

Immersive User Research in Asia

Christy Annatiur

In user experience, we focus on the user aspect of our product. One of the most important questions in developing a product is, who exactly is our user?

The Internet has become increasingly global, and because of that, we need to be aware that our user is no longer just a small group of people familiar to us. Our user base might consist a large group of people with diverse backgrounds. With this diverse market, also come diverse needs.

A successful company is the one that can meet these diverse needs. To achieve that, we need to understand these requirements. An international user research is fundamental to this. Research on these diverse market ensure a deeper understanding of these market needs and provide knowledge in what approach we need to take in developing our product.

There sure are many different ways to conduct international user research. Amongst them are:

- Using local teams for each country
- Identifying one team for multinational testing
- Using remote observation
- Performing remote testing

These are as stated in an article by Simon Herd, Maura Vi, and Tjeerd de Boer in UXPA Magazine, I might argue that out of these options, the more immersive types of research are the ones that we need to do, especially when it comes to an unfamiliar market.

Importance of Immersive User Research Due to Cultural Differences

Like I stated in my paper on UX and IA in Asia, cultural differences and the difference in market behaviour are some of the key aspects we need to pay attention to in developing a product. Whether or not we pay attention to these aspects could determine the market's reaction towards our product.

With the presence of globalization, we sometimes assume that things are not much different on the other side of the world. We could not be more wrong. There are always differences between one culture and another. Sometimes, even when things seemed to be the same on the surface, differences will still be present in a deeper level.

Language Differences

There are a lot of things that could be considered as cultural differences. Some simpler ones like language differences are often more obvious than others. Take the United States and the United Kingdom as an example. Both countries share a lot of cultural similarities and are considered as English speaking first world countries. However, there also present a lot of differences in the way they use their language. Some examples are like how British people say sweets instead of candy and lift instead of elevator. I used to study in Singapore during my high school years. Because of this, I picked up on using the British term (Singapore use British English for the most part) when addressing certain things. In my first year in the United States, I decided to grab lunch with one of my co-workers. Since it was lunchtime, the line in the sandwich shop was pretty long. Because of it, I decided to comment. Our conversation went a little like this.

- Me: "The **queue** is really long there."
Her: (Giving me a weird look) "What did you say?"
Me: (While pointing at the line) "I said, the **queue** is long."
Her: "You mean the **line**?"
Me: "Yeah, the **queue**." (getting a little bit impatient at this point since it was precisely what I said).
Her: (Assuming that since I am foreign, I was either saying gibberish or the wrong English word) "It is called a **line**." (while smirking since she thought it was funny)
Me: (Realising she is being kind of condescending towards me at this point) "I know that it is called a **line**, but it is also called a **queue**. That is how British people call it."

Long story short, we argued for another 2 minutes, and I ended up having to pull out my phone and google this word. I know that you might find this example funny or maybe stupid. However, I see this as a great example to highlight language differences (the usage of the word 'line' and 'queue') and our tendency to assume things about other people's culture. She assumed that since I don't come from an English speaking country, I would understand English less and hence be the wrong one. I also expected that since it is a very commonly used word in Singapore, it would also be commonly used in the United States. These kind of assumptions is what we want to avoid in developing a product. We need to realize that sometimes, even the simplest and most basic assumption could be wrong.

Cultural Expression and Logic

In conducting research, we need to be aware that different people from different background might respond to our questions differently. In Asia for example, we, as researchers need to understand that Eastern people tend to be less outspoken compared to their Western counterpart. They rarely say no when they disagree with us, but rather expect us to read between the lines. This does not only occur in the cases where they disagree with us. Asian people tend to be less direct in giving compliments or expressing their opinion. These could be caused by the lack of public personal expression, like pointed out by Jonathan Weeks and Hiroshi Usiode pointed out in their article for UXPA Magazine.

In user testing, a participant might be reluctant to voice out their opinion due to the social norm. We need to pay attention in constructing and addressing our questions to get the most out of our test. They are more likely to not give a direct answer when unsure. This response is caused by systematic response bias in which the user is trying to respond in the way that is more socially acceptable. They might try to beat around the bush and expect you to understand what they are trying to say without having them saying it. This might cause a research to consume an unnecessary amount of time.

Weeks and Usiode also pointed out in their article that dissonance in the expectation of researcher could result from differences in thinking. Because of this, it is important to localize the research material instead of translating it. This is where having a local research team would be important. They would be able to see the issues present in the existing research and how the material will be received by the local culture. This research team would also understand what questions should and should not be asked and how to form the questions to get the maximum result.

Behavioral Differences

The way the market behaves in a specific situation could play a significant role in how they are going to react towards our product. We have to be aware that as a social being, human behavior tends to be significantly influenced by their environment. Different environments will lead to different behavior. This means that the way people from different background react towards our product will vary greatly. That mean, we need to understand those behaviors to be able to cater properly to these people.

I will give you this example to show how important immersive user research is and why you can't just simply appoint a person to make decisions for you under the impression that the person might understand a lot about your targeted audience. I am Indonesian and was born and raised in Indonesia. I also got to visit Indonesia every six months. According to these things, you might think that I am qualified enough to assume what Indonesian people might like or dislike or know what they want from a product. However, I am not even local enough to understand these things without doing any further research. Being that I am currently living in America, I still get confused about the current trend every time I go back there. More often than not I do not understand why people like certain things or why they are popular. This problem goes further than that. Even in Indonesia itself exist a diverse group of consumer. Just because a product is well received in one place does not guarantee that would do the same in the other.

This level of complications is why immersive user research is essential. There is no other better way to understand the user behavior or tendency. We would not be able to conduct an effective study or draw a satisfactory conclusion about the user needs without understanding them on a deep level. This is why a research team that is local and close to the market is important. They would be familiar with the user behavior or even understand where the user comes from in regards to some preferences or attitudes that are present or decisions that are made. After all, members of the team most likely are also consumer of the existing market in their daily bases. This will not only make the research process more accurate but also more efficient.

In understanding the market's behavior, we could tap into its potential for growth hacking. Growth hacking, as described by Huatong Sun in her article for UXPA Magazine is the approach of utilizing alternative methods outside of traditional marketing campaigns to acquire, activate, and retain customer base. Since this method is non-traditional, it is very crucial to understand the user behavior and the drive behind it to devise a strategy that would work.

In Asia, where user bandwagon mentality exist (meaning that user tends to follow the trend). It is important to acquire user base as early as you can. These users will then serve as a loyal user group that not only will be willing to participate and provide feedback during product development; they will also be passionately promoting our product to their peers. An example of this would be XiaoMi (a Chinese phone manufacturer) who acquired their loyal fan base since the early stages of their development. This resulted in them successfully selling a record number of phones on their first release. As stated in an article by Huatong Sun.

According to the article written by Fei Ren for UXPA magazine, the Asian market tends to be long-term oriented. In this article, he mentioned that customers from long-term oriented cultures trust people more than companies. Meaning they will prefer a more personalized interaction over the generic ones. Personal relationship usually has a positive effect on customer satisfaction in this market. This relationship could serve as a double-edged sword. In cases where service failure happens, customers tend to take it as personal betrayal. This again is the perfect reason why immersive user research is essential. It is needed to understand what kind of personal experience the user precisely wanted. Deep understanding is also crucial in avoiding mistakes and failures.

Conclusions

I understand that out of all the examples I have given, some of them might seem super simple and basic. However, we need to be aware that these simple ones are the exact ones that we often forget in our daily life. Without proper research, we tend to leave out these details that are important even though they are small.

Some cultural and behavioral differences are more evident than others. Some of them are rooted and unspoken. These rules despite not being obvious are the one being upheld by the society. In short, they are the most important rules. It would be hard to understand these values without doing an in-depth and immersive research. Sometimes, without sufficient research, we might not even know about the existence of these rules

In the end, it all comes down to the importance of fulfilling the user needs. In conducting international research, we need to understand that cooperation, trust, and open-mindedness are keys. We have to be open to the idea that the research might not be able to be conducted the same way due to cultural limitations. Much like our product, our research will also most likely need some adjustment to meet the user needs. These need to be done to fulfill the stakeholder's demand and prevent unwanted mistakes from happening.