didn't…you had a chance to… read it before it posted and that's a good thing too. You know, so you can have second thoughts on it and…and re-read it and stuff.

While monitoring the blog, we often noticed participants taking an hour or more to compose a post. We cannot know if they were actively writing for this amount of time (or perhaps paused while composing to do something else), but it does suggest that participants took advantage of the lack of time constraint.

In some ways, online data collection might mitigate challenges that exist in focus groups. For example, in a face-to-face focus group, participants may not have the time they need to thoughtfully consider a particular topic and less outgoing participants may become over-shadowed by more gregarious ones (Krueger & Casey, 2014). In general, we noticed that focus group discussions were similar to the online discussions, although positive perspectives of work, the need to balance routine with flexibility in retirement, and intergenerational issues were explored more fully in the focus groups. The online process, however, allowed participants to engage in the blog in whatever way they felt comfortable. For example, some participants created mostly new posts, while other participants preferred to mainly comment on the posts of others. Similarly, without the time constraints of a traditional focus group, participants were able to have more off-topic discussions (such as the sharing of recipes) without re-direct from a moderator, thus facilitating rapport-building among participants. Another challenge of face-to-face focus groups is that that they often must be kept small to allow for more depth of discussion and to allow each participant time to engage. However, with an asynchronous blog, we were able to have larger groups without reducing the ability of each participant to contribute (Im & Chee, 2006). Lastly, a common criticism of focus groups is that if participants feel put on the spot, they may simply make up answers rather than admit they do not know or cannot remember (Krueger & Casey, 2014). In a blog, however, individual participants might feel less pressure to respond to specific questions when they do not have an answer and have time to consider their responses when they do. While we provided guiding questions, participants selected which questions they addressed and which they did not, suggesting that if they did not have an answer for a particular question, they simply did not write a post about that question.

Finally, the online process was particularly valuable because it allowed us to track participants over time in an experiential way, which is rarely done with qualitative methods due to limitations of researchers' time and funding and due to the burden for participants. Some researchers have attempted to do so, but have generally had to use relatively small time spans and/or extremely small samples due to time and cost constraints (e.g., Kluge, Grant, Friend, & Glick, 2010). In this study, however, we were able to listen to a large group of participants' experiences in real time across three different seasons, which led to valuable insight. For example, during the first session some participants discussed plans related to trying new activities, dealing with winter (e.g., through travel), volunteering, or connecting with old friends. Then during the second or third sessions we were able to learn about whether and how participants had carried out their plans. Similarly, some participants retired at some point during the data collection process and we were able to document their thoughts prior to retirement as well as after. For example, one participant in Group 1 started the first session by posting ":) Hi. I am not yet retired but will be officially in December…I find myself being on a bit of a 'roller coaster' these days. At times excited and looking forward to retirement, and then scared and unsure." Throughout the session she described activities she wanted to do and anxiety about how she would structure her time in a meaningful way. In the third session she posted:

> I find myself still in a transition phase. It's six months [in retirement] now and I am still talking about doing things but not adjusting to do them yet! LOL Hopefully I'll be able to bring my talk & doing more in line! :) I'm thinking that this is like starting a new job; it usually takes a year or so to feel totally comfortable and competent in new jobs so I'm going to try and be kind to myself and give myself a whole year to adjust to retirement. :)

The logistics of the blog also lead to some challenges for data collection. First, for participants who were less comfortable using computers, learning to use the blog took time. For several participants, their first post resembled the following post of a man in Group 1:

> This is my first 'tentative' post, I'm new to this blog. I encountered some technical difficulties, so I was delayed in getting here…
>
> I hope to get up to speed either tonight or tomorrow; at that time I'll post my first 'real' entry, and hopefully I'll be able to say something of substance!
>
> It seems to make a difference, what web browser, and what computer, I use…

Despite tutorials and resources, some participants were uncomfortable posting and also uncomfortable asking for help. Another challenge was the participants' motivation for doing the study.

We did provide incentives to recruit participants and to reduce attrition. Although many enjoyed participating and were less concerned about the honorarium, a few seemed more heavily interested in the honorarium (e.g., inquiring when it would arrive) and these participants were more likely to participate in a way that only met the minimum requirements and provided little insight. For example, some participants would list the activities they had engaged in on a particular day without providing additional insight into the meaning of those activities or the role of the activities within the transition to retirement. One man in Group 2 posted: "I start my holidays yesterday and I enjoyed a game of golf. There was a nice breeze to keep the mosquitoes at bay. We also enjoyed a camp fire, nothing better the sitting around a camp fire in the evening and roasting hotdogs and marshmallows." Finally, the minimal face-to-face contact with researchers and other participants may have reduced the level of rapport built with participants. For example, one participant remarked, "but it's kind of hard to have an intimate conversation with people you don't even know. Like to me, they're strangers." Indeed, Comley and Beaumont (2011) identified physical isolation as a drawback of using a blog to generate qualitative data, noting that the researcher is "…reliant on them being engaged and committed to blogging on an ongoing basis over a number of days" (p. 30). Additionally, researchers note that with online research, facial expressions and body language, which add to the richness and credibility of qualitative data, are lost in online qualitative research (Beddows, 2008; Im & Chee, 2006). We were unable to incorporate these elements into the data analysis as we could not determine whether participants physically expressed feelings of happiness, joy, anger, fear, confusion, or sadness when posting. Possibly this is more of an issue with the Baby Boomer generation than younger adults, as communicating online is second nature to them.

Another important element of conducting this type of research was the process of building an online community. Nimrod (2014) has discussed the many benefits that come from participating in an online seniors' community including enjoyment, intellectual stimulations, and social support as well as benefits to their offline leisure and social lives. The development of not just a blog, but an online community was a particular challenge for data collection in this study because participants consisted of older adults who had volunteered to participate in a research study rather than older adults who had sought out participation in an online community based on shared interests or a strong desire to interact with others online.

We considered the process of community building as we noticed differences between the first group and the second group. Group 1 was smaller and seemed to develop a stronger rapport than Group 2, with longer comments, more dialogue between participants and deeper discussion of issues. Although, as presented in Table 2, participants in both groups left similar numbers of total messages, participants in Group 2 tended to create more new posts and participants in Group 1 tended to provide more comments to the posts of others. Participants in Group 1 each chose a fun screen name to replace the participant number they were assigned, while members of Group 2 all posted under their participant number. Group 2 was larger with more surface-level content such as a list of activities participated in that day, whereas Group 1 created longer discussion threads. These findings might suggest that smaller groups encourage more interaction between participants, but further research is needed to confirm this suggestion.

An important element of community building was its influence on the level of engagement of participants. For example, Im and Chee (2006) noted that many participants in their online study regarding cancer pain posted one or two lines, thus discouraging other participants from engaging in the research. Horrell et al. (2015) similarly found that their online qualitative research participants engaged in "monologue posting" (p. 264), or sharing one's perspective without interacting with other participants, rather than discussion and interaction, which impacted development of a community. It has been noted that qualitative online research tends to be more useful for "…breadth of insight, but can sometimes lack depth" (Comley & Beaumont, 2011, p. 28).

Our analysis revealed that participants in the group with a stronger sense of community were more likely to be self-reflective and commented on the posts of others more frequently. For example:

> Original post: It is still hard some days not to think of "me time" as being selfish but if I don't do art or pursue other interests now I never will! Has anyone else struggled with finding balance of how to fight thoughts of selfishness?
>
> Comment 1: Well not exactly selfishness but guilt about not using my time wisely. At first I thought I was wasting time if I wasn't doing something with a definite end in mind…now I am much more up to taking the time for people now than I was before retirement. Maybe it's called 'having a life.'
>
> Original poster: I like that!...calling it 'having a life' one I will call my own! Thanks

As time progressed and both groups developed an increasing sense of community, they tended to develop relationships, which led to richer data. As evidenced in the above exchange, as participants began to get to know one another they would often raise a concern or question about retirement and others would respond with their own perspectives.

During the focus group, participants addressed several reasons why they had not engaged in more dialogue with their fellow bloggers. Some participants found it too time consuming to read through all the posts and provide comments. During one focus group, a female participant noted:

> I didn't always comment on everybody else but I liked reading, you know, and just seeing…like there wasn't always time to enter into lots of back and forth but it was like, oh yah, that…yah, I can relate to that.

Others reported feelings of discomfort in how others might perceive their comments: "I don't want to comment too much because I don't know how the other parties will take it…my comments….whether I'll offend them. People might interpret my comments in a negative way".

Recommendations

Overall, we felt that collecting data from older adults through an online blog provided a fruitful way to better understand their retirement experiences despite challenges that our participants and we as researchers faced. Based on our experiences with this study, we have developed several recommendations for other leisure researchers who plan to collect online qualitative data with older adults:

1. Clarify for the research team and the participants what type of involvement researchers will have in the blog or forum. While the natural development of an online community is ideal, it cannot be escaped that the experience will be influenced by the fact that participants know they are participating in a research study. While they should be encouraged to express honest perspectives, responding to blog posts with comments of encouragement (e.g.,

“Wow, that is an interesting point!”) may help to ease participants’ concerns as to whether they are “on the right track” in terms of addressing the research questions.

2. As a research team, determine in advance what type of posts (if any) will be considered inappropriate and what action might be taken. Then clearly convey the boundaries to participants. Depending on the type of study or topic, it may be appropriate to involve participants in this process. For example, if conducting research with older adults who have chronic illness, to what degree would participants be allowed to make medical suggestions for one another? Research ethics must be considered during this process.
3. As the development of a sense of community among the group led to richer data, it is beneficial to begin data collection at least a few weeks prior to the later life transition or time period of interest. This would also allow for a period of time in which those older adults who are less familiar with online communication to become more comfortable.
4. Additional ways of building rapport amongst older adults who may feel less comfortable engaging with each other online to encourage a sense of community could include grouping older adults based on interests, creating several smaller groups (e.g., five to seven participants) of bloggers rather than one or two large groups, and having participants “introduce” themselves on the blog prior to the start of data collection in order to create a sense of belonging among participants.
5. Recognize that some participants tend to be “lurkers” (i.e., someone who reads the blog posts, but does not contribute to it [Horrell et al., 2015]) and may need alternative means of expression (e.g., invitations to participate through individual interviews or emails) to express themselves. Reminder emails sent to individuals who are not posting may serve to encourage participation, and additional support from researchers (e.g., following up on questions about the technology, reassurance regarding privacy and confidentiality, may also be useful). Similarly, some participants may agree with a particular post or comment but not bother to respond. For these types of case, it would be useful for the blog to have an “upvote” or “like” function similar to those used by Reddit® or Facebook® to allow participants to indicate their agreement even if they do not have additional information to add.
6. Provide in-person tutorials for any older adults who are not strongly proficient in using the type of program being used (particularly for initial account set up) and be prepared to provide on-going technical support.
7. During recruitment, emphasize the benefits of participation in the study for the older adults specifically, such as having fun, gaining retirement information, being part of an online community and improved computer literacy (e.g., learning how to use a particular program or feeling more comfortable using social media). For example, recruitment posters and letters of invitation could include a list of these benefits to encourage participation in the study. This may help with recruiting more participants and also help to recruit participants who are engaged in the blogging process and who will provide richer data that includes reflection on meanings of retirement and leisure rather than lists of leisure activities.
8. Rather than having only one thread, it might help if the blog has several threads related to various topics pertinent to later life (e.g., health concerns, finances, downsizing, caregiving, travel). This can help in building community as people come together around similar interests and might also help participants to keep up with the blog by reducing the amount of material they will need to read and allow them to focus on topics of interest or relevance to them.

9. To facilitate interaction among participants, another valuable function would be one that sends participants an email when another participant has commented on their post. This was of particular interest to retirees in this study because many did not log on to the internet as regularly as when they were working.
10. Unless members of the team are extremely experienced in web design, hire a professional to develop and manage the website. Also, be sure that you have the necessary resources and skills to do some of the managing yourself. Some aspects of managing the blog may be time sensitive and it might be important for the research team to have the access to make changes as necessary. In cases such as these, we found the manual provided by the web developer immensely helpful.
11. Consider utilizing a survey comprised of items associated with computer literacy, ownership, access, social media habits, and demographics to aid in the mapping and understanding of computer usage by the older adults who are participating in the research. This may provide initial answers relating to why some may not blog often and open up further questioning in the focus groups.
12. Although this study provides valuable practical insights into conducting online qualitative research with baby boomers, additional research is needed to understand the best approaches to designing qualitative online research into older adults' leisure. Specifically, future work should explore differences related to age, gender and other demographic factors.

These recommendations contribute insight to the existing best practices related to online qualitative research methods by focusing specifically on older adults' leisure during a life transition. Most past research using online qualitative methods has looked at younger age groups (e.g., Castanos & Piercy, 2010; Comley & Beaumont, 2011; Nardi et al., 2004). Although some of the recommendations may have value for online qualitative research with any age group (e.g., 2, 5, 10), the rest identify strategies of particular interest for those studying older adults who may have less experience with blogging or social media, less frequent internet use, and lower levels of comfort sharing perspectives online than younger age groups.

Limitations

Some limitations may have impacted this study. First, the dropout rate was high (eight of 33 volunteers did not complete three sessions), and participants who dropped out did not provide an explanation. This may be due to the level of commitment required. Additionally, despite tutorials and resources, some participants were uncomfortable posting and asking for help. Second, we were unable to compare differences between groups due to limited sample size. It is unclear whether differences in participation rates between groups one and two were due to the size of the groups, the broader age range, or other factors. Finally, our focus groups included participants from both groups of bloggers due to scheduling conflicts. Thus, not all focus group participants shared a history with one another, which may have impacted the focus group data.

Conclusion

The data generated through the blog and the focus groups provided insights that extend existing knowledge about using online qualitative data collection to study older adults' leisure. Overall, despite some challenges, collecting qualitative data online provided a valuable means of exploring the leisure of baby boomers. First, it provided a low cost and efficient way to collect a large amount of qualitative data from a relatively large sample with increased logistical convenience for both researchers and participants. Second, it provided an opportunity for participants to improve computer literacy and to participate in blogging as a leisure activity. Online methods may be a tool for reducing some of the challenges McGuire (2000) highlighted as they facilitate the creation of research teams and provide a means of understanding the complexity of leisure and aging. As leisure and aging research advances to respond to McGuire's call for deeper thought, online methods may provide one means of engaging in research that taps into the baby boomer generation's willingness to engage with technology and utilize the Internet. Furthermore, it may provide a platform for gathering data from a generation who are busy balancing a desire to continue on in the workforce along with their leisure pursuits and family commitments to better understand what leisure means as traditional retirement evolves.

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