



NON-PARTICIPANT APPROACH

MOBILE ETHNOGRAPHY

Aggregated multiple self-ethnographies, taking place in a guided research setting where data is collected with mobile devices such as smartphones.

Duration	<p>Preparation: 0.5 hours–2 weeks (depending on accessibility and legal regulations)</p> <p>Activity: 2 hours–4 weeks (depending on number of observations and research objective)</p> <p>Follow-up: 0.5 hours–2 weeks (depending on amount of data and collected data types)</p>
Physical requirements	Computer, mobile ethnography software, sometimes legal agreements (consent and/or confidentiality agreement)
Energy level	Low
Researchers/Facilitators	Minimum 1 (it's better to have 2–3 researchers)
Participants	Minimum 5 (but aim for at least 20 per group)
Expected output	Text, photos, videos, audio recordings, date and time, geolocation, statistics of participant profiles

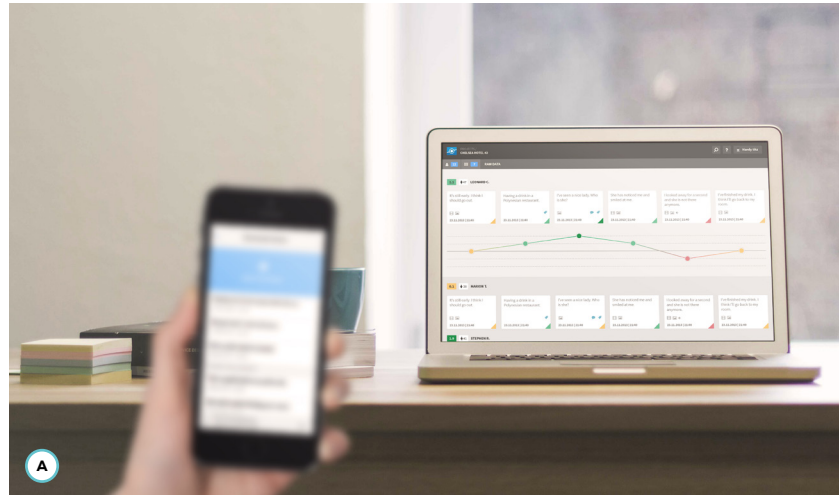
A mobile ethnography project might include 10, 100, or even 1,000 participants documenting their experiences with a brand, product, service, event, or similar. Participants are included as active researchers self-documenting their own experiences as a kind of diary study on their own phones. Participants document their experiences, but researchers can review, synthesize, and analyze the collected data. In some cases, researchers can get in touch with participants through push notifications for ongoing guidance, tasks, or to ask for more details on reported experiences.⁰¹

Mobile ethnography mostly focuses on customers or employees who document their own daily routines, or follow a specific research task to document whatever might be of interest regarding a given research question or topic.

⁰¹ For a comparison of mobile ethnography with other ethnographic approaches, see Segelström, F., & Holmlid, S. (2012). "One Case, Three Ethnographic Styles: Exploring Different Ethnographic Approaches to the Same Broad Brief," *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings* 2012(1), 48-62. For more examples of applied mobile ethnography in tourism, see Stickdorn, M., & Frischhut, B., eds. (2012). *Service Design and Tourism: Case Studies of Applied Research Projects on Mobile Ethnography for Tourism Destinations*. BoD – Books on Demand.

Dedicated apps for mobile ethnography allow participants to self-document almost any experience along their entire customer journey and across all on- and offline channels. Besides text, photos, videos, and quantitative evaluations, these apps also collect information on time and location that can be used to visualize data as journey maps or even as geographic maps. Mobile ethnography follows a self-structured approach, so that participants are invited to document anything that they themselves perceive as important enough. As the collected data is aggregated in web-based software, analysis can be done in real time by a dispersed team of researchers.

Mobile ethnography works well for longer research over one or a few days, as well as for rather intimate subject matters people hesitate to talk about with others. The collected metadata of time and geolocation support any project in which geography is important (e.g., tourism or city experiences).



- A** Participants use an app to report and evaluate their experiences step by step. Remember to offer an incentive for them – otherwise you might not find enough participants. Researchers see data uploaded by the research participants in real time and can start analyzing that data immediately.⁰¹

⁰¹ Photo: ExperienceFellow.



Step-by-step guide

1 Specify research question

Define your research question or the focus of what you are interested in. Consider why you are doing research (exploratory vs. confirmatory research), what you want to do with your findings, and what sample size you'll probably need.

2 Plan and prepare

Based on your research question and aim, use sampling techniques to select your research participants and consider including internal experts or external agencies for participant recruitment. Plan to offer incentives for your participants (remember, it is work for them!) and consider how you will communicate the project: what expectations do you want to set and what is the leading task you'll give them? Recruiting participants is often the hardest part

of mobile ethnographic research. Check if there are any legal restrictions for taking photos or videos and if you need to set up a consent and/or confidentiality agreement for your participants. Also, consider who you want to include as researchers from the client side or from other departments involved in the project.

3 Set up project and invite participants

Choose suitable software for your mobile ethnography project and set up your project. Pay attention to the task you give to your participants: keep it short and clear. Define questions for your participant profile so that you can cluster them into groups matching your target groups or personas. Create an invitation in which you explain the project's aim and their task. Give them clear instructions on how to join the project, how to document their

experiences, and the incentive they will get. It helps if you add a gamification component to this and give out different incentives depending on how useful their collected data is. Also, if possible, arrange interviews with participants before the study to clarify the process and to learn about their backgrounds and expectations regarding your research topic. Start with a small pilot project to double-check if your instructions are clear and the collected data is actually useful for your research aim.

4 Data collection

Once you have invited participants and started your data collection, you can see your data arriving in real time. You can start to synthesize and analyze your data right away, codifying it by tagging documented experiences or exporting journey maps as input for your research wall or workshops.



Optionally, you can decide to use a guided research approach: guided research refers to sending push notifications to your participants either at defined times, such as after an event or every morning as a reminder, or whenever you would like specific participants to elaborate on interesting or unclear data. Set a clear deadline for your participants so that there is an understanding of the time frame and they know when you'll stop collecting data.

5 Follow-up

Go through the collected data and try to find patterns across the reported journey maps (both positive and negative). If possible, conduct debrief interviews with participants to probe further on key issues that arise. Use sorting and filtering options to search for different issues for different groups based on their participant profiles. Once you are done with your individual analysis,

write up your key learnings and compare them within your team. Review all your data and index it; highlight important passages. Try to find patterns among your data and between all researchers. Write a short summary that includes your key findings as well as raw data to exemplify these, such as quotes, photos, or videos. Alternatively, create a conflated journey map for each participant group you discovered.

Method notes

- Like all research methods, mobile ethnography has some disadvantages, such as the method's strong dependency on the participants' motivations, and the lack of cues like body language and tone of voice. Also, mobile ethnography does not work for experiences with a very short time span: the minimum duration is approximately

2–4 hours. With shorter experiences, the usage of a mobile phone affects the individual participant's experiences too much and you'll see a strong bias in your data.

- One way to tackle potential biases is through method triangulation. Mobile ethnography works particularly well in combination with in-depth interviews in which researchers debrief participants. In such debrief sessions, they go through the participant's data together to reflect and decode what they meant and why they chose what they documented. This also allows researchers to dig deeper with regard to key issues. ◀