Diary Study

A diary study is a method used to collect qualitative data from users in their own words over a period of time. This process gathers information about users’ perceptions and attitudes about their work, home and/or leisure environment and may also be useful to evaluate new or re-designed products.

Diary studies are a method of gathering information from users about their behaviors, activities and experiences over time. In laboratory settings, it can be very difficult to create scenarios that will afford the collection of the types of insights gleaned from diary studies. Participants are either provided a diary or journal with which to record activities of interest and thoughts / feelings about the activities, and/or they can be provided with predefined questions that are answered repeatedly over a period of time. Diary entries are traditionally provided by writing in either a paper or electronic diary or journal. Alternatives to text-based entries include photographs with descriptions, or entries recorded in some digital medium (audio or video). These types of studies are longitudinal and, depending on the scope of the project, last anywhere from several days to a month or longer. At the conclusion of the study, a post-study interview with each participant is usually conducted as an opportunity to get clarification and probe for additional insights during discussion of diary entries.

Diary studies afford the opportunity to learn about self reported perceptions, motivations and behavior patterns without performing extensive observations. Diary studies are almost entirely qualitative endeavors that are aimed at understanding the circumstances and environment in which users and customers are engaged. In addition, they can be useful when studying long-term product adoption to gain an unrestricted view of what is most important to the users. Finally, diary studies have the ability to capture changes in users’ behaviors and perceptions over time.

**Benefits**

* Provides a contextual understanding of users’ behavior and experiences over time directly from the users’ perspective.
* Creates a longitudinal understanding of use with minimal resources required.
* Offers behavior insights within the context of users’ natural environments.
* Provides invaluable information about customers’ real-time, real-life behaviors and experiences.

**Limitations**

* Unlikely to provide the rich or detailed understanding that can be realized from observational studies.
* Burden of the study involvement tends to be on the participants, which can make recruiting and full completion difficult.
* Other than frequencies of recorded data, quantitative data and analyses can be quite limited, if not negligible, due to the qualitative nature of the data.
* Self-reported data may not be equivalent across participants (e.g., one person’s definition of a slow system may be different than others’).
* Analysis of data may end up being conducted without sufficient participant clarification.
* Participants must remember to make entries at desired times, when they may not have the availability and/or resources to do so.

**Outcomes**

A comprehensive report, along with relevant artifacts (e.g., diary entries, photographs, audio or video recordings) is the result from most diary studies. Diary studies can be a valuable source of data for scenarios, task analysis, requirements elicitation, customer journey maps, and feedback on technology use and implementation. They often can be focused to provide insight about habits, usage scenarios (e.g., when/where do they use or refrain from using a product), or a better understanding of potential technology solutions. Depending on the methods used, the report may also include more quantitative data around the frequencies of recorded data. Diary studies also have the potential to report on findings and how they evolve and change over time, thus leading to a rich understanding of the end-to-end user experience from the customer perspective.

**Study Execution**

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| **Milestone** | **​    Owner** |
| Initiate Kick-off Call | HFE |
| Specify study design | ​                                                              HFE |
| Identify study location and participants | Business Office |
| ​Recruit Participants | ​Business Office |
| Conduct Diary Study | ​                                                             HFE |
| Analyze and summarize data |  |

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| **Phase of Development​** | |
| ​ | ​Planning, Scoping & Definition |
| **✔** | ​Requirements Gathering |
| **✔** | **​Early Design** |
| **​** | **​Detailed Design & Development** |
| **​✔** | **​Field Testing** |
| ​ | ​Deployment |
| **✔** | **​Post-Deployment** |

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| **Study Characteristics ​** | |
| ​**Timeframe** | ​3-12 weeks |
| **​Level of Effort** | Low |
| ​**Data Collection** | Behavioral, Attitudinal |
| ​**Data Reporting** | Qualitative |

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| **​Related Methods ​** | |
| **Derived from** | ​-- |
| **​Complimentary Methods** | -- |
| **​Similar Methods** | [**Ethnographic Study**](https://vaww.portal2.va.gov/sites/humanfactors/BoKSitePages/Methods/Ethnographic%20Study.aspx) |
| **​Follow-Up** | [**Summative Usability Test**](https://vaww.portal2.va.gov/sites/humanfactors/HFBoK/SitePages/Summative%20Usability%20Test.aspx) |