

# Mix well before use: Understanding the key ingredients of user studies

Arzu Çöltekin

Department of Geography,  
University of Zurich  
Zurich, Switzerland  
arzu@geo.uzh.ch

## ABSTRACT

There are many different approaches to conducting user studies, e.g., direct observations, interviews, focus groups, surveys, questionnaires, online experiments, and controlled experiments. None are perfect, but all are good. Each approach has strengths and weaknesses; therefore, a well-considered *combination* may offer the most reliable results by exploiting the strengths of one method to the benefit of the other(s). In this vein, we discuss a few selected (prominent) dichotomies relevant in experimental research design and give examples from cartography and geographic visualization. The broader discussion is relevant to all user research methods; however, we specifically reflect on what complements *controlled experiments* and offer insights from our experiments with *eye movement analysis*.

## Author Keywords

User studies; cartography; geovisualization

## ACM Classification Keywords

Experimentation; human factors

## INTRODUCTION

Whether the study tackles an issue in e.g., medicine, astronomy or cartography, there are three basic ingredients in user studies: the *stimuli* (typically a “product”), the *tasks* (context), and the *participants* (human). Most experiments revolve around these three dimensions: we test a *thing* for a certain *purpose* and a certain group of *people* (e.g., a map for route planning for first time visitors of a city; a pill for chickenpox in children). Our results are a combined expression of the ingredients of these three ‘pillars’ and even the really tiny; seemingly insignificant details in each of these pillars can change the outcome of an experiment. Thus, our concerns for validity (and eventually generalizability) of our findings are directly linked to the limitations we introduce as we design the stimuli, the tasks, and choose our participants.

One way to assess the user research methods is to conceptualize them in terms of their *usability*. Taking the ISO definition of usability [1], we reflect whether our methods are effective, efficient and satisfying to the scientist who is trying to answer a specific question. An *online study* may be efficient (i.e., fast: we can get hundreds of responses in a week) and perhaps they would operate as they normally would (i.e., “ecologically valid”: instead of coming to an unfamiliar lab, perhaps feeling observed); but

is it really good enough in terms of effectiveness (i.e., success, accuracy)? Since we have no control of what the user is doing, they could talk to someone else, search for the answer online, or take a call during the study. If this is the case, the success (or failure) will not be theirs alone. Furthermore, each participant will be using a different computer with a different processing speed, bandwidth, and screen. All these might affect the findings in profound ways in visualization studies. Similarly, we worry about *focus group* studies. What if people just want to agree with the moderator or with the first (or most dominant) person in the group (known as “acquiescence bias” [2], which applies to many other studies and this is why we need to take utmost care in how we word the questions) or choose what they already believe to be the good thing even if they are ill-informed (“confirmation bias” [3]). *Interviews* may suffer from deriving only ‘self-declared’ success with the visualizations [4], while *direct observations* clearly would depend very much on the observer [5]. If we, then, chose to run a carefully designed *controlled lab experiment*, is it perhaps *too* controlled? To be able to identify a cause-effect relationship, controlled lab experiments attempt minimizing confounding variables through making sure that only a single variable is modified at a time [6]. However, in most cases the necessary simplification of tasks and stimuli makes it very difficult to generalize (this problem is known as “experimental control vs. ecological validity” [7]).

These concerns have been voiced for all user study methods. Below we will present a few selected dichotomies on these concerns and discuss why we should consider using mixed methods to address them.

## SOME DICHOTOMIES IN USER STUDIES

In the scope of this discussion paper, we selected a few dichotomies that we consider important for user studies. Note that this is not a comprehensive survey of all competing paradigms.

### Top-down (hypothesis- driven or confirmatory) vs. bottom-up (exploratory) analyses

Most fundamental experimental science is (justifiably) conceptualized top-down, i.e., hypothesis-driven; meaning that we have an informed position as to why we ask the questions we ask. However, there are benefits in exploring the collected data bottom-up, as this may reveal unexpected patterns and lead to new hypotheses [8]. For example, in an

eye movement study, areas of interest (AOIs) can be designed “top-down” for the design elements we intended to test. However, exploring the gaze patterns beyond the top-down AOIs to inspect where else participants were looking (“bottom-up AOIs”) may give interesting information on distractors or dominant design elements. In cartographic research where the visual stimuli cannot be entirely reduced to a single-variable item (as opposed to perceptual psychology research), this is especially valuable. It is important to be aware that top-down approaches are prone to type I errors (“false positives”), where the bottom-up approaches have a bigger risk for type II errors (“false negatives”), and clearly state which of these approaches were used in what part of the study [9].

### Measuring attitude vs. behavior

Seemingly, what we say (attitude) often does not predict what we do (behavior). The concepts *naïve realism* [10] and *naïve cartography* [11] are expressions of this. At first sight, behavior might appear more interesting than attitude, but again, a mix of the two offers valuable insights. For example, in a comparative study, if the user performance does not differ, but they prefer one of them, we can study what makes one more desirable. Similarly if there is a mismatch between the attitude and behavior, this will inform our visualization (and interaction) design. Furthermore, adding extra behavioral measurements such as eye movement analysis might allow identifying strategies that participants themselves may not be aware of [11, 12].

### Using qualitative vs. quantitative methods

Using qualitative or quantitative methods can create a division among some scientists [13, 14]. Despite the passion for one or the other, mixed-methods studies that utilize qualitative *and* quantitative methods are fairly common in user experiments, and this is for good reason. Qualitative methods can help with ‘why’ questions (as well as ‘how to’), while quantitative methods establish ‘how much’ (as well as ‘how many’ and ‘how long’), increasing our understanding of the phenomena we study [16].

### CONCLUSION

For cartography and geographic visualization, as well as the wider scientific visualization research, controlled studies should be the central method, and be supported by additional research methods case-by-case. Since the controlled studies are time-consuming and expensive, we need to think about what can be recommended to practitioners (e.g., a ‘quick and dirty usability’ scale [17] or a ‘single score’ [18], or a short spatial ability test to predict map reading performance [19]?). However, for scientific research, where the goal is to understand the underlying reasons and identify “universal” patterns, controlled studies that are supported by additional methods (qualitative interviews, direct observations, eye tracking, etc.) are, in our understanding, most *useful*.

However, for our results to be ‘effectively’ useful, we need to become aware of the importance of the *effect size* [20]

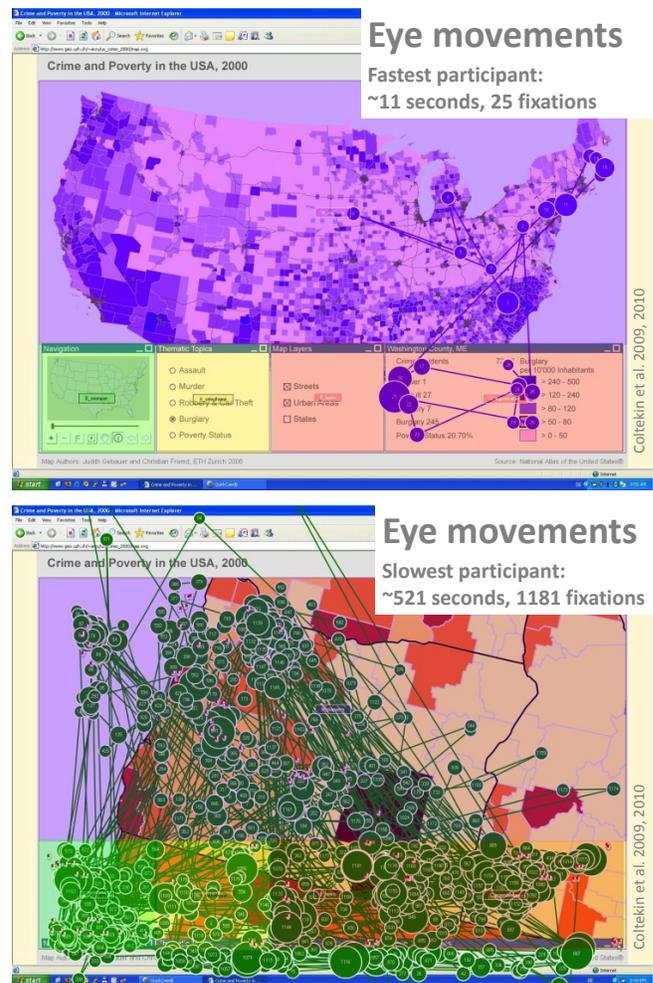


Figure 1. Individual differences between participants can be strikingly high.

and make a habit of reporting it. Another important, seemingly lesser studied issue to be aware of is individual differences, e.g., in *spatial abilities* [20, 21], perhaps expressing themselves in map reading and other geographic tasks (see Figure 1) or *anxiety* [23]. If some individuals respond differently to our research methods, a mixed-methods approach may be beneficial also in this regard. Other psychological concepts such as *priming* [24] and *cognitive biases* [25] would similarly be best addressed through using more than one (carefully selected) method.

Perhaps a metaphor to “multiple-linked views” in visualization can be drawn; a “multiple-linked methods” approach allows approaching the studied phenomena from different perspectives; and may compensate for the lack of certain ‘usability’ aspects in one method by bringing in another that does not suffer from the same issue.

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