

Cultural Probe

How Disruptive Are Communication Based Apps

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Identifying Users:

In today's market there are several communication focused apps competing for users attention that resulted in users often using multiple of these apps at the same time.

Furthermore, we are more connected than we have ever been at any point in history. Most people carry a phone with them at all times and can be reached and contacted at all times by anyone. This seems to be more true with younger people as they grew up in a very connected world and are more open to trying new apps and methods of communication and are more likely to meet different types of people who use different kinds of communication methods. Students fall heavily into these categories and are often using many communication based apps to keep up with friends, family, and school. While being able to communicate with people and be communicated with at any time has many benefits it can also be very disruptive. So this cultural probe will focus on learning what, why, where, when and how disruptive these apps are from a student perspective.

In order to get different perspectives I have recruited 2 students from the University of Wisconsin-Madison who are studying 2 different majors. Participant 1 (P1) is a male junior year college student studying Computer Science with a minor in math. The second participant (P2) is a male junior year college student studying Chemical Engineering.

Prepare the Probe:

In this Probe I am aiming to better understand what communication apps users use in their daily lives, how often they use them throughout the day, and if they cause any form of disruption in the participants lives. As a bonus, I also aim to learn why students use and keep up with different communication apps and what they feel about using multiple apps.

The data will be collected using 3 primary methods which are the following:

1. Self texts: An empty account has been set up for every one of the primary apps the user uses that they will text with info throughout the day to remember times, feelings, and locations in order to make it easier to recall information later that night.
2. Google forms: The participant will fill out a survey form at the end of every day the probe is going for that will compile many of the data they have saved as texts in the previous point.
3. Interview: An interview will be held with each participant about the data collected through the Google forms to get a better feeling about what they thought about each app they have used, how disruptive they were, any clarifications they would like to provide about the data they provided, and any notable events that happened during the cultural probe.

To clarify, the participants are going to go through their days normally and whenever they enter any communication app they will record the notifications they got (on their home screen) in the form of a text to a phantom account we set up beforehand and later that day they will use these texts to help recall information that they will fill out in the Google form. The text will also help recall the time they checked the notification and where they were. The google form will provide me with the number of notifications the participants received throughout their day, how disruptive it was for them, if it was worth the disruption it caused

(if it is an important urgent message or not), who it was from (family, friend, etc), and what was the participant's experience using the app they used. The participants can also provide short comments to clarify or inform me of whatever they want about each app.

I had a check-in with the participant on day 3 to make sure everything is ok and to answer any concerns they have.

In the interview we also used the timestamps in the Self texts the participants sent to the phantom accounts to figure out where they were when they received the notifications as I had not included a question in the form for them to indicate that.

I believe with these steps I can minimize as much error as I can and be able to clarify the data I receive at the end for a better analysis.

Present, probe, collect:

At the start of this step I had a minimal roll as I waited for the participants to go about their lives and record their data and fill out the Google form. On day 3 I took a look at all data collected so far and checked in on the participants. Here I made sure that both participants were still ok with the methods of the probe and that the probe itself was not a disruption to their daily lives similar to some of the notifications they are getting throughout the day. I was told at this check in that P2 forgot to record their data on the first day and offered to add an extra day to make up for it to which I accepted. Overall, it seemed both participants understood what they had to do and had no problems with it.

The day after the last day of the participants recording data I conducted an interview with each participant which I will go over in more detail after the Analyze data stage.

Analyze Data:

All the data collected during this probe were compiled in the Excel sheet included in this submission. After the data was collected some noticeable patterns emerged. After observing these patterns I asked the participants about why they felt the way they did about some of these patterns at our interview.

The first pattern I observed The participants seemed to consider normal text messages very significantly more disruptive than other communication apps such as Discord and Snapchat. When asked about it both participants shared the sentiment that, as opposed to other apps, they do not have filtering settings that would select what text they are notified about and so they get notified by everything such as the pointless Ads texts they get. To the participants, Ads are more disruptive than a text from a friend or a family member as they do not hold any value.

Another pattern observed was that Discord was primarily used to communicate with friends and teammates yet was not deemed very disruptive to them despite receiving some notifications almost everyday from it. P1 said that they did not find it distracting as Discord does not seem to work properly on mobile for them and thus it does not show them all the notifications they receive on it. This resulted in some frustrating moments where P1's teammates were trying to get a hold of him but he did not get any notification of their attempts. P2 on the other hand said that while they do use Discord they are a light user and thus do not get many notifications while in classes and so they rarely feel like it is disruptive. However, for P2 WhatsApp was far more disruptive. P2 primarily uses WhatsApp to keep in touch with their family and friends from their hometown and thus are in several group chats that sometimes have a long string of notifications. When I asked P2 why they do not mute some of the group chats they said that they are worried they might miss something important about what is happening in their hometown.

These anecdotes bring up some interesting findings as sometimes important notifications can be missed despite being connected such as with the Discord example that P1 gave. Imagine the following scenario:

“Amy, Rex, and Alex are 3 coworkers at company X in which they work as a part of the sales department. One Friday afternoon Alex decides to leave for a convenient store a short drive away from the office to get a snack and take their lunch break at the park. While out there, Amy and Rex notice that Alex has forgotten to submit a big client's order. They try getting a hold of Alex over and over again with no success. Unsure of what to do Amy and Rex decide to leave the order for Alex to deal with after they come back. By the time Alex comes back the time for submitting the order has passed and they will have to wait till next Monday to submit it. Upset by this Alex questions Amy and Rex on why they did not call him and inform him of his unfortunate mistake since they noticed it only to be told that Amy and Rex had indeed tried getting hold of him but he did not reply to them. After further inspection Alex realises that their team's chat notification system is not working properly and did not notify them with their coworkers' texts.”

In this scenario not receiving a disruptive text resulted in a worse outcome than if Alex's lunch break was disrupted.

Another scenario we can infer from P2's reluctance to mute some of the group chats can like the following:

“Daisy has an important math test tomorrow and needs to study for it tonight. Unfortunately, Daisy has been struggling with the subject and needs to focus hard to comprehend and understand the concepts. However, whenever she gets into a study rhythm she gets interrupted by her phone buzzing with texts. Her family seems to be texting a lot and worried she might miss something important. She keeps looking at her phone disrupting her

studying. Daisy ended up not covering all the material she needed to cover and ended up not doing well on her exam.”

In this scenario getting these notifications was not preferable to not getting them and focusing on studying for the exam.

One last thing I did notice from the data that I collected from the participants is that certain platforms seemed to have certain demographics of people the participants keep in touch with. For example, WhatsApp seems to primarily be focused on family and friends, Snapchat for friends and Acquaintance, while discord used for friends and teamwork. I asked the participants about this pattern and got the following answers:

P1: WhatsApp is the app that most old people in my family decided to learn and they have basically stuck with it since then. Discord is mainly used to either play video games with friends thanks to voice chat and quick texts while on a PC. It also offers a lot of organization options in servers which make it convenient for group work. On the other hand, Snapchat is mostly used to keep in touch with friends I don't see often or to add people I newly meet as it seems to be preferred over giving out one's number around here.

P2: Well WhatsApp is the only app that all members of my family have and so it became the app for that. Discord I only downloaded and started to use because teammates preferred to use it in previous group projects and so I don't use it much. I only added a few people on Discord who are close friends. Snapchat I only started to use recently as it seems the platform of choice for many people I've met here.