

# When necessity becomes a virtue

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**Since the beginning of the pandemic, the demand for qualitative research has been booming. Because of the changes in people's lifestyles, uses and behaviours, it is becoming increasingly important to really understand the needs of consumers in the "New Normal". But what changes are needed in qualitative research? Julia David and Katharina Winter - experts from the "explore + evolve" department at Produkt + Markt - give examples.**

Face-to-face interviews (F2F), focus groups, in-depth interviews and ethnography are among the most commonly used methods of qualitative data collection. They create the desired depth of understanding. In the pandemic, it was necessary to digitise these methods and move them into virtual spaces, because the boom in demand was and is countered by restrictions on travel and constraints on contact. Even before Covid-19, face-to-face methods had been moved into digital space - but the pandemic accelerated this process. With the first lockdown at the beginning of 2020, we had to quickly look for suitable conferencing software for qualitative interviews in the digital space. After exploring the technology options on the agency, client and participant side, the wheat was quickly separated from the chaff. For international projects in particular, we now rely on the Zoom web conferencing software. This tool has turned out to be the favourite in the cooperation with our clients, because it is cost-efficient, has important security features and has with "Zoom Webinar" a separate observation room. We were also able to effectively incorporate services such as Mural Board or Miro, so-called collaborative whiteboards, for activating stimulus interaction or co-creation processes. The shift to virtual space brought surprising advantages: among other things, it turned out in online groups that the test persons were more relaxed because they were in their familiar environment. This had an effect on the warm-up phase, which was much shorter. In contrast, the discussions took more time, because the people in the virtual space are very careful to let others finish speaking. Online groups are therefore less suitable if topics are to be discussed in a potentially heated manner, such as occurs in Creative Problem Solving (CPS). For example, the method of "war gaming", a typical approach from health care market research, is difficult to simulate virtually. In "war gaming", the participants are supposed to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the new preparation in a controversial way and they predict the expected communication activities of the competition, which is - without interrupting each other – quite difficult.

## **How living rooms become innovation hubs**

In the case of inhome visits, we faced the greatest challenge, as contact restrictions and the two-household rule made it impossible to take the client into the test persons' homes. In order to continue providing up-close client contact and vivid immersion into different living environments, we have developed a solution that allows our clients to be live and direct during inhome interviews. With a professional camera system with first-class picture and sound quality, we set up a live video transmission of the interview from the households. The clients can follow via video streaming from the comfort of their office or home. Only the researcher is then on site in the households, so that all hygiene regulations can be observed. Due to live streaming, we have to be even more careful than usual to ensure the privacy of the participants. In order not to violate anonymity, private photos are taken down or documents lying around are put away. In addition, we are very transparent with the subjects about how the interviews are stored and who will be listening to the interview on the observer side. All participants introduce themselves briefly at the beginning of the interview and sign a confidentiality agreement. These trust-building measures quickly make people forget about the technical setting with the camera and the observers. The participants warm up very quickly and there is a familiar, personal atmosphere. All this together the "Broadcasted Home Interviews" are going very well and we cannot find any disadvantages compared to the personal home visits. On the contrary, a number of advantages have emerged for our clients. On the one hand, they have the opportunity to be present at all inhomes and thus never miss an insight. They also experience the needs and pains of the customers and consumers in their entirety and live. On the other hand, the clients receive increased flexibility in terms of time and space due to the fact that they don't have to visit the households personally. Broadcasted inhomes have thus gone from being a "stopgap" to a preferred research method among our clients.

## **Web interviews in the studio remain possible**

For another project we were faced with a similar task. The client needed early feedback on a product at the prototype stage. This was to be particularly about the perception of value as well as the correct focus of the product features. If obvious, the results should reveal potential for improvement. For this, it was necessary for the respondent to actually see the device. Since prototypes are subject to strict secrecy and cannot be tested in several households at the same time, we had to conduct this survey in a test studio. However, at the time of planning the survey, the recommendation was to keep contacts to a minimum, so we switched to face-to-face web interviews with consumers. The respondents were on site in the studio, while the researcher conducted the interview via web conference from the home office or the office. For the respondents, the interview situation was a bit unfamiliar at first, but they quickly warmed up and a pleasant open conversation atmosphere developed. With the camera, we were also able to perceive mimic reactions and respond accordingly, which made this new approach an even more pleasant one. This made this new approach an equal alternative to the conventional method, as long as it is not absolutely necessary for the qualitative researcher to recognise micro-mimics or non-verbal signals (as in the case of haptic experience, for example) in order to answer the question.

## Self-ethnography is more doable

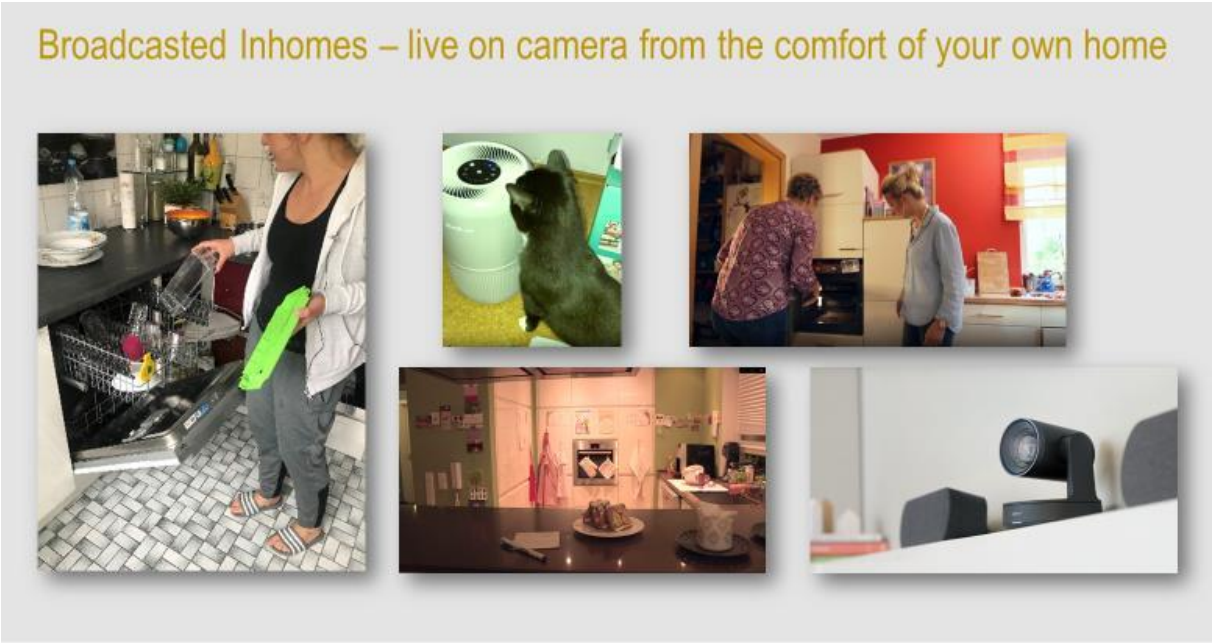
We love ethnography for many reasons: We get to meet and understand a wide variety of people, we can immerse ourselves in cultures and see first-hand how behaviour change manifests in different parts of the world. We can explore how ideas have a very nuanced impact in different groups or countries, based on the underlying values or local cultural context, the unique customs and even the climate. While we interviewed and especially observed people in person before the pandemic we have increasingly used mobile self-ethnography, which has also experienced a real boom during the crisis. For this, the test persons take over tasks themselves, for example uploading videos, taking photos of their surroundings with their smartphones, filling out questionnaires or posting articles. In a two-wave self-ethnography in the pandemic year 2020, we immersed ourselves in 22 German households to identify long-term changes in behaviour and attitudes as a result of the Corona crisis.

As regrettable as the omission of face-to-face contacts is, it did not lead to a decrease in insights. We were able to observe, among other things, that the home has changed into a place of "cocooning" since the beginning of the pandemic, that people place more value on a healthier diet, or that there has been a much more conscious interaction with families and friends, a new "we". Our summary: Covid-19 forced us to completely change our approach, but we have seen a number of benefits from this shift to online approaches:

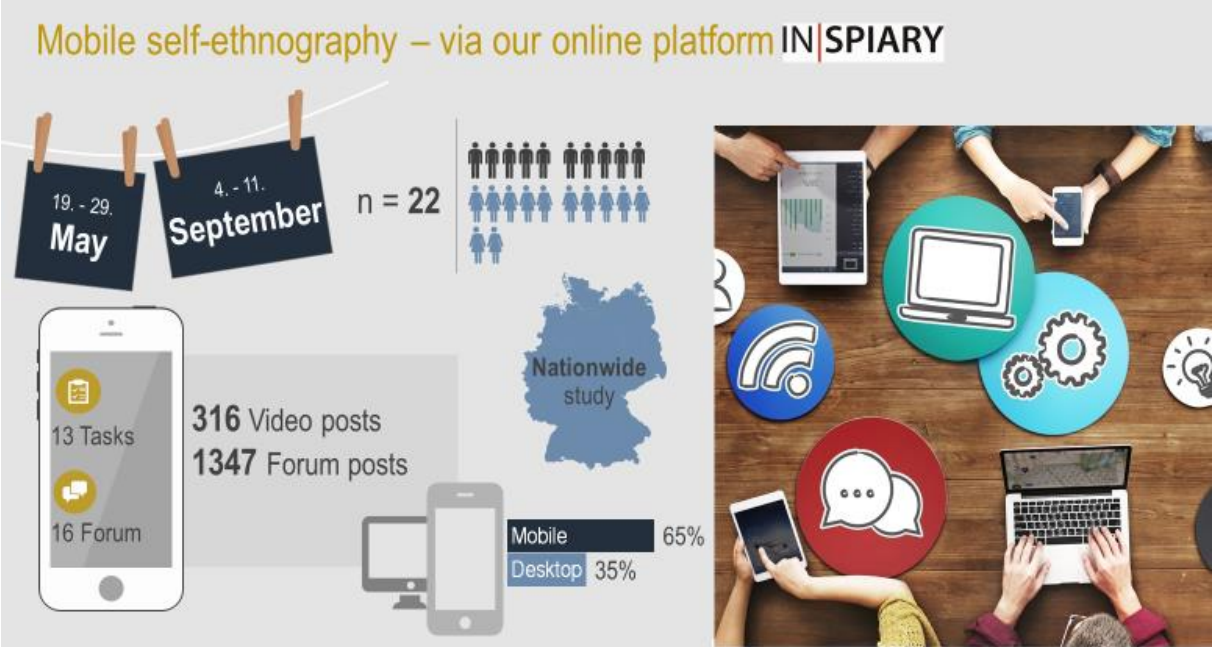
- Qualitative market research can be fast In the past, international qualitative market research in particular required a lot of time in several countries and involved high travel costs. Nowadays we can moderate an Australian focus group in the morning, conduct an in-depth interview in the UK at lunchtime and look at sessions in France in the early evening. Moving to virtual space has made our studies much more time and cost efficient.
- More regional representation Qualitative face-to-face market research has typically been limited to centralised hubs and specific cities. Online approaches have broken down these barriers. In a group session people from a remote village in the Alps, a small town on the Baltic Sea or the metropolis of Berlin can participate.
- More team participation means greater agility While there are great advantages to having everyone in an observation room behind the one-way mirror and follow a group together, but it is not always possible for the clients to be on site in the test studio. Online research means that principals can attend sessions much more easily and observe and influence much of the research. This makes agile innovation processes possible in companies.
- Diverse and unique discussions. As people spend more and more time at home, they are becoming more comfortable with video calls. We have found that participants often feel safer and more open to talk about sensitive topics in a one-to-one interview due to the relative anonymity. This has led us to uncover a surprising amount of unique insights through this medium. The use of tablets and laptops also allows for flexible movement around the house, which has given us access to comprehensive insights into lives.

While many of us can't wait to get back to the test studio, we cannot deny the benefits of these new approaches. When we return to normal, if we ever do, we expect to see more mixed approaches between online and face-to-face research. Qualitative market research will be better as a result.

Equipped with camera and microphone, the client can watch the interview



Self-ethnography creates deep insights into persons' lives



## About the authors



Julia David is a graduate psychologist and Group Manager of the qualitative expert team "explore + evolve" at Produkt + Markt. Ethnography is her specialty. She is also a certified leader for Design Thinking, Agile Coach and trainer for other innovation methods.

[jdavid@produktundmarkt.de](mailto:jdavid@produktundmarkt.de)



Katharina Winter is part of the qualitative team "explore + evolve". She is an expert in moderating in-depth interviews, focus groups and creative workshops (CPS, Design Thinking, Co-Creation), both on and offline.

[kwinter@produktundmarkt.de](mailto:kwinter@produktundmarkt.de)