

Issues in Online Focus Groups: Lessons Learned from an Empirical Study of Peer-to-Peer Filesharing System Users

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The development of easy-to-use Internet tools for synchronous communications has made a new research method possible: online focus groups. Attempts to apply them to questions formerly addressed by face-to-face focus groups have resulted not only in promising avenues for research, but also in substantive criticism. We have chosen to adopt online focus groups as a research methodology for a qualitative study of user beliefs and attitudes concerning peer-to-peer filesharing systems. This project is still in its early stages, so herein we describe not confirmatory findings of rigorous research, but the issues raised by our exploratory study, and indications of important issues to address in the use of online focus groups. This paper also demonstrates a novel analysis method which visually maps one of the unique characteristics of such groups, multi-threaded simultaneous conversations, and uses such maps to identify some notable tendencies and behaviors. We also identify some typical participant strategies we have observed, describe some skills and techniques for use in moderating such sessions, identify some powerful advantages provided by the instant and automatic transcript generation capabilities of chat session software, and characterize some important research questions to be addressed in future research.

Keywords: online focus groups, qualitative, focus group methodology, file-sharing, digital music, digital media