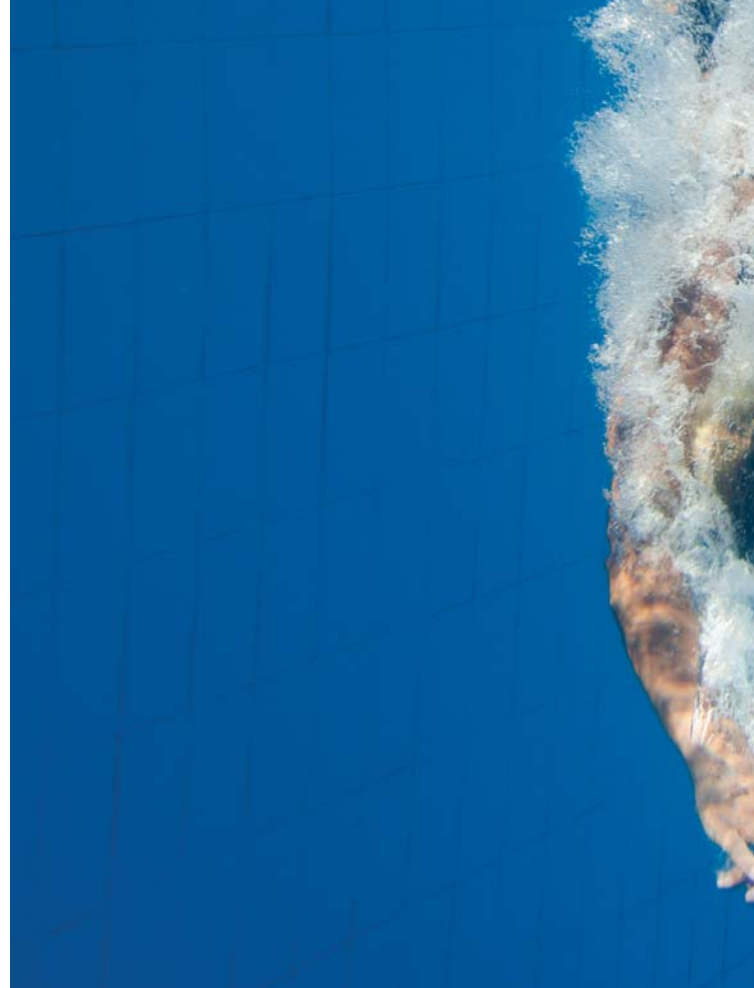


••• qualitative research

Close from a distance

Leifheit turned to digital qualitative research when in-person wasn't an option

| By Barbara von Corvin, Johannes Pirzer and Thomas Diehl



snapshot

The German household products maker used digital ethnographies to help generate new product ideas during COVID-19.

How well do digital ethnographies work – and how do they compare with our pre-pandemic experiences with face-to-face in-homes? This is the question that many research agencies and clients across the globe have been forced to address over the past 12-18 months as proven face-to-face or in-person approaches have been sidelined by the pandemic.

In this case study from fieldwork executed during the pandemic in 2020, research company Happy Thinking People and German multinational household products manufacturer Leifheit will document how a two-stage online ethnographic approach worked extremely well, even exceeding client-side expectations. We share the methodological approach, key learnings, benefits and suggest a number of watch-outs.

Digital ethnography is, we conclude, a suitable candidate for the new normal in qualitative research and offers an expanded digital tool that can deliver in-depth insights from a distance.

Notable digital expansion

While qual was originally slow to transform itself fully digitally, the pace of recent change has been remarkable. Digital is certainly not new for qualitative research – online communities (MROCs) have been mainstream for at least 10 years in many geographies and mobile ethnographies have been broadly adopted since the early 2010s – but there has been a notable digital expansion and acceleration over the past 12 months, spurred on by the pandemic.

A number of qual methods have been positively impacted. Online depth interviews and mini-online groups have gained global acceptance as positive experiences have dispelled doubts over issues of depth of insight, reliability and consistency of results.

Ethnographies – or in-homes – were traditionally seen as only possible face-to-face. Lasting over many hours in users' homes, they delivered authentic glimpses into participants' real lives, rich in emotional subtlety



and naturally occurring, contextual insights. They are well established as the go-to method for new product development projects to help reveal white spaces at the front end of the innovation process.

A potential switch to digital in-homes raised fundamental questions:

- Were sensitive depth and true empathy possible from a distance?
- Could online deliver equally inspiring and granular insights as face-to-face or was the absence of physical proximity a deal-breaker?

Simplify daily life

Leifheit's slogan "How housework's done today" summarizes the company mission to simplify everyone's daily life through the development of modern, innovative and convenient household products.

Its focus for the current study was to identify relevant consumer insights and needs to inspire the ideation of breakthrough solutions with huge consumer relevance and high satisfaction potential. In addition, Leifheit wanted to use trends as a springboard to ensure a high resonance with various target audiences. One of these trends was the aging society.

The study was originally planned for spring 2020. COVID was peaking and all of Europe went into lockdown. Face-to-face was out of the question, so a new digital approach was necessary – with the following key challenges:

- How can we best replicate the sense of closeness using online tools and operating from a distance? How can we best attune the setup and moderation approach?
- How can we fully capture the context, the in-home situation, when researchers are not physically present and able to explore and investigate?
- What about non-verbal information – often small, potentially subtle but revealing pieces of information that an in-home ethno invariably throws

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up? Would vital clues get lost?

- The same question for unmet or unarticulated needs. Observers in situ can arguably see more broadly whereas digital offers a potentially narrower, selective angle.
- How can we ensure the full involvement of participants aged 60+? This was especially critical given the importance of the growing segment of internet users over age 55 (aka Silver Surfers).

In retrospect, we think these concerns were perhaps exaggerated. They are assumptions based on an idealized or even romanticized view of traditional ethnographies: that only face-to-face can allow researchers to fully read between the lines or adequately surface submerged emotions. While accessing nuanced sentiments and anchoring them in a relevant context is probably more difficult online – and requires a different setup and research approach – it's certainly not impossible!

Complement one another

Our design approach was driven by the need to deliver deep dives that were broader and more category-relevant while also specific. It seemed to us that a multistage approach would work best to deliver on both objectives. Our hypothesis: A mixture of online communities and screen-to-screen depths could complement one another well.

We knew from experience that MROCs are powerful tools that use an asynchronous and longitudinal approach over days (and sometimes longer) to give researchers a solid understanding of how a brand or product category is used in real life. They deliver a rich mixture of responses and response types, from quick polls to videos, picture uploads, picture sorts and more. Combining this array of outputs with targeted in-depth explorations seemed a good option.

We had worked extensively since the onset of the pandemic on how best to access digital depth and learn the new skills and approaches for qual researchers. For the Leifheit project we used the

following two-step, 100% digital design:

Phase 1: 10-day online insight community with 36 participants overall, divided into three subgroups.

Phase 2: 12 screen-to-screen interviews, one hour each, for in-depth subsequent explorations.

In the online insight community, the subgroups were allocated appropriate cleaning tasks and asked to keep a multimedia cleaning diary. They uploaded pictures and short videos, commenting on them. To keep interest high and stimulate discussion, participants within the subgroups saw each other's posts and shared thoughts.

Allowing participants to post in their own time and over the space of 10 days delivered a huge array of material and insights that compares positively to that generated by a half-day face-to-face in-home session.

We also observed a higher level of sharing of more personal, even intimate details than our long experience with in-homes usually generated. The absence of a physical moderator in-home perhaps played a disinhibiting role here.

Overall, we gained a nuanced understanding of our participants as individuals and the varying facets of their personalities, thanks to the range of contributions to different aspects over the duration of the research. This in-depth knowledge helped inform a selection of participants for the ensuing deep-dives.

The screen-to-screen depth sessions involved selected participants (a subset of the online community) using their smartphones and taking us on a real-time video tour of their homes, taking/uploading the output enriched with accompanying still photos.

Each tour involved a focus on a particular area and type of activity, with participants talking us through their needs and challenges for each. Effectively, it felt like we were there in person. We asked people to go to a particular room or area, show us something more closely or help us understand something they had shown in more detail.

This part of the research was key to getting to the motivational drivers – what was really important to them, in their own words and why. The

mixture of tasks and targeted research dialogues was a powerful mix of behavioral and attitudinal aspects.

Sharing seemingly everyday problems such as cleaning the house was perceived as entertaining and – especially during the difficulties of the global pandemic – a welcome distraction, with a high sense of community.

Delivered on all the areas

Digital truly allowed depth from a distance. Despite the restrictions on sensorial involvement – smell and touch for example – the 100% digital approach delivered on all the insight areas required for the new product development team.

Participants were clearly comfortable with the setup (no “strange observers” in their home) and arguably this fostered an even more natural setting. The longitudinal aspect also allowed participants to relax and do things in their own time, which must enhance the authenticity of the output.

The sense of emotional bonding definitely worked digitally, despite the concept of researchers and participants linking up in a temporary virtual space. As researchers, we felt like we were with our participants in their homes; in fact, the distance of half a meter from our computer screen wasn't any distance at all.

In this study, we strongly felt that the digital approach would fare well in an academic equivalence approach compared to face-to-face. The range of insights, the depth and granularity were all outstanding.

In summary, we would suggest that the multiphase digital approach delivered the following advantages: high engagement and involvement levels; easier, more comfortable for participants; superior time and cost efficiency; broader geographic spread of participants; and better eco-footprint (no travel).

Can run smoothly

The above assumes that the user experience for participants is seamless and free of problems. The software has to be easy to understand and use for all age groups and tech-affinity levels, so that both video interviews and overall interaction between community par-

ticipants can run smoothly.

Basic aspects need to be double-checked. For example: participants being at home during the interviews; log-ins from a mobile device rather than a PC; Wi-Fi being available throughout the whole home.

However much technical confidence researchers may have gained, not all participants have the same familiarity and comfort level with the various technical requirements, making tech support essential to help handle unforeseen glitches.

Project managers also have to take particular care with digital data ownership/intellectual property issues and data protection and privacy requirements. These can be different – and in some cases stricter – with 100% digital market research projects. Usage rights and copyright reside with the participants (the content generators), which has implications for any subsequent usage of the material generated. Researchers need to plan accordingly.

Digital can deliver

Our fully online case study with Leifheit demonstrated that when executed in the right way, digital ethnographies can deliver just as well as (and in some cases better than) their face-to-face counterparts.

The study confirmed that digital ethnographies offer closeness from a distance, yielding range, depth and density of insights. Digital closeness does however require a different approach from researchers.

While it's premature to talk of validation, the study suggests that digital ethnographies can be added to the qualitative toolkit and be regarded as part of the new normal in qualitative research. 📍

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