

Review of Literature Comparing Face-to-Face and Computer-Mediated Focus Groups

Olmstead & Underhill (2002) found that on-line focus group participants and face-to-face participants make the same number of participation attempts, but on-line group participants use fewer words. However, many of the social cues typical of face-to-face communication (Rice, 1993) are absent in an on-line focus group discussion, and there is little scientific literature on the ways in which this loss affects focus group discussion content (Olmstead & Underhill, 2002). There are other potential benefits of on-line focus groups (e.g., logistical efficiencies for all participants, increased access for participants in remote locations, and faster reporting of results due to automatic data capture), but they could be offset by costs such as decreased participant satisfaction and less complete responses (Olmstead & Underhill, 2002).

According to a review article (Walston & Lissitz, 2000), the computer-mediated (CM) environment may:

- a. lessen members' concerns about what the moderator thinks about them
- b. make it easier to disclose embarrassing information or express hostile attitudes
- c. limit the participation inhibition imposed by status (e.g., attractiveness)
- d. increase task orientation (as compared to a socializing orientation), especially when there is a strict time limit
- e. increase the number of unique ideas generated without sacrificing quality

Recommendations:

- Keep CM groups relatively small so that there is time to read others' responses.
- Keep a moderator's questions visually distinct from participant responses by using different fonts, colors, sizes, styles or positions.
- Use programming features such as placing line numbers and participant pseudonyms next to each comment to facilitate interaction among members.

According to an abstract translated from Japanese, Shiraishi, Endo & Yoshida (2002) compared face-to-face focus groups, discussions in which participants were separated by a screen, and CM groups. Compared with the two other modalities, there was less polarization of views after a discussion of controversial topics in the CM environment. Post-discussion, CM group participants retained their original views more often than participants in the other kinds of groups. The absence of social context cues may have reduced the perceived expertise of other group members; the influence of other participants may have been reduced by this equalized status.

A study of discussions of health behavior changes after colon cancer (Campbell, Meier, et al., 2001) found that:

- a. themes in on-line and face-to-face focus groups were similar, despite demographic differences

- b. the anonymity of the groups seemed to permit more discussion of sensitive personal health issues (e.g., on-line participants reported more use of support groups).
- c. for patients who were still experiencing symptoms and couldn't travel to and sit in a face-to-face group, the CM groups made participation possible.

A final study (Moloney et al., 2003) examined the use of internet discussion boards as virtual focus groups. It suggested that CM groups may be more difficult for moderators to control, but acknowledged that the control problem may have been a function of the fact that the discussion board exchange was not conducted in real time. It was not possible to tease apart the separate effects of the CM environment and the ability to post comments at any time, day or night.

In summary, there is little research that suggests that on-line focus groups cannot be useful.

References

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