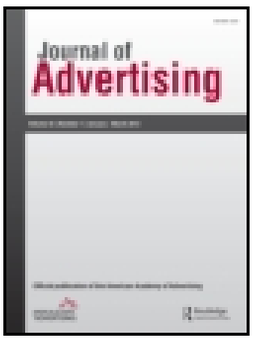

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Invited Article

Online Focus Groups

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The rise of Web 2.0, the advent of greater bandwidth, and new technology platforms have made it possible to extend the range of focus-group research to the online environment. This provides advertising researchers, advertising agencies, and advertisers with opportunities to reach consumers who were heretofore difficult to reach, to create groups with new and different compositions, and to use online collaborative tools not readily available in face-to-face groups. This article reviews online focus-group research, identifies several types of online groups, and contrasts the uses and results of online focus groups with the uses and results of face-to-face focus groups. The article concludes that online and face-to-face venues for focus-group research are complementary, with online focus-group research opening new opportunities for gathering data to inform advertising research, theory, and decision making. The article also suggests that differences between online focus-group research and face-to-face focus-group research, with respect to group interaction and the ability to obtain information, are being eroded as technology provides greater opportunities to create social presence in an online environment.

Research using group depth interviews, or focus groups, is one of the most widely employed research methods in advertising and marketing research, as well as many other disciplines (GreenBook 2014; Stewart and Shamdasani 2014; Morgan 1997). Such research also has a long history with deep roots in the social sciences, advertising research, and marketing practice (Slurzberg and Rettinger 1994; Stewart and Shamdasani 2014). While focus-group research is not without its critics (e.g., see Terlep 2016; Schirr 2012), much of this criticism focuses on the use of focus-group research when it is not appropriate for the research questions under consideration, such as developing projectable point estimates, evaluating alternative actions, and forecasting. Nevertheless, the appropriate use of focus groups for quickly exploring topics about which little is known is rarely disputed.

The dynamics of groups tend to quickly reveal similarities and differences in perspectives, attitudes, preferences, and behaviors among group participants (Iacobucci and Churchill 2015; Stewart and Shamdasani 2014). The focus-group setting, which frequently allows researchers and managers to observe the group discussion through a one-way mirror or through live or taped video transmission, is also a powerful means for sharing the "data" obtained in a group discussion and for providing creative professionals, advertising researchers, and marketing managers with firsthand contact with consumers.

Advertising researchers, advertising agencies, and other marketing organizations have long used focus groups to develop insights into consumers' motivations for purchasing and using various products and services. The objective of such research is often to identify compelling benefits that will make an advertising message more persuasive, to identify unmet needs that may form the basis for new product development or the positioning of an existing product, or to explore a topic about which little is known. Focus groups also provide researchers and agency and advertiser personnel with firsthand experience with consumers that may inform the language, tone, and affect associated with specific products or services, which may aid the design of other research or the content of advertising messages. Finally, focus groups provide a means to engage consumers in the cocreation of research, advertising messages, and other content through the elicitation of new ideas and the evocation of responses to ideas.

Until recently, focus-group research was considered a mature methodology with few genuine innovations beyond efforts to extend the methodology to teleconferencing (Allen 2014). Many of the limitations of focus-group research, its exploratory nature, its use of small convenience samples, and

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the influence of contextual cues of the group dynamic are well-known (Iacobucci and Churchill 2015; Stewart and Shamdasani 2014). Nevertheless, focus groups have remained an important tool for advertising research, because they provide an efficient and cogent means for generating consumer insights that inform response to advertising, facilitate innovation and creativity in advertising practice, and generate and refine ideas for the design of research among academic scholars.

However, a key limitation of focus-group research is that it has tended to be bound in time and space by the need to identify, recruit, and assemble a group in a single place for purposes of discussion. Many populations of interest to focus-group researchers are difficult to reach and schedule. Such populations can be global, busy, immobile for physical or economic reasons, unavailable at comparable times, or otherwise difficult to schedule to participate in a focus group at a fixed, physical location. Technology has reduced, if not entirely eliminated, this limitation, and made possible a broader use of focus groups in an Internet-enabled world. Much of the literature regarding the use of remote groups, whether by teleconference or via the Web, was published prior to the increases in bandwidth and the development of specialized platforms for the conduct of online groups. For this reason a reading of the extant literature often suggests that remote focus groups are inherently inferior to face-to-face groups but may be necessary for research on some topics and with some populations. This article focuses on the use of the Internet as a means for conducting focus-group research in an era in which bandwidth, even in developing nations, provides a means for online face-to-face interactivity when it is desirable and where specialized research platforms provide tools for expanding the ways in which focus-group members, the moderator, and others can interact.

THE ONLINE WORLD

Empirical research has demonstrated that many of the same interpersonal processes and dynamics that characterize face-to-face interactions also characterize online interactions, even when the interaction is between avatars rather than face-to-face among persons. For example, just as eye contact is an important social cue in face-to-face conversations, so too is it in online conversations (Bailenson et al. 2005; Garau et al. 2001). Similarly, gender, racial, age, and even height and attractiveness stereotypes in online interaction appear to mirror stereotypes found in interpersonal interactions (Fiske et al. 2002; Fox and Bailenson 2009; Dotsch and Wigboldus 2006, 2008; Groom, Bailenson, and Nass 2009; Yee and Bailenson 2007). In addition, numerous studies have demonstrated that online interaction tends to be very similar to that in face-to-face interaction (Hoffman, Novak, and Stein (2012). For example, the well-known Milgram obedience study (1963) has been replicated online (Slater et al. 2006), as have studies of interpersonal distance (Yee et al. 2007) and requests for cooperation (Eastwick and Gardner 2008). Such research suggests it is possible to replicate the social interaction and benefits of face-to-face focus-group research in an online environment. Research also demonstrates that behavior in virtual environments can affect how individuals behave in the real world (Yoon and Vargas 2014). Thus, the distinction between the "real" world and the "virtual" world is increasingly becoming blurred.

With Internet penetration growing exponentially from 400 million people in 2000, largely concentrated in developed countries, to 3.2 billion people in 2015, a majority of whom live in developing nations (International Telecommunications Union 2015), researchers are increasingly adopting the low-investment alternative of online focus groups to reach their target participants. Indeed, at the end of 2015 it was estimated that almost half of the population of the earth had access to the Internet (Internet World Stats 2015). This increase in the use of online, or virtual, focus groups is corroborated by a survey conducted by the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (2010) that found commercial research firms were experiencing either no growth or a decline in location-based focus groups and in-depth interviews, but also reported that revenues from online focus groups had nearly doubled (Pope and Kluce 2011).

Online focus groups enable researchers to overcome various challenges revolving around cost, location, and attracting specific types of participants, especially teens, low-incidence groups, and handicapped individuals. Existing online research communities can also benefit by further engaging their active participants through online focus groups to understand perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Technology has made it possible to link people who are scattered across very broad geographic regions. This has made it possible to conduct interviews with highly specialized groups that might be difficult to assemble in a single location. The potential anonymity of virtual groups may also make participants more willing to participate when the topic is sensitive or potentially embarrassing. This latter advantage needs to be weighed against the prospect that group participants may not be who they represent themselves to be and the concern of some potential participants about sharing personal information with strangers in an electronic context. These latter issues are unlikely to be problems when respondents are prerecruited, identities verified, and topics are not of a sensitive nature. Such circumstances would be typical of focus groups used in many research situations but may not always hold.

Use of virtual groups greatly expands the pool of potential participants and adds considerable flexibility to the process of scheduling an interview. Busy professionals and executives, who might otherwise be unavailable for a face-to-face meeting, can often be reached by means of information technologies. Virtual focus groups may be the only option for certain types of samples, but they are not without some costs relative

to more traditional groups. A lack of face-to-face interaction can reduce the spontaneity of the group and may reduce or eliminate the nonverbal communication that plays a key role in eliciting responses. Such nonverbal communication is often critical for determining when further questioning or probing will be useful, and it is often an important source of interplay among group members. Use of virtual groups may reduce the intimacy of the group as well, making group members less likely to be open and spontaneous. However, there is evidence that such limitations were more common prior to the availability of significant bandwidth, the availability of specialized platforms for online group interaction, and the widespread familiarity with the online world that now characterizes the Internet (Rainie, Anderson, and Connolly 2014).

DISTINGUISHING FOCUS-GROUP RESEARCH FROM OTHER TYPES OF ONLINE RESEARCH

There are many ways to obtain data via the Internet. In addition to the delivery of surveys, these methods include monitoring social media, tracking browsing behavior, listening in on the discussion of online communities and forums, following postings on bulletin boards and review sites, and monitoring behavior in virtual worlds, among others (see Hooley, Marriott, and Wellens 2012; Kozinets 2002). Such data collection may or may not occur with the permission of those whose behavior is the focus of research, and may or may not occur with the explicit or implicit knowledge of those who are providing the data. These approaches to gathering data using the Internet often yield interesting and useful data. However, they also raise, at least on occasion, various ethical concerns about related to privacy, confidentiality, vulnerable populations, consent, and other issues (Bruckman 2002).

It is not the purpose of this article to review the many forms of data collection that may employ the Internet. Rather, the emphasis is the extension of focus-group research into virtual space. Such an extension does not eliminate ethical concerns, but it does place the use of virtual focus groups within an established protocol for research with deep roots in the behavioral and social sciences. Focus groups, in both face-to-face and virtual contexts involve, by definition, a moderated discussion of a topic under the direction of a skilled moderator by a group of volunteer and informed discussants who have been recruited for purposes of discussion. This means the ethical issues raised by unobtrusive behavioral tracking do not generally arise when conducting online focus groups. Nevertheless, the ethical issues, need for appropriate approval, such as is provided by an institutional review board (IRB), and requirement for informed consent apply to online focus-group research just as they apply to the conduct of face-to-face focus groups.

USES AND EFFICACY OF ONLINE FOCUS-GROUP RESEARCH

Online focus groups have found application in a wide range of settings, including advertising (Campbell, Parent, et al. 2011; Kelly, Kerr, and Drennan 2010; Campbell, Pitt, et al. 2011), marketing (Sweet 2001; Jiles 2010; Harrison 2010), health care (Adler and Zarchin 2002; Kenny 2005; Tates et al. 2009; Stancanelli 2010), higher education (Rezabek 2000; Galloway 2011), basic social science research (Gaiser 2008; Stewart and Williams 2005), and computer science (Hughes and Lang 2004; Parent et al. 2000), among others. Research has demonstrated that online focus groups perform as well as face-to-face focus groups with respect to the elicitation of information from group participants (Campbell et al. 2001; Franklin and Lowry 2001; Schneider et al. 2002; Underhill and Olmsted 2003; Reid and Reid 2005), though there are clearly circumstances where one type of focus group may offer advantages over the other (Murgado-Armenteros, Torres-Ruiz, and Vega-Zamora 2012).

Surveys of participants in online focus groups have found that participants prefer the convenience of online focus groups, including the flexibility in scheduling and the ability to participate from home or office (Zwaanswijk and van Dulmen 2014). Participants also appreciate the greater anonymity they perceive to be associated with online focus groups, the greater ability to contribute, the absence of the visual distractions associated with group processes, and the tendency to stay on topic. On the other hand, when compared to face-to-face focus groups, participants found that the discussion in online focus groups did not flow as well. However, Houliez and Gamble (2012) observe special advantages of online groups, such as collaboration and construction of objects that are more difficult in face-to-face group settings.

Criticism of the use of online focus groups often reflects the same concerns about inappropriate use often found in criticism of face-to-face groups. In addition, some criticism of online focus groups, especially criticism in earlier years, has also focused on the technological limitations of the online environment (McDaniel and Gates 2002). Many, but not all, of these limitations have diminished or been eliminated by advances in technology, greater bandwidth, and the availability of specialized software. Greenbook.org, an online resource published by the New York Chapter of the American Marketing Association, provides listings of firms that host online focus groups (Greenbook.org 2016a) and of software for use in the conduct of online focus groups (Greenbook.org 2016b).

The online world represents an expansion of the research tools available to researchers. Online, or virtual, focus groups may be viewed as a substitute for more traditional face-to-face groups, but this is a limited perspective. Rather, it is more useful to consider the two approaches as complements. Both types of groups belong in the researcher's toolkit. There are enormous opportunities to use technology in novel and creative

ways to gain new insights about consumers. As technology evolves, face-to-face and online focus groups may increasing look very similar, with the decision about which to use being determined more by the characteristics and location of the relevant set of consumers and the sophistication and cost of specialized tools for enhancing discussion, such as virtual reality, simultaneous translation, and cocreation exercises.

TYPES OF ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

"Online" focus groups are not really new, because telephonic focus groups have been in use for many years (White, Coverdale, and Thomson 1994; Cooper, Jorgensen, and Merritt 2003; Allen 2014; Koskan et al. 2014). However, the ubiquity of the Internet, technologies for sharing information, and platforms for interacting with others have dramatically increased the versatility and utility of online focus groups. There are numerous combinations of technologies and approaches for conducting online focus groups, but there are three broad approaches for conducting them: asynchronous groups, synchronous groups, and groups in "virtual worlds." These three types of groups are defined by the temporal and spatial characteristics of the research, the communication or measurement modalities, and the sample selection characteristics of each type of group. Such dimensions are not unique to online focus groups; they have been widely employed to describe various types of research designs in the social sciences (Miller 1991; Babbie 2016).

Asynchronous Online Focus Groups

Also known as bulletin board focus groups (BBFGs), asynchronous focus groups are conducted over a period of time ranging from hours to days or even weeks and usually involve only chat-based interactions (Poynter 2010; Sintjago and Link 2012). In such groups the moderator's role largely involves starting a discussion thread, sharing new questions with the participants at regular intervals, and probing comments to keep the participants engaged. An advantage of this approach is that the participants have more time to process the questions and reply at their own convenience. As a result, they often tend to contribute more detailed answers. Platforms such as Google Groups (https://groups.google.com/forum/#!overview) and Ning (http://www.ning.com), among others, provide a means for setting up asynchronous online focus groups and discussion threads that require quite negligible bandwidth. In educational settings, collaborative learning platforms such as Blackboard (http://www.blackboard.com) can be useful. These platforms provide for some degree of customization and are relatively easy to use by both moderator and participants. Such platforms can be designed to assure respondent anonymity and make it easy to capture the content of the discussion.

A disadvantage of Google Groups, Blackboard, and some other systems is the need for synchronization with the regular e-mail inboxes of participants, which can be perceived as intrusive and create complexity when participants have multiple e-mail accounts. Ning provides some opportunity for customization of visual design as well as some limited synchronous text-based chatting that helps to support participants with technological issues. Commercial platforms for asynchronous focus group research include QualBoard (http://www.2020research.com/qualboard/), Dub (https://www.dubishere.com/), FocusVision (https://www.focusvision.com/), itracks (https://www.itracks.com/), and FocusForums (www.focusforums.net). Madge (2008a) provides further discussion of asynchronous methods and video examples of how they work in practice.

Synchronous Online Focus Groups

Synchronous online groups are the closest approximation of traditional face-to-face focus groups and involve real-time discussions led by one or more moderators and usually up to eight participants (Poynter 2010; Sintjago and Link 2012). The effectiveness of synchronous groups is highly dependent on the availability of sufficient bandwidth and active facilitation by a skilled moderator. Synchronous voice and chat technologies enable the transmission of relatively nuanced expressions and emotions in video mode. Tools like Skype (http://www.skype.com/en/), webinar software such as Adobe Connect (http://www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html), and video conferencing platforms like Gotomeeting (http://www.gotomeeting.com) and WebEx (https://www.webex.com) are able to replicate a real-time, face-to-face interaction virtually.

Where bandwidth is an issue, groups can be conducted as audio-only groups, or even typed chat, though such approaches reduce the flow of discussion and the availability of visual information. Skype is one of the most widely used Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) tools and offers a portfolio of modes for interaction, ranging from instant text messaging and real-time voice chat to video and file-share options. However, these features require a high-speed Internet connection, which may be a drawback in some cases. Skype does not guarantee anonymity to users and is often perceived as a more informal communication tool, which may be disconcerting for some participants.

Adobe Connect, on the other hand, is a webinar tool that allows the moderator to assign different authorization rights to participants and to develop multimedia "pods" with different layouts to guide participants through multiple user experiences within the same virtual meeting space. Adobe Connect features include customizable meeting rooms, breakout sessions within a meeting, meeting recording, screen sharing, polling, notes, chat, virtual whiteboards, sophisticated user permissions management, and audio- and videoconferencing, among other functions. Similar capabilities exist for various online meeting and conferencing platforms. Among the commercial providers of synchronous focus group platforms are

itracks (https://www.itracks.com/products-services/video-chat/), e-FocusGroups (http://www.e-focusgroups.com/video.html), FocusVision (https://www.focusvision.com), and QualBoard with webcams (http://www.2020research.com/qualboard/). Madge (2008b) provides further discussion of synchronous online research, along with video examples of the use of such groups in practice.

Focus Groups in Virtual Worlds

A virtual world, sometimes referred to as a massively multiplayer online world (MMOW), is a computer-simulated environment in which individuals interact through personal avatars (Bartle 2003). Virtual worlds include many online gaming environments, such as *World of Warcraft* (http://us.battle.net/wow/en/community/) and various simulated worlds, such as *Virtual World* (http://virtualworld.com), *Smeet* (http://en.smeet.com/virtualworld), and *Second Life* (http://secondlife.com). Virtual worlds provide meeting rooms and other locations for interaction among avatars. The interactions may occur through typed text or through voice chat. Various collaborative tools are also available, such as virtual brainstorming tools, document sharing, whiteboarding, flowcharts, 3-D mind mapping, collaborative creation, and language translators. Although still relatively new, virtual worlds have been used as venues for focus groups (Turney and Pocknee 2005; Tatar 2008; Houliez and Gamble 2012). Companies have experimented with using *Second Life* as a product design and testing platform (Lynch 2008), advertising research has been carried out in *Second Life* that examines the roles of virtual spokespersons (Jin and Bolebruch 2009), and several retailers have experimented with virtual-world stores (Carothers 2008).

Avatars on the Internet are graphical representations of their users and usually take a humanoid form (Nowak and Rauh 2005; Hemp 2006; Yoon and Vargas 2014). "Avatars become the incarnation of the player and convey his or her identity, presence, location, and activation with others" (Annetta 2010, p. 106). Virtual-world users typically interact with one another using their avatars. They can converse, move, point, touch one another, and engage in other social behaviors, just as they would in face-to-face interaction. There is a rich literature on how people create and use avatars (Luppicini 2012). Research has demonstrated that using avatars increases users' perceived level of social presence, which encourages reciprocity and sharing behavior, two behaviors critical to the success of focus group research (Teubner et al. 2014). Groups of avatars can meet in a virtual focus-group room, where their conversation is not visible to other avatars that are not members of the group.

The virtual world that has seen the most focus group activity is *Second Life*. Tatar (2008) provides a discussion of the use of *Second Life* as a venue for focus groups (and a video example of a *Second Life* focus group can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mn9A0lOqfs). A potential advantage of focus-group research in virtual worlds is that the use of an avatar requires the respondent to be more engaged and interactive than might be the case for other online methods. Another advantage is that it is possible to create "in-world" products, advertisements, store designs, and other stimuli with which participants can interact. There is also the opportunity to engage participants in cocreation activities. On the other hand, virtual worlds require respondents to have a virtual-world account and be reasonably knowledgeable and skilled about how the avatar navigates "in world." Another potential disadvantage is that it is sometimes difficult to verify the identity or even basic demographic characteristics of group participants.

Table 1 provides a summary of the relative advantages and disadvantages of the three approaches to online focus groups relative to face-to-face focus groups.

CONDUCTING ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

The design and conduct of online focus-group research share many similarities with more traditional face-to-face group research. However, the online setting creates unique problems and opportunities for the researcher, especially with respect to recruiting and moderation of the groups.

Recruiting Participants for Online Focus Groups

The flexibility associated with online focus groups creates opportunities to expand the pool of potential participants and to conduct groups with individuals that would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible, to bring to a central location for a face-to-face group meeting. It is for this reason that online focus groups have found particular application in research involving handicapped, disabled, and disadvantaged populations. This flexibility also makes it possible to construct groups with participants who would otherwise be difficult to bring together. Thus, opinion leaders and experts who are geographically dispersed, or busy executives, professionals, or policymakers can more readily be recruited for participation. Finally, online focus groups provide an especially appropriate venue for reaching young people, who are generally quite comfortable and facile in the online world but who are otherwise difficult to reach by other means (Fox, Morris, and Rumsey 2007, Kelly; Kerr, and Drennan 2010).

This advantage of online focus groups extends beyond merely having such individuals participate. Many research questions are better informed when such individuals can interact with one another and where the interaction itself is a part of the generation of ideas and perspectives. On the other hand, because online groups require access to and facility with technology, recruiting will of necessity be limited to individuals who have access to and skills using whatever technology will be used to conduct the group. Thus, it is necessary to screen for uninterrupted access to the Internet and the basic ability to

TABLE 1
Comparisons of Face-to-Face and Three Forms of Online Focus Groups

Considerations	Traditional Face-to-Face Focus Groups	Asynchronous Online Focus Groups	Synchronous Online Focus Groups	Virtual World Focus Groups
Participant recruiting	Longer process; higher costs; more reliable as physical interviews are possible	More convenient due to online recruitment processes; comparatively lower costs; easier to reach traditionally inaccessible participants across the globe; may be less reliable, especially as video interaction is limited; does not require all group members to be present at the same time	Online recruitment makes it more convenient, faster and easy to coordinate; opportunities for involving participants from different countries/groups; costs are higher than asynchronous but lower than traditional as databases/online tools may need to be installed; reliability higher than in asynchronous due to real-time interactions among participants	Restricted to members of virtual world who have facility navigating in world; participants must have avatar representatives in world
Cooperation rates	50% to 80% of recruited	< 50%; attrition is higher over time as participants may drop out without sufficient engagement/ monitoring	Similar to face-to-face focus groups but on the higher side due to increased convenience	Similar to face-to-face focus groups but on the low side due to potential technology problems
Technological challenges	Modest; largely confined to video/ audio equipment	Some challenges related to the need for basic computer knowledge among group participants	High; need for a high-speed internet; requires participant understanding/ navigating the focus-group user interface (generally more sophisticated than the asynchronous platform)	Requires substantial bandwidth and virtual-world platform; participants must be knowledgeable about and skilled in using the platform
Moderation	Moderator needs to be skilled in processing information, simultaneously using visual cues and steering conversation in the desired direction	Moderator can engage participants intermittently, may also need to summarize discussions, encourage participants to elaborate answers, and provide discussion guides to drive interaction	Moderator needs to be more proactive, similar to traditional focus groups; also needs to be adept at using online interface	Moderator needs to be both skilled in facilitating group discussion and in using the platform technology

(*Continued on next page*)

TABLE 1
Comparisons of Face-to-Face and Three Forms of Online Focus Groups (*Continued*)

Considerations	Traditional Face-to-Face Focus Groups	Asynchronous Online Focus Groups	Synchronous Online Focus Groups	Virtual World Focus Groups
Participation	Participants can be somewhat inhibited but can get over initial inhibition through expert moderation; tremendous richness of expression is possible	Lack of face-to-face contact encourages respondents to express true feelings in writing; especially encouraging for shy participants as they can take time to formulate their responses	Online platforms are comparatively more informal and hence participation is likely to be richer than traditional face-to-face groups	Highly engaging venue that encourages role playing
Sensitive topics	People take time to open up and share their honest opinions on sensitive topics	Anonymity and high sense of psychological safety for sensitive topics allows participants to speak more freely	Anonymity and the "informal" characteristic attached to online formats coupled with a virtual group support effect and the comfort of being located at a familiar location allow participants to be more open than in traditional formats	Anonymity encourages sharing of sensitive information
Observer participation	Comparatively lower as observers need to physically travel to the different focus-group location to monitor progress; two-way mirrors and videotaping can provide real-time and delayed observation	High because observers can log in anytime per their convenience and scan the comments submitted by existing participants	High (but lower than asynchronous due to real-time nature) because observer can log in and listen to ongoing interactions	Similar to synchronous online groups
Incentives	Need to be higher and in tangible forms because participants are required to make a comparatively higher time commitment	Incentives lowest for asynchronous groups because they provide the most convenient form of participation; incentives often take the form of online coupons that can be shared when the session ends	Incentives can be similar to or slightly lower than face-to-face groups but are administered online in the form of gift cards/ redeemable coupons	Incentives take the form of in-world money or products

(*Continued on next page*)

TABLE 1
Comparisons of Face-to-Face and Three Forms of Online Focus Groups (*Continued*)

Considerations	Traditional Face-to-Face Focus Groups	Asynchronous Online Focus Groups	Synchronous Online Focus Groups	Virtual World Focus Groups
Transcripts	Need for a dedicated individual to write down notes or a recording device for putting together transcripts later	Word-for-word transcripts are available/can be downloaded almost immediately	Easy recording is usually facilitated by built-in tools in the online interface	Easy recording of text, audio, and in-world video
Cost	High costs related to facility rentals, transportation, equipment rentals, participant incentives, etc.	Typical bulletin board formats generally cost one-third of traditional formats	May or may not be similar to traditional formats based on various factors (geographical locations of participants, sample source, method of recruitment, etc.)	May or may not be similar to traditional formats based on various factors (geographical locations of participants, sample source, method of recruitment, etc.)

Note. Adapted from Stewart and Shamdasani (2014); Silverman (n.d.); and Sweet (2001).

navigate through the research platform or tool with support from the researchers. For this reason, participants may also be asked to register and log in to a research website created for the study to confirm their technological proficiency.

Other benefits of online focus groups that are related to recruiting include cost savings and reductions in lead time. Online focus groups lend themselves to a recruiting process that is entirely online, an option that leads to considerable savings compared to traditional focus-group recruiting, especially when an e-mail database of potential participants is readily available. In addition, while the lead time for organizing face-to-face focus groups can be as much as several weeks, the lead time for online focus groups can be significantly reduced, often to just a few days, due to the enhanced flexibility and accessibility that the Internet offers. The popularity of online focus groups has also led to a rise of companies offering online recruiting services and other support functions for conducting online focus groups. Utilizing the services of companies that have a preregistered list of volunteers or a comprehensive database of potential participants can also be an effective approach to recruiting for online focus groups.

Despite these advantages, researchers recruiting for online focus groups also confront unique challenges related to recruiting participants. When recruiting is done online, the absence of direct verbal contact with potential participants either by telephone or in face-to-face interaction reduces the ability to screen participants for obvious qualifications or disqualifications, such as age and gender. Use of commercial consumer panels that use double opt-in recruiting methods can overcome much of this disadvantage, however (Marketing Research Association 2015). In addition, online commitments to participate in a group are not as compelling as verbal commitments to a person. Without regular follow-up during and after the recruitment process, participants may be more likely to drop out of online focus groups. Some people will agree to take part in a group but then not register; others will agree to participate and register but then either not take part at all or take part only to a small degree. Thus, it is generally necessary to substantially overrecruit the number of potential participants relative to what is necessary when recruiting for face-to-face groups. It is also important to make sure that potential participants understand clearly when the research will take place and what it will involve.

Synchronous online groups and virtual worlds require the availability of significant bandwidth, as well as a working knowledge of navigation within online platforms. This means an additional filter is necessary when screening participants. Ideally, this screening should involve some type of verification of the bandwidth available to a potential participant and the participant's facility with whatever technology platform will be used to conduct the group. These technological requirements may be a challenge, especially when recruiting participants from third-tier cities who may not necessarily have access to a high-speed Internet connection.

Moderating Online Focus Groups

Facilitation of productive face-to-face focus-group discussions requires a skilled moderator. The skill of the moderator of online focus groups is no less important, and the level of

skill required for success may be even greater in the online context. On the other hand, the online environment can provide tools to assist the online moderator that are not generally available to moderators of face-to-face groups. These tools include time-tracking monitors that inform the moderator about which group participants have contributed, how long each participant has talked, and the time since a participant's last contribution. They also include the feature of allowing respondents to raise their hands to be recognized. Most of the tasks of a focus-group moderator are similar whether the group is conducted in a face-to-face format or online. Nevertheless, the mechanics of the tasks of the moderator are different for online groups and are different from one type of online group to another.

Face-to-face focus groups begin with the arrival and welcoming of the participants to the focus-group facility. The analog to the focus-group facility in the online world is the online research site where participants go to register for the group in which they will participate. It is crucial that the online research site includes a welcome message along with an overview of the process for first-time users. Similar to face-to-face interactions, it is the moderator's responsibility to put the participants at ease and build rapport. One of the easier options that online focus groups allow includes regular follow-ups between the registration time and the start of research. This can easily be done via personalized or mass e-mails but should not intrude on the privacy of participants or spam their mailboxes; such intrusions can potentially discourage participation.

As with face-to-face interviews, it is usually best to begin the group discussion with simple and easy questions. Subsequently, depending on the responses and without disrupting conversation flow, the moderator can seek elaboration by probing with more specific questions. In all focus-group research, asking fewer questions, allowing adequate time for participants to offer detailed responses, and following up with probes and requests for elaboration and clarification is preferable to asking numerous questions. Indeed, long lists of questions in an online environment often signals to participants that the moderator wants short answers and the discussion can quickly degenerate into an online survey.

For both asynchronous and synchronous formats, avoiding a long list of questions is critical to the success of the online focus group. Depending on the subject of research, 12 to 15 questions is ideal. Moderators should be careful to present questions as general requests for information designed to open up discussion of a topic rather than a checklist of direct questions requiring a quick answer. Like face-to-face focus groups, questions should be asked in a way that facilitates and encourages ongoing discussion.

In face-to-face group discussions the moderator and group participants rely on a wide range of visual and other nonverbal cues to manage the discussion. Such cues are not as readily available, if present at all, in the online environment. This means the moderator must be especially proactive in moving the discussion along, in calling on specific respondents, and in probing and following up answers to questions with requests for additional information, for clarification, and for responses from other members of the group.

While engaging group participants is essential to the success of a focus group, it is also important for the moderator to stay engaged to show that the discussions are being evaluated. This is especially important for asynchronous focus groups that are conducted over a longer duration. In such cases, participants are more likely to drop out if they are not engaged or do not perceive the moderator as being involved. Sharing summaries, providing feedback, and offering encouraging comments on a regular basis are means by which a moderator can communicate interest and involvement.

As with face-to-face focus groups a discussion guide is critical for the success of a focus group and prevents the discussion from deteriorating into an unfocused set of rambling thoughts. In some cases, the interview guide might be shared with participants in advance of an online focus group so that participants can give thought to their responses prior to the group. Such sharing of the discussion guide is rare in face-to-face groups, but it may be helpful in online groups by giving participants a sense of the focus and direction of the discussion. It may also afford participants time to review records, consult others, or gather other information that can help inform the discussion. On the other hand, it may reduce spontaneity and produced biased answers, especially to questions discussed later in the group.

Stimuli for facilitating discussion. Products, packages, print and television advertising, and other stimuli are commonly used in face-to-face focus-group research to facilitate discussion. The use of physical objects, like products, is difficult and usually impossible in an online context. However, pictures of products can be employed, and it is certainly the case that package designs and advertising can be used to stimulate discussion in online focus groups. Of course, in an online environment, pictures of products lack sensory information related to touch, smell, and taste. This is a limitation of online focus groups. On the other hand, the online environment, and especially virtual-world contexts, provides opportunities for the use of stimuli that would be difficult to use in face-to-face groups. Tools for collaborative design and cocreation are relatively easy to implement in a virtual world, and a variety of other visual tools can be used in asynchronous and synchronous online groups.

Image boards are an effective way of innovatively probing brand associations or other preferences depending on the research subject. The moderators can present a number of different mood boards or images to the participants and ask them to choose the image they best identify with or that makes them think of the brand/topic being discussed. The participants are then asked to explain the rationale behind their choice in a bid to uncover often subconscious perceptions associated with the brand/subject. Such image boards can be and are used in face-

to-face groups, but the online setting affords the opportunity for creating a larger number of variations. In addition, especially in asynchronous groups, images may be modified over time and responses obtained from participants regarding the modifications.

A variation of the mood-board technique involves asking participants to choose an item from their own home, workplace, or other relevant setting that best describes them or the subject of the focus-group research. Online platforms allow the participants to upload a photograph of that object and describe the rationale behind their choice along with other relevant detail, such as the location of that object in their house, what they use it for, and so on.

Response elicitation techniques. An advantage of face-to-face focus-group participation is that such groups tend to be fun and involving for participants. This should be no less the case for online focus groups. Effective moderators do not mechanically ask questions. Rather, they engage participants and frequently employ techniques designed to deepen responses to questions. These same techniques can be adapted to the online environment. Among these techniques is asking the group participants to come up with a single word to describe their association(s) with the subject, brand, product or people. Online platforms enable moderators to present these words in innovative visual ways depending on the options available.

Another common technique that can be adapted from the face-to-face setting is sentence completion. Rather than ask a direct question, the moderators can position the question as an incomplete sentence and encourage the participants to fill in the blank. The moderator can subsequently direct the discussions based on the responses submitted by each participant. Some examples of this technique:

"For me, Brand X means . . ."
"People who use Brand X are . . ."
"Some people may not identify with Brand X because . . ."

While response elicitation techniques are an important and useful set of tools when conducting face-to-face focus groups, they may be even more important and useful in the context of online focus groups. This is because these techniques help create a sense of engagement and participation among group members in an online environment that can otherwise be sterile and passive, in contrast to a face-to-face group setting.

THE FUTURE OF ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS IN ADVERTISING RESEARCH

The global population is progressing toward a truly mobile life, with technology at their fingertips, thanks to the Internet and smartphone revolution. Researchers, businesses, and other organizations will tap into this trend with online focus groups that allow participants to connect from anywhere, at any time, from their mobile phones. Much still remains to be discovered about the unique potential online platforms offer for connecting focus-group participants in ways that were not possible before the advent of Web 2.0. Fully integrated mobile applications with video, discussion board software, and multiuser capabilities will take online focus groups to a whole new level. As the capabilities of online translation software increase, it will be possible for respondents who speak different languages to participate in the same group discussion using simultaneous translation. Such capabilities have the potential to expand the frontiers of global marketing research (Harrison 2010).

Online focus groups provide academic advertising researchers with a new tool for examining research questions. Focus-group research is a common precursor to other types of academic research (Stewart and Shamdasani 2014). Online focus groups widen the range of such exploratory and preparatory research by extending the number and diversity of respondents available at a modest cost. Equally important, if not more so, the use of online focus groups provides a means to create hypothetical stimuli, products, and advertising in an efficient manner and to modify the stimuli in real time based on input from focus-group respondents. Thus, online groups are especially useful for studying processes and outcomes associated with the cocreation of advertising. The online environment is also especially conducive to research involving information acceleration (Urban et al. 1997). The ability to create groups that persist over time, rather than meet once, as is common with face-to-face groups, opens up the opportunity to examine processes that unfold over time, such as message repetition and advertising wear-out.

For advertisers and advertising agency personnel the online environment provides new opportunities to collaborate with consumers in the creation of advertising messages and execution. As the speed of information flow in markets increases, the importance of obtaining real-time, or near-real-time, feedback from consumers also increases. Online focus groups provide one means for such feedback. To the degree that advertising creativity involves the novel combination of ideas and perspectives, online focus groups provide the opportunity to create more diverse groups for purposes of ideation. Finally, online focus groups provide the opportunity to provide advertising professionals and other managers a more immediate and intimate exposure to the full range of consumers they are seeking to serve and influence.

Online focus groups also have clear advantages relative to face-to-face focus groups. They expand the geographic range of the participant pool and provide the opportunity to use larger samples and/or more diverse groups. The potential for anonymity within online groups and the ability to participate from home or other known and comfortable environments may make participants more relaxed and more willing to share information. They are generally lower in cost and faster to completion. The online environment provides a means for demonstrating products, ideas, and messages, and for allowing participants to engage in cocreation.

Realization of the potential advantages of online focus-group research does involve some sacrifices relative to face-to-face groups. There are technical issues to be overcome, and participants must possess some degree of skill in navigating the online environment. It is not possible to engage all senses, so when taste, smell, or feel are important issues, online groups will not be optimal. Moderators have to expend more effort to engage participants. It is also inevitable that some populations will be difficult or impossible to reach in an online environment. Thus, as with any research method, there are trade-offs to be made.

While it is inevitable that online and face-to-face focus groups will often be seen as substitutes for each other, each method of group interviewing has unique capabilities and advantages. A more appropriate perspective would be to consider face-to-face and online focus groups as complementary research methods. Online focus groups appear to be particularly promising for engaging otherwise difficult to reach consumers; for keeping users at the center of product, service, and communication design decisions; for testing social media; for conducting longitudinal studies; for time-sensitive information needs; and for discovering new areas for research.

As technology evolves and consumers become ever more comfortable interacting in an online environment, it is likely that online focus groups, and other forms of online research, will play an increasing role in informing marketers, advertisers, and others about consumers. Much of the work with online focus groups to date has revolved around the computer. Still on the horizon is harnessing mobile technologies in service of research. There are enormous opportunities for creativity and innovation in the online and mobile world of research.

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