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The use of group support systems in focus groups: Information technology meets qualitative research

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Abstract

This paper explores focus groups supported by group support systems (GSS) with anonymous interaction capability in two configurations: same time/same place and same time/different place. After reviewing the literature, we compare and contrast these anonymity-featured GSS-supported focus groups with traditional focus groups and discuss their benefits and limitations. We suggest directions for future research concerning GSS-supported focus groups with respect to technological implications (typing skills and connection speeds), national culture (high and low context; power distance), and lying behavior (adaptation of model of Hancock, J. T., Thom-Santelli, J., & Ritchie, T. (2004). Deception and design: The impact of communication technology on lying behavior. *Proceedings of the 2004 conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 129–134), whereby lying is a function of three design factors: synchronicity, recordability, and distributedness).

Keywords: Anonymity; Computer-mediated communication; Focus groups; Group support systems; Jury research; Marketing research; Qualitative research

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1. Introduction

Advances in information technology (IT) and research in computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) have drastically transformed intellectual teamwork, a staple of modern organizational behavior. Adkins, Kruse, and Younger (2004, p. 2) have observed that "[t]oday's work environment routinely requires employees to interact with a number of people across time and space in order to make critical decisions". In fact, collaborative software has been "identified as an emerging area of importance that will change business practices" (Veverka, 2004, p. T2; see also McGrath & Berdahl, 1998, p. 205). According to Jones and Kochtanek (2004, p. 2), "[c]ollaborative technologies can enable people in distributed environments to work together seamlessly irrespective of location, time or functional area". Such progress is a welcome development as contemporary organizational life is characterized by cognitive work increasingly being conducted in groups because groups "have more resources than do single individuals, and therefore the potential for highly effective performance is very much present in most groups" (Hackman & Kaplan, 1974, p. 461).

However, group interaction is not without its drawbacks, which include "limited amount of time for presenting individual ideas (air fragmentation), domination by one member, reluctance to express ideas due to fear of public speaking or due to evaluation apprehension ... [and] normative influence" (Klein, 2003, pp. 92–93). Moreover, research has indicated "that more than half the time spent in meetings is wasted" (Vreede, Davison, & Briggs, 2003, p. 96).

1.1. Group support systems

In order to overcome the problems inherent in group work, various group support systems (GSS), also referred to as groupware (e.g., see Morison, 2004, pp. 137–140), have been designed to assist groups with their intellectual tasks. GSS is an interactive networked computer information system, consisting of software and hardware, that structures, supports, and facilitates group interaction, thereby potentially enhancing intellectual collaborative work, such as issue discussion, idea generation, problem solving, and decision making (Klein, 2000). "The benefit of using GSS stems from three principle features of the technology: anonymity of participation, parallel communication, and group memory" (Reinig & Mejias, 2003, p. 1).

GSS "allows a group of users to collaborate electronically, sharing and updating a common database while allowing for intergroup communications" (Ullrick, 2000, p. 11; see also Ahalt, 2000, p. 1159). Recently, Vreede et al. (2003, p. 96) have described GSS thus: "With GSS, people share, organize, and evaluate concepts, make decisions, and plan for action. GSS users may work face-to-face or across the globe. Their contributions, anonymous or identified, are available for later recall [via group memory embodied in transcript]".

By allowing parallel communication, GSS permits group members to input their comments simultaneously. Rodgers, Dean, and Nunamaker (2004, p. 3) have explained the advantages of parallel communication thus:

> GSS allows people to work in parallel and to see the contributions of others (group memory). In contrast with manual face-to-face meetings where only one person can