When things go wrong – conducting research during a pandemic

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ICA Workshop on Adaptable Research Methods For Empirical Research with Map Users
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Intended study

- YouthMetre project → shape EU youth strategy
- Digital participation/collaboration mapping platform
- Workshop series in schools in Italy with 200-300 students
- March – April 2020
- Objectives (developed in fall 2019):
  - Field survey to test the tools’ usability with these students
  - Evaluate the relationship between user context and map design usability
Intended study

• Material:
  • 84 different maps
  • Combination of different map-reading tasks, base map styles, information densities, time pressure components
  • All maps were centered on Abruzzi region, Italy

• Between-subjects design

• Online survey in Italian, integrated in the participation platform
Problems and how I tackled them

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Solution</th>
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<tr>
<td>Decrease in communication with other researchers and project partners</td>
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<td>Can I actually conduct the study?</td>
<td>✓ Yes, delay of a few months</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant recruitment?</td>
<td>✓ Participant recruitment through University newsletters, student email lists, and social media</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change study design? Change research questions?</td>
<td>✓ Switched from field survey to online survey, ✓ Translated the survey to German, ✓ Kept everything else as it was designed</td>
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Consequences of pivot

• Online survey:
  • Lack of control
  • No further explanations possible in case of questions
  • Flexibility for participants to complete the survey

• Participant recruitment:
  • Rather random
  • Involvement of different types of participants
  • Difficulty of finding participants (lack of incentives?)
  • High drop-off rate (survey too long?)
  • Only ca. 100 participants completed the survey
Pandemic-related problems vs “things can always go wrong”

• Pandemic-related problems:
  • High levels of uncertainty
  • Decreased communication

• Things can always go wrong:
  • Easy shift to other distribution methods if everything is online
  • Adjust the study design
  • Reflect on the changes and solutions in the related publications/documented solutions
  • Expect that things can go wrong \(\rightarrow\) risk management
Questions that still persist...

• What would have been potential alternative ways to respond to the changes?
  • Change study design?
  • Change research questions?
  • Decrease complexities? → “be okay with less”?  
  • How do you do this when under (time) pressure?

• How do you deal with changes in plans?
  • Risk management?
  • Risk mitigation?