Chapter 7
Experimental Research Approaches for Mobile UX in Emerging Markets

Dhaval Joshi
Nokia Research Center, Shenzhen, China/Bangalore, India

Raj Rath
Symantec Corporation, India

ABSTRACT

Mobile devices and services have changed the way people interact around the world, especially in the resource-constrained parts of developing countries. A growing number of professionals, students, and organizations show interest in understanding the user population in these regions to create solutions that address their needs. In this chapter, the authors aim to share and discuss their experiences and experiments designed to understand these user needs by using a more locally relevant and playful approach. The primary objective is to sensitize the readers about various challenges that a researcher working in this domain might face while trying to gather and understand the user behavior and their responses; and to try to explore tailor-made methods to overcome those challenges while undertaking studies in these regions. The authors’ intent is to benefit the entire fraternity by sharing these experiences, and making them aware of the possible problems in incorporating traditional research methods in developing nations.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to share some of the experiences from our work carried out in past years in a lightweight format. These experiences stem out of the problems we encountered and lessons learned especially with focus on emerging markets, although we believe these lessons can be applied to many other contexts as well.

BACKGROUND

There is an increased interest in academia and industry to focus on emerging markets. Various government, private organizations and multinationals try to understand and explore ways to make a positive change in the lives of the people living there. Donner (2008), in an extensive review of 200 studies on mobile phones in emerging mar-
kets, proposed the categorizations of these studies into ICTD (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) and non-ICTD approaches. The review points to studies oriented to understand a wide variety of dimensions such as diffusion of technology and liberalization; access to better health services; role of ICTD in education; digital divide and universal access; economic growth.

Service and solutions providers invest considerable amount of resources in understanding the needs and opportunities for this user population. Ethnographers have traditionally led user research activities in interfacing with people and translating observations to tangible opportunity areas. However an increasing number of designers, social scientists and even technologists take initiatives to understand these users first hand.

In order to understand the users better, a number of research studies were carried out in various rural and urban contexts. Examples of such studies focused on the role of mobile phones in economic development in Africa (Aker & Mbiti, 2010); use of mobile phone in health education (Danis et al., 2010); mobile banking in developing countries (Wambari, 2009). Depending on the focus and availability of resources, these research studies used various methods to obtain relevant information from their target users.

Each sub topic in this chapter is an experience or a proposal and they are independent from each other. Since these experiences were observed within the context of emerging markets, some prior knowledge might be required in order to make the most out of this chapter.

TOOLS AND METHODS

There is a lot of material available today that deals with various approaches and strategies to carry out both on-field and off-field research work such as compilations of “Design Research in Information Systems” (Vaishnavi & Kuechler, 2004); “Handbook of Qualitative Research” compiled by Norman K. and Lincoln (1994); “Investigating the Research Approaches for Examining Technology Adoption Issues” authored by Choudrie and Dwivedi (2005). A review of the papers published during 1993-1998, in two leading American journals and four European Journals (MIS Quarterly and Information Systems Research, European Journal of IS, Information Systems Journal, Accounting, Management and IT, and Journal of Information Technology), was carried out by Mingers (2001; 2003) and this review presented different approaches such as participant observation, grounded theory, and “Soft Systems Methodology”. However, these methodologies were rarely used while majority of these papers mentioned or pointed to the use of surveys, interviews, experiments, and empirical research as widely used research approaches (Mingers, 2001; 2003). User-centered studies in emerging markets required the consideration of specific circumstances and techniques. During the past five years, we participated and led a number of on-field studies in India and China, but not all of them were equally successful. In fact each study needed a fresh perspective depending on the target users, their circumstances and the resources available to the researcher. This chapter tries to share some practical experiences from these studies.

One of the most important factors we learned from these numerous studies is that communication is the key ingredient for any fairly successful study. Success can be defined in many ways, but we can be almost sure that even with great research strategy and poor communication planning, the information gathered might render itself useless to quite an extent. We specifically emphasize communication as a key ingredient since many times it can be the critical factor on the quality and usefulness of information obtained.
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