

Qualitative Methods: Focus Group Report

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PART 1

Background

Historically, graduate students have had to share career support resources with the significantly larger undergraduate student population at Georgetown University. The graduate career center dedicated to the needs of graduate students is a very recent addition. The student organization body at the university, called GradGov, put out a survey to assess the efficacy of graduate alumni networking opportunities. GradGov is now looking for a richer description of student experiences and is trying to understand what alumni networking services they can provide to meet graduate student expectations as well as how they can improve student experiences so that such interactions are more useful.

Objectives

This focus group is designed to delve deeper into the state of alumni networking events offered on campus and what can be done to improve them. Apart from gathering data from students about their experiences with alumni networking opportunities offered at Georgetown and their evaluation of the same, we also wanted to inquire about any expectations that have not been addressed or potential room for improvement. Hence we focused the study around the research

question:

What do graduate students in the CCT (Communication, Culture and Technology) program at Georgetown University expect from alumni networking opportunities?

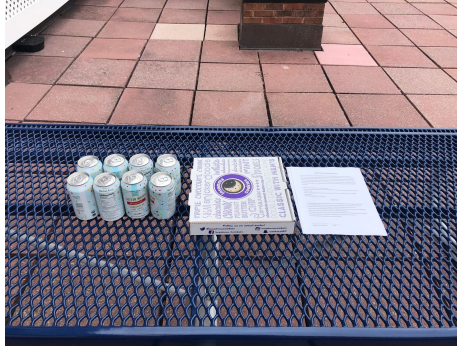
Methodology

The focus group consisted of eight CCT students at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Georgetown University. It was a purposive sample of students who were available at the time. However, we chose students with strong communication skills and tried to get a mix of both first second year students as both groups have different needs for networking opportunities given the stage of the recruitment process they are in as well as in their CCT academic journey. We also included international students from three different countries (India, China, United Kingdom) in our sample in order to get a wider perspective in terms of professional objectives. There were two American students in the group. The study specifically looks at CCT students because due to its vast interdisciplinary nature, the students from the program have unique needs from alumni.

Logistics

The focus group took place on the Car Barn patio at Prospect street from 1:45 pm to 2:30 pm on Tuesday, October 29th 2019. We provided cookies and soda. However, students were primarily incentivized by the opportunity to have their voice heard by GradGov and excited about improving their own experience.

Set-up of focus group environment:



PART 2

Codebook

| Theme | Code | Code Description | Examples |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|---|--|
| Expectations from alumni | Job | A relationship with alumni could lead to employment | “My first two jobs out of undergrad were due to alumni connections”, “My undergrad mentor gave me a job as a teacher at a boys school”, “how do I go about the internship process” |
| | Academic | Advice on how to make the most out of the university experience | “What courses should I select”, “what are the best classes to take for my career” |
| | Contacts | References or connections that end up being useful professionally | “Professional networking”, “Referred me to an artist I wanted to interview”, “put me in touch with someone else in my area of interest” |
| | Career insights | Help in deciding a career path | “What is the day to day life like”, “what the next five years will look like” |
| 1-1 interactions | Virtual | Interactions that are not in person. | “reaching out on platforms like HoyaGateway is suited to my lifestyle schedule” |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|---|
| preferred | Large events | Large events are not preferred | “there’s a lot of students versus five alumni”, “stampede at larger events”, “if there are a lot of people you cannot ask the questions you want to ask and get that time to connect” |
| | Coffee chat | One-on-one conversation in a casual setting | “lengthy chat like a coffee chat”, “Coffee chat with NYT journalist” |
| | Mentors | Facilitating mentoring programs | “set us up with mentors in our narrowed area of intended practice” |
| CCT Specific | Path | Understanding what professional path can one take with a CCT degree | “what are the options out there”, “CCT alumni could explain what they did with their degree” |
| | Broad degree | CCT is an interdisciplinary degree that can lead to a very wide range of careers | “when you’re doing something so broad, it’s helpful for CCT to bring people in from a range of careers” |
| | Pitch degree | Market the degree to employers | “I’m at a loss to figure out how to market this degree to get a job” |
| International Student Specific | Visa status | Refers to the fact that if students don’t get a visa sponsor they will be asked to leave the country | “how should I go about framing my visa status to employers” “international students have a dilemma in this country because of their visa” |
| | Companies | International student friendly companies | “what companies should I apply to that will sponsor a visa” |
| | Cultural differences | Different networking practices in their home country. | “never thought of reaching out to alumni digitally because it is just not something we do in China” “Alumni events were not a thing at my university in UK” |

| | | | |
|------------------|----------------------------|---|--|
| Logistics | Timing | Mismatch in student schedule and networking events. | “I work all day on Friday and both the CCT alumni events were on Friday” “Due to time conflict I can’t be at every event” |
| | Scheduling conflict | Unable to coordinate for a 1-1 interaction | “We got in touch but it never happened,” “the interaction fell through”, “I’ve reached out to people on Hoya Gateway and never received any kind of reply even though these are people who say they want to help” |

Key Findings

1. Students are uncomfortable when approaching alumni for their own needs and feel awkward initiating conversations. This makes them hesitant when it comes to networking.
2. Students that are hesitant to reach out would also appreciate more lessons in learning how to network appropriately and effectively.
3. Some students have high expectations of alumni due to strong ties with alumni in their undergraduate years that led to get their initial jobs.
4. The students in the focus group value direct, one on one interaction with alumni as the best way to network with them.
5. Many students also preferred interacting digitally initially, followed by an in-person conversation.
6. When networking, students are looking for more insight into the profession of the alumni. This could be by shadowing them at work, understanding the path they took to get there

and the logistical details of the particular job title before they decide to pursue a particular career path.

7. The interdisciplinarity of the CCT program makes students feel like the networking model has to be curated differently from that of other schools within Georgetown that have set networking and recruitment models.
8. International students think guidance from alumni networks is especially crucial when trying to navigate an already limited job market.
9. There have been mixed experiences when interacting with alumni. Where some have gotten academic and professional advice, others find it hard to get responses and further coordinate with them due to their busy schedules.
10. Resources for graduate students are limited and vary across departments.

Themes/Insights

Students expect Alumni relationship to help them in four key areas: obtaining **jobs**, **academics**, specifically course selection, referrals to industry **contacts** and **career insights**. Below are some key insights regarding expectations from alumni networking opportunities:

1. *One-on-one interactions are preferred over large events*

Several participants stated that they found **large events** too overwhelming and “unapproachable”. Large scale events where the ratio of student to alumni is like 20 students to one can be intimidating for students and not give them the option of making their voice heard. Every participant said they strongly preferred one on one interaction

opportunities with alumni as their ideal way of networking. Some even spoke about how they would rather approach an alumni through **virtual** platforms first and then further communicate in person via events like **coffee chats** once a relationship has been established. Many students felt **mentors** could be very influential in guiding their academic and career paths.

2. *International student specific career advice needed*

Our focus group had a majority of international students (6/8) representing three different nationalities. All of them raised concerns about the lack of information provided during the job application process with regard to their **visa status** and several legal caveats when applying for full-time employment post graduation. Since they have limited time and opportunities to find employment, interaction with other international students that are currently employed and can provide more detailed advice such as when to apply and to which **companies** to apply to so as to get work authorization in the limited time. There is also no distinct advice given to international students although their application process is different. It was brought up that digital networking is not common in certain **cultures** like China and hence they never thought of reaching out to alumni on digital platforms like HoyaGateway and LinkedIn. The observation that really identified this pressing need for alumni networking specifically for international students was that the only person not very keen on utilizing alumni networking opportunities was one of the two non-international students in the group. All other students, even though they were not fond of networking, unanimously acknowledged that alumni connections were of paramount importance while trying to find permanent employment.

3. *CCT Specific Alumni Interactions are highly desired*

One of the recurring themes during our conversation was the “interdisciplinarity” of CCT as a program and how **broad** it is in its scope. Participants spoke about wanting more guidance from graduates of a program in various industries and establishing meaningful connections through repeated interaction. Not only did some participants reach out to alumni for professional growth, they also thought it helped academically in order to understand the **paths** (“traditional and non-traditional”) they took as CCT students to get to their desired positions. They thought younger alumni could shed light on “what their next 5 years would look like” while older alumni who had established themselves were seen as sources of “inspiration”. Some of the participants even thought previous alumni panels were useful in providing information about how interdisciplinarity could be incorporated into discovering niche roles. With a degree as broad and interdisciplinary as CCT, students were unsure how to **pitch** their degrees to prospective employers since it is not a program as well known as the MPP and MBA degrees.

4. *Logistics*

The participants also spoke about how one of the reasons they had not been able to network or attend such events was because they have never been able to . Some participants indicated a continuous conflict with the **timing** of the events, either with classes or with their current jobs. Some of them suggested holding the events or mixers at a time that doesn’t clash with other classes in the program or with their 9-5 commitments such as during the weekend. They suggested spreading these events out sporadically

instead of within the same time frame each week so that they could make at least a couple within a semester. Another logistical issue that recurred was that a lot of the alumni could not make the times suggested by the participants for one on one conversations due to **scheduling conflicts**. Logistics also determined the type of interaction that was preferred. While many students initially said “face to face” was “number one” for them, however, upon further reflection acknowledged that an initial digital connection was the most practical.

Observations and Reflections

1. It was difficult to get students to 1) commit to coming to the focus group with little reward (snacks and drinks were what we offered), and 2) to show up on time. This played a role in how many people we could collect to attend and participate and how efficient we could be in starting and finishing the actual discussion. Some people had scheduling conflicts (had to leave a little bit early), which also made the latter half of the group discussion slightly more rushed and disjointed.
2. The environment in which a focus group discussion is held has a large impact on the success thereof. We held our focus group outside, which was distracting at times with people walking by and noise levels (constant airplane traffic noise). At times it was hard to hear one another and at other times there were notable distracted participants during the discussion.
3. There was a lot of circular talking (people speaking one after each other around the circle at the table - partially because a recording device was passed around the table causing

people to speak consecutively), rather than speaking more sporadically and randomly.

This led to an organized and civilized focus group, but perhaps made it so that we missed out on some rich data because people felt like had to speak when it was their turn. At times people chimed in when they had something relevant to say in response to another participant, but this was definitely not the overwhelming behavior of the group.

4. The sampling of the focus group was entirely from the CCT program, where most people were familiar with one another (a couple were even in other groups of the Qualitative methods class). This meant that people were more friendly with one another, but perhaps welcomed personal biases and preconceptions into the discussion.
 - a. It is important to note that the sampling group was also almost entirely international students (with the exception of 2 students) - this skews the priorities of the students in terms of job searches because of visa issues and location restriction. There is a notable sense of urgency for international students because without a job they do not of visa status to stay in the U.S.

Recommendations

1. *CCT specific events, as well as industry specific*

The graduate office should offer CCT specific events, as well as industry specific events - that way students are given the opportunity to capitalize on the uniqueness and shared experiences of their programs, while also not missing out on learning about opportunities outside of their programs that are relevant to their career interests.

2. *One-on-one mentorship program*

The graduate office could offer a one-on-one mentorship program with a Georgetown alum that has signed up to participate and matches the industry/career interests of the partnered student. The mentors could be given access to fellow mentor contact information in case they think a student could benefit from additional mentorship in another field. Mentors could be from the same program or from different programs - the priority would be in industry fit, and not necessarily having been in the same program at Georgetown.

3. *Alumni profiles as informational resources*

The graduate government office could offer alumni profiles that are more used as informational resources, rather than for contacting. This would help current students see what kind of career paths alumni have gone on and what opportunities are available in their desired industries. This could take form in visual maps of career journeys or in alumni profiles/biographies and would include courses as well along with testimonials as to how their specific degree helped them in obtaining their job.

4. *Speed networking events: in person and online*

Because a lot of complaints have been in regards to logistical conflicts, the graduate government office could offer “speed networking events”. This way the structure would allow for short interactions that are more digestible and acceptably short where all parties are prepared and expect a shorter interaction and can speak to more people at one event

without it feeling overly chaotic. These events could be offered both in person or online (e.g. via Zoom - a digital conferencing application). Having an online option makes it more easily accessible and to a wider range of people that face logistical conflicts in attending in person events.

Part 3:

Item-by-Item Analysis

- 1. Do you think alumni interactions can be useful to you as Graduate students? If yes, how? If not, why?**

Most students thought that alumni interactions could be useful to them in a variety of ways like finding jobs, making professional connections, understanding career paths however a couple felt that these are only useful in theory because they believe they lack the ability to network well.

“I guess yes theoretically it could be helpful but its just that I’m bad at networking and really bad starting at starting conversations with people...I’ve never gone to any of the networking events” (Participant 1)

“Generally I’m not inclined to doing networking. Generally when I’m disinclined the likelihood of me doing it is quite low.” (Participant 7)

Students generally understood the importance of alumni relationships while gaining employment.

“Former mentor of mine at Boston college directly gave me a job after college.”

(Participant 2)

“First two jobs out of undergrad were hires by alumni.” (Participant 8)

Students also recognized that the CCT degree is a broad degree and most of them are unsure what they can do with it so alumni interactions could help them understand what opportunities are out there and what the possible career paths are like.

“I want to understand, what routes they’ve gone. How they went about the internship process? How they navigated their career paths? How they got to where they are today? There are many possibilities in this interdisciplinary program...” (Participant 6)

*“Did they take traditional or non-traditional paths to get to where they are today?”
(Participant 7)*

It was widely accepted that alumni can be very useful when it came to understanding what the day to day work life in a particular job was like. Additionally, all the students agreed when one of the participants noted that older well established alumni who are leaders in their fields can provide inspiration but younger alumni can help show them what their everyday lives for the next five years are going to look like.

“A lot of careers that you may be interested in, you may only be interested in them theoretically, but you may not know what they actually do in real life. Talking to alumni will bridge that gap.” (Participant 7)

Most students centered their comments around professional and career insights they can gain from alumni interactions however a couple mentioned they had been profoundly impacted by mentors whom they had turned to personally as well as academically in terms of deciding what courses to take.

“I sought him out for both personal and professional advice and he is still an important part of my life.” (Participant 2)

International students felt strong alumni relationships were of unique importance to them as they needed advice navigating the visa situation and a better understanding of what companies they should be applying to.

“How I should go about framing my visa status when talking to companies?”
(Participant 8)

“This summer I reached out to one alumni. He said one reason he wants to help is that his wife is Chinese and that international students can have a dilemma here regarding post education opportunities so he wanted to help. So he actually sent several emails to connect me.” (Participant 6)

2. Have you had any experience interacting with Alumni? If so, please can you describe it in detail?

A lot of the participants spoke about their experiences reaching out to Georgetown alumni, with hit or miss results each time. Only one of them mentioned using alumni for academic help and most others said they would reach out for professional aid .

“Academic a little bit. In the sense that I’ve just tried to find out what are good classes to take...” (Participant 6)

While some said they found good information and contacts, others said they tried to reach out but either didn’t get responses or a mutually agreeable time to meet.

“... So I’ve used HoyaGateway a few times. The conversations I scheduled kinda fell Through...” (Participant 2)

Most interactions were through HoyaGateway or through networking panels; although a lot of people mentioned other sites such as LinkedIn in the conversation. One of the participants spoke from her perspective as an international student and said she reached out to an alumni before joining the program for advice. However, a fraction of the students had the feedback that their connections with alumni from their undergraduate years were much more successful and more useful for them in comparison. In addition, some of them even spoke about not reaching out to any alumni through the networking opportunities currently provided just because they are hesitant about the outcome and creating a lasting connection.

“...where at those big social events, I don’t want to just like stampede towards that one person, but it’s also like you have a lot of people trying to talk to that one person so you never really get that time to connect...” (Participant 7)

3. What services/support opportunities can the university offer to help you connect with Alumni in a meaningful/useful way?

Participants from the focus group made it clear that they have ideas for more effective services that can be offered to the student body to enhance and more effectively capitalize on student-alumni relations. They spoke extensively about how alumni have previously worked as mentors for them and how a similar expectation has carried forward in graduate school.

“I worked as a teacher in an all boys school in Boston that was under the leadership of my former mentor at Boston College... My direct relationship then led to that job.”
(Participant 7)

The participants also emphasized how the university could encourage one on one interaction with alumni through coffee chats, virtual conferences etc.

“I think it’s easier to interact with them digitally beforehand because then again you kind of know a little bit about each other. Maybe the person that you’re wanting to talk to can maybe do a little bit of research into the answers they want to give you.” (Participant 2)

One of the participants also mentioned how professors can help facilitate networks and build ties between their previous students and current students. She believed that having someone in a position of authority vouch for you increases your reliability and how you are perceived in further interactions.

“But also what occurred to me is sometimes having someone vouch for you would be helpful, so like let’s say I don’t know this alumnus but you know this alumnus, you could vouch for me saying “okay Mansi isn’t totally crazy, she will not know harass you”. So, professors can vouch for you, peers can vouch for you, another alumnus can vouch for you, so maybe that would be a helpful way connecting students and alumni.”

(Participant 8)

4. Did you have similar alumni networking opportunities at your undergraduate institutions? Were they better or worse? How?

The students indicated having either strong undergraduate alumni ties or none at all. While some students said their undergraduate campuses were too new or did not have an emphasis on alumni relations, a lot of the students mentioned at the beginning of the discussion how imperative their undergraduate mentors were in their jobs or opportunities after undergrad. One of the students mentioned how she went to a media school that laid great emphasis on connecting with alumni in big television and media companies

“... my undergrad years I spent in a media school... alumni interaction was really important for us, because we could basically find all our alumni in different tv stations and magazines and all the field.” (Participant 3)

Another student said that her undergraduate campus was new so all the alumni were in a different location and so it didn't help much. One of the students said they even worked with alumni on resume building. Another student even mentioned how, in spite of a direct networking opportunity, having known of an alumni in the company he was applying to helped him with the job. It is interesting to note how a lot of students drew comparisons to their undergraduate experiences even without being prompted.

"... From graduating undergrad, their alumni network was pretty big for me in getting a job after." (Participant 2)

5. Do you want to connect with Alumni from your program or Georgetown University alumni at large, in the field you wish to explore?

The overwhelming interest of the group was an ability to connect with the Georgetown University alumni at large, and not just from the CCT program.

"I would like to know all sorts of people from the whole georgetown campus, not just CCT. I like to meet all sorts of cool people. You never know when you're going to "use" different types of people." (Participant 3)

Especially with a program like CCT - extremely diverse in nature and relatively small - the more access to a larger group of alumni the better. It also seems that being overly reliant on one program, could mean that the students of that program could be missing out on other opportunities and connections and joining forces and pooling resources could be the best option for a larger group of graduate students.

“Grad system at Georgetown is kind of segmented. Some programs have much stronger connects than CCT and the career center doesn’t have enough resources. It would help if CCT itself had a stronger support system.” (Participant 4)

That being said, some of the group definitely saw the benefit in having both a targeted alumni network to specific programs, while also being able to connect with a wider range of alumnus. It seems that the most optimal option would be having both networking opportunities: within a program and amongst all of Georgetown alumni.

“Good to have a bit of both. More CCT focused career sessions might be good, a handful of industries within CCT but also Georgetown as a whole. The person who has helped the most so far is a business school alumni. That’s why I think it’s good to have both because there are other things you can get involved in that’s not just CCT.” (Participant 6)

“So I guess I would prefer more CCT specific. Because CCT is already is already so broad so it would be helpful if alumni could explain what they did with their CCT degree because I’m at a loss on how to market this degree.” (Participant 1)

Appendix A: Introduction and Discussion Guide

Introductory Statement

Hi my name is Sanjana. I would like to thank each of you for being here today and for agreeing to participate in this focus group. We should be here for a little under an hour. The reason we are here is to gather your thoughts and opinions about student-alumni relations and what your expectations from them are.

I am going to lead this discussion today. I will be asking you guiding questions that should help structure your responses and help up understand your experience with alumni networking opportunities at Georgetown. I would also like to inform you that the audio of this discussion will be recorded. This is just so that we can refer back to this discussion for our reports and presentations. All information you share will only be used as part of our class assignment and is not being published. However, data from the focus group will be anonymized and presented to GradGov representatives in a presentation.

Rules

As part of the protocol, there are some simple rules for this discussion:

- 1) We encourage you to speak your mind and speak openly. However, please allow only one person to speak at a time.
- 2) This is a group discussion so please share your views with the entire group and not in side conversations.
- 3) Please turn avoid using your cell phones

I hope the instructions are clear. Thank you so much once again for participating in this discussion. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Consent form

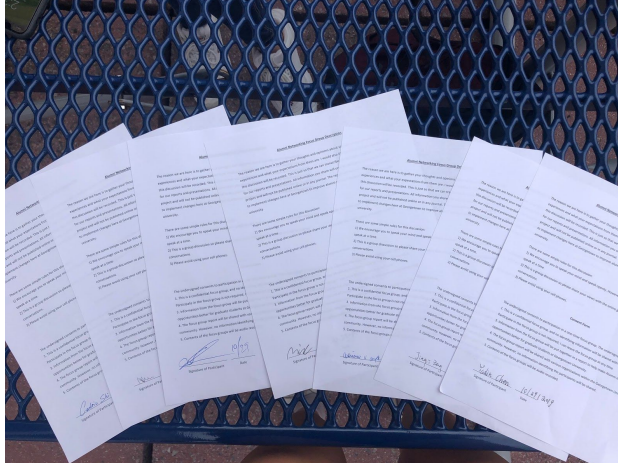
The undersigned consents to participation in a one-time focus group. The undersigned understands:

1. This is a confidential focus group, and no identifying information will be shared with anyone.
2. Participate in the focus group is not required; I can leave the focus group at any time.
3. Information from the focus group will be put together in a report to help make Alumni networking opportunities better for graduate students at Georgetown University.
4. The focus group report will be shared with various organizations within the Georgetown University community. However, no information identifying the participants will be shared.
5. Contents of the focus groups will be audio recorded.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signed participant consent forms:



Discussion Guide

1. Do you think alumni interactions can be useful to you as Graduate students? If yes, how?

If not, why?

[This question largely directly answers the research question of student expectations from alumni networking.]

2. Have you had any experience interacting with Alumni? If so, please can you describe it in detail?

- Did you utilise any university services for this? What were they?
 - Was there a specific event that you thought worked well?
- How did you feel after the experience?
- What aspects were useful?
- What aspects were challenging?
- What could have been done better?

[This question asks the participants to describe and evaluate their experiences so we can understand what worked and what didn't.]

3. What services/support opportunities can the university offer to help you connect with Alumni in a meaningful/useful way?

- What type of interactions would you prefer?
 - Large networking/one-on-one/small groups/mentorship/virtual (email/linkedin/handshake/hoyagateway)/in-person

[This asks students for their preferences of the nature of the interactions.]

4. Did you have similar alumni networking opportunities at your undergraduate institutions? Were they better or worse? How?

[This asks students to draw onto past experiences at other institutions thereby allowing us to infer what Georgetown could incorporate or avoid]

5. Do you want to connect with Alumni from your program or Georgetown University alumni at large, in the field you wish to explore?

- Or, connect with a wider range that isn't limited to Georgetown?

[This is a specific question we decided to ask because through our preliminary research and our own experiences at CCT we realised there is possibly a need for CCT specific alumni networking resources.]

6. Is there anything else that you feel you would like us to know, that could be helpful? Or something else that I should have asked you?

[Concluding question to elicit and unstructured thoughts and any information they may have forgotten to mention during the structured discussion.]

Appendix B: Teamwork

We worked well as a team and divided tasks as necessary. Sanjana acted as focus group moderator, while Aditi and Alie were notetakers. We all contributed to the guiding questions and set up of the focus group prior to its occurrence. We split up the work and took charge of different parts of the focus group as well as the report and analysis, but all-in-all we discussed our individual processes together and made group decisions.

Personal Evaluations:

Sanjana:

I played an active role in recruiting participants for the focus group. I was the moderator during the focus group and worked on the discussion guide, consent form and Part 1 of the report. I analysed the transcript to create the codebook and did the first question of the item by item analysis. I also contributed to the extraction of the themes along with Alie and Aditi and provided the supporting evidence for the insights.

Alie:

I felt as though we worked really well as a team and divided up tasks efficiently. I helped with the guided discussion questions and was a notetaker during the focus group discussion, while also having helped recruited people to participate in the study. For the report, we all organized things together and contributed to each other's sections, but I focused mainly on Part 2 (reflections and recommendations) and organizing the sections of the report as a whole. We all worked on the item-by-item analysis together.

Aditi:

I think we worked well as a team in spite of our clashing schedules and other commitments. We split most of the items up into thirds and coordinated the whole process that way. We also pitched into and glossed over each others work. I wrote the introduction, the briefing and some of the consent form before we conducted the study. I also recorded the audio and took notes during the discussion. As for the report, I wrote out the key findings, three of the item by item analyses and the overall themes of the assignment.

Link to Audio:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1lPEcJA13jjeCMmcKfNReLQuV7fl7a_yM