

Assignment 4 – Contextual Design: Interview and Observation

Team No: 2 Uber User Research

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1. Understanding the Role of Contextual Interviews

Contextual interviews are a foundational method in contextual design used to uncover how people actually use a system, rather than how they claim they use it. Unlike surveys or purely observational studies, contextual interviews capture both *what users do* and *why they do it*. They create space for natural storytelling, revealing underlying motivations, frustrations, and workarounds that are often invisible in quantitative data. For our study, we conducted interviews with Uber users to understand their interactions with the ride-hailing platform. Because Uber is typically used during time-sensitive, stressful, or safety-relevant moments, understanding the real context of use is critical. The interview method allowed participants to narrate authentic experiences, such as confusing pickup locations, discomfort with certain drivers, or difficulties navigating the in-app help center. These insights would not have emerged through simple questioning; instead, contextual interviews helped surface deeper behavioral patterns, trust-related perceptions, and implicit decision-making processes.

2. Planning the Interview: Developing Effective Strategy and Structure

A successful contextual inquiry requires careful planning so that each session produces meaningful insights.

Defining Objectives. Before writing any questions, our team set clear goals around common issues in ride-hailing: pickup accuracy, driver reliability, user safety, and in-app issue resolution. These objectives shaped our recruitment and guided our questions.

Recruitment. We selected participants who had used Uber within the last six months to ensure their experiences were recent. Our sample included occasional riders, frequent commuters, late-night student users, and price-sensitive participants. This diversity helped us capture a range of perspectives on trust, familiarity, and usage context.

Designing the Protocol. Our sessions followed a four-part structure:

1. Introduction - explained purpose, obtained consent, and clarified note-taking.
2. Warm-up - built rapport through general questions about ride habits.
3. Core inquiry - explored specific experiences aligned with our research goals.
4. Closing - invited suggestions and wrapped up with appreciation.

This flexible framework allowed natural conversations while keeping them focused on our objectives

3. Conducting the Interview: Principles for High-Quality Inquiry

When running the sessions, we followed several key principles drawn from contextual design.

Building Trust. Participants were more open when we began with casual conversation and reassurance that there were no “right” answers. This helped them discuss sensitive issues such as safety concerns or discomfort with drivers.

Encouraging Stories. We avoided yes-or-no questions, instead prompting narratives like “Tell me about a recent ride that did not go as planned” or “Walk me through what happened when your pickup point was wrong.” These prompts led to rich accounts of real behavior; adjusting map pins, calling drivers, or relying on intuition when something felt off.

Probing for Depth. We asked clarifying follow-ups such as “What made you realize it was incorrect?” and “How did you decide what to do next?” to understand the reasoning and expectations behind each decision.

Recording Data. After every session, our team documented detailed notes and used affinity mapping to group insights under themes such as pickup accuracy, reliability and safety, and issue resolution. This systematic process helped turn individual observations into collective findings.

4. Challenges Encountered During the Interview Process

We faced several challenges that showed how complex interviews can be. Many participants began with vague descriptions, so we used gentle probes to draw out concrete examples, which underscored the importance of clear question wording. Sensitive topics like late-night rides and safety required a slower pace and reassurance to build comfort. We also noticed a bias toward memorable negative events, so we intentionally asked for neutral or positive experiences to balance the picture. Because real-time observation was impractical, we relied on recollections that may not perfectly match in-the-moment behavior. During affinity mapping, we sometimes interpreted the same comment differently, which led to helpful discussions to reach consistent categorizations.

5. Lessons Learned From the Mock and Real Interviews

Reflecting on both our mock and actual interviews, we gained several valuable lessons about conducting effective sessions. We learned that flexibility within a planned structure often led to deeper insights, as letting participants guide the discussion uncovered details about trust, reliability, and navigation habits. Probing required practice; over time, our follow-up questions became more natural and helped participants share richer responses. We also noticed that people tend to describe what happened rather than why, so analyzing multiple interviews together helped us identify hidden causes like GPS errors or unclear pickup points. Affinity mapping proved essential for organizing data, revealing recurring issues such as driver mismatches, location inaccuracies, and user uncertainty about safety features. Most importantly, we discovered that listening attentively; using pauses and eye contact and affirmation encouraged participants to open up more than constant questioning ever could, transforming our approach from interrogation to genuine conversation.

Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

Warm-Up

1. How often do you use Uber and in what situations?
2. When was your last ride, and what was it for?

Pickup and Navigation

3. Tell me about a time your driver had trouble finding you.
4. What do you usually do when the pickup location is incorrect?

Driver and Safety

5. Have you ever felt unsafe or uncomfortable during a ride?
6. What helps you decide whether to trust a driver?

App Experience

7. How do you usually resolve issues in the app?
8. Have you ever used the in-app help center? What was that experience like?

General Reflection

9. What do you like most and least about using Uber?
10. If you could change one feature to make rides smoother, what would it be?