



Methods for Change

The Pop-up Stall: A Mass Object-Elicitation Method

Robert Meckin

*The University of Manchester
& National Centre for Research Methods*

Andrew Balmer

The University of Manchester

Corresponding author

Robert Meckin

robert.meckin@manchester.ac.uk

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The Pop-up Stall Method is a social research technique that stimulates people's sensory experiences and develops interactional understandings on a topic of interest. Pop-up stalls involve setting up a stand or counter in a common space where passers-by can smell, touch, see and taste stimulus materials and discuss these with each other.

The stimuli can be objects, foodstuffs, scents, photographs, arts-materials – anything related to the project that people can see, smell and handle that might elicit comment, conversation, and interaction. They are a 'mass object-elicitation' approach because they can involve lots of participants and a collection of diverse objects or items. Pop-ups allow people to interact, compare and exchange ideas on the central topic and work towards nuanced, co-productive knowledge-making.

Pop-ups can be used to explore many different topics, such as how people use objects in everyday life, how they think of or relate to their environment, or their associations with clothing or food. Pop-ups can be used alongside other methods in a project that may not focus on the senses and interaction, including home visits, interviews or observations. They can be especially good at highlighting moral and emotive aspects as people compare and discuss similarities and differences. A key advantage of pop-up stalls is they allow researchers to engage a greater variety and number of participants and objects, generating lots of data of in a short amount of time, than might otherwise be possible.



Figure 1: Illustration of a pop-up stall at a garden centre by Lynne Chapman. Copyright Lynne Chapman. Used with permission.

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How does the Pop-up Stall Method create or contribute to change?

Change happens throughout the research process with the Pop-up Stall Method. Initially, deciding on the objects or stimulus materials brings different things into contact with each other which might not ordinarily come into contact. A central point about this method, then, is 'juxtaposition', as different individuals, groups and objects come together, highlighting contrasts and differences in people's understandings and uses of objects or places.

During data generation, people are either asked directly to exchange ideas or without prompts start sharing thoughts with one another, informing each other with different points of view, or by strengthening existing feelings and ideas. The Pop-up Stall Method creates change through sharing different ideas – showing amounts of variety and variability in people's experiences and meaning that people's understandings can be broadened, challenged and confirmed.

In contrast to a qualitative research interview conducted in a room one-to-one, or in small groups, the pop-ups are 'open' in the sense that people can visit them and interact with them for as long as they want, even drift away and return as they please. By situating the stalls in places where people are going about other business, they also juxtapose the spaces, materials and objects in unusual ways, which can produce insights or highlight humour as means of coping with things 'out of place'.

For instance, people may make jokes with particular objects that are usually found in private spaces, like bathroom cupboards or bedrooms, but are on display in the pop-up stall. This also means the Pop-up Stall Method changes the ways people might engage with social research, because the stalls facilitate a playful, dynamic, and interactive engagement on participants' own terms, rather than being directed by a set of interview questions.

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What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

This method has been influenced by the rise of participatory research approaches which value different knowledge. A key inspiration for developing the Pop-up Stall Method were the wider debates regarding the 'public understanding of science' beginning in the 1980s and 1990s. This largely emerged from science education and was partly conceived as a deficit model of understanding, where 'The Public' did not fully understand science and technology and so made choices that were not sufficiently informed by science. This led to many innovative contributions, which broadly explored aspects of science communication, how scientists and policymakers construct publics, and how particular publics respond to different scientific issues. It frequently turns out that publics do understand science, but also bring in local knowledge and ethical perspectives that change how scientific knowledge and methods are interpreted.

In this regard, the Pop-up stall method values people's lived experiences and feelings, and the resulting findings can be fed back to scientific communities. This knowledge exchange is important to help produce scientific projects that are designed as 'science with and for society', rather than science imposing knowledge on communities.

There has been a debate in anthropology and sociology about the duration of ethnographic research, with some arguing that it takes a minimum of a year to fully 'immerse' oneself and generate a deep personal experience of the object of study. Drawing on the ideas of focused or intensive ethnography, Pop-up Stalls can generate a great deal of rich and varied data in a short space of time. In our research, we were also inspired by a trend in some social sciences to focus on the material world, and here we direct readers to Jen Owen's excellent guide in this series focused on [object-oriented interviews](#).

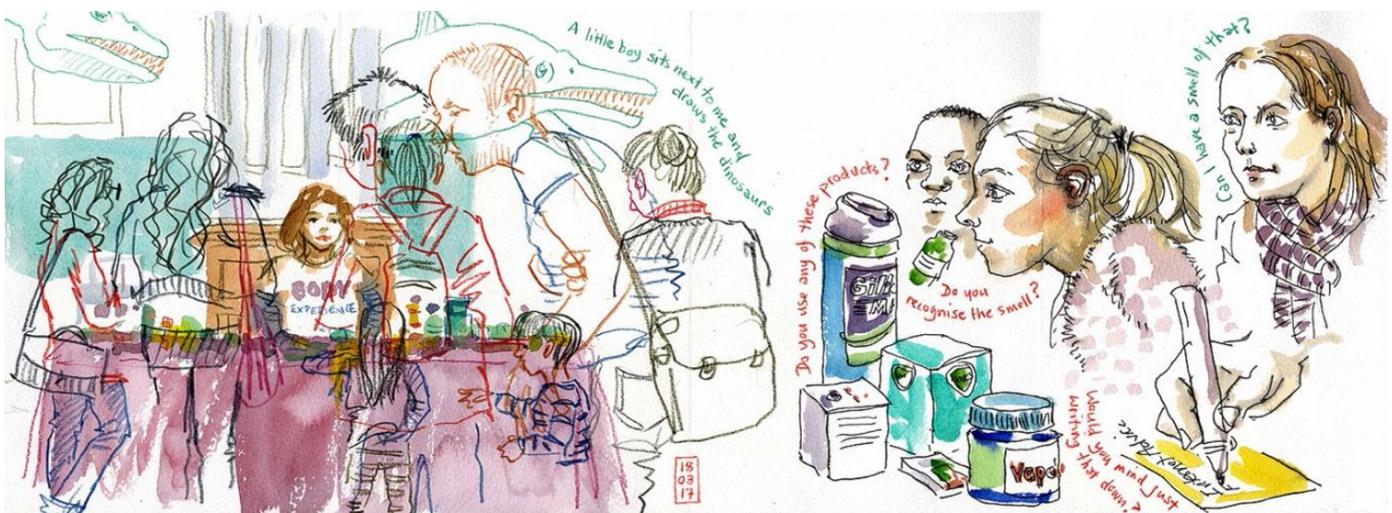


Figure 2: Illustration of pop-up stall at a museum by Lynne Chapman. Copyright Lynne Chapman. Used with permission.

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Why might I want to use the Pop-up Stall Method?

- The Pop-up Stall Method is ideal for engaging publics in a variety of topics, particularly those that seem mundane or unproblematic. It engages people through sensory and material objects and so offers different insights into their importance in people's lives.
- By talking to passers-by, this method can generate interest in a research topic with people within a particular place, and so it is possible to see patterns and differences between different pop-up stalls.
- Pop-up stalls create a sense of dynamism and spontaneity to the research process as participants come and go. This moves the analysis away from what individual people say, to the ways affect, meaning and sensation are evoked throughout the whole phenomenon of the pop-up.
- Pop-up elicitation is useful to check findings or develop findings at a different 'scale' than individualised accounts found in social research. Pop-ups can be useful alongside other methods because they allow a focus on comparison, difference and variation across the practices and themes explored through other methods.
- Pop-ups are also ideal for seeking out different, interactional forms of data in a way that is less ordered and controlled by researchers than, for example, semi-structured interviews.

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Step by step guide to using the Pop-up Stall Method:

1. Think about the topic of interest in terms of objects or images:

The Pop-up Stalls are best done with objects, materials and images that relate to the topic of interest and that engage one or more of the senses. For instance, in our research on how people use everyday chemicals, we used many personal care and medicinal products that contained menthol, such as muscle rubs, toothpastes, shower gels, cough sweets, chewing gums and lozenges to explore the sensory, emotional and meaningfulness of minty and mentholated fragrances, balms, and flavours in people's lives (see example 'Menthol in Everyday Life' below).

Pop ups can take a lot of planning and experimentation so allow time for trialling and piloting different ideas.

2. Assemble a collection of objects: Once you have decided on the types of objects or materials you are going to display, think about how you will select, obtain and curate them. This might include printing images (what format, how many copies, size); purchasing products (from shops, ordered online, etc); foodstuffs; media; gathering materials from nature or the built environment (e.g. plants, leaves, soil samples, bricks, rust, carpet samples); or sourcing other kinds materials (e.g. fabrics, clothing). These then need to be displayed in an accessible way, such that passers-by can see the objects and can easily handle, smell or taste them.

Think about any additional considerations you may need to make that are specific to the objects you are working with. For example, if you are asking people to handle something that is messy, you may wish to offer wipes or tissues so that participants can wipe their hands.

3. Think about data: The Pop-up Stall Method can be used to generate diverse kinds of data. Consider what would be the different modes with which people could engage, and how you might record these. Notes, fieldnotes, photographs, recordings, selfies and sketches are all options, and it is a good idea to have several modes. Also, consider how pop-up stalls fit into the wider project as they seem to be a good complementary strategy rather than a stand-alone mode of data generation.

4. Strategy and opportunity for choosing places: The pop-ups can be used in lots of different places and spaces. It's important to plan and make enquiries into different options. Many commercial spaces require payment while council-owned spaces may charge. Both may require specific risk-assessments. Other locations like museums or shopping centres attract people who are engaged in different practices and so strategically choosing the places helps create diversity in the data. However, once the pop-up stall has been designed it can also be used at short notice should this be necessary.

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5. Organising and managing stalls:

The stalls require some time to set up, so arrive early and make sure you are set up in good time for the event or opening hours of the space. They often involve several researchers, so it is important to coordinate breaks and delegate different responsibilities for data generation. As they are public-facing, there is a large performance component to the pop-ups stalls so make sure researchers get good breaks so they can continue to be responsive and engaged themselves. It can be very tiring to be 'on stage' for half a day or more. At the end of the session or event, make sure everything is packed away neatly ready for next time. Take note of any objects that have been used or need replacing for any reason (e.g. consumables).

This is a playful and interactive method and should feel fun to do!

6. Analysis: The Pop-up Stall Method creates different kinds of data, so it is important to think in advance about how these will be used. Ask yourself, what are the specific frameworks for selecting and integrating important information? It's therefore crucial to choose a mode of analysis that can deal with both different kinds of data and different elements of lived experiences.

7. Ethics and Consent: The Pop-up Stall Method is interactive, so it is important to have smooth modes for gaining consent, including participation in research and media release for those participants who could be identifiable. Think about whether consent could be given verbally or electronically (using a tablet or similar). Having printed information sheets and consent forms means that it is possible to quickly have people sign consent at the end of their interactions.

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Examples of the Pop-up Stall Method in social science research:

The method was initially developed alongside a large scientific project aimed at synthesising flavours and fragrances using bacteria that promised to change the potential for manufacturing these chemicals. Thus, the trajectories of scientific research programmes can be informed with other forms of knowledge production.

The Pop-up Stall Method was used as part of the 'Menthol in Everyday Life' project. The aim was to explore how people used everyday aromatic chemicals in various routines and life practices in order to understand how they were involved in different moral and personal activities. Menthol was the focus because scientists were hoping to use a novel biotechnological production method and considered menthol to be a 'neutral' chemical such that the means of production would not matter.

By using menthol, we set up pop-up stalls in different sites, sometimes alongside scientific or science communication stands and sometimes not. This means pop-up stalls can change the relationships between formal scientific knowledge and people's knowledge created in their lived experiences.

The pop-up stalls were useful because they meant the project was able to engage with a diverse range of participants, including families, older people and students, as well as people engaging in different activities including education, hygiene, tourism, fashion, and home-making.

Researchers also used a range of Object-Based Methods including home tours, object-interviews and focus groups. The pop-up stalls were an important aspect in this portfolio of methods as they were informed by and informed the development and progress in other methods.

Analytical concepts from 'Theories of Practice' were used to identify the knowledges, practical actions, relationships, and ethics in which menthol was involved. Menthol was therefore heavily implicated in participants feeling better 'safely' and 'naturally'.

Findings were shared at a range of events where scientific researchers aiming to use biotechnology could consider how and why menthol was not neutral as they took it to be. For instance, participants trusted brands like muscle rubs or inhalants to be products they could use safely with young children when they were poorly. Thus, changing the mode of production to a biotechnological process had consequences for how these products were used by parents. The data from the pop-up stalls, including photographs and sketches were particularly useful in conveying some of the findings, such as how much people engage with smells, touch and taste.

The work also had implications for how we understand the importance of objects in everyday life, and how objects can be used to convey moral behaviours, such as caring for children, in the short, medium, and long term.

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Where else could the Pop-up Stall Method be used?

The Pop-up Stall Method could be particularly good for working in natural environments or in buildings, houses and other urban spaces. Pop ups would help researchers understand the ways different materials or elements in the surrounds feature in community understandings, feelings and relationships. This would be useful for architecture and environmental planning, or for advocacy groups who could generate knowledge to influence design and policy.

Pops ups are good at uncovering the mundane and take-for-granted aspects of living by showing the ways objects are involved in important ethical activities. Through this, understanding aspects of personal life, consumption and organisational practices can be explored. Pops ups could be used in other innovation sectors where new modes of production may change how people understand the mundane objects they use.

Top tips

- Try to identify key objects that are particularly engaging, sensory or emotive.
- Be ready for chaos and intensity, followed by periods of quiet as people visit other stalls or spaces.
- Be ready to generate a lot of data in a short space of time, and also be aware that some of the data can be overlapping unlike in interviews or small groups.
- Plan lots of different ways of gaining consent and giving information to participants. Decide the different levels of ethics required for different levels of engagement.
- Learn from each experience. Take some time after each pop-up stall to discuss the process, reflect on what went well and what could be done differently. Adapt the objects or images, data generation, or ways of interacting as you go.

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Further reading

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