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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to evaluate opportunities and challenges of online focus group as a method for collecting qualitative market information from teenagers. The research purpose is divided into three sub-purposes: to develop understanding of the focus group as a research method and effects of the online environment on its traditional structure and functioning, to examine the teenagers as a target for online focus group research, and to test the online focus group technique in practice with teenager respondents. This thesis is qualitative with constructive research approach. The theory part of this thesis is based on the literature written about the Internet as research environment, teenagers as target group for marketing research, focus group methodology and the practical functioning of the traditional and online focus groups. On the basis of the theory part is created a construction for evaluating the opportunities and challenges in teenager marketing research. The construction is tested in practice in the empirical part of this thesis by implementing four online focus group sessions with teenager respondents, and revised based on the experience of the implementation.

Internet as research environment creates new possibilities for focus group as a method of youth research. The members of an online focus group can take part in the discussion from their own home computers, which saves costs and eliminates geographical limitations in the recruitment phase. The transcripts are produced automatically, which saves costs and time. Anonymity of the Internet improves group dynamics by reducing peer pressure and making the participants more equal. However, the online focus group as a method for youth research involves also challenges. Anonymity may encourage adolescents to behave aggressively or to fake their identities. Comments may be articulate due to the discussion held in written text, but if the participants cannot put their thoughts in writing fast enough or if the participants are on different levels with their chatting skills, the result may remain vague due to the lack of the nonverbal elements and superficiality of the comments. Also, an inexperienced or incompetent moderator may not be able to relate with teens or concentrate too much on the participants with better chatting skills.

This thesis does not provide unambiguous conclusions on the usefulness of the online focus groups. However, this study suggests that the challenges may be overcome by taking them into concern for instance in training of the moderator and recruitment of the participants. Final conclusion of this study is that the usefulness of the online focus group as a method in teenager research can be improved if the opportunities of the Internet as a research environment are fully taken advantage of and the challenges are met with the right measures.

Key words	group dynamics, Internet, marketing research, qualitative research, youth
Further information	