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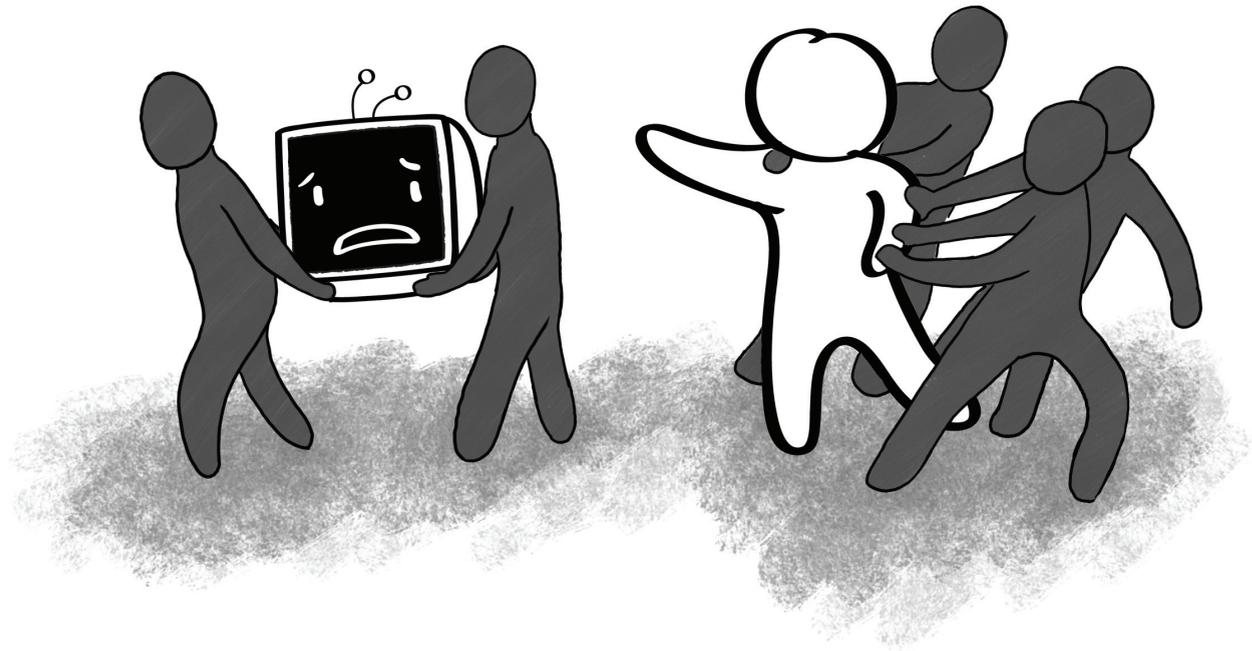
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You Won't Miss It Till It's Gone...

Using deprivation research to understand what consumers value

by Jeremy Alexis & Megan Fath



Imagine taking a beloved product away from someone and then observing how they deal with life without it. While it may sound like a cruel and unusual form of punishment, it is also the basis for deprivation research, a methodology currently being applied in a professional setting at research firm Conifer Research and explored in academic settings such as the IIT Institute of Design in Chicago.

Deprivation allows one to uncover emotional attachments to current behaviors, understand deeply embedded practices and beliefs, and identify key barriers and perceived costs to change. When conducting deprivation research, we deprive users of a frequently used

product or service, observe changes in their behavior, and then conduct in-depth interviews to understand the impact. The method offers, in our opinion, the most insightful and unbiased method for understanding the parts of people's routines that they most value.

Many innovative concepts may require significant behavioral changes and alterations to the routines that were carefully studied.

Instead of merely asking people to generalize what they value, you can observe behavior changes (what is harder? what is missed?), and ask questions based on tangible experiences.

Deprivation research is a valuable tool because it focuses on how people deal with situations that necessitate significant changes to their behavior and habits, which is what many innovative concepts require. It is ultimately about uncovering value, and is part of a

larger toolset of rich, exploratory design research. Changing people's routine behaviors is tough work; change can be hard. One of our fellow teachers at IIT Institute of Design demonstrates this

by beginning his class each semester by asking students to change the orientation of their sock and underwear drawer for two weeks. This experiment empathetically shows them firsthand the difficulty of disrupting and adapting routines.

Our students' struggles with adapting their behavior exemplifies what often leads to failed products in the real world. When creating something completely new, it is important to know if users will willingly adopt the new offering and potentially change their behavior in order to do so. Some famous new product failures can be traced back to misunderstanding what users valued. For example, in a Harvard Business School case study of Webvan (the online grocery store that went bankrupt in 2001), Webvan leadership noted that one of the primary reasons for its downfall was that they had never understood the value consumers placed on selecting their own items, particularly produce. Because users were unwilling to change their ways to adapt to Webvan's model, the company failed.

Deprivation research helps us understand which elements of a routine are adaptable versus valued (and thus potential stumbling blocks for designers). Asking consumers if they will change their behavior or give something up is unreliable (sure I will diet, quit smoking, and start investing in retirement). A better approach would be to assess users' values through direct observa-

tion. However, most ethnographic practices appropriated by designers focus on users' current activities and behaviors. This typically yields insights for immediate product improvement as they are based on observing users' current, embedded routines.

In contrast, deprivation research method can elucidate future behaviors. For example, a study at Conifer Research regarding online television recruited self-proclaimed television addicts with few experiences watching

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content online. At the time of the study, early adopters had begun switching from the television and cable box to online streaming and downloadable content, but the vast majority of television viewers had not yet migrated online as a critical mass. For our deprivation research, we targeted mainstream users, who are far less forgiving than early adopters of perceived hurdles, in order to provide deeper insights about both behavior changes and users' changing needs. To understand the adoption barriers to watching content online, we took away their access to broadcast television. Coping with the absence, participants were faced with a choice to

regress (not watch television) or progress (try watching shows online). We use this example to illustrate the steps of how to conduct deprivation research on the next page.

Our general experience has been that most skilled design researchers can implement a deprivation study as part of a larger research design as it complements and builds on other ethnographic research methods. The approach is based on tools we already know and use, such as self-documentary studies,

observations, and interviews.

We have also been pleasantly surprised with the gusto with which the research participants have received the deprivation method. The motivation for participation is viewed as a personal challenge. The data generated (often as video clips) are compelling stories rich with emotion and personal reflection. There is no 100% accurate way to quantify how much value people place on existing products and services; deprivation research can provide a useful proxy for determining what will and will not work.



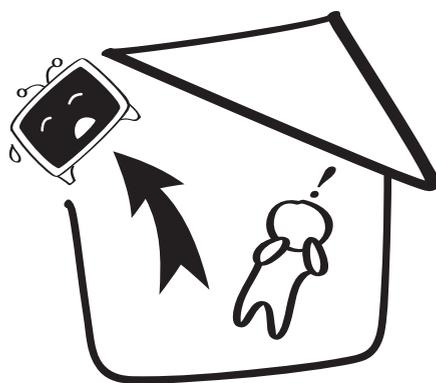
Steps of the Deprivation Method



1 Build a baseline

Embarking on a deprivation study, the research team needs to first establish a baseline set of behaviors and routines related to the topic. This can be established using self-documentary studies and in context observations. Interviews are generally not sufficient to establish a baseline since we want to document actual behaviors for comparison later. Also, participants should be fully briefed on how the method works before the study to address any ethical concerns.

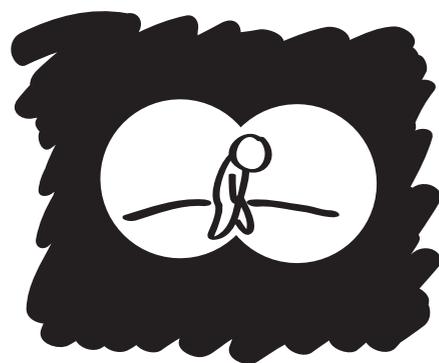
For the project conducted by Conifer Research, our team wanted to learn more about the perceived emotional and social benefits of broadcasted television. In the first phase of this study, participants logged their normal television viewing as well as other entertainment related activities.



2 Take it away

Next, the research team decides what element(s) of the routine to take away. The team can decide to take away the most habitual, beloved element (what the participants are most reliant on) or the element most relevant to the topic.

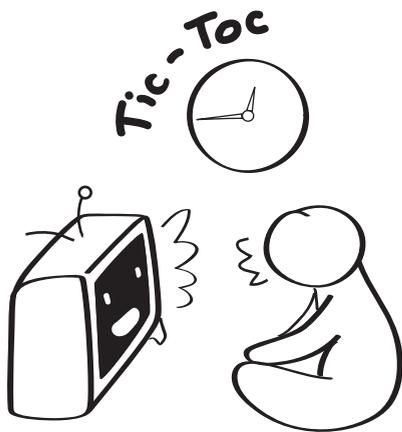
Participants were unable to use their television to view any regular and cable programming as well as DVDs for two weeks. To make it interesting, the team intentionally staged this deprivation to coincide with the season finales of many proclaimed must-see shows. Some families embraced the challenge: one child disconnected the cable box while another taped up the television's power button.



3 Watch the experience unfold

Next, the team observes new behaviors and how the users cope without the familiar. This research should mirror the approach used to set the baseline and can include self-documentation as well as in context observations. The research team should be looking for changes in behavior, any new solutions concocted by the participants, pain points or unanticipated delights and catalysts for new behaviors.

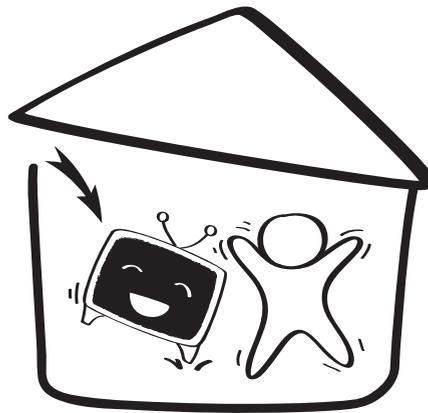
How are they coping without broadcast television? What are they doing instead? Are they migrating to online television? Going outside more? While some families did confess to watching a bit less television, all of the participants did try watching episodes available on the internet. As they documented these firsthand experiences, we were privy to view some of the environmental compromises. Families, for example, began huddling around their desktop computer and sharing office chairs in the den.



4 Insert a fun twist to the study

Give participants a lifeline. This twist has become one of Conifer Research's trademarks to the deprivation method. Our teams have found it is interesting to insert a loophole by allowing participants to use the deprived elements for a limited time during the study (as long as they document it). What were the tipping points? Why did they cave?

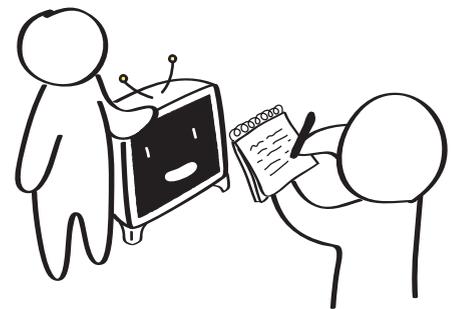
Participants were given the opportunity to watch one hour of television during the two-week deprivation. They used this lifeline at their discretion but were required to document the experience. In the final hours of the Democratic presidential nomination race, one of our participants surrendered her lifeline to watch Obama's appearance on Larry King with a friend. Moments such as this demonstrated a pattern in the value of broadcast television for live events and social occasions.



5 Capture the happy reunion

When the deprivation is completed, do not miss the most critical moment—when participants are joyfully reunited with their beloved product or service. Capture the moment by providing them with a documentary tool such as a video camera. This can be very revealing to the deprived product or service's value—are participants overjoyed or noncommittal to be using the product or service again?

One of our participants recorded her daughter tearfully embracing the TV at the end of the study. She had missed the independence of setting up and navigating the experience by herself. During the study, the girl was forced to use the computer in her grandmother's room. The family also struggled to find favorite shows on the internet. The experience of switching to Channel 8 at 6pm was much different than recalling the specific episode name.



6 Follow it up

At the conclusion, the team can then conduct a follow up interview, probing for what changed, as well as the participant's feelings, beliefs, and preferences. A final set of documentation, using the same approach as the baseline, should be used to see if any part of the routine has changed after the deprivation period is over.

Few participants switched entirely to the internet at the conclusion of the study. The struggles of conversion highlighted the limits of viewing occasions associated with conventional television, such as social viewing, ambient viewing, and channel surfing. Their experiences captured the new behaviors that required adopting a new user language, replacing channel flips, and emphasizing new tools for social connection. The client teams continue to integrate these learnings in prototyping future products, identifying potential partnerships, and establishing criteria for evaluating technological advances.