

Comparing Recruitment for Focus Groups and Friendship Groups: Which Methodology Makes Recruitment Easier?

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Background

Focus groups are an excellent technique to capture users' perceptions, feelings, and suggestions about a topic, product, or issue (Ritchie et al, 2014). The groups are conducted in a controlled, neutral data collection environment. Participants typically do not know each other and researchers purposively recruit a demographically diverse group of individuals (Smith 1972). Recently, a new methodology, called "friendship groups" or "friendship cells," has emerged in the market research area (The Friendship Group Toolkit, 2014). This approach involves recruiting a single "source participant" who in turn recruits friends or acquaintances possessing the characteristic(s) desired for the study. The source participant hosts the group in his or her home.

The friendship group methodology has the potential to significantly reduce recruiting costs, since researchers must recruit only one participant instead of many. However, a potential risk of this methodology is that the resulting group(s) may not be demographically diverse.

Method

For this study, we compared recruiting results from two traditional focus groups and four friendship groups with physically active women ages 20-50. In order to address the potential issue of diversity, our design involved testing two approaches to friendship group recruiting. Half of the friendship groups attempted to mimic the traditional purposive method by asking the source participant to recruit a "racially diverse" group of friends, whereas, in the others, the source participant was simply asked to recruit a group of friends, with no mention of diversity.

Focus Groups

Focus group participants were recruited via Craigslist, the newspaper, blogs/forums, Facebook, LinkedIn, Google and our internal database. The ads for each platform varied in length based on character limitations, but always contained information about the discussion topic, length and location of the focus groups, as well as the incentive amount. Because of OMB restrictions, we were only able to offer individuals \$30 for participating in a 100-minute focus group.

Friendship Groups

For the friendship groups, we utilized our internal database to recruit four individuals to act as "hosts." Emails were sent to groups of women in the database between the ages of 20-50 who reside in Montgomery County, Maryland. The emails contained information about the topic of the group, how the group will work, the individual's role as a host, the length of the group, and incentive amounts. Half of the women received an email that explained that hosts would need to recruit a "diverse" group of friends, while the other half received an email with no instruction about diversity.

Hosts were offered a \$100 gift card and those they recruited to participate each received \$30 in cash for a 100-minute group. Once hosts were selected, Westat recruiters provided them with example text to use to recruit the attendees. Throughout the process, Westat recruiters answered any questions hosts had and were responsible for checking on the host's recruitment status. As the date of the group neared, Westat recruiters reminded hosts that if they were not able to successfully recruit 5-7 participants for the group, the group would need to be rescheduled or cancelled altogether.

Results

We compared the focus group and friendship group methodology in terms of the ability to successfully recruit target populations, the cost per completed group, the timeline for recruitment and the resulting relative diversity of participants.

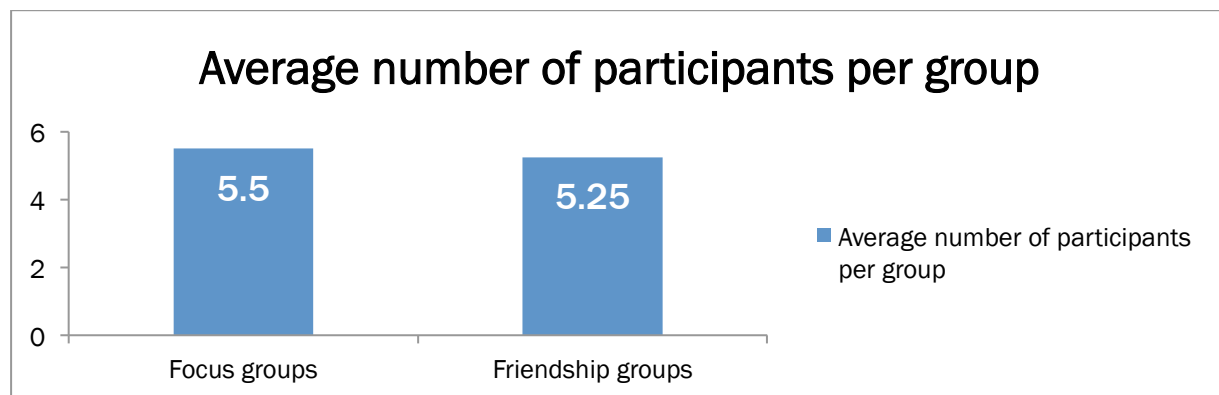
Ability to recruit target populations

Recruitment had a goal of 5-7 participants for each group.

For the focus groups, a total of 227 potential participants were recruited and screened. Given the length of the focus group and the low incentive amount, a high no-show rate was anticipated. To ensure adequate attendance, Westat recruited 12 participants for each focus group. The focus groups had an average of 5.5 participants for each group.

For the friendship groups, only hosts were directly recruited by Westat. In order to obtain two hosts for the "organic" friendship groups and two for the "purposive" groups, a total of about 215 emails were sent out for each type of friendship group. Only five individuals expressed an interest in hosting the racially diverse "purposive" group, as opposed to ten individuals who called in to host the "organic" groups. The friendship groups had an average of 5.25 participants for each group.

In the end, both the focus groups and friendship groups were able to meet the recruiting goals.

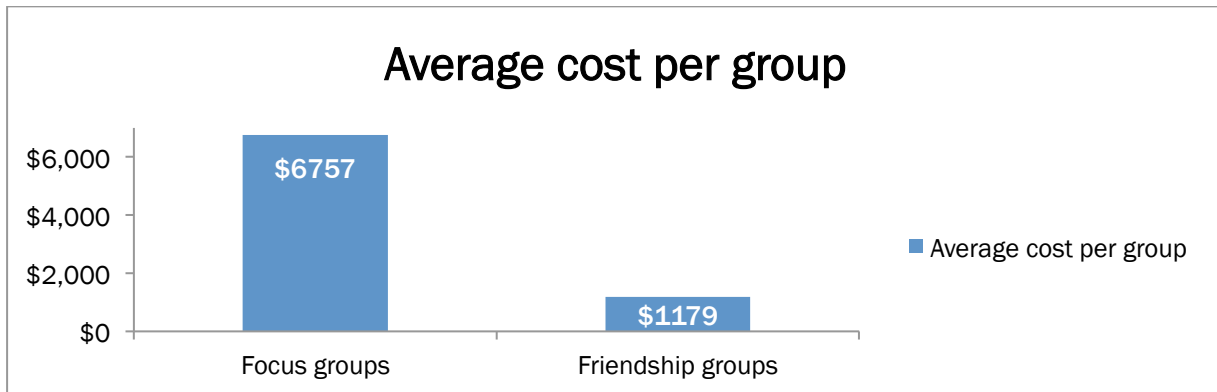


Cost per completed group

The average cost per group was calculated, including both labor and advertising costs.

For the friendship groups, the average cost per group was \$6757. Please note that this cost is higher than a typical focus group, which we attribute to the small incentive amount.

For the focus groups, the average cost per group was \$1179.



Timeline for recruitment

Focus group recruitment was completed within three weeks, whereas the friendship group recruitment took about two months.

For the focus groups, when respondents informed us that they were unable to attend a group, the respondent was replaced and the originally scheduled group occurred as planned.

For the friendship groups, one of the "purposive" hosts had last minute cancellations that resulted in fewer than five scheduled participants. As a result, a new replacement host needed to be recruited, postponing the recruitment timeline for the friendship groups by a month. Had this not occurred, all four friendship groups would have been completed within a month of the recruitment start date.

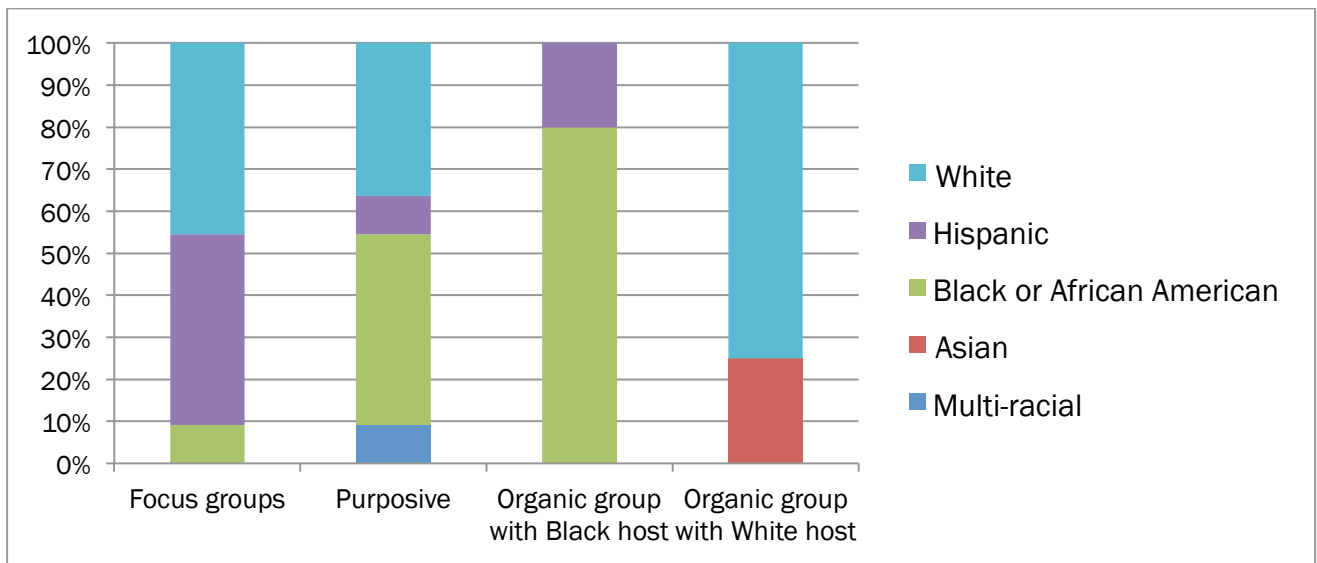
Relative diversity of groups

To explore the relative diversity of the groups, we looked at race and ethnicity, as well as education levels. Since the study specified participants must be women aged 20-50, we did not look at gender or age.

Race & Ethnicity

To meet study goals, recruitment for the focus groups targeted White, African American, and Hispanic women. Within those constraints, the focus groups were relatively diverse.

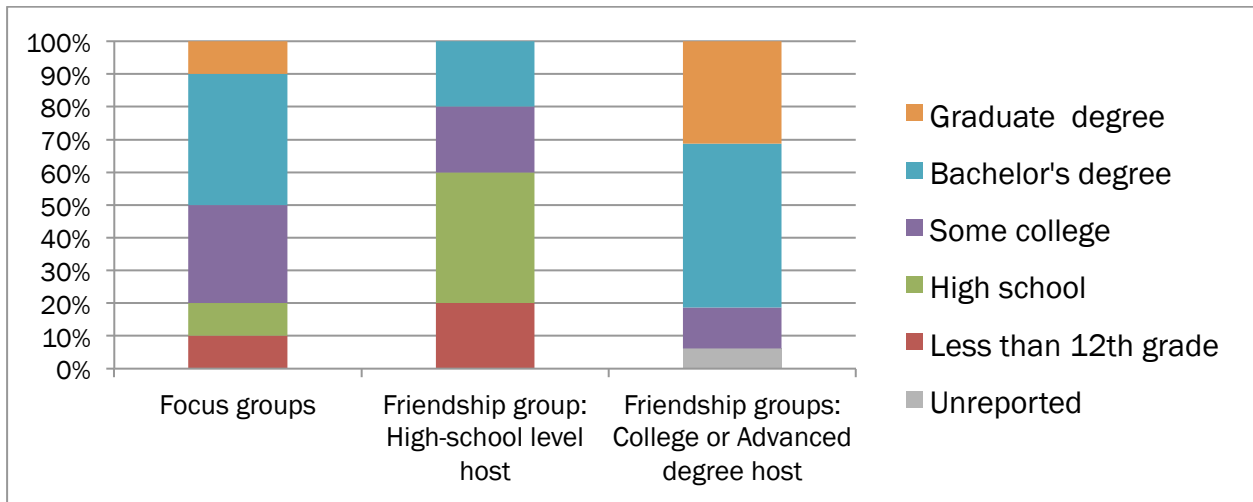
The “purposive” friendship groups, where hosts were asked to recruit a “racially diverse” group of friends, were also relatively diverse. The “organic” groups, where hosts were given no instructions about diversity, however, were much less diverse. Furthermore, the race of most participants within the group tended to reflect the race of the host.



Education Level

Overall, friendship group participants appear to skew more highly educated than those that participate in focus groups.

However, like with race, the education of the friendship group host appears to have had an influence on the education level of group participants. Of the four hosts recruited, one had a high school degree, one had a college degree and the remaining two had advanced degrees. Hosts with a higher level of education tended to recruit respondents with higher levels of education and vice versa.



Conclusions

As anticipated, the friendship groups did have greatly reduced recruiting costs as compared to the focus groups. Labor costs for friendship groups are minimal since researchers must recruit only one participant for each group instead of many. However, because of significant delays due to a host cancellation, the friendship group recruiting timeline was unexpectedly longer than the focus group timeline.

As also anticipated, friendship group hosts tended to invite people similar to them in regards to race and ethnicity and education levels. Instructing hosts to recruit a “racially diverse” group of friends was able to counteract this tendency in terms of race and ethnicity. However, recruiting materials that included this instruction yielded a much lower rate of interest among potential hosts.

In conclusion, we feel that friendship groups are a potentially viable methodology for qualitative data collection. To determine how the setting and methodology of friendship groups might affect data, further research is currently being conducted. To learn more about how friendship groups affect data quality, look for *Friends or strangers? Examining an innovative focus group methodology* to be presented at the 2016 International Conference on Questionnaire Design, Development, Evaluation, and Testing (QDET2) in Miami, Florida.

References

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