



*'Bringing Research to Their Doorsteps': Reflections  
on Using Synchronous Online Focus Groups for  
Researching Young People's Experiences of School-  
Based Sex and Relationships Lessons*

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# Key arguments of my PhD thesis

1. Sexuality education is a 'right' of children and young people.
2. Sexuality education should meet children's and young people's informational needs.
3. In attempting to devise a curriculum for sexuality education, we should speak to children and young people themselves to ascertain their views on what is important.

# Selecting a research method

1. Research is qualitative in nature – so choice between available qualitative methods.
2. Focus groups preferable over individual interviews.
3. Online focus groups preferable over in-person focus groups.

# Why online methods for researching with children and young people?



# Why online focus groups?

01

Synchronous

02

Anonymity  
(reinforced by the  
use of  
nicknames)

03

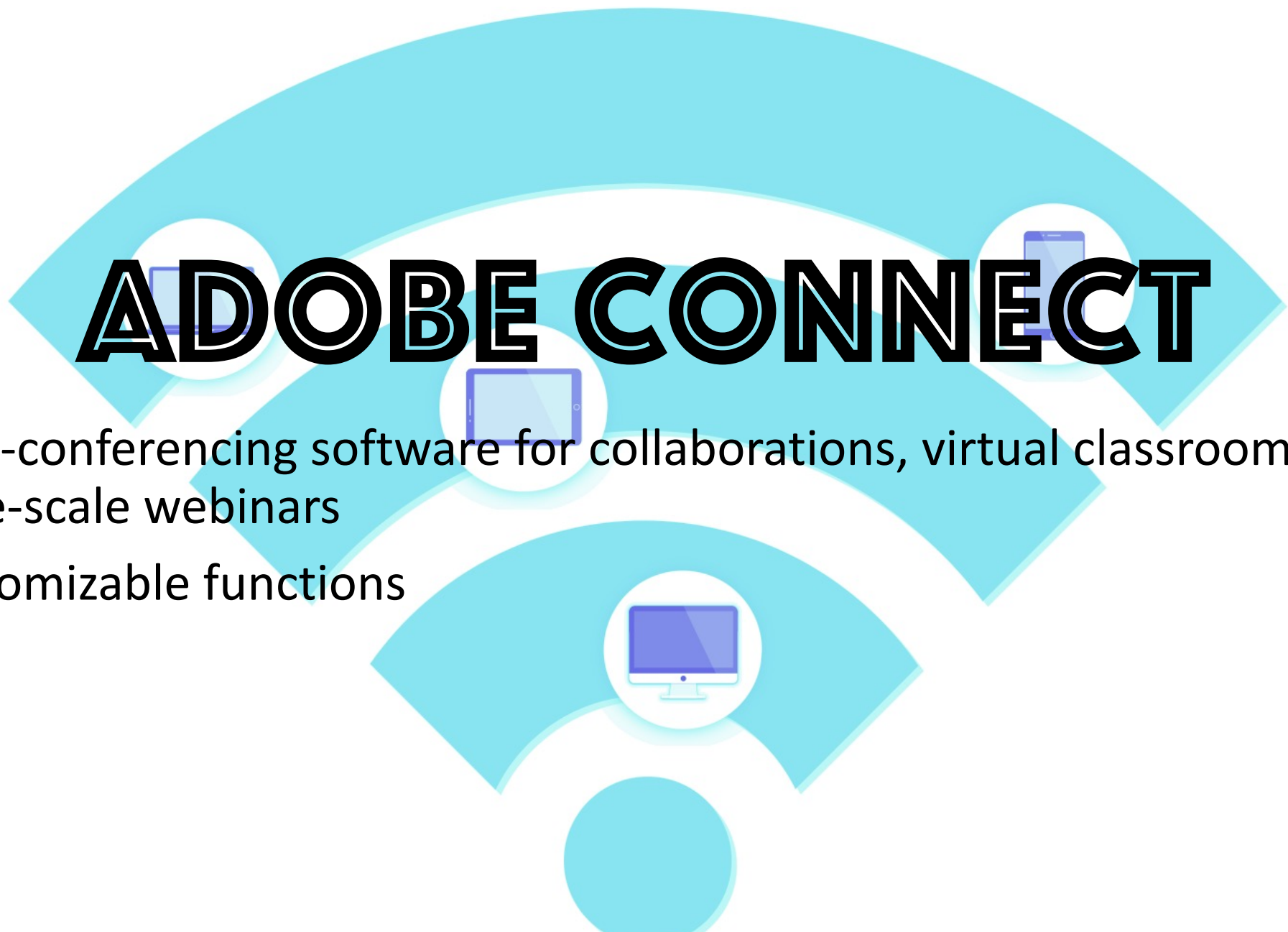
Timing/  
location

04

Private and  
secure

05

Access to data

The background features a large, light blue Wi-Fi symbol. Overlaid on this symbol are several circular icons: a laptop, a tablet, a smartphone, and a desktop monitor. The text 'ADOBE CONNECT' is prominently displayed in the center of the Wi-Fi symbol.

# ADOBE CONNECT

- Web-conferencing software for collaborations, virtual classrooms and large-scale webinars
- Customizable functions



Information about the re... [Menu Icon]

11 [Font Size] [Bold] [Italic] [Text Color] [List Icon]

**The Researcher**  
My name is Rachel and I am the researcher on this project. I will also be facilitating the focus group today.

**My Project**  
I would like to know what you, as young people, think about Sex and Relationships Education in schools. I think this is really important because young people should be able to obtain information about sex and relationships that is appropriate, relevant, useful and interesting to you Therefore, I feel that adults should listen to you in coming up with a curriculum for Sex and

Chat area (Everyone) [Menu Icon]

Everyone [Text Input] [Send Icon]

Participants (1) [Menu Icon]

[Icons: Mute, Video Off, Person]


Active Speakers

Hosts (1)  
Rachel Heah

Presenters (0)

Participants (0)

Presentation (1).pptx [Draw] [Eraser] [Stop Sharing] [Full Screen] [Menu Icon]



Young People's Perspectives on Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in schools

[Navigation Icons] [Sync]

Ground Rules [Menu Icon]

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1. Please try not to chat to the people next to you while the research is taking place - it may distract them from typing their answers.
2. There are no 'silly' answers - all your opinions are important to me and I would love to read them.
3. Spelling/grammar does not matter - this is not an English test.
4. Short answers (e.g. 'yes' or 'no') are perfectly fine, but I would also love to see detailed opinions - so take your time to type out answers!
5. You do not have to answer all the questions asked. Feel free to skip questions that you do not want to answer.
6. Please be respectful of everyone in this online space.
7. Try not to give personal examples or tell personal stories which may violate your own or someone else's privacy.
8. Have fun!



# Logistics

- What I *planned* to do:
  - Recruit participants in schools – those interested would e-mail me back
  - Focus groups would take place outside of school hours
  - Participants would access focus groups from locations convenient to them
  - Participants would use nicknames in the focus groups – such that their identities would only be known to me.
  - Safeguarding issues – reported back to schools
  - Participant's consent only – not parental consent

# What ethics said...

- Ethics mainly took issue with:
  - The lack of explicit parental consent
  - The fact that research of this nature would take place online
  - Gatekeepers not being physically present.

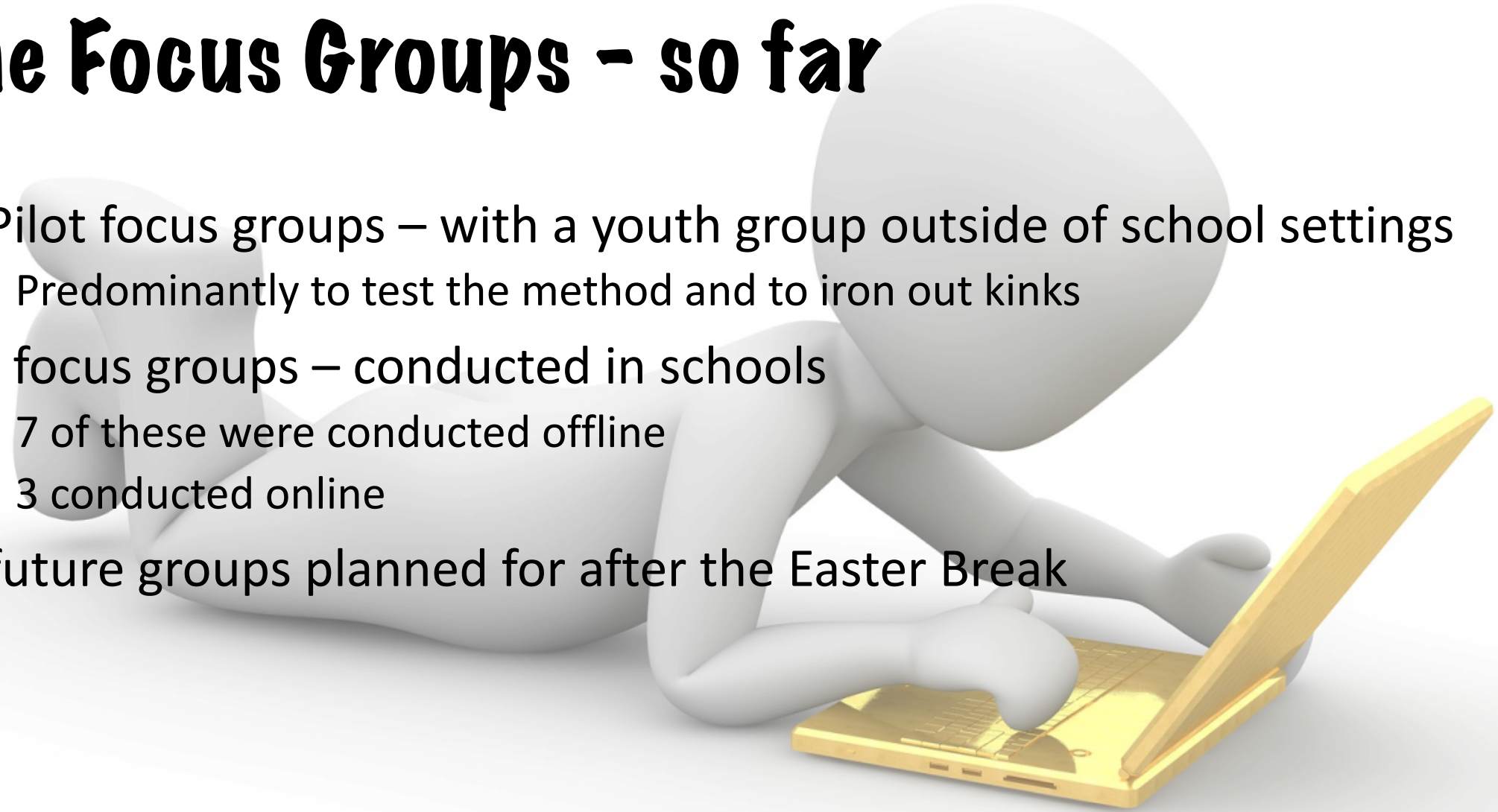
**No!**

# Logistics

- ~~What I *planned* to do:~~ What I *actually* did:
  - Recruit participants in schools
  - Focus groups took place in schools, during school hours
  - Participants gathered in the same classrooms for the research
  - Parental assent/consent obtained where it was school policy to do so
  - Provision for in-person focus groups to be conducted as an alternative to online focus groups

# The Focus Groups - so far

- 2 Pilot focus groups – with a youth group outside of school settings
  - Predominantly to test the method and to iron out kinks
- 10 focus groups – conducted in schools
  - 7 of these were conducted offline
  - 3 conducted online
- 3 future groups planned for after the Easter Break



# Reflections: Online vs In-Person Focus Groups

- Power imbalances
- Participation and engagement
- Interest
- (Over-)disclosure
- Moderating



# What participants thought of online focus groups (1)

- The criticisms:
  - One participant said they would have preferred to speak face-to-face, as that was more social
  - A few said that they found the layout boring, and would have preferred more colours
  - One very good comment about finding it difficult to read the chat as it was black on white background
  - One pointed out that if there were too many people in the online meeting room, it would become hard to follow the conversations



# What participants thought of online focus groups (2)

- What they liked:
  - Getting to use technology
  - Not having to speak/talk/'write' things
  - The anonymity
  - Not feeling 'judged' online
- Participants also mentioned:
  - That the online medium "helped them answer" and should be used in school more often.
  - That anonymity would help them ask questions in SRE lessons
  - That they liked being able to share their thoughts and opinions with someone else!



# Conclusions

1. Online focus groups = not a perfect method for research.
2. But still worth using with children and young people?
3. Thoughts?



**THANK  
YOU!**



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