Online Facebook Focus Group Research of Hard-to-Reach Participants

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Abstract
Conducting discovery-oriented qualitative research about the life experiences of hard-to-reach individuals posed several challenges for recruiting participants and collecting rich textual data. In a study pertaining the experiences of Third Culture Kids (TCKs), we explored the benefits of the social media, such as Facebook as a platform to collect data. TCKs are individuals who define their sense of belonging to the third culture trailing their parents moving across borders during their developmental years. Adult TCKs live in many different countries, and accessing and interviewing respondents could be a difficult and costly endeavor. In this article, the authors share their experience conducting online, asynchronous focus groups using a Facebook platform. We reflect upon the process of setting up a secret Facebook focus group for research purposes, recruiting participants, rapport building between facilitator and participants, monitoring and keeping track of participants’ responses, and the dynamics emerging within an online focus group. We also discuss the novelty, limitations, and benefits of the Facebook focus group as an emerging mode for collecting qualitative data from hard-to-reach participants.

Keywords
Facebook, hard-to-reach participants, online focus group, Third Culture Kids, qualitative research

Introduction
The rapid development of the Internet and various social network applications enable researchers to employ virtual communications formats to capture research participants’ understanding of a social phenomenon of interest (Stancanelli, 2010). In this article, we share our experience of utilizing Facebook online focus groups to collect textual data for a discovery-oriented qualitative study into the meanings and subjective life experiences of Third Culture Kids (TCKs). TCKs are high mobility individuals who grew up moving across borders trailing their parents’ on overseas assignments (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). As a result, TCKs engage with three cultures simultaneously: the culture of the country of origin (called the “passport country”), any and all cultures in the countries where they have lived (the “host country”), and the global transcultural and interstitial culture of global nomads (Lijadi, 2014). TCKs come from families in the military, foreign affairs or diplomatic corps, multinational missionary settings, or business organizations, and all have experienced international mobility (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Furthermore, adult TCKs live scattered across the globe, and accessing this group for a qualitative study soliciting in-depth interviews verges on the impossible with traveling to different places for fieldwork being costly and time consuming. We therefore opted for a focus group approach to collect stories from TCKs living across the globe and employed a new way of conducting these focus groups online through Facebook.

Online Focus Group Research
Stancanelli (2010) claims “online focus groups and traditional focus groups have more commonalities than differences” (p. 764), and this alerted us to the possibilities of conducting online groups through Facebook for our project with adult TCKs. Williams, Clausen, Robertson, Peacock, and McPherson (2012) defined the online focus group as an interactive qualitative group discussions, comprising a selected group of individuals who gave consent and volunteered to participate in a facilitated, predesigned, online discussion in order to explore a specific topic for the purpose of research. Using online focus...
groups have both benefits and limitations when compared with the traditional face-to-face focus groups, that is, online participants tended to contribute shorter comments and were more likely to say just a few words of agreement; in the face-to-face groups, some participants tended to contribute a disproportionately large number of words, whereas other participants were relatively silent (see Brüggen & Willems, 2009; Kerr & Murthy, 2004; Murgado-Armenteros, Torres-Ruiz, & Vega-Zamora, 2012; Qiu & McDougall, 2013; Schneider, Kerwin, Frechtlng, & Vivari, 2002; Underhill & Olmsted, 2003). In market and consumer research, Brüggen and Willems (2009) suggested that off-line focus groups might provide greater depth and breadth in responses among participants and lead to high-quality outcomes, while online focus groups might be more efficient for eliciting spontaneous reactions and interactivenss, although the outcomes could be somewhat superficial.

Most researchers agree that online focus groups could help reduce cost and remove the time and geographical constraints as participants can log in anytime, anywhere, and when it is convenient for them (Brüggen & Willems, 2009; Kerr & Murthy, 2004; Murgado-Armenteros et al., 2012). Furthermore, the physical absence (White & Thomson, 1995) and psychological distance of the Internet could stimulate group participation and boost self-disclosure, especially for individuals who might otherwise hesitate to participate in a face-to-face focus group (Reid & Reid, 2005). The main limitation, however, is that online focus groups are restricted to participants with Internet access. The role of the facilitator of an online focus group could also be more complex as he or she might have to respond to more than one posting at the same time, while also having to pay attention to the interaction between participants, and maintain the flow of the online conversations. There are also concerns over the participant’s authenticity and confidentiality. The anonymity of the Internet could, for example, mean that researchers need to take into account that respondents are really who they claim to be (Greenbaum, 1998, 2003; Reid & Reid, 2005).

Furthermore, the online focus group could be conducted synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous focus groups occur in real time (either audio or text) and require participants and researchers to join at the same prearranged time. This option is difficult to implement when recruiting participants from various countries around the world who could not necessarily be online at the same time for real-time discussions. Asynchronous focus groups, on the other hand, are text based and allows greater time flexibility and typically use online discussion boards or forums allowing participants and researchers to read the prompts and have more time for reflection before responding to the discussion. Therefore, we decided to use asynchronous online focus group to accommodate the availability of TCKs worldwide.

The purpose in this article is to report on utilizing a Secret Facebook Focus Group (SFFG) as innovative strategy for collecting textual data in a discovery-oriented qualitative study with adult TCKs. The adult TCKs we recruited were hard-to-reach participants, and we opted for asynchronous online focus groups to accommodate the availability of TCKs worldwide collecting rich textual data and narratives. The SFFG was employed as a means of data collection exploring the perceptions and sense of belongingness among adult TCKs who grew up following their parents across borders. In this article, we do not report or discuss the outcomes of the study regarding TCKs, which was the core phenomenon of a larger study. Rather, we focus on the insights gained from the process of conducting online focus groups using a secret Facebook set up.

The Facebook Focus Group

Wilson, Goslin, and Graham (2012) report on a rapidly growing literature dedicated to research studying the impact of Facebook on social life, the utility of Facebook as a novel tool to observe behavior in a naturalistic setting, test hypotheses, and recruit participants (see their review of 412 academic journals studying the Facebook phenomenon). In 2014, Facebook claimed to have over 1.23 billion users worldwide, representing a large portion of the global population engaging in one way or another with social media and making the world become more connected. The popularity of Facebook opened the opportunity for us as researchers to use this platform for conducting the online focus groups. Other social media platforms do not have such a broad reach and are less popular with the target population of our study. To become a Facebook user is quite easy requiring only two steps: (i) sign-up and (ii) provide a valid e-mail address or phone number for activation. Facebook could at once connect both globally and locally (Backstrom, 2011), connecting people who are geographically apart while at the same time also allowing for dense interaction in local or small communities. Furthermore, in order to join others on the Facebook platform, users need to accept the friend request from another user and become a member of her or his friendship circle. Once a friend, all parties can view each other’s comments and time line as well as news feeds from any other members connected within the friendship circle. The user’s status on Facebook is anonymous instead of anonymous (Jääkälä & Berki, 2014; Zhao, Grassmuck, & Martin, 2008) and allows for checking the authenticity and member identity (add reference). Because of its popularity and ease of access, we chose to use Facebook for the online focus groups instead of any of the other social media platforms that did not have such a broad reach globally.

Facebook also allows for the formation of special interest groups. Any Facebook user can initiate a Facebook interest group to interact with other users on a special topic. The initiator acts as a facilitator and invites other Facebook users to join the group or may get requests from other users to join a group. A major feature of an asynchronous Facebook special interest group is that it focuses on the users’ ability and willingness to:

(a) post and share relevant information beneficial for the group members;
(b) raise awareness on certain issues related to the special interest group description and purpose;
Communication within the Facebook special interest group is promoted through the “newsfeeds” posted by the facilitator and/or members and a “message” system that allows for private communication between members and the facilitator. Members could also choose to leave the special interest group at any time.

While the Facebook special interest groups could be either public or closed depending on the purpose and participation settings, Facebook recently added a new feature for the formation of a “secret group” with strict confidentiality and privacy settings. In the secret group context, Facebook allowed the facilitator to create an exclusive group discussion based on the research questions and could control and monitor participation. No users outside the group can find or see the group’s existence and conversation threads. Thus, participation is by invitation only, and, as a research tool, this allows the researcher to select only participants who comply with predetermined criteria for participation and to control the size of the group. The facilitator could also check with silent members to ensure equal and fair participation of all parties in a discussion of a posted topic.

Different than other Facebook pages and special interest groups, there is no discussion threading possible within a secret Facebook group. There is no function allowing users to reply with individual comments on each of posts as is typically found in blog comments and some forums. Threaded conversation is more difficult to follow and may cause the discussion to deviate from the main post and topic under discussion (Kear, 2001). Rather, threading conversations in Facebook are collapsed and require members to click to read and follow the conversation related to the topic under discussion. Therefore, we considered the Facebook secret group suitable for asynchronous focus group discussion.

Some scholars in the social sciences are sceptical about using Facebook as a means of collecting reliable data seeing that the “Facebook profile page amounts to a blank canvas on which each user has free reign to construct a public or semi public image of him- or herself” (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012, p. 213). Researchers also study the process by which people create a public image in Facebook, and the Facebook platform provides a valuable new means of studying interpersonal interactions on a wide variety of social phenomenon within a cyber world setting (Back et al., 2010; Rife, Cate, Kosinski, & Stillwell, 2014). In our study, the online image portrayed by the TCKs’ Facebook users was not our main concern. Rather, we aimed to conduct a group discussion using Facebook as the platform to collect textual data collection about the TCKs phenomenon. Nevertheless, we were cautious of possibilities that TCKs participants could construct different public images during group discussion.

(c) raise questions on certain issues;
(d) get consensus or gain understanding about another member’s perspective on certain issues; and
(e) to “meet” new people who share similar interests.

We choose to conduct a focus group research, in order to learn about adult TCKs’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions to their high mobility lifestyles during their developmental years. Focus groups are more likely to reveal TCKs’ group identity in a social gathering and while interacting with others and thus more feasible than if we were to use other methods such as observation, one-to-one interviewing, or questionnaire surveys (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Peek & Fothergill, 2009; Wilkinson, 1998). In the focus group, a multiplicity of opinions could be elicited as participants responded within a group context (Greenbaum, 1998, 2003; Kruger & Casey, 2000), and at the same time we could gain an understanding of the level of consensus among participants on the topic under investigation (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993; Rakow, 2011). However, in this article, we do not report or discuss the outcomes of the study regarding TCKs high mobility lifestyle. Rather, the aim was to share our experiences and insights of conducting SFFG discussions and the processes that emerged from utilizing social media as platform for a discovery-oriented qualitative research project. The first author acted as facilitator, and we reflect upon the lessons learned from using the SFFG as a means of data collection in qualitative research.

Preliminary Observations and Setting Up

We started this project with first observing existing groups on Facebook and focusing on groups that were possible sites that adult TCKs might find attractive. We observed two existing Facebook open groups, namely, “Third Culture Kids Everywhere” and “You know you are Third culture kids when . . .” for 3 months from April to June 2013. In this early process of observation, we wanted to learn:

(a) who were the members of these existing groups;
(b) what did the users post on Facebook; and
(c) how did the group members interact with one another.

We focused our observation to postings that generated more than 10 comments and noted the popular topics of discussion. Initial observations revealed that there were more than 1,500 users of Facebook who identified themselves as TCKs. TCKs who joined these groups also claimed that they found a sense of belonging in the group, even though it was only in the cyber world.

After the initial observations, we conducted a pilot study of a Facebook focus group discussion about what parents of young TCKs could do to prepare their children for the next move and to ensure the well-being of their children. Within 1 week, we received 50 comments for our post, which supported our initiative to gather potentially useful data for the main project with adult TCKs. We also noticed that interactions occurred primarily before working hours and during the weekend or lunch breaks in the participants’ respective time zones. This pattern most probably occurred because participants interacted on Facebook when they had some spare time. As
suggested by Bystedt, Lynn, and Potts (2003) for face-to-face focus groups, we used the outcomes of our observations and the pilot study to identify discussion topics for the main project on perceptions of belongingness and place identity construction of TCKs. Also similar to traditional focus groups, we prepared a response schedule and set up the housekeeping rules discussed in more detail below.

**Recruitment**

Following the preliminary observations, we set up the formal study to take place from December 2013 to February 2014 and recruited participants using a snowball-sampling method. The research information was posted in the Facebook group of TCKs and other TCKs-related websites and asked for volunteers to recommend our research to their friends who met the criteria of TCKs for our research. We recruited both male and female participants who were 18 years or above and who identified themselves as TCKs having lived in at least three countries during their developmental years (i.e., childhood to 18 years). Although language was not a criterion, participants had to be conversant in English, familiar with the SFFG context, and aware of its settings and privacy.

In less than 1 week after posting the messages on Facebook, the facilitator received 20 replies and over 25 private messages inquiring about the project from TCKs wanting to sign up. The facilitator replied to all inquiries including the following information:

1. the details of research project;
2. the informed consent form;
3. a biographic questionnaire, and
4. an invitation to the individual to accepting the “friend” status in the SFFG.

The invitation to accept “friend” status enabled us to invite them to the group discussion, and it took on average between 2 and 3 days for participants to respond positively to the friend acceptance. All correspondences between the participants and us were either by e-mail or by private message and were archived electronically. Adult TCKs who participated in this research were aware that all other participants were also TCKs, which enabled them to develop a sense of belonging within the group (Barker, 2009) and for the researchers to establish rapport. The biographic questionnaire also included question on time availability of the participants to join the focus group discussion, with the option of GMT+8: 6–8 a.m., 12 noon–2 p.m., 5–8 p.m., and 12 midnight–3 a.m. Although participants accepted the invitation quickly, it took almost a month to collect all the signed informed consent forms and biographic information.

Advocates of traditional focus group interviews recommend group sizes of between six and eight participants to ease moderation, assure that each member has an equal opportunity to respond, and to cover all topics in 60- to 90-min period (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In the SFFG where conversations become digitized, facilitation of group dynamics became less problematic, and groups could have more members and allow for lengthier and in-depth discussions over a period of time. We started with five participants in the first SFFG and quickly gathered more than 20 pages (A4), double-spaced transcript. Thus, we concluded that a maximum of five to six participants were sufficient to collect rich data using the SFFG approach. In total, 35 eligible participants from 7 continents signed up to participate in the study. These participants were assigned to seven groups based on the participant’s age provided in the biographic questionnaire and the time when a participant accepted the “friend” invitation. Finally, we conducted three SFFGs with participants aged 19–29 years, two groups with participants aged 30–39 years, and two groups with participants aged >40 years. The seven group discussions using SFFG were conducted simultaneously during the period from December 2013 to February 2014 and each lasting approximately 10–18 days each.

**Ethical Consideration**

It is important to note that for the SFFGs we conducted, only the facilitator could assign participants to join the group. Each member in the SFFG could become “friends” with other participants in the same group but it was not necessary and it was at their own discretion. As Facebook users, participants had to register and accept the Facebook terms of use. Facebook explicitly protects certain user rights and requires that any operator or facilitator of a Facebook application should obtain consent from users and clarify what information would be gathered and how the material would be used (Boyd, 2008; Solberg, 2010; Zimmer, 2010). In addressing ethical concern of this research project, participants were informed about the purpose, procedure, and benefits/risks of the study (e.g., the fact that Facebook is itself archiving all data) and were reassured about privacy. All participants also had to sign the informed consent provided during the invitation period (Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008). The consent form informed participants about their right to refuse to post or withdraw from the study at any time. All consent forms were electronically signed and e-mailed back to the researchers. Pseudonyms were used in the transcripts and data analysis (i.e., name and name of affiliated places or organization).

**The Facilitation of SFFG**

Focusing on conducting a SFFG for data collection rather than the content of the discussions, we reviewed the processes involved and reflected on the lessons learned. While we conducted interpretative phenomenological analysis of the transcripts of SFFG for the main study, the analysis of the processes involved with conducting and collecting data using the SFFG was primarily done through a critical reflexive approach (Watt, 2007). In this regard, we extensively discussed three key processes of preparation, monitoring, and keeping track of participants’ responses. While the first author acted
as the facilitator and had sole access to the participants and their responses, we extensively reviewed the field notes and discussed facilitator–participant interactions where relevant to exploring the processes as they emerged throughout the period of data collection. In the following section, we report on our reflections and lessons learned conducting the seven SFFGs with adult TCKs and related to the preparation, monitoring, and tracking of participant responses.

**Preparation**

The SFFG for the formal study were conducted in a similar way to traditional focus groups. In this regard, the facilitator would start the discussion with an introduction and present the housekeeping rules and response schedule, before inviting all members to introduce themselves. Introductions could be done parallel when the participants were online during the scheduled time period. Establishing rapport between the facilitator and the group members was important (Terrell, 2011), and prior to conducting further discussions, the facilitator engaged with the participants about their personal Facebook profiles as they were “friends” in cyberspace. Furthermore, the facilitator could check if participants were online or whether the participants knew or became friends with each other beyond the scope of the study. Bear in mind, that every Facebook user can control what they want their friends or audience to see. The participants could therefore “see” each other within the Facebook interface once friendships had been established (Back et al., 2010; Barker, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, after setting up the formal study, the facilitator received responses from 35 volunteers who wanted to participate and who were assigned to seven smaller groups. Accepting the “friends” option for the SFFG, we observed with great excitement how quickly group members became familiar with each other and establish a sense of cohesion. Rapport building was easy, and we could sense a positive vibe among the adult TCK participants when everyone was online being friendly, open to exploring the topic, personally involved, and without restraining themselves when expressing both pleasant and unpleasant memories. It seemed as though all participants related well to the many unspoken traditions, customs, values, and rituals only understood among TCKs, and they could easily detect whether or not another member belonged to the same “culture,” which assisted with ensuring the authenticity of participants’ identity. The interaction between the participants was spontaneous, honest, and straightforward with no real need to solicit responses.

**Monitoring**

In the SFFG, monitoring the group dynamic closely for the first 72 hr was crucial to the success of establishing rapport and a reasonable response pattern given the various time zones of participants in the group. For this purpose, we set up the following housekeeping rules once participants signed up to a particular group (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2012):

1. The SFFG will discuss questions related to the topic as stipulated in the welcome post.
2. The SFFG discussion will continue for a minimum of 8 days and a maximum 18 days.
3. The facilitator will inform participants of the timetable when everyone could be available for discussion, taking into consideration the time zones of participants and the facilitator. Your active participation in the discussion during these times is very valuable for the study. Please advise the facilitator if for some reason you are unable to join the discussion during the allocated time indicated and we will try to accommodate your schedule.
4. Participants are expected to reply at each question posted by the facilitator.
5. Participants are expected and encouraged to express their opinion or give comments in the form of written text.
6. When replying directly to another participant’s comments, please insert the person’s name so that he or she will get notification of your response.
7. Participants are discouraged to use foul language and to post irrelevant photos or videos.
8. Once all participants have discussed a question posted by the facilitator, the facilitator will post another question until all questions are asked and discussed. No more than two questions will be posted at the same time depending on the focus of the discussion.

Monitoring continued after posting a question in the SFFG and when the facilitator could observe that all participants had viewed the post during the predetermined scheduled time for the discussion. Some participants disappeared from the discussion and had to be reminded of the housekeeping rules. If there was no response from a participant at the scheduled time, the facilitator would wait for the next time frame before taking action and reminding the participants to respond as stipulated in the housekeeping rules. If the participant still did not show up for three scheduled time frames, the facilitator would send a private message to ask if the participant needed a different schedule or had any pertinent reasons for not participating. Below are some of the replies we received:

(a) I had to attend to urgent matters.
(b) I experienced interrupted Internet connection.
(c) I request an additional schedule.
(d) I had nothing to add and had the same opinion as others.

Sending a private message is another advantage of the SFFG allowing the facilitator to monitor participation without offending the participant in any way, as others would not be aware of such communication. Thus, the researcher–participant relationship was not jeopardized as could be the case in traditional face-to-face focus groups. In case someone responded that they had nothing to add, the facilitator would encourage all participants, in a friendly and inviting manner to use the “like” or “thumbs up” to indicate that they agreed to a specific comment.
from another participant to avoid questioning their participation in the discussion.

The facilitator also had to ensure that all participants remained engaged with the topic while simultaneously safeguarding against a participant getting upset because he or she did not receive a prompt response. In some cases, the facilitator could rephrase the question for all to see or write a comment directly to an individual participant asking for a response. As an example of this monitoring process, the following summary suffices:

Facilitator posted the question: What were the challenges of repeatedly changing schools?

Follow-up responses from the facilitator directed at individual participants:

- Amy, in your biodata you mentioned you attended 12 different schools before the age of 18 years. Please share your experience in leaving and adjusting to so many schools.
- David, how about your experiences “attending and changing 4 different schools” during your primary school years?

Further to monitoring the progress in the SFFG, the facilitator had to know when to post a new topic for discussion. In a traditional face-to-face focus group, the next prompt or topic would only be presented once each group member had a chance to reply and a draft consensus was achieved. However, in the SFFG, some members might be eager to go to the next topic. Participants in the SFFG responded at a different pace than would be expected in a traditional face-to-face focus group because the discussion took place asynchronously. Thus, in an attempt not to lose the momentum and engagement of participants, the facilitator might have to post the next topic even before a previous topic had been fully responded to by all members. On the other hand, the SFFG facilitator could always recapture an earlier topic if considered important, although the discussion for a second topic had already started. Most importantly, the facilitator needed to be careful not to post another topic too soon and possibly stymie participant discussion. Rather, the facilitator needed to remain vigilant of all topics under discussion and should review earlier posts and responses during times when others were not online to recapture topics not fully discussed and “re-engage” participants if necessary. In this way, the SFFG made it easier than for traditional focus groups to keep participants involved and obtain rich data from participants.

**Keep Tracking of the Responses**

Further to monitoring group participation in the SFFG, the facilitator had to be vigilant keeping each member in the loop and at the same pace with other members. Keeping track of the responses in the SFFG we observed that participants across all age-groups seemed apparently keen to read and comment on another participants’ content. Participants logged on during the prescheduled time periods and responded quickly and coherently on other people’s posts. We also observed that participants were not reluctant to respond both positively and negatively to another participant’s content allowing for dynamic conversations within the group.

Moreover, the responsiveness of participants had both positive and negative consequences on the facilitator’s role keeping track of replies as more than one reply could arrive at the same time. In some instances, participants might not have read a previous post from another member, responded too quickly, or diverted the discussion away from the provided question prompt. Time and geographical location might be overcome with the SFFG but could also boomerang. For example, one member might be active during dawn, and someone in a different part of the world would only be reading the response in her or his part of the world the next day.

Common to a synchronous focus group where a few individuals could dominate the discussion and the facilitator had to intervene to balance participation among all members, some group members in the SFFG posted lengthy responses (1–2 pages) or responded with a single word. Although providing valuable data, lengthy responses could be off-putting to other members who might be reluctant to read and comment on the various issues presented in the long response. In the SFFG, the facilitator used a strategy of intervening to lengthy posts by extracting the participant’s comments in point format and making it easier for other members to read and comment. In another case, responses from one participant were posted in a staggered manner and presented in several posts or posted in between the responses from other participants thus creating difficulty keeping track and requiring additional attention to follow. The facilitator needed to be alert and paraphrase these staggered responses to maintain a degree of coherence in the discussion on a topic. Such summarizing or paraphrasing often took place during times when there was no prescheduled discussion, and group members were not active.

On the other hand, brief, single word responses could alert the facilitator to prompts that were too dichotomous eliciting a discussion. Brief responses could be as short as one word or even a symbol (i.e., emoticon) or abbreviation and interpreted as:

(a) The participants considered the responses in the focus group were saturated when replying with “Agree” or “Correct.”
(b) The participants used a word or symbol that they assumed to be universally understood or at least would be understood among the participants, such as “res” for reverse culture shock or emoticons.
(c) The participants responded to dichotomous statements posted by other participants with one-word remarks (e.g., “Not me” or “Maybe”).
(d) The participants were reluctant to respond due to the asynchronous nature of the discussion and the facilitator needed to readdress the question/comment to ensure responses matched with the comments.
Some scholars have criticized the absence of nonverbal behavior or communication in the online focus group affecting the quality and depth of data (Graffigna & Bosio, 2006; Greenbaum, 1998, 2003; Stewart & Williams, 2005). However, we believe that nonverbal communication in the online focus group emerged in different forms and modes of communication. In asynchronous focus groups such as the SFFG, there were many linguistic characteristics mirroring the spoken word and extending beyond what is possible in traditional face-to-face focus groups. For example, participants could post blogs, photos, songs, videos, emoticons, and links to other websites.

Nonverbal communications mimicking speech acts are common in social media and we also observed the use of these communication strategies in the SFFG in the form of emoticons and abbreviations. Examples of these nonverbal speech acts in the posts of participants included:

1. phatic statements, such as “omg (Oh my God),” “arrrgh,” “lol” (laugh out loud);
2. emoticon applications;
3. the usages of variety of fonts, UPPER CASE and color for emphasis; and
4. external links posted by participants to add remarks or draw attention to specific issues.

The speech acts in the participants’ responses alerted the facilitator to the mood in the group and helped with interpreting the group dynamics, processes, and meanings (Stewart & Williams, 2005). The following excerpt suffices as an example of how emoticons and text abbreviations were used to set a tone of sadness and irony when responding to the question of “How do being different affected you?”

Sonja: This is a difficult question. [Emoticons: chuckle]. I am seen as different whenever I am outside of Holland . . . Then when I am in Holland I don’t feel so Dutch anymore . . . To strangers that ask I just give them a brief description: ‘Yes I’m Dutch but I’ve only lived here 6 years so I don’t know that much’ [Emoticons: sad, cry]. Only my good friends know the long story because it is long and most people find it either boring or bragging (sic). Therefore I always try to find the short way out. LOL.

Mirjam: I liked being “different”; maybe because that’s all I knew? LOL. As a blonde [Emoticon-wink] living in Arab or Hispanic countries, I was a novelty and was treated such. Imagine my horror when I was in Germany/Austria & no one would give me the time of day! “boring or bragging” (sic): I can relate Participant A!!!!

The nonverbal communication through the speech acts mentioned here gave proof that the tone of the group interaction could be observed in a similar manner to what is expected in traditional face-to-face focus group discussions. These speech acts were also incorporated in the transcripts and added richness to the data, as would the researcher’s field notes of nonverbal communication in a traditional focus group setting.

Given that the facilitator had more time to reflect upon responses, the different modes of communication used in the SFFG allowed her to pay attention to and capture nonverbal communication embedded in the text, something often problematic when conducting real-time focus groups. Thus, the speech acts and other modes of communication added a further dimension to the data collection process and could be considered the artifacts available when conducting ethnographic research with SFFG.

Reflection and Conclusion

Online focus group using Facebook was beneficial to our study for several reasons. Recruiting and interacting with adult TCK participants globally were made easier using SFFG, and we were able to collect rich data supplemented by different modes of communication (i.e., text, photos, songs, video clips, poems, links to relevant website, emoticon as well as other nonverbal communications), and which allowed us to conduct rigorous analyses for the main study. Using Facebook made it easier to recruit hard-to-reach participants globally. In our study, participants had to adhere to very specific criteria for adult TCKs and it would have been difficult to access this population using real-time face-to-face interviews. However, while easier to access eligible respondents globally, participants were limited to Facebook users and those who did not object to be Facebook users.

The SFFG required both researchers and participants to be familiar in using Facebook and to be able to express their thoughts/opinions and emotions in writing. Furthermore, requiring participants to sign-in as Facebook users and to accept friend request from the facilitator established the participant’s willingness to participate. Similar to traditional focus groups, the interaction in the SFFG was not anonymous. The only difference was the lack of physical presence. Accepting the “friend” status in cyberspace enabled the researchers to establish rapport and participants could get to know one another beyond the immediate interface of the SFFG. Several participants commented, for example, that they found a sense of belongingness within cyberspace engaging with other TCKs from around the world.

Compared to the traditional focus group technique, the experience of conducting a focus group using Facebook was totally novel and different from conducting a real-time face-to-face focus group, particularly facilitating the group discussions. Given that participants might be scattered around the world, there were many challenges monitoring and keeping track of responses, and keeping participants engaged adding complexity to the role of facilitator. The interaction among SFFG participants could be intense, with many comments and sensitive memories being revealed. Facilitating the SFFGs was also an exhausting and intense process, and we advise novice users of a SFFG not to conduct more than one focus group at the same time even though it is possible.

The number of social media users is increasing faster than ever, and various social phenomena could be explored equally
well in the real world as well as in cyberspace. Collecting qualitative data from a difficult to access populations about such a social phenomenon is often a daunting task. However, researchers need to be open to and flexible in using new technologies for accessing and interacting with participants in different parts of the world. We also recommend SFFG for target populations who have auditory impairments and difficulty communicating verbally. Using text when expressing opinions could minimize the potential disputes and embarrassment between facilitator and participants with or without auditory impairment. Furthermore, using SFFG is a viable option including individuals who work shifts and cannot be accessed during usual working hours for a face-to-face conversation. The SFFG provides a solution as it allows participants to respond at a convenient time and the facilitator could adjust the schedule in anticipation of when the comments will be posted. Thus, the SFFG has great potential for researchers who want to include populations and minorities often excluded from social science research because of physical, geographical, or time constraints.

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