

Focus Groups in Hospitality Research *Why are they not used in Jordan?*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the reasons for the lack of focus groups in Jordan by conducting a focus group with twenty four Academics from Jordanian Universities. Focus groups are commonly used for academic purposes and taught at colleges and universities. The outcome of focus groups for marketing, especially in the tourism industry, is a beneficial learning tool. Focus groups, however, are rarely used for a number of reasons. This research tool is foreign to university students, and unless they study abroad, they are not exposed to a wide range of research and education tools. There are barriers that exist with focus groups. These barriers include: government and educational funding, cultural limitations, personal expectations, teaching materials and resources. Following this research, the recommendations are to have focus groups implemented in Jordanian school systems and to conduct focus group training sessions, encourage students to use them as a research tool and explain the link between focus groups and the hospitality industry. By limiting curriculums in Jordanian education systems, students will not have the proper knowledge or skills once they graduate to compete with markets outside of Jordan. Recommendations are discussed based on the author's research findings.

Keywords: Focus groups, qualitative research, hospitality industry, Jordan.

Introduction

When conducting research for academic papers, there are many common tools used, including, but not limited to: interviews, focus groups,

literary reviews, surveys and questionnaires. As an initial tool in qualitative research, focus groups can prove to be very valuable. They are a cost efficient way to discover opinions directly from the target audience.

While there are certain costs associated with focus groups, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. At the very least, focus groups should be taught in Jordanian universities in order to give students the tools to succeed in the future, and the option to use them, should they decide to use them. For the purpose of this research, a focus group was conducted with a variety of Jordanian academic professionals. They expressed both their delight and concerns with focus groups, but most importantly, none of the participants had discovered the use of focus groups until they studied abroad.

Focus groups are an ideal way to collect qualitative data from the source. Researchers can ask probing questions to a small group of carefully selected individuals in order to retract information the various academic and business purposes.

In the hotel and tourism industry in Jordan, focus groups could illustrate what is working and what is lacking in the hospitality sector. Ideal candidates for these focus groups would be tourists or people that are well travelled. These individuals could share their travelling experience and what they are looking for when they book a flight, a hotel, and other tourist attraction activities. By sharing their experiences, the researcher could collect valuable information regarding where the Jordanian hospitality industry could improve.

Literature review

There has been a rise of focus groups being used in educational circumstances. In the 1980's there were very few schools in the United States using them, however, in the early 1990's, this changed. As time has progressed, focus groups continue to be used frequently (Jayanthi and Nelson, 2002, Carey and Asbury 2016). Focus groups have various definitions in literature as researchers will often use them for different purposes. A focus group is defined by Krueger and Morgan as being:

'a research tool utilizing small-group interviews to obtain qualitative data, as well as items for questionnaires or surveys'
(O'Sullivan, Rassel, and Berner, 2008: 490)

Focus groups have been used to test prototypes (qualitative research) and has been used for many marketing experiments to determine which product is the best fit for the largest number of consumers (Parasuraman, Grewal, Krishnan, 2007). They are traditionally done face to face with a moderator and participants in a room for a specified period of time, varying from one to two hours (Rezabek, 2000).

They are viewed as:

‘a type of a group interview where a small group of individuals are gathered together for the purpose of discussing one (or sometimes more) topic of interest.’

(Barrows, 2000: 193)

Barrows does not share the reason for the focus group, as they are used for different purposes. They can be conducted for academic purposes (as a learning tool), for marketing (to study ways in which to encourage patrons to visit your restaurant), or professional (how to keep a business’ employees happy and loyal).

Focus groups are also identified as:

‘a group of interacting individuals having some common interest or characteristics, brought together by a moderator, who uses the group and its interaction as a way to gain information about a specific or focused issue.’

(Marczak and Sewell, 2007: 1)

Focus groups are a research technique to assist with academic and professional research. It is a controlled way to gather opinions from individuals on various topics. It is also always best to monitor the focus groups, and, whenever possible, transcribe the dialogue as they can be used for future reference, and even referenced in academic papers. There are advantages and disadvantages to focus groups. Some of the advantages are: a collection of more detailed information and the moderator can clarify questions and answers immediately. Some of the disadvantages are: the need for a skilled coordinator and they are time consuming (Evmorfopoulou, 2007).

Focus groups are often used in professional settings as well to determine appropriate training needs and how employees could potentially become happier in their employment. Happy employees have proven to be the most loyal employees and are, as a result, beneficial to organizations. It is a means to gather feedback on employees’ training needs (McClelland, 1994); but it has only recently has such a technique been used in hospitality establishments (Barrows, 2000). There are two different ways to describe research. There is quantitative research, which is a ‘tool of measurement’ or qualitative which is a ‘tool for understanding and insight.’ Quantitative research normally includes a large number of people while qualitative involves smaller groups of people (Baxter, 2012). There are advantages and disadvantages to both forms of research, however, qualitative research will reflect more specific opinions, while quantitative research will only give researchers a general idea of what the participants thought. For this reason, when conducting qualitative research, it is crucial that the participants selected will be beneficial to the research.

Krueger and Casey (2000: 5) have defined the focus group as a:

‘carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.’

By gathering people together in controlled groups to discuss pre-determined topics, valuable information can be collected.

‘When qualitative data are collected first, the intent is to explore the topic with participants at sites.’

(Creswell, 2003:212)

While some may not agree with the use of focus groups for the collection of data, by exploring topics with participants in these groups, helpful information can be collected. The question is, like with every other form of data collection, what are the advantages and disadvantages of hosting focus groups? Advantages of the focus groups are wide. They can incorporate a large number of people at the same time (Wall, 2001, Carey and Asbury 2016). This is a proven way to efficiently collect a large amount of a variety of information (Krueger, 1994; Gibbs, 1997; Barrows, 2000, Krueger and Casey, 2014, Carey and Asbury 2016). Focus groups are also an efficient way to gather opinions and attitudes from groups of people in a short period of time (Hines, 2000). Focus groups are also most beneficial to the researcher when combined with other methods of data collection (McClelland, 1994; Threlfall, 1999, Krueger and Casey, 2014).

Focus groups have also proven to be extremely efficient because they allow for deeper conversations to commence as opposed to other research tools. By allowing participants to speak freely and discuss specific topics with other people will allow for insight that could not be obtained from pre-determined surveys or interview questions (Masadeh, 2012).

The above noted advantages are all reasons to conduct focus groups; however, there exist certain disadvantages as well. While focus groups can be relatively cost-efficient, and have been referred to as a low cost research tool compared to other options (Dreachslin, 1999; Leitão and Vergueiro, 2000; Wall, 2001, Carey and Asbury 2016) and that they are relatively easy to prepare (Threlfall, 1999, Davies, 2007). The cost issue with focus groups comes about when all aspects of its development are taken into account. There is pre-testing, question development, recruitment and screening processes, the cost of moderators, accommodations for participants, if needed, facility fees, the cost to transcribe the sessions, cost of the facilitator among many other factors.

According to Davies, the total cost can reach approximately \$1000 USD per participant for a one hour focus group in both the United States and Europe (Davies, 2007). Another disadvantage associated with the focus group is that receiving results can be time consuming, slow and overall complicated. To speed up the process, there are costly software programs

that can be purchased by businesses, which can vary in cost but is normally around \$2,000 USD for a full edition (Schmidt, 2001). This cost could be manageable for successful companies; however, it is an outlandish cost for students or new business owners, who are often the market for these companies. A further limitation of focus groups is related to the fact that they are rarely used as a sole method of data collection (McClelland, 1994) owing to their small sample: therefore, such a group may not be representative (Gibbs, 1997; Wall, 2001; Davies, 2007), and its outcomes cannot be generalized to the whole population (Gibbs, 1997; Jinks and Daniels, 1999; Threlfall, 1999; Barrows, 2000). There are a variety of advantages and limitations in focus groups (Evmorfopoulou, 2007). The main advantage of using

‘focus-group discussions during rapid assessment is that they provide in-depth information without requiring full-scale anthropological investigations. The informal group setting is believed to make people feel at ease, encouraging them to express their views freely’

(Khan et al, 1991: 145)

Focus groups are also defined as a session in an

“in-depth discussion in which a small number of people (usually 8-12) from the target population, under the guidance of a facilitator (moderator) discuss topics of importance for a particular study/project. It is basically a qualitative method in which the moderator, with the help of predetermined guidelines, stimulates free discussion among the participants on the subject of inquiry”

(Khan et al, 1991: 145)

There are not always eight to twelve participants in focus groups. There is no definite rule when arranging the size of a focus group: different researchers have noted ranges in size from four (Krueger, 1994; Seggern and Young, 2003; Boddy, 2005), five (Morgan, 1988; Ruyter, 1996) or six (Prince and Davies, 2001) to twelve participants; from six to eight participants (Leitão and Vergueiro, 2000, Evmorfopoulou, 2007); and from seven (Marczak and Sewell, 2007) or eight (Greenbaum, 2003) to ten participants. According to Boddy, groups are most often composed of six or eight participants (Boddy, 2005), although focus groups have been conducted with ten to as many as twenty three participants (Braithwaite et al, 2004), and as many as thirty one in a single focus group (Gloet, 2002). Eight to twelve participants is common practice in the USA (Falco et al, 1998 cited in Prince and Davies, 2001), while five or six is more common in the United Kingdom and other countries (Marketing News, 1995 cited in Prince and Davies, 2001). If Jordan conducted focus groups, they would be more likely

to have five or six participants. The ideal length for a focus group session are normally between 30 minutes to two and a half hours per session (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990).

Focus groups, according to Boddy, are meant to emphasize that a group will discuss a focused topic of interest rather than general topics (Boddy, 2005). The groups vary in size, but Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1990: 137) reported that:

'the size of the group should manifestly be governed by two considerations...it should not be so large as to be unwieldy or to preclude adequate participation by most members nor should it be so small that it fails to provide substantially greater coverage than that of an interview with one individual'

There are many factors to consider when arranging for a focus group, not only the size of the group. One of the most important aspects of the focus group is the moderator. The interviewer (or moderator) should be present to guide the sessions should the participants become confused or begin to discuss items that are off topic. The moderator should not, however, intervene in the participants' responses.

The role of the moderator is also to bring the participants together. Marczak and Sewell describe focus groups as:

'a group of interacting individuals having some common interest or characteristics, brought together by a moderator, who uses the group and its interaction as a way to gain information about a specific or focused issue.'

(Marczak and Sewell, 2007: 1)

Maintaining order and consistency in the focus group sessions is crucial in order to ensure proper data collection. The moderator assists with the consistency of the sessions. In hospitality, focus groups could prove to be a very useful tool. Focus groups are an

'excellent tool to pretest aspects such as menu design, media messages, or proposed new names or logos... Focus groups are popular with hospitality organizations because they are relatively low cost and can be implemented rather quickly. Management can view the discussion process so that they get a real feel for not only what consumers say, but also how they say it... Focus groups can also help generate new product ideas'

(Kandampully, Mok and Sparks, 2001: 151-152)

Focus groups are used by certain professionals as a research method in order to develop data to create questionnaires (Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 1999; Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002; Constantine and Bourne, 2005; Kim et al, 2005). This is a common approach in businesses

according to much of the literature (see, for example, Lankshear, 1993; Hoppe et al, 1995; Laflin and Hyatt, 1999; Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 1999; Mcneill, Sanders and Civile, 2000; Trocki, 2000; Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002; Prince and Davies, 2003; Constantine and Bourne, 2005; Kim et al, 2005; Deshpande, 2007; Tracey and Barham, 2007). The focus groups in these situations are meant to explore the possibility of appropriate questions for the use in questionnaires and surveys in the future. These focus groups can produce very successful results, especially in situations where there is an absence of research on specific topics or when the topic has been minimally researched (Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002) and can be helpful in lucidly defining the survey items (Morgan, 1997). This approach is the most common type of focus group, ahead of ‘clinical focus groups’ and ‘phenomenological interaction-centered focus groups’ (Hines, 2000: 10).

Questions asked during a focus group should be in order from broad or general to narrow or specific, as recommended by Eliot & Associates (2007):

- *Engagement questions*: begin the session with a question or two that put the participants at ease and create a comfortable environment open to participation.
- *Exploration questions*: penetrating, well-constructed group members’ questions that get to the heart of the discussion.
- *Exit questions*: ask if there is anything more or any further comments regarding the topic, and check if we had missed anything.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, twenty four Academics from a variety of Jordanian Universities have been selected from across the country. There were a total of four focus groups conducted in four meeting rooms. Three of the meeting rooms were in a hotel while the last was at a University. The Researcher has embraced the acknowledgment in Prince and Davies’ (2001) research that ‘small-sized’ groups of four to six will be most productive since they encourage members to partake in the discussion. While some researchers recommend larger focus groups, a small group will likely make participants feel more at ease.

As a result, a considerable amount of different ideas will likely be generated on the discussion topic within the specified time constraints. These small groups of participants will feel more comfortable contributing to the discussion compared to larger groups of people. When participants feel overwhelmed, they will likely not feel as relaxed, and, as a result, will not share opinions as freely as those who are at ease. The six participants in the focus groups were not chosen at random. The Researcher chose six

academics for each focus group, who all have PhD's. The sample research illustrates that there is a general consensus among researchers through previous focus group reviews that the optimal number for a focus group is approximately six people. There is some research that recommends larger groups (from eight to twelve participants), but the average recommendation is six participants per focus group. There are also varying factors when selecting the number and type of participant (e.g. gender, age, profession, education level, etc.). The type of product that is being examined would require a certain type of market, and the focus group should reflect this data. For example, if the focus group is intended to collect information on European sports on television, then the major market group will likely be men. If they are looking to recruit more women to watch European sports on television, then the company may select more females for the focus group to see what can be changed in order to intrigue the female audience.

All interviews were captured on tape and transcribed verbatim with permission secured from all interviewees and participants. The informants requested that their names, the names of their employers and the names of their universities be kept anonymous. The Researcher complied with their request without questioning the reason as keeping personal information confidential is important during focus groups in order to respect the participants' privacy. For this reason, the data collected does not reference any specific names or locations. It is important to note that no corrections were made to the participant's quotations.

For the purpose of analyzing the data collected during the focus groups in order to summarize the results, the participants responses were qualitatively analyzed using content analysis. Content analysis techniques (Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990) have been applied to examine the data emerging from the focus groups by studying the statements made by and opinions of the participants. The focus group members' contributions were then supported by carefully selected descriptive quotations. The quotations chosen from the candidates are written verbatim based on the tape recordings taken during the sessions. The research was selective with the quotations selected in order to best represent the recurring themes in the focus group. Many topics surfaced consistently within the different focus groups and among different participants. Items that were repeated within the sessions were calculated based on number of times they were mentioned (frequency) within the data. Verbatim quotations from the interviewees were undertaken in majority of this analysis and results in order to 'lend authenticity and texture' (Maxwell, Watson and Quail, 2004: 162) and to 'bring the data to life' (Taylor-Powell and Renner, 2003: 5). Without knowing exactly what participants say, it is difficult to interpret their opinions, therefore, untouched quotations result in a clear image.

A number of various issues and ideas were expressed by participants within the four focus groups. The purpose of these focus groups was to understand the perception of focus groups in an academic environment. The findings represented below divide the thoughts of the participants into relevant subsections for clarity.

Findings

Four focus groups with 6 participants in each, were conducted. One of the initial questions asked in the focus group was where the participants had first heard of focus groups as an academic research tool. The majority of the responses reflected that participants had only heard of focus groups while studying abroad, but not in Jordan.

Qualitative analysis of the focus group discussion responses revealed that only eighteen out of the possible twenty four participants knew what focus groups were. The remaining six contributors had never heard of focus groups as a research, marketing or academic tool. The eighteen participants who knew about focus groups stated that they had never heard of focus groups in Jordan, and that they only discovered the tool after they had completed their Bachelor's degrees in Jordanian Universities. These participants became familiar with focus groups while completing their post-graduate education in Europe or North America.

Seven of these participants had heard of focus groups during their Master's degree, while the other eleven hadn't heard of focus groups until they were completing their doctorates. All eighteen of these academics discovered the focus group tool while studying outside of Jordan.

Two participants from this group mentioned that they had heard of the technique but that the Arabic name did not translate directly to focus group. It is not uncommon for different educational institutions to refer to similar techniques by different names; however, it may become confusing if there is no universal terminology in the world of academia as the education becomes less transferrable.

When asked who could use focus groups, one participant shared that 'no one does (focus groups)' and continued to say 'that's my opinion and my experience.' One of the problems with this statement is not that focus groups are not being used, but that there is no explanation why this is the case.

No participant in any of the conducted four focus group sessions, indicated that they had ever used the focus group technique, with the exception of one participant in the third group who had used it once before.

One of the participants who had never used the technique expressed that he 'didn't find it is even used here in Jordan' and that the 'tool focus group is no way to be found in our dictionary.'

It is interesting that focus groups are so unheard of in Jordanian Universities as it has been proven to be a relatively cost efficient and useful tool for most academic and professional institutions around the world.

When all participants were asked whether they felt that focus groups were used in hospitality research in Jordan, six out of twenty four participants indicated that did not know what focus groups were or what purpose they served. These are all well-educated academics with varying degrees of post-secondary education. If these professionals do not know what a focus group is, it is unlikely that less educated members of the Jordanian society will know the purpose of a focus group.

As the majority of the recruited participants had never heard of focus groups or had never used them for research purposes, the Researcher was able to introduce the technique to them without any pre-existing beliefs or expectations. This likely helped to maintain the quality of the data collected.

Questions asked by the moderator during the focus groups included, but were not entirely limited to:

- Have you ever heard of focus groups?
- Are focus groups used in Jordanian universities?
- If not, why, in your opinion, focus groups are not used in Jordan?
- Have you ever used a focus group for research purposes? Why? Why not?
- Have you ever been a participant in a focus group?
- Where did you all study?
- Do you believe we need focus groups in research?
- What is preventing Jordanian Universities from using focus groups?
- Do Jordanian students know what focus groups are?
- Are you planning to use focus groups for your own research?
- Are you planning to use focus groups for research in the hotel and tourism industry?
- Are there any research fields other than hospitality that can use focus groups?

The answers varied and the themes that emerged from the analysis of the responses are presented in the subsections below.

The role of Government

One of the obstacles to using new research tools and advancing academically is the lack of funding from the government. In this setting, the situation is no different. The government requires concrete justifications for the need to use any research tools as there is always a desire to spend less. If the government thinks that they are allocating a sufficient amount of their

budget to academic research, then they will not provide additional funding without a solid rationale for such a need.

In recent history, there has been a significant decline in the amount contributed by the government to scientific research and other research in universities and ministries.

One participant shared that ‘depending entirely on governmental financial support is one of the obstacles facing the focus group research.’ Unfortunately, without funding support from the government, focus groups are often too costly to be administered.

According to another participant, in order for focus groups to be successful, there must be ‘financial support, ameliorating the researcher’s financial condition so the researcher can fully concentrate on his research.’ In other words, in order for focus groups to be successful, there must be support for research and funding from the government and business communities in Jordan.

The role of Universities

Based on the collected data from the four focus groups, concern was expressed by the participants around the current research culture in academic institutions in Jordan and the insufficient funding for scientific and other academic research.

Some participants expressed their concern with the college institution in Jordan and how their current procedures are less than perfect. One said:

‘Research in Jordan is rather about quantity than quality in order to get promotion.’ [P03]

Another participant expressed that ‘university studies are the core of researchers’ efforts who always crave to come with something new.’ Knowledge is never completely attained and true academics will always crave new things according to this participant. While focus groups are a new development in Jordan, they have been proven to work in other parts of the world.

Other participants expressed the way in which focus groups could be helpful in Jordanian research and that it should be used more often.

A contributor described the situation of scientific research in Jordan as well as in the Arab world by saying that ‘university research studies and publications are often accumulated onto shelves and instead of converting them into labor and financial plans, they are camouflaged.’

Another participant shared:

‘In Jordan, thousands of valuable research and university studies in scientific, industrial, medical domains vainly fill the stores. Should they be applied, many dilemmas would be remedied. In the west, there are many strategies to put

everything in application...our universities are squandering our energy.’ [P18]

These participants do not feel that they are being taught to their full potential in the formal post-secondary education system in Jordan.

In addition to the limited variety in the curriculum, one participant added:

‘There are no centers for scientific research; most of Jordan’s research is being done universities, colleges and academic institutions. Academics are supposed to dedicate their time to the scientific research; however, their bad financial crisis is a hindrance.’ [P09]

Similarly, another participant shared that:

‘Universities do not provide any financial aid. Simultaneously, promotions are given to academics in accordance with their scientific research. Nevertheless, their research is not worthy of all the efforts and just vainly fills libraries’ shelves.’ [P03]

Another participant suggested that:

‘There also should be a communication channel amongst public and private institutions and research centers in universities. Institutions can therefore convey their needs to the centers and simultaneously provide part of the financial support. The private sector should lavish financial support on the scientific research, for huge profits can be yielded should these researches be put in application.’ [P21]

Another participant suggests that ‘a part of the universities’ budgets be dedicated to the scientific research.’ The implication here is that universities are not supporting the research.

On the topic of support, one contributor shared that:

‘Supporting the advanced scientific research by universities plays an essential role in serving and developing the education system in Jordan.’ [P05]

Another participant said:

‘In Jordan, the reason why the focus group got dilapidated is the low income of the university teacher, and therefore, they can’t do focus group research because it is costly in terms of money.’ [P11]

Overall, these participants are making it clear that they are not satisfied with the current structure and support for research and researchers in Jordan.

Teaching approach and teaching materials

Teaching is a fundamental part of any academic experience. In order to know how to do or use something, one must be taught. In order for

students to know the benefits of a focus group, they should have the opportunity to learn the advantages and disadvantages of it as a research tool.

One participant said that:

‘Quite frankly, the first months in PhD my supervisor asked me to use focus group in the first phase and I didn’t know about focus groups and I tried to get familiar with it but I found myself giving up and changed the path of my research as it was difficult to get myself with it in short period of time I should’ve known and studied before....it is the mistake of our educational system. Therefore, we as academics we should not allow this to occur with anyone of our students.’ [P19]

This participant has a valid point. In order for students to become familiar with focus groups, they must learn about it early in their education in order to have time to get comfortable with this approach and maximize the benefits of using focus groups as a research tool.

One participant noted that in Jordan:

‘During my bachelor and master’s degrees in Jordan in X University, the curriculum had no research methods module in it’ [P07]

Students cannot be expected to use the focus group research tool if they do not know about it. Even though, focus groups is not always the appropriate tool to use, it should be presented as an option, or at the very least, as a learning tool for students.

The focus group participants were mostly in favour of using focus groups in research. It was expressed that ‘focus group teaching and training in curriculum is a fundamental part in universities and college.’ Focus groups, along with other research collection methods should be taught to Jordanian students.

One participant believed that the lack of using focus groups in Jordanian universities is a result of the education system and the lack of focus group teaching material. One shared that:

‘With great respect I studied master’s degree here in X, and master in England There are big differences between the two.’ [P24]

Another participant shared that:

‘...research in the western countries is completely different. Throughout my experience, research outside Jordan is dominantly qualitative due to educational, cultural and social factors.’ [P01]

This illustrates that not all universities worldwide are functioning at the same level. However, while there is value for each university specializing in certain topics depending on the location of the school, what is being taught

at other universities should not be foreign. Learning should be universal and things taught in one corner of the world should be taught or be available in all corners of the world. This is necessary in order to avoid academic ignorance.

Communication and collaboration between academics at Jordanian universities and academics from universities from other countries should be encouraged. Professors in Jordanian universities should not be afraid to teach what is being taught elsewhere as it will prepare their students well for ultimate academic and research challenges.

Another participant shared:

'First: You know the description but most of our university depends on quantitative techniques because it refers to the experiences of teachers in this field by analyzing as well as to easiness factor.' [P08]

It is relevant to state that if teachers are not aware of the technique, they certainly cannot teach it competently. The question becomes, then, how do teachers become familiarized with focus groups and other tools that they are not currently using?

There seems to be an overall lack in this area in universities. Based on one participant:

'I do not remember even that we studied how we analyze interview at any stage.' [P17]

This analysis is necessary, and cannot be overlooked. This illustrates that there is a need to expand knowledge in this area in academic institutions.

When asked if they encouraged students to participate in and conduct focus groups, one participant shared:

'As personal things I encourage the students to do it, is to make discussion not science research, I encourage the students to practice, to have knowledge and to respect the others opinion.'
[P23]

This is a great modern attitude from a teacher.

A participant also shared that with respect to post-secondary institutions abroad:

'One of the evaluation standards in these universities is the scientific research. The qualitative scientific research is one of the most essential pillars of the higher education. It is incumbent upon professors, institutions and universities, public and private sector to support and develop it.' [P04]

These colleges and universities support their teachers and curriculums financially and otherwise.

Lack of support from the hospitality business community

Most hospitality organizations in Jordan, are not being overly helpful with the research. For instance, there was a hotel manager that would not allow employees to participate in a focus group. Also, it is nearly impossible to gather a group of hotel General Managers in one focus group.

One participant expressed that:

'It is thwarted by businesses lack of awareness of the research importance...businesses in Jordan happen to be not fully aware of the research role in possibly identifying our problems then solve them.' [P16]

Another participant shared an example of the issues associated with the lack of focus groups in Jordan by saying:

'For example, you've got a problematic issue in the marketing of tourism products in Jordan.' [P22]

In order to be competitive with other tourist markets, Jordan must know what tourists are looking for. However, without asking them, it is nearly impossible to know.

These organizations should be informed and educated on how participating in focus groups could help their hospitality and tourism business and consequently the overall economy of Jordan and its communities. Focus groups can identify information such as what types of services or amenities patrons are looking for in a hotel. By knowing this information, hotel managers are more likely to provide these things for their customers. Knowledge is the single most important aspect of running a business and marketing.

As a realistic suggestion, one of the focus group participants suggested that:

'Universities should organize awareness campaign surrounding hospitality business.' [P02]

This would be a cost efficient way to educate hospitality and tourism businesses.

Furthermore, there are solutions as suggested by participants, such as conducting focus groups of shorter duration, or conducting them outside of regular business hours. Another option is to give ample notice prior to the focus group so that they are able to plan accordingly.

Culture

One of the concerns with focus groups in Jordan is the cultural expectations. One participant shared this thought:

'The culture is not to accept the opinion of others. Not accepting others' opinions is the problem which the focus group is facing. Not accepting the opinion of others in a

particular culture, leads to an academic dispute being transformed to a personal dispute” [P14]

One participant shared that:

Scientific research in the Arab world is still way behind the coveted level. Despite all the potential, we still are not able to convert into the wished level.’ [P22]

This may partially express resistance for embracing new approaches in academic research and it can change if Jordan allows new technologies and lessons to be introduced into the academic system, such as focus groups for research purposes.

Academic attitudes and resources

When asked if the students in Jordan knew about focus groups, participants consistently said no, they did not know anything about focus groups.

Many academic institutions have discouraged students and faculty from conducting certain types of research and using certain tools.

One contributor stated that:

‘Another point even at the academies is that there is no one to do the focus group, so you will see many like us who don’t know the focus group technique. Virtually he won’t use this step because there are other things that are more simple for him to use other than focus groups.’ [P01]

Due to lack of resources, the above participant cannot easily conduct focus groups. Resources are crucial at any university. One must have the tools in order to perform proper research.

Another issue with conducting focus groups is the equipment. While focus groups have been referred to as a cost efficient research tool, there are certain associated needs that can be costly. For example, there is a need for the use of tape recorders, video cameras and other electronics. One participant stated:

‘When I made the focus group, female participants didn’t want to be filmed, the cameras is important.’ [P10]

This inability to have access to the proper equipment can negatively affect the outcome of the research.

Attitudes towards the Focus Group Process

While focus groups have proven to be useful in many situations, Jordanian academia has also survived for many years without using them. One participant shared that:

‘This is a created activity in my point of view. The focus group, is not wrong to make it, but the answer of the question if we need focus groups? I see that we don’t need it.’ [P20]

They are expressing that, while focus groups could be helpful, they are not convinced that they are needed as research tools.

Any additional form of education or research tool that is cost efficient is useful. Also, not all students will be obligated to use focus groups, but the option should be there for them if they choose to use a focus group in the future.

Another participant shared this thought:

‘If you noticed on the word need, I found in the scientific research information with me or with my colloquies or experience or study, the scientific research explain the words to the people in some way or other way, (field work) or (questionnaire).’ [P12]

Their point is that focus groups are not needed, but they could prove to be beneficial. During the session, all participants, except for one, shared that they believe that focus groups should be used. The one participant in disapproval said ‘in my point of view we don’t need it very much.’ The remaining participants had relatively positive comments and believe that focus groups could be extremely helpful with research in Jordanian Universities and the hospitality market. The comments obtained were predominantly positive.

The Focus groups process has been proven to be beneficial when collecting data. One participant shared that:

‘The use of focus group is the best way to collect the information in this research if they have theory building approach and there is no background about a subject.’ [P06]

An ideal market for using focus groups, based on this comment, would be the Jordanian hospitality industry as they do not know as much as they could about their target market. Understanding your market is the single most important aspect of tourism and hospitality.

The participant continued by saying:

‘The results cannot be generalized, if the research subject is specialized, such as in hospitality for example.’ [P15]

When asked if they would conduct focus groups in the future, one participant shared that they

‘Prefer focus groups because it’s easier to make it.’ [P07]

He also added that:

‘Focus group research is not easy. T there are other easier tools and we usually use the easy way such as questionnaire...not the mention the time. It takes a lot of time

from recruitment, preparation and conducting the focus groups. Others think why I should take this long road when I have a short cut, I mean other easier research tools' [P07]

Recruitment process and selection of participants for focus groups

When a researcher decides to conduct a focus group, one of the most important factors is the selection of appropriate participants. Not any participant can be part of a focus group. Depending on the subject matter, there should be a carefully selected group of people that will best reflect the opinions of relevant people in the field of research.

Many of the participants expressed that finding the proper people to take part in the focus groups is very difficult. One said that:

'This is the problem of this approach (focus group) is that is difficult to find the sample.' [P13]

Another participant also expressed how difficult it is to find the best candidates for the focus groups.

'It is very rare that you meet the appropriate sample and even when you meet someone he may be busy. And if you want to do it in the companies and especially in the private sector, they will be careful in their talking, so the debate will not be in depth. Everyone tries to maintain secrets and keep the technique in front of others.' [P24]

Another participant shared that:

'You must be careful when you choose people to make a focus group with them, because sometimes there were persons who talked but they did not bother to the depth so we did not take from them something real.' [P02]

With this in mind, it is in the researchers best interest to select participants that are a target audience for the subject matter (for example, students are the target audience for research related to use of textbooks) but not necessarily those that know too much about the subject matter (for example, the authors of those same textbooks are not an ideal audience as they will likely compete with the other authors in the focus groups).

Choosing contributors for the focus groups should not be taken lightly. They are the single most important part of the data collection. The researcher is trusting their insight and, therefore, choosing the best possible participants is extremely important (Mece, 2016)

Advantages of using focus groups

Like any other research tool, there are advantages and disadvantages to using focus groups in research. It is interesting to note that during the focus groups, nobody, including the moderator, mentioned the specific

advantages or disadvantages of focus groups. They were implied, but were not mentioned specifically.

Many of the participants believe that focus groups are needed in the academic world. One participant expressed that, in his opinion:

'Focus group is an essential indispensable technique.' [P18]

After the data were fully collected and summarized, the research showed that all participants except for one believed that focus groups should be learned and used.

Like anything else, according to one participant:

'Research has to be well planned and aim at serving the community and the country.' [P06]

This is true with focus groups and can prove to be advantageous when all factors are considered.

One of the participants shared the following statement:

'To benefit from scientific research, the research needs to be connected to the scientific tool. It is essential to invigorate new method and new tools for university scientific research and technical development. We have to raise awareness about the importance of these new tools and methods like the ones we are discussing right now (focus groups), through curricula, student's research, lectures, seminars, conferences etc.' [P23]

This statement relates to the issues with education systems limiting their subject matters.

On a related note, another participant said the following:

'Studies contain a practical part that needs be put into practice and that comes from qualitative research and these kinds of qualitative studies – focus group is qualitative, isn't it? Research is useless unless they are connected to the business or community needs. So, it is important the research studies be related to our real world to get the most benefits out of it.'
[P13]

One another supported this by saying that:

'Not reaping the benefits of the survey questionnaire is one of the main problems. This weakness is common and quasi similar to all research because they are quantitative.' [P05]

Another participant expressed their happiness with the focus group by reflecting on their participation:

'The largest reward of my participation in my focus group is, I have an idea now about focus group as an important tool.'
[P10]

It is certain that this academic will be using focus groups again in the future.

Like anything else, in order to be advantageous, research must benefit the community. Using focus groups for research purposes, has the possibility to benefit the Jordanian economy in a number of ways. Mainly, if focus groups are used for research in the hospitality industry, then there is the potential that by using the information obtained and applying the research findings, more tourists will be attracted to Jordan.

Disadvantages of using focus groups

When asked if they had participated in focus groups in the past, only two participants indicated that they had previously participated. When asked if they had conducted focus groups in the past, one participant shared that they had not because ‘there is no financial benefit.’

It is true that there is a cost associated with conducting focus groups, however, it is not the most costly research tool.

Another participant shared that:

‘At the end there is a problem with how to analyze and how to inform the results.’ [P21]

There is a process to conducting focus groups and it takes time to perfect it, which is why it should be taught in schools early in the academic programs. Another stated that:

‘Focus group predicaments are lack of cooperation amongst research groups and lack of precision in choosing the right topics that could inconvenience the research development.’ [P09]

One noted that:

‘The very quandary in the scientific research is bad management and lack of financial resources at universities.’ [P03]

Like any other new tool, there is a financial need when introducing anything new.

As mentioned several times before, the following participant references the struggle with the cost associated with conducting a focus group:

‘The major problem encountered by focus groups research is the lack of financial support from our universities. I mean they grant us a little amount of money and it is not enough to do interviews or focus groups, therefore we go with survey questionnaire. These obstacles happen to be ubiquitous everywhere in our Jordanian universities.’ [P17]

Without the proper funding, it is difficult to commit to focus groups and any other non-traditional research approaches.

One noted that:

'Focus group research, like other research tools suffers from lack of financial resources as well as other umpteenth obstacles: speaking of costly and troublesome publishing.'

[P11]

The disadvantage of focus groups, like many other things is often described as the cost and related lack of funding. This issue remains to be a hurdle.

Recommendations based on participants' responses

- Teaching and use of focus groups should be included in university curriculum;
- Government and university funding departments should be encouraged to support further scientific research in Jordanian education systems;
- Jordanian post-secondary educational institutions should be encouraged to update their teaching curricula with more modern techniques;
- Training sessions for professionals should be conducted, as needed, to explain the benefits of focus groups and how to conduct them;
- Students should be encouraged to use focus groups as a research tool;
- A link between the local hospitality business and universities should be identified to successfully conduct relevant and helpful research for the purpose of collecting useful market data;
- It should be explained to the hospitality industry, the government and educational institutions how focus groups can benefit the future of Jordan's economy.

Discussion

The whole purpose of using focus groups is to examine the research topic with all of the focus group participants present during the session (Creswell, 2003).

The views regarding using research focus groups in Jordan and focus groups in general were relatively consistent based on this research. 18 out of 24 participants stated that they had never encountered focus groups while studying in Jordan. Those who were familiar with focus groups had encountered them while studying abroad, either in North America or Europe.

There were also several views expressing that there is a severe lack of government funding as well as funding from academic institutions which is preventing academics from using certain tools. There is also a Jordanian cultural mindset that is unwilling to move forward in terms of teaching

methods which is also limiting contemporary students from learning and using certain tools.

With the exception of one participant (out of twenty four), there was a general consensus for encouraging the use of focus groups as it is a relatively cost efficient research tool. Focus groups can gather information from a large number of people in the same group (Wall, 2001). While teachers and professors, such as the participants in this research, are willing to teach and use different research methods, if these methods are not part of the curriculum or if funding does not exist, then this is not possible. An adjustment to university curricula to make room for current research methods and technologies would benefit students and academic institutions. Focus groups allow the researcher to dig deeper for information from the participants in order to gain insights on specific research topics (Barrows, 2000).

The majority of the focus groups participants indicated that they will likely use the research tool in the future with their students. Focus groups are not normally intended as the only method of data collection (McClelland, 1994) but they can be extremely valuable to academic and professional research. While there are still hurdles that remain, participants felt that the benefits outweigh the issues and that students would benefit from learning a different way to collect data. The out of date curriculums in Jordan are affecting the students and should be revised according to the focus group contributors.

Conclusion

The research conducted for the purpose of this paper provides a solid starting point for considering the use of focus groups in Jordan. The reasons why Jordanian universities do not support focus groups are still not entirely clear but the two major concerns seem to be an out-dated education system and lack of funding.

As the majority of the participants had never participated in a focus group, all of the information was completely new to them. One participant shared that it is a 'new as well as good experience' and another said 'when you contacted me for participating, to be honest, I felt ambivalent about it but now I think it is rewarding experience and thank you for giving us this opportunity.'

Based on this change of opinion, the focus group was a success. The focus groups produced several suggestions to encourage and support scientific research. Jordanian universities should be educating their students by using various research tools in order to ensure their future economy. If the education system is outdated, then students will not have the most modern tools to make them competitive in the worldwide market.

The hotel and tourism industry in Jordan should be a constantly growing market as there is much money to be made in the hospitality sector. In order to stay competitive and encourage tourists to go to Jordan as opposed to other countries in the world, much research has to be performed. Focus groups can assist greatly with this research. By gathering participants who are world travelers or tourists themselves, hotels could discover what the most and least appealing aspects of travelling are. In order for focus groups to be successful, however, they must be understood in how they can be conducted and how they can be helpful and the researcher must have an abundance of experience with focus groups and the data analysis following the session. The proper equipment and funding is also necessary in order to ensure there are no delays for technical reasons.

Jordan would benefit greatly from encouraging businesses and schools to teach and utilize focus groups for the purpose of qualitative data analysis.

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