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A breakdown of UX research types

What's the difference between generative and evaluative research? Qualitative and quantitative? There are different types of user research to suit different goals. In order to select appropriate types of research methods, you need to understand what you are trying to achieve.

Are you trying to gather data, understand your staff, or both? Do you have a concept or idea you are wanting to test with users, or are you trying to generate ideas?

When it comes to understanding how people feel vs how they act, it's a good idea to always try and cover your bases with both. It's not enough to know how many people used a feature last month, it's also important to know whether they were satisfied and felt they were able to use it effectively. You need to build in an awareness of both behaviour and attitude in all research and design. Even research with a heavy focus in one area, should include a little bit of the other.

Generative

Generative research (sometimes referred to as exploratory, foundational or discovery research) seeks to understand the broader context of a user's experience.

It's typically conducted when little or nothing is known about a particular area, with



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It's important to keep an open mind when conducting generative research, and avoid fixating on what has already been built, or on existing solutions.

Evaluative

Evaluative research is used when trying to assess how well something is working. Whether that's an existing product or service, or some improvements you're trying out.

Usability testing is a core part of evaluative research, but not the only part. You might not want to just find out how usable something is, but also how people feel about it, what made them use it, or how well it suits their needs.

You can evaluate something using any type of prototype — but often the lower fidelity the better, so that people don't get hung up on the details. Pen and paper sketches, digital prototypes, mock-up concepts, or implemented experiences can all be used with evaluative research methods.

Behavioural

The goal of behavioural research is to find out how people act, what they actually do, the tasks they perform, their instincts and interactions.

Behavioural research methods aim to measure what users actually do, providing quantitative data about how users actually interact with your website. It's common for a participant to behave differently to how they had either previously described or expressed their feelings and attitudes.

Attitudinal

Attitudinal research seeks out what people think and believe, how they feel and their emotional reaction to your product or service. It is an effective way to gather qualitative insights into user's experience.

A traditional method of attitudinal research is running focus groups. When conducting attitudinal research, it is important to minimise 'herd behaviour' as users will be influenced by other users when questions in larger groups.

Attitudinal research methods allow you to gather quotation and anecdotes which can



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When we do research, we also need to think about how we'll gather data, and what type of data we're looking for.

As with research types, it's a good idea to cover your bases and seek both qualitative and quantitative data. It is always recommended that you design your research or ongoing measurement to draw from a range of methods and data types, to ensure you're getting a broad and deep understanding.

In order to execute this properly, it is important to understand the differences between qualitative and quantitative data.

Quantitative

Quantitative data is designed to collect facts, actions and numbers. It is structured and statistical.

The benefit of quantitative data is that there are a number of ways to collect it with varied resources and effort required.

Quantitative data provides support when you need to draw general conclusions from your research. It can provide a reference point for the rest of the research and data. Quantitative data is best enhanced with other research. For example, quantitative data can tell you that your design isn't usable based on task completion however, it can't tell you what the user felt the problem was or what to change to solve the problem.

Qualitative

Qualitative data collects information that seeks to describe a topic more than measure it.

Methods that explore a person's impressions, opinions, or views usually result in qualitative data. Qualitative research is usually less structured and delves deep into people's thinking and attitudes.

Some types of research are both qualitative and quantitative

An example is a survey seeking people's feelings and perceptions but using formats that deliver quantitative results that you can count and use statistically like a likert





While this brings depth of understanding to your research questions, it also adds complexity to the ways you might analyse or interpret your research data.

Choosing the right methods

In order to select which method of research (or combination of methods) to use it is important to understand what you are trying to achieve. This will be based on the stage you're at in the process, your research goals and objectives — but also your synthesis and analysis methods.

Here's an idea of how it all fits together

This is a small sample of user research methods shown across the range of research and data types, to give you an idea of how they intersect.

	Qualitative	← →	Quantitative
Behavioural	Usability studies	Information architecture testing Remote usability studies	Data mining and analysis A/B testing
↕	Contextual enquiry		
Attitudinal	Focus groups User interviews	Card sorting	Intercept micro-surveys Surveys Pulse feedback

Thanks for reading! I'm happy to answer questions if you have any 🙄

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