Cultural Probes

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	FACILITATORS	CATEGORY	DURATION	LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY
10 – 15	none	Empathize	10 – 30 days	Moderate

Description

The cultural probes method is aimed for understanding users from a qualitative and ethnographic approach. The probes could be various material designed by the research team that are later handed out to the participants. These include diaries, postcards, maps, photo books, etc. These objects are bundled in a tool kit when presented to the participants. The participants will use these tools to reflect and report their daily activities, thoughts, moods, etc. After a period of time, the probes will be collected by the research team. Ideally, the researchers can get an impression of the cultural insights of the participants based on the probes.

Materials

‣ Pen

‣ Paper

‣ Probes Toolkit of

    ‣ Postcards

    ‣ Diary books

    ‣ Maps

    ‣ Camera

    ‣ Photo books, etc.

Preparation

The probes should be carefully designed by the researchers, as the core idea of the cultural probes is inviting participants to self report their life. It is believed that the aesthetic design of the probes help achieving this purpose. For example, Subtle details of a postcard could make the participants feel they are treated with respects and warmth, not merely a research object.

Similarly, how to give the participants the probes is equally crucial. It is preferred to handle the cultural probes kit to the participants in person and explain how should they use them. All these interactions between the researchers and the participants can help reducing the distance between both sides.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Specifying the probes
   Based on the research objectives, the researchers should decide which probes should be used for understanding the potential users. Another factor would be the target group and how they would like to record their daily life. For example, the elderly may prefer to write things down in a notebook, while the younger generation could prefer media diary. Besides, identifying the duration of the cultural probes is necessary and will influence the design later.

2. Designing the probes kit
   The aesthetics of the probes should be considered. These apply mostly to postcards, diary books and other handwritten note taking options. For products like cameras or recorders that are not designed by the team, it would be appropriate to attach some notes and instructions to guide the users. The probes should be bundled as a kit, meaning an overview of the workflow should be considered for the users.

3. Launching the probes
   Giving the probes to the participants is the only time the researchers can get in contact with the participants in person in the process. Therefore, the researchers should show a friendly and respectful attitude and explain the cultural probes. However, the rules regarding using the probes shouldn't be too strict, as this is an exploratory and open method.

4. Collecting the Probes
   After a period of time, the probes will be collected by the researchers. Then the results will be reviewed by the team to get inspirations and impressions. Nonetheless, the results shouldn't be analyzed because the method is only meant to get an impression and incentives of the culture from the participants.

Remarks, Tips, Limitations

‣ Great effort should be put to the aesthetic design of the probes, as it will stimulate the motivation of the participants.

‣ The format and components of the probes should be flexible and fit the target group.

‣ The results are not meant to be formally analyzed.

‣ The quality of self-reporting from the participants is not guaranteed.

‣ Researchers have little control during the process.

References

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