Research Note

Focus Group Interviews with Japanese University Students: Reflections on the Joys and Challenges of Fieldwork

Antonia Vesting, Stefanie Schwarte, Anne-Sophie L. König and Gabriele Vogt

Abstract
Focus groups are being used as a qualitative method of data collection in several of the social science disciplines. In fall 2024, we conducted 14 focus group interviews with Japanese university students for our research project on demography and democracy in Japan. We set out to inquire how the aging of Japanese society affects youth attitudes and interest in politics. We also asked which strategies the youth employ to make their voices heard in the political arena. In this paper we introduce focus group interviews as a method in social science research on Japan. We offer insights into the processes of designing and conducting focus group interviews with university students, while highlighting methodological considerations specific to research in Japan. We aim for this paper to serve as a resource for researchers who are considering related research approaches.

Keywords: qualitative research methods, focus group interviews, Japan, political participation, political interest, youth, university students

Antonia Vesting, M.A. is a doctoral student at the Japan Center at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) in Munich and a research associate for the DFG-funded project (510553228) *Demography and Democracy: How Population Aging Alters Democracy—The Case of Japan*. Her research focuses on renewable energy initiatives, sustainable urban development, youth participation and demographic change. For inquiries, please contact her at a.vesting@lmu.de.

Stefanie Schwarte, M.A. is a doctoral student at the Japan Center at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) in Munich and a research associate for the DFG-funded project (510553228) *Demography and Democracy: How Population Aging Alters Democracy—The Case of Japan*. Her research interests include politics in Japan with a focus on gender and representation, multi-level governance, and democracy. For inquiries, please contact her at s.schwarte@lmu.de.

Anne-Sophie L. König, M.A. is a doctoral student in Japanese Studies from Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) in Munich and a research associate for the DFG-funded project (510553228) *Demography and Democracy: How Population Aging Alters Democracy—The Case of Japan*. Her research interest is politics in Japan with a focus on democracy studies, representation, local politics and reforms. For inquiries, please contact her at an.koenig@lmu.de.

Prof. Dr. Gabriele Vogt holds the Chair in Japanese Studies at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) in Munich. She is the PI of the DFG-funded project (510553228) *Demography and Democracy: How Population Aging Alters Democracy—The Case of Japan*. For inquiries, please contact her at gabriele.vogt@lmu.de.

Introduction

During fieldwork, a researcher can derive ample joy from her work, but multiple challenges might await just around the corner. From unexpected occurrences such as a nearing typhoon, a snap election, lack of sufficient Wi-Fi, or applying a research method for the first time, there are always challenges awaiting in the field. It is very likely that something does not go as planned. Field reports by other researchers can serve as valuable resources for developing one's own fieldwork and providing reassurance that we are not alone in dealing with its complexities. Bearing this in mind, we contribute to the expanding body of methodological literature in social science research on Japan by recounting our own experiences of designing and conducting focus group interviews as one of the methods applied in the DFG-funded research project *Demography and Democracy: How Population Aging Alters Democracy—The Case of Japan*. This research project explores the political implications of population aging and the potential responses to this demographic shift with regard to youth participation and representation in politics and policymaking. Within the bigger framework of this project, focus group interviews, next to the more standard one-on-one semi-structured interviews and an online survey, are one element of a multi-method approach designed to explore Japanese university students' engagement with politics amidst an aging population. Focus group interviews as a qualitative interview method are often used to study how a group of people—in our case Japanese university students—engage in an open or moderated discussion on a given topic. Rather than hearing solely individual responses to a set of interview questions, focus group interviews allow for insights into how participants react to and engage with other group members' perspectives, potentially sharing their opinions more freely.

The focus group interviews discussed in this paper were conducted during a three-week fieldwork phase in Japan in October and November 2024. Within these three weeks, we conducted 14 focus groups with Japanese university students and a total of 96 participants. At the time of scheduling our trip, we had no way of knowing that in our first week in the field, a parliamentary election would be held.[1] This unforeseen timing and the media coverage of election campaigns might have resulted in a somewhat heightened awareness of policy issues among our participants. Our research team comprised the PI (principal investigator), three doctoral students and one student assistant; the PI and two of the doctoral students were present in Japan during that timeframe, while the other team members provided support remotely from Germany. Conducting focus group interviews was a novel experience for all of us. Here we offer insights into the processes of designing and conducting focus group interviews with Japanese university students, while highlighting methodological considerations specific to research in Japan. We aim for this paper

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1   Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba dissolved the lower house on October 9, 2024, and called for a snap election, which was then scheduled to be held on October 27, 2024 (The Asahi Shimbun, "Ishiba dissolves").

to serve as a resource for researchers who are considering related research approaches.

This paper is organized as follows: In the next section, we discuss relevant literature for social science research in Japan and methodological considerations for preparing focus group interviews. The main part of this paper outlines our research design, beginning with a discussion of the rationale for selecting focus groups as our method of data collection and showcasing the necessary preparations for conducting successful interviews. This most importantly includes recruiting participants, securing locations, acquiring technical equipment, obtaining ethical clearance, and conducting a pilot study. We furthermore provide an overview of the structure and flow of our focus groups and add reflections on conducting research as a team, as well as subsequently on the discrepancies between our expectations and the reality of conducting focus groups with university students in Japan. Finally, we summarize our findings and provide an outlook on open questions and further contemplations.

Literature Review

This paper aims at contributing to the emerging literature on qualitative fieldwork within Japanese Studies and to discussions of focus group interviews as a research method. In the following, let us briefly sketch out both fields.

Qualitative Fieldwork in Japanese Studies

Japanese Studies, as part of Area Studies, encompasses a broad variety of disciplinary perspectives (Basedau and Köllner 2007). Consequently, scholars of Japanese Studies adopt the methodological approaches of the respective discipline(s) they situate themselves in. Oftentimes we face uncertainties as to how the methods of these disciplines can be applied to the Japanese context. The lack of scholarly debate on this topic has previously been criticized (Aldrich 2009: 299) and so has the fact that some of the emerging literature on the more general question of how to do fieldwork in Japan has been compiled solely by non-Japanese scholars and presumably remains limited to an outsider's perspective on Japan (Ben-Ari 2020). An early example of collecting various experiences by non-Japanese scholars doing fieldwork in Japan is an edited volume by Bestor, Steinhoff and Bestor (2003). Similarly, edited volumes by Furukawa (2007) and by Linhart, Pilz and Sieder (1994) on methods, fieldwork and ethnography dive into a discussion on the role of the researcher and the relationship of researcher and research participant. The ethics of ethnography and the new trends and challenges of fieldwork in Japan have been laid out in a comprehensive manner in Robertson (2007), Reiher (2018), and Gmeinbauer, Polak-Rottmann and Purkarthofer (2020). Other publications give advice on ethnography and ethical conduct in the field in Japan (Aldrich 2009; McLaughlin 2010). Probably the most comprehensive recent addition to the literature on research methods in Japanese Studies is the edited volume by Kottmann and Reiher (2020), which addresses each step of the research process—from

formulating a research question to publishing one's findings—while including real-world examples as experienced in the field.

Lastly, we want to stress the importance of cultural sensitivity in conducting fieldwork in Japan and other regional settings. Adapting to the cultural norms of our fieldwork site counts as a basic research skill, and awareness of our own positionality cannot be over-emphasized, as Yamaguchi (2020: 202) explains: "[…] qualitative interviews are carried out in a conversational style; inevitably they are entangled with cultural norms […]." Yet, as non-Japanese and white scholars, it is clear that we would stick out in any fieldwork setting in Japan. Several colleagues in their writings emphasize this context dependency (Alexy and Cook 2019; Yamaguchi 2020; Holthus and Manzenreiter 2020: 152; Roberts 2003). Sometimes, being a foreign researcher in the field can be advantageous (Aldrich 2009), as being an outsider may open doors to us that remain closed to insiders and accidental rudeness may be more readily excused when committed by a foreign researcher (Yamaguchi 2020). This outsider status might, however, also pose challenges, potentially limiting access or shaping interactions in ways that negatively influence the data collection process. Furthermore, in the Japanese academic context, with its pronounced authority structures, students may feel pressured to comply with a request (such as for participation in an interview) from their teachers (Takeda 2022). For the above listed reasons, sharing, openness, respect, and trust—along with an awareness of gender roles and linked expectations—are important factors for researchers during fieldwork in Japan (Alexy and Cook 2019: 246–247).

Focus Groups as a Method

Focus group interviews have been established as a research method since the early 1960s, foremost in market research (Barbour 2018; Glesne 2011: 130). Since the 1980s, this method has experienced a boom and has been employed in many research fields, such as public health, communication, education, psychology, sociology, and political science. Given the multidisciplinary rootedness of this method, definitions of focus group interviews tend to be broad, as exemplified in this definition by Kitzinger and Barbour (1999: 20): "Any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction."

Focus groups as a flexible methodological tool are often used in multi-method designs in combination with other qualitative or quantitative methods (Bergmann 2020: 439–440). They can also serve as an exploratory tool to refine concepts and language for further research (Tonkiss 2018). The interactional context of focus groups generates a certain type of data: focus groups best capture the dynamics of group interactions and discussions. The method assumes that opinions, attitudes, and accounts are socially constructed, making it particularly useful for studying how individuals negotiate topics through social interaction. Rather than aiming for generalizable findings, focus groups generate qualitative data that reveal diverse

perspectives on a given issue (Barbour 2018; Tonkiss 2018). These perspectives are not fixed; on the contrary, participants may build their opinions throughout the discussion, so contradictions and inconsistencies or changes in their opinions may emerge as the discussion progresses. The strength of focus group interviews lies in revealing these dynamics (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015: 202–203).

Focus groups can provide access to people or groups that may be difficult to reach otherwise (Glesne 2011: 130). By engaging the vulnerable and addressing sensitive or difficult topics, *security in numbers* encourages conversation (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999). The method is especially useful in investigating "why participants think as they do" (Morgan 1997: 20), i.e. through focus groups we can capture attitude formation (Barbour 2018). For this process to function smoothly, advanced decision-making is crucial and needs to encompass the place, demographics and number of participants and overall number of focus groups, interview duration, and questions or prompts encouraging the topic of the group discussion (Glesne 2011: 131). Also, Tonkiss (2018) and Barbour (2018) outline various approaches to structuring focus group discussions, ranging from the appropriate group composition to including the use of fixed questions, thematic topic guides, group exercises, and visual cues. Managing group dynamics on-site poses another challenge for researchers that includes setting discussion rules, ensuring balanced participation, maintaining focus, and fostering a comfortable environment; for all this moderator skills are relevant. Dividing responsibilities during the focus group setting is a good idea as several tasks need to be looked after simultaneously: taking notes, facilitating the session, checking the video and audio recording, and time management (Glesne 2011: 131–133).

Focus group participants should be selected according to the research question and hypotheses. As Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read (2025: 201) point out, "familiarity among focus group participants [can] increase or decrease their willingness to communicate and divulge information. While in some contexts it would be impossible or undesirable to assemble a group of total strangers, in other contexts […] [it] would generate better data and enhance the prospects of maintaining collective confidentiality." Some individuals might express more extreme opinions in a group setting than they normally would (Glesne 2011: 134). In cases where participants are drawn from the same institution or organization—such as from the same university or even the same seminar—they are likely to be familiar with one another, which may also affect group dynamics in one way or another (Tonkiss 2018: 251). By paying attention to group interaction, we can gain insights into the process rather than the outcome of discussions (Barbour 2018: 23–25). In fact, compared to (semi-)structured interviews, the dynamics of a group discussion offer a more suitable context for observing opinions and attitudes as they are communicated in everyday life (Flick 2009). As discussion dynamics can vary significantly between focus groups and the flow of discussions is not predictable, comparisons between focus groups are difficult. As moderators, researchers must often make decisions in

real time, for example, when certain participants dominate the discussion while others remain mostly silent, or when the conversation does not develop naturally.

Two focus group studies were of great help in developing our research design because they closely thematically connected to our specific research interests. Goerres and Prinzen (2013) employed focus group interviews to investigate citizens' attitudes toward intergenerational justice in the context of demographic change and its impact on the German welfare state. Their study analyzed 12 focus groups, each consisting of four to eight participants ranging in age from 17 to 89 years. Here, focus groups with mixed-age participants were used to explore the influence of generational diversity on group discussions and compared to control groups. The findings suggest that the composition of focus groups directly affected the dynamics of the conversations: mixed-age groups demonstrated greater consideration for the needs of other generations, whereas homogenous groups, particularly those consisting of younger participants, approached issues related to older age groups, such as healthcare costs for the elderly, in a predominantly utilitarian manner. In a Japanese setting, Taniguchi (2019) conducted experimental focus groups with Japanese high school students aged 16 and 17 on citizenship education and active learning. Taniguchi tested the effectiveness of different instruction styles for teaching the content of citizenship education. Her findings suggest that for students who are used to lecture-style instruction, discussion can be encouraged by well-prepared prompts.

Above we elaborated on some of the literature that was particularly useful in building our knowledge on qualitative research and especially focus groups. However, our list is not exhaustive and there are many more guides and accounts on focus groups, such as, for example, Acocella and Cataldi (2021), Cyr (2019), Morgan (1993), Morgan and Hoffmann (2018), Puchta and Potter (2004), and Schulz, Mack and Renn (2012), to mention just a few. Crucially, Sultana (2007) underlines the importance of researchers having a high level of awareness regarding the specific cultural context or target group within which an interview is to be conducted, and of incorporating this into the methodological planning from the onset.

Focus Group Interviews with Japanese University Students

In this section, we elaborate on our reasons for choosing focus groups as a method and specifically on how we designed and prepared for the focus group interviews; this includes practical and formal elements. We furthermore highlight some technical aspects to take into consideration when conducting focus groups and discuss the importance of testing the research design before the actual data collection phase. Following an in-depth explanation of the structure of our focus group interviews, we reflect on how to conduct research as a team. Concluding this section, we then juxtapose our initial expectations with how the focus groups actually proceeded.

Why we Chose Focus Groups

In our research project we are interested in how demographic change affects the fundamental workings of democracy in Japan. We analyze the effects of population aging on political participation, political representation and policymaking, as well as the responses to these effects emerging from within societal groups and institutions. As one part of this larger research project, we aim to understand two aspects of Japan's youth as the societal group that is most likely to be alienated from the world of politics given their comparatively small size and thus weak lobbying position. We first ask, how does the aging of Japanese society affect youth attitudes and interest in politics? Second, what strategies do young people employ to make their voices heard in Japan's political arena? Among a multitude of possible research designs, none of the research methods alone produce data to cover the scope of these two aspects, making a multi-method approach necessary. We decided on a large-n online survey for findings that are more generalizable. Through the survey, we also obtained context to interpret findings from our two qualitative methods: semi-structured single interviews and focus group interviews. While semi-structured interviews are influenced directly by the persona of the interviewer, their relationship with and impression on the interviewee, focus groups imitate a more natural setting and thus the persona of the researcher takes the figurative backseat in the interview setting, and participants concentrate on the discussion with their peer group (Glesne 2011: 131–133). Hence focus group interviews presented us with the opportunity to find out how the Japanese youth negotiate usage and significance of different forms of political participation within a peer group. We were able to gain insights into their thoughts on how population aging influences their avenues and means of political participation. In line with the research literature (c.f. Kitzinger and Barbour 1999), we found that interviewing students in a group setting took the pressure off the individual and made it relatively easy for them to voice their opinions *vis-à-vis* their peers.

Preparations

Conducting focus group interviews requires thorough preparation, particularly when working in a different cultural context. One key consideration in our research was the difference in discussion culture between our own academic background and the Japanese university setting. While we were personally accustomed to open discussions in seminar settings within Area Studies and the social sciences in Germany, Japanese university students often experience more teacher-centered instruction and may be less familiar with openly exchanging opinions in group discussions. Acknowledging this, we carefully designed the materials we aimed to use during the focus groups, following the goal of creating a setting that would encourage participation without much prior knowledge about the discussion topics on the part of the student participants (c.f. Taniguchi 2019).

To facilitate the beginning of the discussion, we prepared an introductory presentation and several prompts to guide participants. This material will be introduced in more detail in the subsection *Flow of the Focus Group Interviews*. All the input was provided in Japanese for accessibility and ease of understanding for the participants. A central element of the discussion prompts was a set of 30 photographs depicting various political activities.[2] Participants were asked to sort and discuss these images through several exercises. To foster a sense of familiarity, we selected only photographs featuring Japanese individuals in a Japanese setting, ensuring that the content resonated with the students' lived experiences. This was acknowledged by several participants who not only noticed and mentioned the presence of Japanese people in the photographs, but also voiced their surprise about the broad variety of activism that is part of Japan's political culture. To guarantee linguistic and cultural accuracy, all materials underwent multiple rounds of proof-reading by Japanese colleagues at our home university. Additionally, we sought feedback from professors based in Japan who had experience with teaching at Japanese universities or even with conducting focus groups in Japan. All these steps helped us to confirm the feasibility of our research design in a Japanese university setting. We aimed to create an environment where students felt comfortable engaging in discussion, minimizing potential cultural barriers to open dialogue and reducing any potential pressure due to social desirability.[3]

Alongside designing the discussion materials, we developed consent sheets for the participants. The primary consideration in designing these documents was deter-mining what information to include while ensuring transparency and ethical research practices. We needed to clarify what type of data would be collected and how it would be used. While the transcripts of the discussions could potentially be included in publications, video recordings and photographs would be used strictly for analytical purposes and not be made publicly available. The consent sheet also provided a detailed explanation of data usage and anonymization specifying who would have access to the material and how video and audio recordings would exclusively be used for the transcription process. To ensure that the consent sheets were clear and appropriate for the context, they were shared in advance with

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2   The set of 30 photographs depicted various political activities, including: *running as a candidate, small demonstration, demo camp, newspaper reading, campaign helper, post sharing on social media (SNS), Pride Parade event, voting, hunger strike, mass demonstration, SDGs event, organization of a matsuri (*local festival*), student self-administration, volunteering, setsumeikai* (informational meetings), *chōnaikai* (neighborhood association) *activities, collecting signatures for petitions/referenda, machizukuri* (community building), *joining a political party, collecting donations/donating, boycotting products/companies, sit-ins, circle activities, International Women's Day March, political conversations with family, political conversations with friends, kenmin taikai/jūmin taikai* (regional and citizens' rally), *second-hand markets, neighborhood/beach clean-up activities, and joining a politician's Instagram live event.*

3   The social-desirability bias in research is at play when a respondent participant chooses their response to an interview question along the lines of what they assume the interviewee deems to be the preferable response (Bergen and Labonté 2020).

professors and facilitators in Japan, giving them the opportunity to suggest modifications or raise concerns before the documents were finalized. This added to the trust between us, the researchers, and the professors recruiting their students as participants. Participants were informed about their rights regarding their own data not only through the consent sheet but also during the introductory presentation before the focus group started. Through this careful review process, we aimed to create a consent form that was both ethically sound and comprehensible to all participants.

How to Organize Focus Groups: Recruiting Participants, Facilities, and More

A key challenge in organizing focus groups is participant recruitment. There are different sampling methods for focus groups (Tonkiss 2018; Flick 2009). One major consideration for us was whether to invite students voluntarily or to integrate the interviews into class sessions. Since students have a right to their education and, in Japan, pay considerable tuition fees, using class time for research raises ethical concerns. Eventually, we conducted focus group interviews both during class time and during off time and left the decision about the setting to the discretion of our Japanese colleagues who recruited students for our project. We primarily recruited students from political science and related fields, ensuring that the discussion would be engaging and relevant to their studies.

In the early stages of designing the research project, we aimed to include a broader sample of young Japanese, not limited to university students. However, we quickly realized that recruiting participants outside institutional settings such as universities would be difficult as a research team based abroad and without the leeway of conducting multiple field visits ahead of the interview wave to build relationships and trust with individuals. As a result, we mainly relied on our personal connections with professors at Japanese universities: They introduced us to their students and provided us with the facilities to conduct the focus group interviews by booking suitable rooms at their universities. This recruitment strategy resulted in a sample that is primarily composed of students from high-ranking universities studying political science, law, education, and economics. This limitation must be considered during the analysis phase. Established relationships with faculty at educational institutions who acted as facilitators hence proved essential to our recruitment process. Understanding their interests and negotiating our own research needs required careful communication. This included deliberating over what specific information to disclose regarding our other contacts when asked and whether adjustments to our research design were necessary to align with certain universities' requirements.

Participant compensation is another important consideration. Due to budget and administrative constraints, we were unable to offer financial compensation. However, this decision also involved ethical considerations, as paying students could have influenced their willingness to participate in the interviews or the nature of their

responses. Instead, we followed Japanese gift-giving customs to express our gratitude.[4] We provided water, tea, and snacks during the interview sessions to create a friendly atmosphere and, after the session was closed, we handed out small packages with sweets brought from Germany to every student.

One factor that significantly influenced our focus group interviews was the extent to which participants already knew each other. In most cases this was unavoidable since we recruited students from the same universities and, oftentimes, the same seminar groups. The impact on discussion dynamics varied: In most groups, prior acquaintance made students more open and willing to engage in discussion, particularly in settings where a strong sense of camaraderie already existed within the seminar and the relationship between the students and the professor was very friendly. On some occasions, familiarity had the opposite effect. One student expressed discomfort discussing political interest and participation in front of peers whom he knew but was not particularly close with. This may have influenced the depth of his contributions to the discussion.

Ethical Clearance

In our case, the topic of ethical clearance arose in the later phase of planning our focus group interviews. While ethical clearance is a common practice at Anglo-American universities and life science faculties globally, in Area Studies, including Japanese Studies, in Germany it is yet to be established. Our funding agency did not require an ethical clearance for our project and the ethics committee at our home institution initially claimed that they processed applications only if conditioned by the funder. This points to a problem other researchers in Area Studies might also face at their home institutions, especially in Germany. Then, about a month before the actual fieldwork, a request by one of the Japanese universities that we had approached was conveyed to us through the corresponding professor in Japan: the university needed to know that our project had received ethical clearance at our home university and furthermore wanted our research project to be cleared in their in-house committee again. This put us under significant time pressure and moreover had us worried not only that this university would threaten to pull out of hosting us for focus group interviews, but potentially that other universities would communicate similar requests to us shortly before we were scheduled to depart for Japan.

On the bright side, we now had a valid reason to ask our home institute's ethics committee to review our case. To be more precise, for a lack of a committee within the Department of Asian Studies, we had to ask for help from another department and two different committees were close enough to be considered; these were the

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4   In Japan, it is customary to bring local specialties as souvenirs for family, friends, and colleagues when traveling (Aldrich 2009, McLaughlin 2010). These souvenirs are called *omiyage*. By following this practice, we honored local customs while showing appreciation for the students' time and engagement.

ones in the political science department and in the anthropology department, and both had their fixed schedules for submitting applications. These schedules are important to consider early on when recruitment is done via institutional actors. Additionally, the content and demands of the application differ depending on the discipline. In the end, we chose to work with the ethics committee in the anthropology department because of two reasons: the submission deadline for applications was impending, and anthropology and Japanese Studies at our home university are part of the same School for the Study of Cultures. Applications submitted to the anthropology committee have to adhere to the *"Frankfurt Declaration" of Ethics in Social and Cultural Anthropology* (GASCA 2008) by the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology (GASCA).

Eventually, the ethics clearance at our home institution and at the Japanese partner institution went relatively smoothly. This was thanks to members of our home institution's committee who processed our application quickly, the professor at the Japanese university, who mediated and advised, and the staff from the partner universities' research support team who rigorously checked our application and gave valuable feedback before it was submitted to their in-house committee. One minor difficulty was that in our case, the committee at our home university processed an application with a mixed method design including the focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews, and online survey. Our partner in Japan required different applications for qualitative and quantitative methods, so we prioritized and only applied for the qualitative methods because of time constraints. For readers who are faced with an ethical clearance application at a Japanese university, we would like to add that the wording of our consent sheet in terms of clarification about how the participants' data would be used and the exact method of anonymization of the university name and participant data were of particular importance to the Japanese ethics committee.

Technical Aspects

Before getting started, careful planning of technical requirements is essential for ensuring success in focus group interviews. It is important to keep in mind that different phases of the research process demand different types of equipment and software. The necessary equipment naturally depends on the specific research setup and the budget at one's disposal. For data collection, a camera, an audio recorder, and a laptop are typically required. Additionally, external storage devices or cloud-based solutions may be needed to securely store and backup recorded data. For data analysis, appropriate software for transcribing, coding, and analyzing qualitative data—such as MAXQDA[5]—should be considered.

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5   MAXQDA is qualitative data analysis software used for systematically coding, organizing, and analyzing textual, visual, and multimedia data in research.

Budgeting for technical equipment should comprise hardware and potential costs for software licenses, data storage solutions, and transcription tools.

The technical setup for focus group sessions depends on factors such as room availability, the number of discussions running simultaneously, and the overall duration of each session. In our case, we required a camera capable of recording continuously for at least 60 minutes. We encountered an unexpected challenge due to an EU regulation imposing higher import taxes on professional video recording equipment capable of recording videos of that length. As a result, many standard cameras on the market were limited to a maximum recording time of 30 minutes, which complicated our search for suitable equipment and increased costs. This issue highlights the importance of thoroughly researching technical requirements in advance. Some universities or faculties may provide equipment rental services for students and researchers, which can be a substantial help once you plan the acquisition of equipment and reduces costs.

Despite careful preparation, unforeseen technical issues can arise, requiring researchers to remain flexible. Equipment malfunctions, insufficient battery life, or compatibility issues between devices can disrupt data collection. Therefore, it is advisable to test all equipment before the actual interviewing phase, have at least one backup recording option (such as a smartphone or another recording device), and bring spare batteries for the camera and audio recorders as well as data storage devices.

Once data has been collected, researchers must consider storage capacity and data security. Large video and audio files require substantial storage space. This raises questions about whether university servers can accommodate the data and, if so, how long the uploading and downloading of files will take. Depending on institutional infrastructure, additional external hard drives, or cloud storage solutions may be necessary. In our case, the hotel Wi-Fi during our fieldwork trip was too slow for university servers to function as a reliable backup solution for our interview data; this required us to use an external hard drive instead. Furthermore, researchers should ensure they have suitable software for processing and transcribing recordings, as well as for anonymizing sensitive data before analysis and publication. Such software might also be provided by your own institution. It is worth checking which licenses are already available to researchers without any additional costs.

By anticipating technical requirements early in the research process, researchers can avoid logistical complications, ensure smooth data collection, and facilitate efficient data management and analysis.

Test Run: Conducting a Pilot Study

We decided to conduct a pilot study to test our focus group design well ahead of the planned fieldwork phase to ensure the smooth handling of the interview flow. One member of our research team conducted a test run with three university students in Japan to assess the quality of the research design. Beforehand, the same research

member also presented the research design and the prompts we had prepared to an online research colloquium led by a political science professor at a Japanese university. Our research design provoked a lively discussion. In addition, we received comments and advice on Japanese language expressions.

The first hurdle in conducting the test group proved to be the acquisition of participants. Participants were mobilized through a professor based at a Japanese university, who invited his seminar students to voluntarily participate in this experiment. In this way, we were able to organize one test group with three students. Similar inquiries to professors at other institutions proved difficult. While they kindly collected email addresses of students who had voiced interest in our project, upon contacting these students via email, hardly anyone responded to our request to indicate their availability via an online scheduling platform to arrange a suitable date. The experience of trying to set up test groups taught us how important and efficient it was to have the backing of a facilitator—here the professor who would provide a concrete date and time as well as the meeting room and would directly communicate the specifics with the volunteering students. On the other hand, trying to establish contact through email or arranging dates online in our case came to no avail and generally needs to be considered as more difficult due to the lack of personal connection to the outsiders and a subsequent lack of commitment.

The test run was arranged in mid-July. The procedure was the same as described in the following subchapter. Since only one team member was in Japan at the time, two other project members joined online via video call. They were introduced to the participants beforehand and their cameras remained switched off during the test run so as not to disturb the participants. Having two more team members joining online helped with measuring the timing of the successive activities and taking notes. This gave the test leader onsite more leeway to observe the participants' reactions to the diverse activities and to take photos of the materials that emerged during the focus group setting. Upon finishing the test run, each participant was handed a feedback sheet. Their feedback was mostly positive and encouraging. Based on the results of the test run and participants' feedback, we once again decided to make slight adjustments to our research design and time plan.
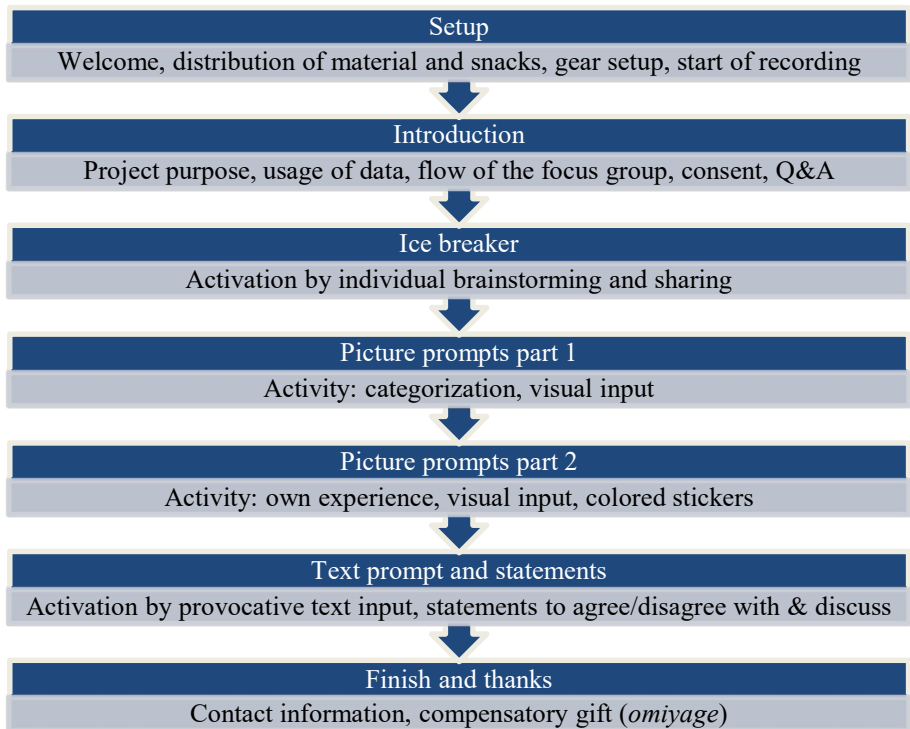
Flow of the Focus Group Interview

We designed the flow of the focus group with the main objective being to foster a positive atmosphere, inviting and encouraging discussions among participants. Figure 1 shows the schematized structure of our focus group interviews. During the setup of our focus group interviews, we prepared the technical equipment as well as drinks and snacks, welcomed the arriving participants, and handed out materials such as consent sheets and demographic questionnaires. To kick off the group interview, we introduced the research team and project, and provided clear instructions for the discussion using a PowerPoint presentation. These instructions included an overview of the timeframe and structure of the focus group, an oral confirmation of consent to

be recorded on video and audio, as well as some discussion rules. Before diving into the discussion, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions.

Throughout the interview, we prepared several prompts to facilitate discussion and guide participants. The main part was designed to generate a variety of data via tools such as a short demographics survey, notes and stickers indicating experiences and opinions. These tasks resulted in not only a recording, but visual, textual, and numerical results.

Figure 1: Schematized flow of the focus group interview including purpose of each part. Design by authors.

Setup
Welcome, distribution of material and snacks, gear setup, start of recording

Introduction
Project purpose, usage of data, flow of the focus group, consent, Q&A

Ice breaker
Activation by individual brainstorming and sharing

Picture prompts part 1
Activity: categorization, visual input

Picture prompts part 2
Activity: own experience, visual input, colored stickers

Text prompt and statements
Activation by provocative text input, statements to agree/disagree with & discuss

Finish and thanks
Contact information, compensatory gift (*omiyage*)

The content-based elements of the focus group interview started with an individual brainstorming task, followed by sharing and group activities. We asked the participants to think about their own definitions of political participation while taking notes. This icebreaker gave all participants a chance to produce and structure some thoughts before engaging in a group exchange. The purpose of this step was to give shy or more observant participants time to adjust to the situation—a step more

extrovert participants might not have needed as much. Having all participants present their definitions placed each of them in the position of contributing to the discussion in the focus group setting right from the start.

To keep the momentum, we then kept everyone engaged with our first activity. The participants were tasked with categorizing thirty picture prompts of different activities that could be deemed political (cf. "Picture prompts part 1" in table 1). We opted for a large number of photographs and a short time to complete the task to ensure that the participants remained focused and responsive. The pictured activities were meant to inspire and make them rethink their definitions of political participation. We deliberately chose a variety of activities, some of which could be labeled controversial like *hunger strike* or *demo camp*. The large number of photographs ensured that all participants had to help with the sorting and categorizing, and that they had to do so while being engaged in conversation with one another. This approach helped to prevent the group from splitting into active and passive participants. Having a pre-decided set of activities allowed us to narrow down the direction of the discussion and to some degree to visualize the result of this part of the discussion. Through the categorization process, we aimed to detangle the common impressions that the participants shared regarding the sample activities.

The following prompt was meant to get an individual account of how politically active the participants have been in their lives (cf. "Picture prompts part 2" in table 1). Here we engaged everyone by giving them stickers of two different colors. One color was to mark the activities that they had done before and the other to mark activities they would like to do in the future. With all the participants distributing their stickers at the same time, it was not possible to track any given sticker to the person who placed it. This made the results semi-anonymous. After applying their stickers, we encouraged a group discussion assessing which activities had many stickers and which had few to none, and what the reasons for the popularity of certain activities versus the unpopularity of others might be. The result of the stickers was recorded in an Excel chart after each focus group to make them comparable with other focus groups.

In the final step, participants received a text prompt on the aging of Japanese democracy and youth participation in politics (cf. "Text prompt and statements" in table 1). In each focus group, one volunteer read the prompt to the group. Subsequently the group was shown three statements on youth participation and representation in the aging society and were asked to discuss whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements and why. Through the text prompt and the statements, we ensured that the topic of demographic change was prominently included in the discussion. The statements were part of a battery of statements in our large-n survey on the political interest, participation, and representation of young Japanese, which we conducted online at the same time. We designed this part as well as the picture prompts of political activities in line with the survey to make a mixed method analysis of these two sections of each research design possible. Closing the session,

we expressed our thanks by distributing *omiyage* from Germany. Finally, while some participants started to eat the sweets, we had time to stop the recording devices, check the return of consent sheets and demographic questionnaires, and organize all other materials.

Conducting Research as a Team

Teamwork is essential in focus group interview research, as different stages of the process require the coordination of multiple tasks. The responsibilities within the research team are distributed across three key phases: preparation, data collection, and data analysis. Firstly, during the preparation phase, all team members should develop a thorough understanding of the research method and collaboratively design an approach that aligns with the research question(s). This strengthens the research design and fosters effective collaboration during data collection.

Secondly, during the data collection phase, tasks should be clearly divided to ensure efficiency. Ideally, at least two to three researchers should facilitate a focus group interview; in our case, we conducted sessions with two team members. Just before heading into the actual interview, one researcher should set up the technical equipment while the other should prepare the discussion materials and welcome participants. The introductory presentation can be conducted jointly. During the discussion itself, one team member should take notes and intervene when the conversation slows, while the other should monitor time and regularly check the technical equipment. If multiple focus groups take place simultaneously, having an additional researcher present is helpful. To create a comfortable discussion environment for student participants, we deemed it important that only peers were present during the focus group interviews. To this end, the junior research members acted as moderators. Prior to the focus group, we politely asked professors to leave the room or (at least) to refrain from engaging with their students during the discussion and observe from the background.

Thirdly, analyzing the collected data as a team presents both opportunities and challenges. In our study, we applied qualitative content analysis using MAXQDA, which required the development of a coding manual to ensure consistency in data interpretation. While a team-based approach enhances research quality through discussion and reflection, it is also time-consuming, requiring frequent meetings and alignment on methodological decisions. This aspect should be considered when planning research projects that involve multiple researchers.

Beyond data collection and analysis, careful documentation is crucial for ensuring the usability of research data beyond the initial project team. This includes systematically saving and explaining data, as well as detailing the research design in a way that allows for future accessibility. Such considerations should already be integrated into the early stages of research planning to facilitate later use by both the original team and other researchers. Many universities offer services to support researchers in data management by promoting FAIR data principles (Findability,

Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reusability). They also provide data management planning tools, such as the Research Data Management Organizer (RDMO), which is in place at many German institutions, and offer repositories for publishing datasets to enhance their reusability beyond the original research team (e.g. Open Data LMU at LMU Munich).

Conducting Focus Groups in Japan: Expectations vs. Reality

When choosing focus group interviews as a method of data collection, our research team was confronted with a black box of assumptions on the feasibility of this method. Probably the biggest black box concerned the willingness of students to actively participate in the group discussion. Several of our contacts voiced their concern that even if students chose to take part in the focus group interviews, they would be silent observers. At first, we thought this to be a polite verbiage of Japanese communication, but as the instances and repetitions of this concern increased, we started to worry. We decided to consult with Naoko Taniguchi who had done focus group research with Japanese youths before (Taniguchi 2019) and she emphasized that activating the group with prompts is key to getting them talking. We aimed to follow this advice as closely as we could. Eventually, almost all groups proceeded in a very lively manner and the students' Japanese professors were pleasantly surprised.

In retrospect, we think that five strategies that we employed contributed to the sessions' overall successful flow. Firstly, we placed great emphasis on students feeling comfortable with taking part in our focus group interviews and being able to refuse without fearing negative consequences from their professors, which involved thorough consultations with the Japanese facilitators.[6] Secondly, to further reduce any potential discomfort, the researchers conducting the focus groups dressed casually rather than formally, thereby avoiding any visual showcasing of a certain academic status. They also, thirdly, refrained from overly formal or polite speech to avoid reproducing any teacher–student dynamics. Fourthly, we think it was explicitly our foreignness that positioned us as outsiders which prompted participants to adopt a pedagogical stance—explaining not only political participation, but specifically the Japanese context to us. Also, after the interview sessions, we invited students to ask questions and offer feedback, which allowed us to refine our interview setting and overall research design, and which helped to create an eye-to-eye-level atmosphere throughout our interactions with interviewees.

In addition, fifthly, we would advise *not* having any educators in the room when conducting the focus group interviews as their presence could influence the content of discussion. At times, when the professor remained in the room, the atmosphere depended on the relationship and teaching persona of the respective professor.

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6   In one instance, when our focus group interview was scheduled during a regular seminar slot, the Japanese professor in charge provided an opportunity for students to swap to a different room and use the slot as a quiet study time.

Though we had worried about possible communication problems with the students if no native speaker were there to assist, we in fact never encountered any language issues. The several rounds of proofreading and testing of the wording paid off. We recommend an open dialog on the benefits and downsides of the presence of a teacher with the respective contact person when deciding on the presence of an educator.

In our experience, however, two factors made it difficult to engage the students: Firstly, the Friday afternoon timeslot (naturally) had less vibrant discussions, probably a result of the exhaustion of the week. Secondly, a larger group resulted in less speaking time for each participant and ideas could not be formulated as elaborately as in smaller groups. We recommend anything between four and seven people for a focus group interview of approx. one hour. Anything above seven persons also results in restless and distracting behavior among the participants, especially when doing activities like categorizing the picture prompts. Sporadically, there were still quiet students who engaged in the discussion only when directly asked to like when presenting their definition of "political participation."

Generally, we feared that it would be difficult to recruit participants with the quite controversial topic of political participation even when focusing on students of law, political science and economics. We started the recruitment of student participants some three months prior to fieldwork, which in Japan marked the time between teaching periods. This made recruitment very unpredictable. However, contrary to our expectations, on six occasions we eventually had to split the group into two because so many students showed up to participate. On some occasions when there was time left to chat with the participants after the session, many mentioned what a unique experience the group discussion on political participation had been for them and shared that the fact that there are not many spaces for them to have exchanges on this topic with their classmates, which was what drew them to the focus group interview.

Self-Reflection and Outlook

In this paper we introduced focus group interviews as a research method in social science research on Japan. We offered an insight into the processes of designing and conducting focus group interviews with Japanese university students, highlighting methodological considerations specific to research in Japan. Overall, we found focus group interviews to be a challenging—in respect to planning and preparation—but also rewarding method, which enriched our experience of conducting fieldwork in Japan and significantly contributed to our mixed method approach and collection of data in our research project. Especially when conducting focus groups in another cultural context and language, solid language skills and knowledge of the cultural context are required. In our case, we were told that it would be difficult to engage Japanese students in discussions about Japanese politics and political participation. However, apart from a few outliers, students were eager to engage in the activities

and discuss their experiences. This might also be due to the fact that our sample mostly consisted of students with backgrounds in political science or related fields and the coincidental timely overlap with parliamentary elections in our fieldwork phase. Generally, we did not find interviewing young people in Japan, who are said to be politically apathetic and reluctant to talk about politics, frustrating at all. The most important factors for successful focus group interviews in our case were thorough preparation, close interaction with the Japanese professors (facilitators), having the advantage of offering the students something new to experience, and giving them a space to discuss a topic which they might otherwise seldom get the chance to talk about. When asked by students about the political engagement of their German counterparts we always happily engaged in an eye-to-eye-level exchange with them.

However, how might the outcomes have differed had we conducted the focus groups in a different cultural setting? The extent to which certain topics can be discussed openly may vary considerably across cultures. Additionally, the content of focus group discussions is likely to be shaped by the prevailing political context and current events. Access to student participants may also differ significantly, requiring sensitivity to local customs. We deem it important that researchers remain aware of cultural stereotypes (e.g. the assumption that Japanese students avoid political discussions) and that they not allow such preconceptions to hinder inquiry. Regarding researcher positionality, it is worth considering whether the interviews might have unfolded differently had we been of a different ethnicity, gender, or professional status. This is certainly plausible, particularly with respect to gaining access to the target group. Our positionality as young, white, female researchers may have reduced social distance, thereby facilitating smoother focus group interactions, and the joint socialization of interviewees and interviewers in liberal democracies created an overall context supportive of political engagement and open discourse.

Concerning our research, we now have a vast pool of focus group interview data that at the time of writing still needs to be thoroughly analyzed. We are fully aware that as our sampling method relied on facilitators at Japanese universities, the sample has some bias. Thus, future research could aim at conducting focus group interviews with young adults outside the elite university context. This could include students from vocational schools and junior colleges, but also university dropouts, NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), or those who transitioned into the labor market after graduating from high school, etc. It would be exciting to see how different life courses are reflected in different experiences of political participation and representation. The question of how to gain access to these other groups, however, remains. Having a facilitator introducing you can foster trust and access and still seems to be essential in Japan. In conclusion, we want to encourage anyone interested in enlarging their methodological repertoire to give this method a try if suited to the research aim and question—not solely, but surely also within social science research on Japan.

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