

Navigating Boundaries: Uncovering Constraints in Focus Group Discussion Within the Context of Security Issue

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ABSTRACT

Focus group discussion (FGD) is a crucial data collection strategy in qualitative research design. Using FGDs enables researchers to gather in-depth information from a large number of participants efficiently in terms of cost and effort. The advantage of FGDs is that they allow the collection of diverse perspectives from multiple participants simultaneously in a single location. However, despite their benefits, FGDs—like other research methods—have certain limitations that must be identified to implement appropriate mitigation measures. This paper aims to explore these limitations of FGDs. The researchers employed observation techniques during a series of FGDs in Sabah to examine security issues in the region. The study investigated the challenges experienced by both researchers and participants throughout the process. The findings reveal various constraints that emerged before (networking challenges, inappropriate site selection, last-minute cancellations), during (insufficient information, inadequate moderation skills, device issues, irrelevant information, time constraints, social desirability, groupthink, personality dynamics), and after (analytical constraints) the FGDs were conducted. These insights are expected to benefit future studies, particularly those in which FGDs are being considered as the data collection method.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research has become increasingly prevalent across various disciplines, including the social sciences. As one of the most widely used tools in qualitative research, interviews provide deeper insights into phenomena, especially when little is known about a topic (Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021). Among the most common methods used in qualitative studies is the focus group, which is typically defined as a method of collecting data through moderated group discussions, when participants share their perceptions and

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experiences of a given research topic. In these discussions, the researcher usually assumes the role of a moderator, guiding the conversation for one to two hours based on the research focus.

The key features of a focus group include: 1) the research is conducted through interviews, 2) these interviews are held in a group setting, and 3) the interview format is flexible, permitting an in-depth exploration of the central research theme (Gawlik, 2018). Typically, the format of a focus group begins with background questions, such as those related to participants' personal histories and their experiences with the research topic. The next stage, often referred to as the 'letting off steam' phase, includes general questions related to the broader research area. The third stage involves more in-depth questions addressing the central issues of the research and exploring the participants' opinions on the research questions and objectives. The final stage, known as debriefing, concludes the session by summarising the main points discussed, reaffirming the confidentiality of the information provided, and reminding the participants of the purpose and objectives of the research (Adams & Cox, 2008).

Researchers often favour focus groups for data collection because this approach provides participants with the freedom to express themselves, thus offering valuable insights into individuals' perceptions of a research topic (Manu, 2018). Focus group discussions have been recognised as fast, cost-effective, and efficient methods of data collection (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). They also encourage interaction among participants and are particularly suitable for analysing data from social groups. Additionally, focus groups are generally well-received and enjoyed by participants (Dawson et al., 1993).

Despite the many advantages of focus groups, some challenges have been observed by both researchers and participants. While there is a growing body of research regarding the benefits of focus groups, a limited number of studies have addressed the challenges associated with this method. Some of the existing literature on this topic too has focused on Western contexts, with limited research conducted in developing countries such as Malaysia, particularly in the context of national security issues, which are critical especially in Sabah. Sabah faces various security challenges, including border security issues related to illegal immigrants, which in turn contribute to other cross-border crimes such as kidnapping for ransom (Jalil et al., 2024), terrorism (Dollah et al., 2016), and smuggling (Hassan et al., 2020). Additionally, socio-economic security issues such as poverty (Asadullah et al., 2023) and underdeveloped rural areas (Huda et al., 2022) further exacerbate problems like income inequality, lack of access to education, and unemployment, which in turn contribute to more serious domestic crimes such as bribery, corruption, and robbery, ultimately leading to social unrest. All these issues are significant threats that can impact the country. Hence, observing the challenges of focus group discussions, including how participants react to the topics discussed, will provide valuable insights, particularly for future researchers conducting FGDs in the security context. This study presents key findings from a series of FGDs conducted in Sabah, Malaysia, in 2023. It is hoped that this paper will benefit academics and researchers by offering strategies to enhance the effectiveness of FGDs and ensure they yield meaningful data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Qualitative research uncovers complex phenomena by exploring in-depth data to gain insights into participants' perspectives and experiences (Lim, 2024), as this type of data cannot be obtained through quantitative methods (Busetto et al., 2020). Additionally, qualitative research is often used to describe or explain a studied context within a smaller group, serving as a foundation for future research to test findings on a larger scale quantitatively (Dawson, 2019). Nonetheless, qualitative researchers often face common difficulties, such as collecting data in an inappropriate venue (Taherdoost, 2022), time constraints (Guest et al., 2017), and recording devices that fail to capture responses clearly. Therefore, to address the issue, qualitative researchers must equip themselves with the appropriate strategies such as preparing sufficient recording devices (Rutakumwa et al., 2020) and ensuring the researchers are properly trained to develop

the necessary skills for effective data collection. Additionally, if possible, providing a token of appreciation to participants (Silverio et al., 2022) can serve not only as a gesture of gratitude but also as an encouragement to participate in the study. Various types of qualitative methods can be employed to collect different kinds of data, based on the researcher's objectives. One commonly used qualitative method is the focus group discussion.

Focus groups involve a group interview method, whereby a small group of individuals engage in a focused, in-depth discussion on a specific topic. According to Gundumogula (2020), focus groups involve structured conversations led by a trained facilitator to explore a research topic in depth. While this method has become increasingly prevalent in qualitative research, particularly in fields like education (Yulianti & Sulistyawati, 2021), environment (Low et al., 2024), public health (Guigon, 2024), sustainability (Papargyropoulou et al., 2025), consumer behaviour (Nguyen et al., 2020), psychology (Lee et al., 2024), and business (Fuzy & Noor, 2024), its application is not without criticism or limitations.

One of the primary advantages of focus groups is their capacity to provide rich, nuanced insights through diverse perspectives. This is especially important in qualitative research, where the goal is often to explore participants' emotions, beliefs, expressions, and experiences in relation to a particular subject. Focus groups are also useful in the early stages of research, enabling the researcher to identify multiple dimensions of a topic and gather a broad range of viewpoints (Gundumogula, 2020). Despite these advantages, some scholars have raised concerns regarding the method's limitations, particularly the risk of disorganised discussions when clear research objectives are not established during the event.

For instance, Franz (2011) emphasizes the importance of carefully planning and designing focus groups. He argues that the success of a focus group is not dependent solely on a strict protocol but rather on the ability of the moderator to guide the conversation in ways that encourage open and productive dialogue. This aligns with the observation by Scheelbeek et al. (2020) that formal conversation between the researchers and the participants can suppress open dialogue and limit the depth of insights gained from the discussion. Moreover, this approach may be unsuitable for exploring individual perspectives and experiences in depth, especially when involving a large number of participants (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021). This is consistent with Lobe and Morgan (2021), who found that moderators seem to be more effective in small groups compared to larger ones.

Notably, Scheelbeek et al. (2020) also highlights the value of modifying traditional focus group formats to better align with the participants' needs. Their research showed that this tailored approach resulted in more detailed and insightful data compared to conventional methods. This underscores the necessity of adapting focus group techniques to the specific context and participants involved. Besides, it is also important to create a safe and non-judgmental space for participants to voice their opinions. Establishing trust between participants and researchers is vital for overcoming the barriers of FDGs (Sim & Waterfield, 2019).

Similarly, the psychological barriers to effective communication within focus groups, as identified by Hadi and Junaidi (2021), raise critical questions about participant dynamics. The authors note that shyness, lack of confidence, and difficulty in organising thoughts can prevent participants from fully engaging in the discussion.

Nowadays, FGDs can also be conducted through online platforms, especially after the pandemic, which has influenced the way qualitative studies are carried out. However, this approach may lead to issues such as a lack of conversational flow and focus, as well as technical challenges, including connectivity problems and struggles in using the platform (Falter et al., 2022). This indicates that despite the cost-effectiveness of online tools, in-person discussions remain preferable to mitigate these challenges.

Ethical issues, particularly regarding consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, also frequently arise in focus group settings. Sim and Waterfield (2019) highlight that the unpredictability of group dynamics and the personalities of participants may lead to such issues. These problems are particularly salient in focus groups, where the social nature of the setting can obscure the lines between privacy and anonymity. Kitzinger (1995) underscores that fear of disclosure is a key concern among participants, potentially preventing them from sharing sensitive information.

Finally, incentives are another challenge facing focus group research. While financial or material incentives are commonly used to thank participants for their time and input, Theobald et al. (2010) found that these incentives can sometimes create expectations that go beyond those required following a token of appreciation. Participants may perceive their incentive as compensation for more intensive involvement, which might affect the effectiveness of the discussion.

In conclusion, while focus groups offer valuable advantages in qualitative research, they are not without significant challenges. Issues such as psychological barriers, ethical dilemmas, power dynamics, and the impacts of incentives need to be critically addressed to improve the reliability and depth of focus group data. Although the challenges associated with focus groups are well-documented, the existing literature tends to focus primarily on identifying these issues without addressing the full spectrum of challenges that arise before, during, and after focus group discussions. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the difficulties encountered by both researchers and participants across all three phases of the focus group process: before, during, and after the sessions. This would enable appropriate strategies to be developed to mitigate these challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised qualitative methodologies, employing an observational approach to data collection. As Garaway (2004) suggests, observation is a critical tool in both evaluation and case study research. Morgan et al. (2017) also highlights that observational data can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of a discussion, capturing contextual factors and processes while revealing subtleties such as body language and the physical environment.

Data were gathered through the researchers' direct involvement in 16 purposively selected focus group discussions (FGDs) involving both enforcement agencies and local communities. To ensure the validity and credibility of the participants, all enforcement agency officers selected were directly involved in security enforcement and operations. Similarly, only local community members with direct experience of security issues were included. This ensures that all participants have relevant experience and can provide the desired data. These sessions took place one week, from July 3 to 11, 2023, across several districts in Sabah, including Kota Kinabalu, Tawau, Sandakan, Lahad Datu, Keningau, and Semporna. The FGDs were attended by six to 25 participants aligning with the recommendations of Robyn (2016) who stated that focus groups typically consist of six to twelve participants, although they can include up to 40 participants (Hennink et al., 2019).

All verbal and non-verbal cues including body language, facial expressions, tone, environment, and participants' reactions were noted throughout the data collection phases by each researcher. The data were then triangulated among researchers before the analysis phase, during which observational data were further validated using post-observation summaries generated immediately after each session. These summaries included researchers' reflections on the effectiveness of the focus group discussions.

The compiled data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase guide by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, researchers familiarised themselves with the data. Then, initial codes were generated.

Next, patterns were identified, and themes were developed. These themes were subsequently reviewed and refined before finalisation. Finally, the researchers reported and discussed the established themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the observation of all the FGDs conducted reveal several key challenges in conducting the focus group discussions, highlighting the complexities faced by both researchers and participants across all three phases: before, during, and after FGDs. Notable issues included late notice cancellation, inadequate moderation skills, incentive opportunists, personality dynamics, and analysis constraints. These challenges emphasize the importance of thorough planning and effective facilitation to ensure focus groups are productive and yield high-quality data. These key challenges are summarised in Figure 1 below:

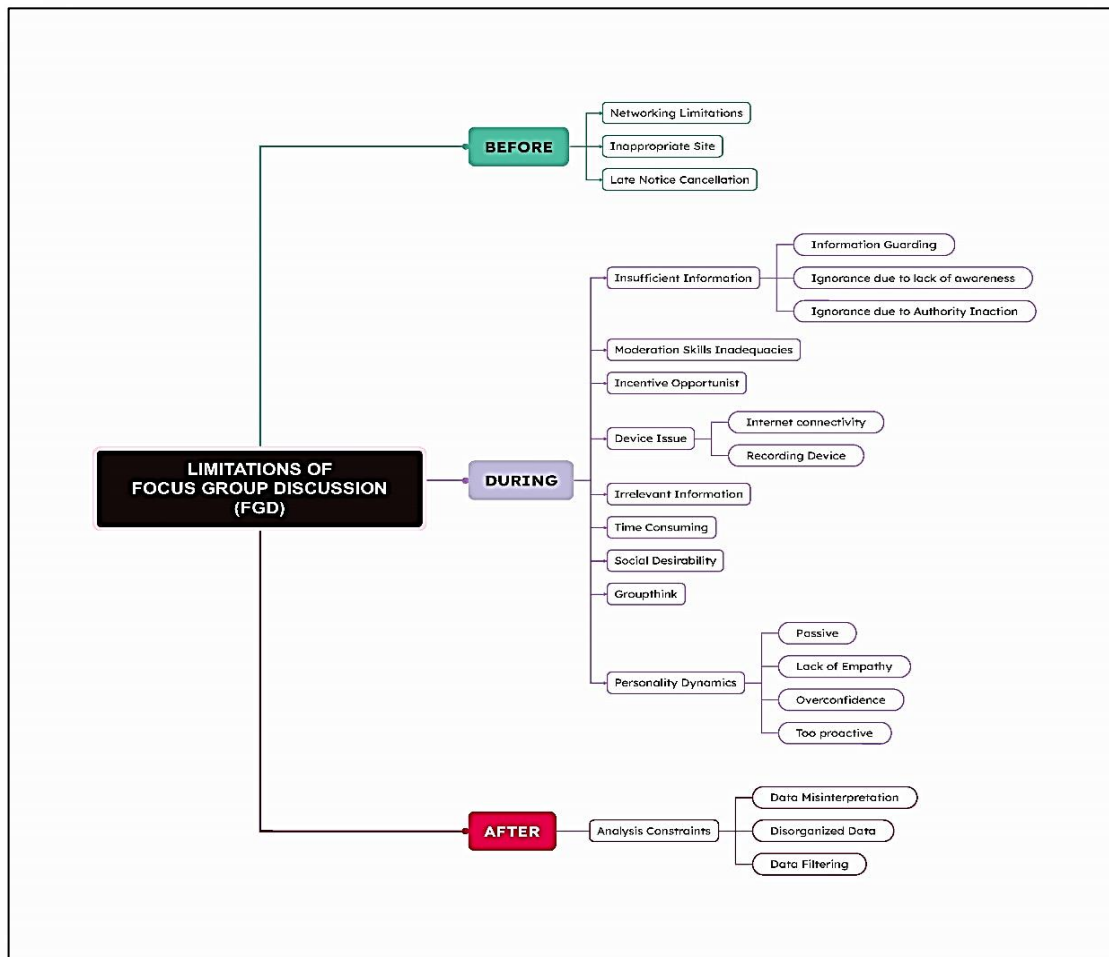


Fig. 1. The Three-Phase Limitations of FGDs (Source by authors)

Challenges Encountered Before FGDs

During the exploration of focus group discussions (FGDs), three main challenges were identified prior to the sessions. The first challenge involved networking limitations. The researchers needed to coordinate with a key contact person, who played a crucial role in connecting them with participants who met the inclusion criteria. Without this support, identifying and recruiting participants would have been far more difficult, especially when seeking participants directly involved in security issues. This ensures that the selected participants have substantial experience in the subject matter and can provide valuable input to the study. This is crucial, as the nature of qualitative research requires in-depth data to understand the phenomenon being investigated (Lim, 2024). Additionally, the contact person was helpful in assisting with logistical arrangements, such as securing the venue, providing technical equipment, and organising refreshments. Having this network in place streamlined the FGD process, making it more efficient than self-arrangement by the research team.

The second challenge was selecting an appropriate venue. If the location was unsuitable, it affected both the comfort of the participants and the quality of the discussion. While researchers and participants typically need to agree on the location, there were instances when less-than-ideal sites were chosen due to accessibility or availability issues. This often happens in FGDs with local communities, as the choice of location is limited to ensure that all selected participants can participate in the FGDs. For example, one FGD was held in a noisy, open-air space, making it difficult for the researchers to hear the participants' responses. This not only hindered the flow of the discussion but also affected the quality of the recordings, ultimately influencing the data analysis. Even though this issue is also apparent in other qualitative studies, including one-on-one interviews (Taherdoost, 2022), FGDs involve a larger number of participants, making it more challenging to find an appropriate location compared to one-on-one interviews.

The third challenge was last-minute cancellations by participants. This issue arose when expected FGD attendees cancelled at the last moment. The absence of these key individuals, especially when the FGD involved multiple agencies requiring diverse input, meant that crucial insights were lost. This resulted in a partial understanding of the topic, preventing the study from fully capturing reality on the ground. Moreover, late cancellations led to waste because arrangements for refreshments had already been made, incurring unnecessary costs.

Challenges Encountered During FGDs

While several challenges emerged prior to the focus group discussions (FGDs), numerous difficulties also surfaced during the actual sessions. One key issue was insufficient information being shared by participants. This often arose from information guarding, particularly when participants belonged to a government agency. Due to the sensitive nature of some topics, participants were sometimes unable to fully disclose relevant information, especially in group settings where confidentiality could not be guaranteed. This aligns with the findings obtained by Kitzinger (1995), who observed that participants tend to withhold information when there are concerns about confidentiality. Some participants were often observed doing this, as they were unable to disclose information due to the need to safeguard private and confidential data, especially when it involved national security-related information. This enables them to avoid ethical issues related to confidentiality, risk of harm, and anonymity, as identified by Sim and Waterfield (2019). Moreover, some participants were observed to be ignorant due to a lack of awareness about the issue being discussed, limiting their ability to contribute meaningful insights. In other cases, participants were ignorant due to official inaction on issues previously raised, leading to a sense of apathy and reluctance to share their perspectives.

Inadequate moderation skills represent a core challenge in FGDs. Moderators lacking the necessary skills to effectively manage a session may struggle to ensure that the discussion proceeds smoothly and yields valuable insights from the participants. This had several consequences, including an inability to probe participants effectively, difficulties in engaging passive participants, and the potential for dominant voices

to overshadow others. These issues can undermine the quality of the data collected. Previous studies (Franz, 2011; Sim & Waterfield, 2019) emphasize the crucial role of the moderator in controlling the discussion flow and probing participants to elicit meaningful responses. By addressing these challenges, such as managing dominant voices, engaging passive participants, and maintaining interest, moderators can create a more balanced and productive FGD environment, ensuring more comprehensive insights.

Incentive opportunists were another challenge observed during the FGD sessions, particularly among non-governmental participants. While incentives were intended to encourage participation, some participants seemed more motivated by the reward than by providing meaningful input. As a result, the incentive became a mere attraction for participants who had no interest in giving fruitful inputs. As a result, the researchers struggled to gather the necessary insights to address the research objectives. While tokens of appreciation are typically used to encourage participation (Negrin et al., 2022), they can inadvertently become a challenge in certain cases. This aligns with the findings of Theobald et al. (2010), who noted that participants may expect more than what is offered, leading to unrealistic expectations and making the research process more difficult. This shows that the successful recruitment of the participants does not always guarantee successful participation in the study.

Device issues represent a critical challenge during focus group discussions (FGDs). Internet connectivity problems can significantly impact the quality of a discussion, especially when some participants are attending virtually. When internet connectivity is unstable, it becomes difficult for attendees to fully engage in the session, which can hinder the conversation flow and limit the effectiveness of the discussion. Additionally, problems with recording devices can also affect the FGD process. In qualitative research, recording devices are essential for data collection (Rutakumwa et al., 2020). During the subsequent data analysis phase, the transcribing process is crucial for identifying emerging themes and patterns. If a recording device malfunctions or the audio quality is poor, it becomes difficult to transcribe the data accurately, which can impede the analysis and limit the depth of the insights derived from the discussion.

Another challenge arising during FGDs is the tendency of participants to provide irrelevant information. While participants typically offer valuable insights when asked to share their perspectives and experiences on the issue being discussed, some may respond with information that is not directly related to the specific questions posed. This not only disrupts the focus of the discussion but also renders their contributions unreliable, making it difficult to utilise their input in addressing the research objectives. This situation requires the moderator to probe deeper, redirect the discussion, and encourage participants to provide the intended insights.

Sessions being time-consuming is another critical challenge in FGDs. This issue is not unique to FGDs; it is a common challenge in qualitative research in general. However, in the context of FGDs, time constraints are exacerbated by the need to conduct interviews with a large number of participants simultaneously in the same setting. This aligns with Guest et al. (2017), who mentioned that FGDs take longer compared to individual interviews. The diversity of insights shared by participants can further prolong the discussion. As a result, a session may last up to three hours, which can be exhausting for participants, particularly when the number of attendees reaches as many as 20. This extended duration can lead to fatigue, diminishing participants' engagement and potentially causing the discussion to veer off-topic.

Social desirability was another challenge observed during the FGDs. Since participants' responses are not anonymous, some may choose to withhold their true opinions, instead offering answers that align with the views of others. This tendency often stems from a desire to fit in or avoid standing out. Consequently, the perspectives shared may become skewed, with genuine insights being suppressed or obscured.

Moreover, the nature of focus group discussions (FGDs), which involve interviewing multiple participants at the same time, can increase the likelihood of groupthink. This happens when participants, despite initially having differing opinions, offer views that align with those expressed by others during the discussion. As the conversation progresses, some individuals might modify their responses to conform to the opinions of the group, even if they held a different perspective at the outset. This influence can suppress the expression of genuine insights and lead to a more homogenous set of responses, ultimately resulting in biased inputs.

Personality dynamics among participants presents significant challenges for researchers during focus group discussions (FGDs). Some participants tend to be passive, offering minimal input during a session. For example, participants might provide only brief responses, such as a single sentence, when prompted. This is a common challenge in qualitative research, often linked to factors like shyness and lack of confidence, which can hinder a person's ability to express their opinions effectively (Hadi & Junaidi, 2021). To address this, researchers must actively probe and encourage such participants to share more comprehensive insights.

In contrast, some participants may exhibit egotistical behaviour. This is particularly evident among high-ranking individuals, who may prioritise their own views or those of their department while dismissing the perspectives of others. Additionally, there are instances when certain participants are uncooperative, especially when researchers request specific information, at which point such participants might redirect the inquiry to other agencies, thereby hindering the data collection process. This behaviour can impede the data collection process and prevent researchers from obtaining the necessary information for later analysis and reporting.

Moreover, some participants may be overly proactive, dominating the discussion due to their eagerness to share their views. This can disrupt the balance of the FGD, making it difficult for other participants to contribute. In such cases, strong moderating skills are essential to ensure that the session remains balanced and that all the participants' opinions are effectively explored. Without such facilitation, the data collected may be skewed, and important insights from quieter or less dominant participants may remain unexplored.

Challenges Encountered After FGDs

The data analysis phase following an FGD is crucial, yet analysis constraints also present significant challenges for researchers. For FGDs, data analysis is a complex stage, as researchers must analyse rich data gathered from a large number of participants (Muthiah et al., 2020). Three main issues commonly arise during this phase: misinterpretation, disorganised data, and data filtering. One of the key challenges is data misinterpretation, which occurs when the data analyst misunderstands or incorrectly interprets participants' responses. This can be caused by various factors, such as unclear or ambiguous input from the participant, or cultural differences between the participant and the data analyst. The data analyst may not fully understand the cultural context behind certain responses, leading to misunderstandings or incorrect conclusions. Without proper clarification or confirmation, these misinterpretations can result in inaccurate data.

Secondly, researchers often face the challenge of disorganised data during the analysis phase. This issue arises because, during an FGD, multiple participants may speak at once or interrupt each other to express their opinions. As a result, it becomes difficult for the researcher to capture each insight clearly and systematically. A lack of order during a discussion may lead to important insights being overlooked or missed entirely, complicating the data analysis process.

Lastly, data filtering presents another challenge during the data analysis phase. Given the abundance and richness of the data collected, the situation is further complicated if the data are disorganised, leading to chaotic or fragmented information. In such cases, important insights may be overlooked, and, as a result,

the final dataset may not accurately reflect the realities of the phenomenon being studied. This can undermine the validity of the analysis and the conclusions drawn from the FGD.

In short, challenges can arise throughout all three phases of conducting focus group discussions (FGDs). While FGDs are a valuable technique for obtaining rich data from diverse perspectives, failing to manage the process effectively can lead to unreliable, unintended, or undesired information, ultimately affecting the quality of the data collected. Thus, to mitigate these challenges, several recommendations can be implemented to enhance the effectiveness of FGD sessions across all three phases.

Firstly, to address challenges before the FGD sessions, researchers must be thoroughly prepared for all possible obstacles. Establishing a strong connection with the person in charge is crucial, particularly at the beginning of the data collection process, as their assistance in identifying and recruiting the right participants is highly valuable. In addition, researchers should ensure they have adequate audio recording devices and, if possible, place them in multiple locations to clearly capture participants' responses, especially when FGDs are conducted in less conducive environments.

Next, to address the issue of last-minute cancellations, researchers may invite more participants than required to ensure sufficient attendance, especially when insights from multiple agencies are needed. Alternatively, if feasible, researchers can conduct separate one-on-one sessions to capture data from the necessary agencies. Meanwhile, during the FGDs, the most critical strategy lies in the moderator's ability to effectively manage the session. Hence, moderators need to possess strong moderating skills. Beyond ensuring a smooth discussion, moderators must be able to build rapport, probe deeper, and elicit meaningful responses from participants to capture their true insights. These skills can be developed through various approaches, including training (Silverio et al., 2022), mentorship, and frequent participation in moderating FGD sessions.

Finally, after the FGDs have been conducted, researchers should remain mindful of potential constraints during the data analysis phase. They may cross-check data among themselves to ensure triangulation. Additionally, other triangulation methods, such as member checking where the analysed data is presented to participants for feedback should also be conducted. This ensures that the data produced is valid and reliable. Therefore, researchers must conduct advanced planning to facilitate a more harmonious and productive FGD session, ultimately leading to the exploration of diverse and rich data.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while focus group discussions (FGDs) offer significant benefits such as faster data collection and cost-effectiveness in engaging a large number of participants, they also present several limitations, which can emerge before, during, or after a session. To address these challenges, it is crucial to implement appropriate mitigation, especially by ensuring the moderators possess the skills necessary to effectively guide the discussions. By doing so, most of the limitations encountered while using this approach can be minimised, leading to richer, more reliable findings that contribute to achieving the study's research objectives. However, FGDs in the context of security issues may differ from other FGDs, as some information is sensitive and confidential. Participants tend to keep such information undisclosed, especially when it involves national security. Although this study provides valuable insights, particularly within the realm of qualitative research, its scope is limited to the use of FGDs. Future researchers could extend this investigation to other qualitative methods, offering a more comprehensive understanding of different approaches. This would help ensure that qualitative researchers are equipped with a broader knowledge of various research methods, which would enable them to apply effective mitigation strategies across different data collection techniques. Additionally, future studies could focus on developing practical solutions to address the limitations identified with FGDs, ensuring that these challenges are effectively managed. Ultimately, the aim of this study is to offer valuable input for stakeholders, particularly those planning future research involving FGDs, by highlighting through observation the potential challenges of this data

collection method. Some recommendations have also been highlighted as part of the mitigating strategies to prevent similar issues from occurring. These can be considered as alternative approaches to managing FGDs, an important qualitative research technique for efficiently gathering diverse inputs from multiple participants within a short period of time.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

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