

Beyond Methodological Preferences: Rethinking In-Depth Interviews and Focus Group Discussions in Contemporary Communication and Media Research

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Abstract

Qualitative research is increasingly central to communication and media studies because it enables researchers to examine experiences, meanings, perceptions, interactions, and social processes that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures. Within this context, in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) remain prominent approaches, although their respective strengths, limitations, and methodological applications continue to generate debate. This article situates the debate within contemporary qualitative communication research and aims to critically synthesise foundational and contemporary scholarship on IDIs and FGDs while developing a context-sensitive basis for methodological selection. The study adopts a critical integrative literature-review model, drawing on foundational works by Brinkmann and Kvale, Merton, Morgan, Rubin and Rubin, and Seidman, alongside contemporary contributions by McLafferty, Onwuegbuzie et al., Rodriguez et al., and Thelwall and Nevill. A thematic synthesis was employed to examine epistemological foundations, methodological strengths and limitations, interactional dimensions, cultural considerations, and emerging research gaps. The results indicate that IDIs provide distinctive access to individual experiences, personal narratives, confidentiality, and interpretive depth, whereas FGDs generate valuable evidence through participant interaction, collective reflection, disagreement, and meaning-making. However, neither approach is inherently superior, as both are influenced by contextual, ethical, cultural, participant, and researcher-related factors. The review identifies insufficient communication-specific methodological theorisation and proposes an Integrated Context–Method Fit Framework (ICMFF) based on the research problem, communication context, participant characteristics, knowledge required, and interactional dimensions. The article concludes that qualitative communication research should prioritise methodological fit, reflexivity, analytical rigour, and contextual appropriateness rather than methodological preference.

Keywords: *In-Depth Interviews; Focus Group Discussions; Communication Research; Media Research; Qualitative Methodology*

1. Introduction

Qualitative research has become increasingly important in contemporary communication and media studies because it enables researchers to investigate meanings, experiences, perceptions, interactions, and social processes that cannot be adequately reduced to numerical measures. Within this tradition, in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) have become established approaches for generating rich qualitative evidence. Their continued relevance is reflected in the broader expansion of qualitative research across academic fields. Thelwall and Nevill (2021), for example, found that qualitative research increased across almost all broad academic fields between 1996 and 2019, with interviewing emerging as the most prevalent of the qualitative approaches examined. Foundational scholarship nevertheless establishes important distinctions between IDIs and FGDs. Interviewing emphasizes sustained engagement with individual participants and is particularly suited to exploring personal experiences, interpretations, motivations, and meanings (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2019). The interview is consequently not simply a mechanism for extracting information but an interactive process through which knowledge is produced. Rubin and Rubin (2012), for example, emphasize responsive interviewing, in which researchers adapt questions and probes to participants' responses, while Seidman (2019) emphasizes the importance of reconstructing participants' experiences through detailed qualitative conversations. FGD scholarship proceeds from a somewhat different methodological logic. Rather than treating the individual response as the primary unit of qualitative evidence, focus-group research emphasizes interaction among participants as a source of data (Merton, 1987; Morgan, 1997). Participants may agree, disagree, challenge one another, recall experiences, or negotiate meanings, thereby producing forms of collective knowledge that may not emerge through individual interviews. However, group interaction can also introduce conformity, unequal participation, and the possibility that dominant voices will influence discussion (McLafferty, 2004; Rodriguez et al., 2011).

These competing positions generate an enduring methodological debate. Advocates of IDIs emphasize depth, confidentiality, flexibility, and individual disclosure, whereas proponents of FGDs emphasize interaction, collective sense-making, and the social construction of meaning. Yet neither method is inherently free from researcher or participant influence. Qualitative interviewing involves interaction between researcher and participant (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), while focus-group research requires attention to interaction, response order, non-verbal communication, and group dynamics (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The methodological question, therefore, cannot simply be which approach is superior. A further issue concerns the changing environment in which communication research is conducted. Contemporary communication scholarship increasingly investigates digitally mediated communication, diverse communities, and complex media environments. Consequently, qualitative researchers must consider technological access, cultural context, participant characteristics, ethical issues, and the nature of the communication phenomenon when selecting data-collection methods. Rodriguez et al. (2011), for example, demonstrate the importance of culturally responsive focus-group practice, while Thelwall and Nevill (2021) demonstrate the growing importance of qualitative research across academic disciplines. Despite these developments, the mapped scholarship reveals a continuing need for methodological synthesis specifically oriented toward communication and media research. Much of the foundational methodological literature emerged from broader social-science traditions, while relatively limited attention has been devoted to establishing a communication-specific framework for deciding when interviews, focus groups, or an integrated design are most

appropriate. This gap is particularly important because communication phenomena may involve both individual experience and collective meaning-making.

Accordingly, this article critically maps foundational and contemporary scholarship on IDIs and FGDs, examines their principal arguments and counter-arguments, identifies methodological gaps, and considers their implications for contemporary communication and media research. It ultimately argues for a shift from methodological preference to methodological fit, proposing an Integrated Context–Method Fit Framework for guiding qualitative data collection in communication and media studies.

2. Literature Selection

The review draws exclusively on the mapped foundational and contemporary scholarship concerning qualitative interviewing and focus-group research. The foundational corpus includes methodological contributions by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), Merton (1987), Morgan (1997), Rubin and Rubin (2012), and Seidman (2019). Contemporary methodological scholarship includes McLafferty (2004), Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009), Rodriguez et al. (2011), and Thelwall and Nevill (2021). The literature was examined according to its contribution to understanding the purposes, strengths, limitations, interactional dimensions, analytical procedures, cultural considerations, and evolving applications of IDIs and FGDs. The review does not claim to constitute a systematic bibliometric review; rather, it is a critical synthesis intended to generate methodological insight for communication and media scholarship.

Analytical Approach

The literature was thematically synthesized around five interconnected issues: the epistemological foundations of interviews and focus groups; their methodological strengths and limitations; arguments and counter-arguments surrounding their use; emerging gaps in qualitative communication research; and implications for future methodological practice. Particular attention was given to points where scholars converge and where methodological assumptions remain contested.

Foundations of In-Depth Interviews

The intellectual foundation of qualitative interviewing rests on the recognition that individuals interpret their experiences and construct meanings within particular social contexts. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) conceptualize qualitative interviewing as an interactive process through which knowledge is produced rather than a neutral procedure through which information is simply extracted. This position challenges the assumption that the researcher can remain completely detached from the research encounter. Rubin and Rubin (2012) similarly conceptualize qualitative interviewing as a responsive process. Their approach allows the researcher to pursue emerging themes and probe participants' responses rather than following a rigid sequence of predetermined questions. This flexibility is particularly useful when investigating complex communication phenomena in which participants' experiences may reveal issues that were not anticipated at the beginning of the study. Seidman (2019) further emphasizes interviewing as a means of understanding how individuals reconstruct and interpret their experiences. The strength of IDIs therefore lies in their capacity to produce detailed accounts of individual perspectives and experiences.

Foundations of Focus Group Discussions

The intellectual foundation of focus-group research is associated with the focused interview tradition and subsequent developments in group-based qualitative inquiry. Merton (1987) identified important continuities between the focused interview and focus groups while also recognizing the distinctive contribution of group interaction. Morgan (1997) subsequently established focus groups as a major qualitative research approach, emphasizing interaction among participants as a central source of data.

The significance of interaction differentiates FGDs from IDIs. Participants can respond not only to the moderator's questions but also to one another. Consequently, agreement, disagreement, clarification, challenge, and collective reflection become analytically significant. Focus groups therefore provide researchers with opportunities to examine how meanings are constructed within social interaction (Morgan, 1997).

Convergence and Divergence

The foundational literature reveals both convergence and divergence. Both approaches value participant perspectives, contextual understanding, interaction, and interpretation. However, IDIs generally privilege the depth of individual narratives, while FGDs emphasize interaction and collective meaning-making (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Morgan, 1997; Seidman, 2019).

The distinction should not be interpreted as evidence that one approach is universally superior. Rather, it demonstrates that the two methods provide access to different dimensions of social and communicative reality.

Contemporary Scholarship

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly focused on methodological rigor, analytical procedures, cultural responsiveness, and the expanding prevalence of qualitative research.

McLafferty (2004) demonstrates that focus groups require careful consideration of recruitment, group composition, moderation, and interaction. The value of the method therefore depends substantially on how the discussion is organized and facilitated. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) extend this argument by identifying the complexity of analysing focus-group data. They propose attention to participant response order, interaction, response characteristics, and non-verbal communication rather than restricting analysis to the literal content of participants' statements. Their framework therefore challenges simplistic approaches to focus-group analysis and strengthens the case for methodological rigor. Rodriguez et al. (2011) further demonstrate the importance of culturally responsive focus-group practices. Their framework emphasizes adapting the research experience to participants and paying attention to cultural and ethical considerations. At the broader disciplinary level, Thelwall and Nevill (2021) provide empirical evidence that qualitative research has become increasingly prevalent. Their analysis of Scopus-indexed research from 1996 to 2019 found that qualitative research increased across almost all broad academic fields and that interviews were the most common of the four qualitative approaches examined.

Together, these developments demonstrate that contemporary methodological scholarship is increasingly concerned not simply with whether interviews or focus groups are used, but with how they are designed, conducted, interpreted, and justified.

Individual Depth Versus Collective Meaning

The principal argument for IDIs is that individual conversations allow participants to provide detailed accounts of personal experience without the immediate influence of other participants

(Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Seidman, 2019). The counter-argument is that this individual focus may exclude the social processes through which meanings are negotiated. FGDs address this limitation by treating interaction as data (Morgan, 1997). However, the counter-argument is that interaction can also produce conformity or unequal participation. McLafferty (2004) and Rodriguez et al. (2011) therefore underscore the importance of careful group composition and facilitation.

Confidentiality Versus Interaction

IDIs can be particularly appropriate where participants need privacy to discuss sensitive experiences. However, individual interaction may also limit opportunities for participants to challenge or elaborate one another's perspectives.

FGDs provide interactional stimulation but may create confidentiality concerns. Thus, neither method possesses an inherent methodological advantage; the appropriateness of each depends upon the research question and participant circumstances.

Researcher Influence

Interviewing requires researcher engagement, probing, and interpretation, making reflexivity essential (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Focus groups similarly require active moderation, but the researcher must additionally manage group dynamics (McLafferty, 2004).

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) demonstrate that focus-group analysis should account for interactional and non-verbal dimensions, further showing that researcher responsibility extends beyond simply recording participants' words.

Analytical Simplicity Versus Interactional Complexity

Focus groups may permit researchers to obtain data from several participants within one session, but the resulting data can be analytically complex because researchers must account for interaction and response patterns (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Interviews may generate more individually coherent narratives, but they can require greater time for participant-by-participant data collection (Seidman, 2019). The appropriate comparison is therefore not simply data-collection efficiency but the total methodological demands of recruitment, data generation, analysis, interpretation, and reporting.

Research Gaps and Implications for Communication and Media Studies

The mapped scholarship reveals four principal gaps.

First, there remains insufficient communication-specific methodological theorization of interviews and focus groups. Foundational sources provide powerful methodological principles, but they are not specifically designed to address the full range of contemporary communication phenomena.

Second, there is a need for greater attention to methodological context. Communication research encompasses journalism, media audiences, political communication, development communication, health communication, environmental communication, and digital media. The appropriate qualitative method may differ across these contexts.

Third, cultural responsiveness requires greater methodological attention. Rodriguez et al. (2011) demonstrate that focus-group research should be responsive to participants' cultural contexts. This has particular implications for communication research in multilingual and culturally diverse environments.

Fourth, the expansion of qualitative research documented by Thelwall and Nevill (2021) creates a continuing need for methodological reflection. The increasing use of interviews and focus groups makes it important for researchers to justify their methodological choices rather than treating them as routine conventions. These gaps have direct implications for communication research. In journalism studies, IDIs can illuminate professional experience and institutional decision-making, while FGDs can reveal audience interpretations and collective perceptions. In development and environmental communication, interviews can illuminate institutional and expert perspectives, while FGDs can capture community-level meaning-making. In digital media research, researchers must additionally consider how communication technologies shape participation and interaction.

Integrated Context–Method Fit Framework

The synthesis supports an Integrated Context–Method Fit Framework (ICMFF).

The framework proposes that qualitative methodological choice should proceed through five questions:

1. What is the research problem?

Is the study primarily concerned with individual experience, professional practice, collective perception, interaction, or meaning-making?

2. What is the communication context?

Is the research situated in journalism, digital media, political communication, development communication, environmental communication, health communication, or another context?

3. Who are the participants?

Are they individuals, professionals, audiences, community members, policymakers, marginalized populations, or mixed stakeholder groups?

4. What kind of knowledge is required?

Is the researcher seeking personal narratives, collective meanings, interactional processes, institutional experiences, or multiple forms of evidence?

5. Which method provides the best methodological fit?

The answer may be:

IDI;

FGD; or

strategic integration of both.

The framework therefore replaces the question “Which method is better?” with “Which method or combination of methods best fits the communication problem?”

This is the central methodological proposition of the article.

3. Methodology

This article adopts a critical integrative literature-review approach. The purpose is not merely to summarize scholarship on interviews and focus groups but to critically synthesize methodological arguments, identify areas of convergence and disagreement, and derive implications for contemporary communication and media research. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the importance of aligning qualitative research decisions with the research problem, philosophical assumptions, and methodological approach. Their position provides an important foundation for the present review because the article is concerned with moving qualitative methodological selection beyond routine preference.

4. Results: Theoretical and Methodological Contribution

The article makes three principal contributions.

First, it reframes the IDI–FGD debate from a question of methodological superiority to one of methodological fit. This position is consistent with the broader qualitative research principle that research design should follow the research problem and philosophical assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, it integrates individual and interactional conceptions of qualitative knowledge. The framework recognizes that communication is simultaneously personal and social: individuals interpret experiences, while groups negotiate meanings.

Third, it provides a communication-oriented basis for methodological integration. Instead of recommending the routine combination of methods, the ICMFF argues that integration should occur when the communication phenomenon contains analytically distinct individual and collective dimensions. The contribution is therefore methodological rather than empirical. The article does not claim to establish that IDIs or FGDs produce objectively superior data. Instead, it proposes a conceptual basis for making more defensible methodological decisions.

Conclusion and Future Research

This review has demonstrated that the scholarship on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions contains enduring methodological tensions but also increasing evidence of complementarity. Interviews offer distinctive opportunities for exploring individual experiences, meanings, and narratives, while focus groups provide access to interactional processes and collective meaning-making (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Morgan, 1997; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2019). The central argument advanced in this article is that methodological preference should no longer constitute the primary basis for choosing between the two approaches. Instead, researchers should consider the research problem, communication context, participant characteristics, type of knowledge required, and interactional dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation. The proposed Integrated Context–Method Fit Framework provides a conceptual basis for this shift. It does not eliminate methodological distinctions between IDIs and FGDs; rather, it identifies circumstances in which each method is likely to provide distinctive forms of evidence and circumstances in which their strategic integration may be justified.

Future research should empirically test the framework across communication and media contexts. Comparative studies could examine how IDIs and FGDs perform across journalism, audience research, development communication, environmental communication, political communication, and digital media. Further research should also examine how culturally responsive approaches can strengthen qualitative communication research, particularly in diverse and multilingual settings (Rodriguez et al., 2011). Ultimately, the future of qualitative communication research should not be defined by competition between methods. It should be defined by methodological reflexivity, contextual appropriateness, analytical rigor, and a clear alignment between research questions and methods. The challenge for contemporary communication researchers is therefore not to identify a universally superior qualitative method, but to make theoretically informed and contextually defensible methodological choices.

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