Speed Dating, Love Letters, and Couples Interviews: How to Get the Spark Back in User Research Methods

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Abstract

Many researchers find themselves in a methodological rut and end up using the same tried-and-true user research methods, such as usability studies or interviews. Though these methods have their merits, there are times when asking questions directly may not suffice or researchers simply have trouble getting to the insights that are needed. This two-hour tutorial will focus on teaching creative methods that can spark new conversation or illuminate different insights. We will focus on three methods: speed-dating, love letters, and couple interviews. These methods are particularly effective for researchers and practitioners who study personal topics such as communication messaging apps and websites. The tutorial will provide a useful toolkit of creative methods and best practices.

Author Keywords

User experience research; user experience; design thinking; creative methods; speed dating; love letter; co-design

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

Introduction

It can be easy to get into a methodical rut using the same technique to solve a problem. Thinking about the Einstellung effect can be useful.

"The Einstellung Effect is the tendency for people to develop a fixed method of solving problems, and to use that method even if better methods of solving the problem become available" [5].

For many researchers, we tend to rely on a small subset of research methods (e.g. usability studies, interviews, and surveys) [5]. This can lead to methodological stagnation. Researchers sometimes refrain from using other methods due to habit, pushback from stakeholders, or having risk aversion to trying new methods. For example, Hannington and Martin (2012) provided more than 100 different methods in their widely adopted research handbook, but many researchers still find themselves falling back on what they know best [3]. To spark some methodological risk-taking and to push researchers to try new things, we created this workshop.

We will present on three methods that we have successfully used in our mobile research that has sparked new idea generation and provided the team with a new way of uncovering user needs. We have found these methods particularly useful given that our products (e.g. messaging, phone call, and video chat apps) require users to share intimate details of their conversations, habits, and lives.

Speed Dating

Speed dating is an effective low-fidelity method for exploring product concepts and validating and

prioritizing user needs [2]. As its name implies, the method exposes participants to a large volume of ideas to gather feedback. Through discussion and activities such as questionnaires, the more promising concepts and needs bubble up. This method is effective in a group, but it can also be conducted with a single participant. For validating needs, participants are shown drawings that illustrate a perceived need. Participants then individually rank the severity and frequency of the need. Discussion allows for diverse perspectives to emerge and provides context around any tensions. At the end, the severity and frequency questions can be used to rank needs.

Love Letters

Love letters are a tool that captures not only a user's favorite features in a mobile app or website and their emotional connection to the product being studied [5]. Participants are asked to write a love letter to one of their mobile applications (e.g. Snapchat, Facebook Messenger). The task is often assigned as homework before a session, allowing participants to complete the activity with less pressure and in their preferred writing space. Participants are encouraged to only take five to 10 minutes, so as to have fun and not overthink the letter. Most letters are a few paragraphs long and provide meaningful context into how the app or website and its critical features fit into people's lives. Breakup letters are an alternative application of this tool that can provide similar insights.

Couple Interview

A couple or dyadic interview is a method where two participants interact to elicit responses from one another [6]. This method is particularly useful when collecting feedback on communication apps and

websites (e.g. video chat, messaging) as participants share information or memories they may not recall on their own. It can also be useful to hear two friends discuss, endorse, compare, contrast and argue, about features of an app. If testing usability on a product, each participant goes to a separate room to avoid influencing one another. This also mimics a more realistic interaction than if both participants were in the same room. Once participants have completed tasks, they come back together for the couple interview to discuss feedback on study artifacts.

Learning Goals

The goal of the tutorial is to provide new research methods, application and synthesis at a higher level. Integrating creative research methods is done on many teams but we often don't get a chance to share them. The methods we apply in the tutorial do not take a lot of time and can easily be used in conjunction with other more traditional methods (e.g. usability studies, one-on-one interviews). Participants will practice methods during hands-on activities and are welcome to bring real-world examples to the tutorial.

The intended audience includes researchers and practitioners in the mobile and/or desktop apps space as well as any website. We know this area can be difficult to study given its personal and intimate nature; however, by using creative methods, we are able to get participants to share their experiences in more engaging and open ways [1]. Through presentations, must-read reference materials, stories, and hands-on activities, tutorial attendees will have a set of creative methods for their research toolboxes.

Tutorial Structure

This will be a two-hour tutorial with an in-depth look at each methodology, hands-on activities and reference materials. During hands-on activities, participants will practice applying and conducting each method to a current project or example. Instructors will be available to answer questions, provide guidance and feedback.

Schedule

Time	Description
09:00-9:30	Introductions, ice breakers, and introduce three creative methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speed dating• Love letter• Couples interviews
9:30-9:50	Hands-on activity: Attendees practice speed dating
9:50-10:10	Hands-on activity: Attendees practice love letters
10:10-10:20	Break
10:20-10:40	Hands-on activity: Attendees practice couples interviews
10:40-11:00	Wrap up: Group discussion on best practices

Expected Outcomes

The overall objective is to provide additional methods for a practitioner's toolkit for researching and exploring mobile apps.

Attendees will leave with a tutorial toolkit including reference materials on methods, method cards summarizing the creative method, and instructions with best practices will be designed and provided on the tutorial website.

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Biographies

Heidi Sales is a Senior UX Researcher at Google where she has focused on experiences for software developers and consumers in the mobile app space. In her previous work, she has led research for Microsoft and Intel. Heidi enjoys mentoring students in STEM and is an active member of local UX community and Diversity & Inclusion efforts in Seattle, WA.

Denise Su is a UX Researcher at Google on the Communications team. She focuses on creating amazing mobile app experiences in US and emerging markets. In past work, she has consulted for several large companies that have spanned tech industries including medical, gaming and voice. Denise holds a doctorate in Developmental Psychology from the University of California Santa Cruz, where she focused on culture and access to information.

Megan Torkildson is a UX Researcher at Google where she has worked on communications products, such as Hangouts and Allo, since 2014. Her recent projects have focused on early stages of the product development and localizing features for various international markets. She has also conducted foundational research in India, Indonesia and Japan. Before joining Google, she studied Human Centered Design and Engineering at the University of Washington.