Digital technology has become increasingly more prevalent with the rise of smart phones and tablets that ensure almost instant access to the Internet and social media. With an extensive online presence, what does it mean to be “safe” online? An exploration of under represented rural populations and future research would benefit from delving further into how individuals perceive their online presence through mixed methodology.

 method
Focus groups. 65 participants from rural Appalachian who participated in 9 focus groups (average 7 people per group). Three focus groups were conducted with adolescents ages 12 to 16, one group with undergraduate college students, and 5 groups were conducted with adults. Participants were 58% female. The majority of the sample identified as White/European American (non-Latino) (92.3%), followed by Latino/a (3.3%), reports of being more than one race (3.3%) and African American/Black (non-Latino) (1.5%).

In-depth narrative interviews. 24 participants from rural Appalachia completed in-depth semi-structured interviews in which they were asked to review and comment on draft questionnaire items generated from the focus groups. Participants ages ranged from 12 to 70s; 25% were ages 12-17, 16.7% were ages 18-24, 8.3% were ages 25-29, 16.7% were ages 30-39, 12.5% were ages 40-59, 12.5% were ages 60-69, and 8.3% were 70 years of age or older. The sample was 62.5% female and 37.5% male. The majority of the sample (87.5%) was White/European American (non-Latino), 8.3% were Latino/a, and 4.2% of the sample were African American/Black (non-Latino).

Procedures: Focus groups in semi-structured focus groups, participants answered questions regarding technology use, problems faced when using technology (scams) and strategies that protect their privacy. Sample items include, “Do you think that some technologies are safer than others?” “We live in a very rural area. How do you think living in a rural area affects your use of technology?” Each focus group participant received a $20 gift card for participation.

In-depth cognitive interviews. The in-depth interviews were structured like the focus groups, except that participants received a $50 gift card for participation. The interview participants were shown a list of items on digital privacy concerns that were developed from the focus groups by the research team and reviewed by 6 external researchers.

Data Analysis: We utilized grounded theory analyses (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Walker & Myrick, 2006) to formulate codes, categories, subcategories, and themes from participants’ own words.

Discussion: Several interconnected themes arose through our content analysis of the focus groups and cognitive interviews. Several participants noted that it was challenging to determine if an email or a Facebook account was legitimate because the scam appealed to their emotions, eliciting fear, trust, or hope. Additionally, participants noted that aggressive commercial solicitations, though not illegal, were more “annoying,” inconvenient, and at times, frightening because of the amount of personal information these companies had accessed.

Lastly, participants endorsed such online protective strategies as ignoring emails or phone calls from people they do not know, restricting the amount of personal information shared online, and limiting their use of public Wi-Fi as a route to stealing private information.

Limitations and Future Directions: Though our sample was taken from an often underrepresented rural population in psychology, the lack of diversity in our sample is apparent and may impact the generalizability of these findings.

Our qualitative analyses provide a unique framework for studying online privacy protection and future research would benefit from delving further into how individuals perceive their online presence through mixed methodology.

what does it mean to be “safe” online? An exploration of under-represented digital privacy concerns and online protective practices in a rural community

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