



Collage of photoboosts mounted on cardboard, gelatin silver prints, 455 x 585 mm (detail), 1972 Franco Vaccari

USER OBSERVATIONS

When can the method be used?

Depending on the discipline there may be different hypotheses and research questions to be answered, and thus very different data to be assessed and analysed. Human Sciences mainly focus on the behaviour of people and their interactions with the social and technical environment. Using well-defined indicators, you can describe, analyse and explain the relations between observable and hidden variables.

Observations are helpful whenever you have no or hardly any understanding of phenomena, influential variables or other elementary interrelations, or want to see what will happen in 'real life'. Different observations will confront you with both expected and unexpected situations. When exploring the design problem, it is helpful to articulate the aspects that influence the interactions. Observing people in their daily routines leads to a better understanding of what makes a good product or service experience. Watching people interacting with your prototypes will help you to improve your design. You will gain a better understanding of your design problem and how and why concepts work effectively – and also rich illustrations to help you communicate your design decisions to various stakeholders.

How to use the method?

If you want to observe people in their natural setting without intervening, you can do this by acting as 'a fly on the wall' or by observing and asking questions. For subtler research, you observe how people react to situations in real practice or in a lab situation. Video is the preferred means of documenting observation results, but many other methods are also available, such as photos and taking notes. As with

User Observation helps you to study what your intended users do in a specific situation. Observations enable you to understand phenomena, influential variables or other elementary interrelations in 'real life'.

any other research method, it is very useful to add further data sources to triangulate the analysis and interpretation of the data; for example, you may combine observations with interviews to get a better understanding of what was going through people's minds. For analyses all data are grouped in combinations of pictures, remarks and quotes and qualitatively analysed.

Possible procedure

For User Observation to understand usability aspects of your design:

STEP 1
Determine what, who and where you want to observe – the whole situation.

STEP 2
Define criteria for the observation – duration, money, main design criteria.

STEP 3
Select and invite participants.

STEP 4
Prepare the observation sessions – check whether video/photography is allowed; make an observation form, including a checklist of everything you want to observe and questions for interviews; and do a pilot observation.

STEP 5
Execute the observations.

STEP 6
Analyse your data and transcribe the video results.

STEP 7
Communicate and discuss your findings with your stakeholders.

Limitations of the method

When people know that they are being observed, they might behave differently than they would normally. When they do not know, ethical guidelines need to be taken into consideration.

Tips & Concerns

- Always carry out a pilot.
- Make sure that the stimuli, such as models and prototypes, are suitable for the observations and ready in time.
- Ask those you wish to observe for their permission if you want to disclose the observations, or be sure to make them anonymous.
- Think about inter-rater reliability. It is easier to plan this at the beginning of a study rather than later.
- Think of ways to operationalise the data.
- Go through your notes and add impressions as soon as possible after each observation.
- Engage stakeholders by doing at least part of the analyses together. However, be aware that they might take only one or two impressions as a reference.
- The hardest part of observing is to keep your mind open. Do not look for things you already know. Instead, be prepared for the unexpected. For this reason, video is preferred; though it is time-consuming, it provides you with rich illustrations and latitude for multiple observations.