

Usability Journal: Small studies are effective

While conducting the card sort activity recently, I was curious as to how small study groups could influence the decision-making that goes into user research and into developing products. I was particularly inspired by the fact that only two of the closed card-sort participants were able to point out issues relating to user flow of the project. This further sparked certain questions that I had relating to the topic of small amounts of research participants and their impact on qualitative usability testing.

One question was: how can a small study supplement the results of a quantitative study? After all, numbers can be objective, and they tell a story too.

Kathryn Whitenton (2018) offers guidance here. She writes that other team members may object to the representation of a small study, however, sources highly representative sample of user can be effective. Nonetheless, Whitenton further goes on to say that truly there may be situations where a quantitative study could be paramount that a small qualitative study. Still, it is important to pitch your reasonings to your team as to why a small qualitative study may prove effective (Whitenton, 2019). This insight informed my question on how a small study can be supplemental. While numbers are important, channeling the concerns of a small group of study participants can prove vital in identifying blind spots.

Another question relating to my own skepticism of a small group study is: can a small group offer insight into a large, even enterprise level, product interface?

Justin Shelby of Reaa Global highlights: small samples can provide the opportunity for in-depth and richer interactions with participants. Additionally, such a study also promotes contextuality because while numbers offer insights, they can also fail to provide a “why” for user behavior. Shelby goes on to say a sample of a handful of users provides the opportunity for an iterative approach to user testing; that is, continuous feedback that bolsters refinement and actionable insights. Shelby further states that this is resourceful and focused (Shelby, 2024).

While learning more about the advantages of small-scale user research as it relates to qualitative studies, I learned about “guerilla usability testing.” This refers to actively conducting user feedback of a prototype or design in the public domain (UserTesting, 2023). This form of testing brings in a small set of users that likely may not be familiar with the product. In Shu Jiang’s case study, she used guerilla approach to test the results of a previous quantitative report. Having received the results of 7 users who were at coffee shops in San Francisco. She presented the participants with 3 user scenarios. In short, Shu Jiang concluded that this small sample was able

to drive her research and resulted in significant takeaways of her study (Jiang, 2018).

In conclusion, while quantitative data provides essential objectivity and scale, small qualitative studies offer depth, contextuality, and iterative feedback that can refine product development and user experiences.

Works Cited

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