

Student experience podcast transcript: Samantha Vandermark

Could you tell us about your research project? We are particularly interested to hear about the research design and the research methods that you chose.

My research project was an in depth, qualitative study into views of mothers of young children around the topic of childhood obesity, specifically focusing on the Government health initiative 'Change 4 Life'. I used two semi-structured, open-ended focus groups with around six participants each, alongside semiotic and discourse analyses of two 'Change 4 Life' advertisements, which were also shown to the focus groups to prompt discussion and either validate or invalidate the Government's messaging. I did not have a specific hypothesis, instead the project was exploratory; my design was loosely focused and I followed the direction of the most prominent themes that appeared throughout the course of the project.

What sparked your interest in the subject you chose to research?

Firstly, seeing the 'Change 4 Life' advertisements and other media consistently speculating the consequences of child obesity in terms of children of today and future generations, and the growing concern being generated about this in society. The increasing visibility and seemingly changing perceptions of obesity in general made me think of how the mothers of today must be feeling in terms of recognizing and assessing this risk for their own children, and the actions, if any, they have chosen to take in light of this escalated concern.

Could you tell us how you came up with those questions?

In order to develop feasible and valid research questions that would be relevant to the respondents, I tried to put myself in the respondents' shoes, as mothers, and think about how I would want to be asked about my own opinions and my actions as a mother. I also used my pre-literature review reading to think about both historical and current issues within the topic area, developing questions that would be relevant to the mothers of today (which included researching and thinking about radically changing lifestyles across more recent generations). I wanted to gain an overall picture of social alterations that have taken place, particularly charting the mothers' own experiences and how these have influenced not only their opinions but their own parenting techniques. Before the focus groups I did a pilot study with three mothers to assess the relevance of the questions I had developed, and this helped my questions to evolve when applying my newfound knowledge of the topic and transforming it into a logical structure.

I used, much like my research questions, specific themes which could directly link with my findings while giving a contextual background to the data. After the data analysis I returned to my literature review to see where findings could be introduced/framed through background literature.

What prompted you to choose this research design and method?

I wanted to use multiple techniques that really delved into underlying meanings, and assess government motives, particularly for the advertisements, which would validate each other, rather than relying on

one method to bring out the kind of data expected. This also combined my University course knowledge of both sociology and new media, and was intended to place an interesting twist on the qualitative method of focus groups.

What factors influenced your choice of research methods?

I took the time factor in close consideration. With more time and resources it would have been great to materialize a much larger research agenda; however, it soon becomes clear that the extensive methods undertaken by research academics with sponsorship and funding cannot be matched by a dissertation project!

How did you choose your sample and what principles guided your sampling?

Family networks and then snowballing into asking people I already knew of their connections with mothers of young children; once connected with one mother I used her as a primary point of contact to gather additional respondents for the focus groups.

Did you have any problems when conducting your research?

I didn't really have any difficulties, but the main concern was ensuring the attendance of all the respondents, as the groups had been arranged via my primary contact.

What were your research questions?

I didn't have a static set of research questions because my aim was to discover the valid thoughts and feelings of the groups involved, and therefore hopefully represent a small section of the 'mother' population. However, my questions were focused around a specific set of themes that were intended to draw out the underlying issues surrounding childhood obesity. These issues were:

- What do the target audience of the Change 4 Life campaign, e.g., parents or in this case mothers, think about the campaign and what do they think its key messages/intentions are – and have these advertisements been successful, both in terms of creating awareness and prompting action?
- Definitions of childhood obesity – how do mothers 'define' childhood obesity, e.g. in visual terms, and how did they develop these perceptions?
- The emergence of childhood obesity within society – what kind of lifestyle/psychological/social factors, if any, have been the catalyst for this recent problem?
- Perceptions and trends of childhood obesity, particularly focusing on social class – is there a social class divide in terms of lifestyle/who is obese? Also looking at views around supermarkets, food manufacturers, working mothers, etc. and the impact they have made upon childhood obesity levels
- Parents' own experiences and concerns – how did the mothers' own childhoods and eating patterns/lifestyles contribute to their mothering techniques and children's food behaviours?
- Finally I linked all of this back to the Change 4 Life campaign and whether the mothers would change their actions as a result of the issues raised within the advertisements?

Did you experience any ethical difficulties at any point in your research?

The only potential ethical concern within my research was ensuring that my questions that focused on childhood obesity and parenting styles in particular were not leading, offensive or upsetting. This was taken into account when creating my research questions and ethical statement, where respondents were made aware of their right to stop their participation at any time.

Did you experience any difficulties with equipment or software at any point?

The only significant difficulty, as with any research project involving digital recording, was ensuring the focus group recordings were kept safe and accessible. I was also aware and therefore careful of my transcribing technique, e.g. ensuring that I was accurately transcribing verbatim and not adjusting the data in any way, including trying to maintain the colloquial nature of the conversations and various accents. I did consider using qualitative analysis software such as Atlas, but I found that noting down themes on each piece of transcript was more effective (and less time-consuming than attempting to learn a new software package so quickly, which could have hindered my analysis thought process!).

Do you have any comments about your relationship with your research project supervisor? What role did they have in the process of doing a research project?

My project supervisor was extremely supportive; giving me sound advice when needed while allowing me the opportunity to be independent and confidently develop my own sociological ideas. Her primary role was being a consistent point of contact for broader questions and concerns I had about my project – either solidifying doubts when things were not feasible, or pushing me to follow ambitious decisions which would be beneficial to the project.

What are the main lessons that you have learned from this process? Are there any aspects of the research that you would like to have done differently?

I have learned that self-discipline is something that cannot be taught to you by anyone else; you have to be determined and confident in what you do, with the reassurance that you have support when things get difficult. What I would have done differently is focus in on more specific questions and aspects of the topic to make my project more detailed; however, unfortunately this is something I could have only discovered by actually doing the research project.

If you had one bit of advice to give to students who are about to begin working on their research projects, what would it be?

Be realistic, but be ambitious and aim to do something different.

How did you go about analyzing the data?

Once my focus groups had been transcribed precisely and printed, I began a qualitative thematic analysis. I ensured, on the advice of my supervisor, I left enough margin on each page to make notes. I read through the transcripts line by line, noting down themes as I saw them appear in the data, for

example if a mother openly spoke about the negative impact of fast food chains on childhood health, I would note this down as 'Causes – fast food'. At the bottom of each page I would then note down the main themes that had come from that page's conversation. From this initial, detailed analysis I looked again at the themes that had been pulled out, and started to group these into wider thematic categories that would represent overall segments of conversation from within the focus groups. Finally, I used the electronic copies of my transcripts to piece together the segments of data which represented each theme, and developed my qualitative analysis through analyzing in detail what the mothers said about these themes and what they might signify in terms of wider social attitudes and norms.

How did you go about writing up your research project?

I found it easier and was recommended to work backwards in terms of the write-up. As already outlined, my literature review was constantly updated and adapted to ensure it sufficiently framed the background focus of the research project, so could not be finalized until all data analysis was completed. The methodology was the section completed first, as once the data gathering was complete I could reflect on this process, adding this to justification for choosing the methodology and the possible negative consequences on both reliability and validity of data. Once I had performed the analysis, I wrote this up as quickly as possible, while my qualitative interpretations were still fresh in my mind. It was definitely more effective to complete one section as fully as possible before moving onto the next one, as it was easy to lose focus within the chaos of trying to think about the finished article before it has really begun! The conclusions and abstract were written last, as I had pieced all the other sections together and gained a more holistic view of my findings, which allowed me to develop an overall summary of the project that readers could quickly decipher.

What problems did you encounter at this stage and how did you succeed in overcoming them?

The main difficulty was remembering that each section of the write-up was going to be pieced together at the end, therefore I needed to make sure there was a flow between the sections and keep in mind the bigger picture.