

# Sage Research Methods: Doing Research Online

## Remote Data Collection in Low-Resource Settings: Doing Research with the Rohingya Community in Bangladesh Refugee Camps

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**Author:** Anas Ansar, Uwe Hunger

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## Abstract

The incorporation of digital platforms has profoundly transformed research methods and ethics following the COVID-19 pandemic, yielding flexibility and creativity in scientific research. The pandemic outbreak and the resulting global shutdown for years and physical and social distancing amplified the dependency on digital tools in pursuing research around the world. Logistical challenges related to travel and public health concerns have contributed to a rise in digital research placements at the expense of more traditional offline methods—symbolizing a larger shift in international research and humanitarian data-collection strategies. Nevertheless, questions remain about the universal applicability of such rapid change in the research landscape. Bringing a Global South perspective, this case study revisits the scale and scope of digital data collection in conflict and displacement settings. In doing so, we unpack our experiences of conducting a qualitative study in the sprawling Rohingya refugee camps in southern Bangladesh adjoining the Myanmar border. At the core of our reflection are the challenges we encountered while doing online research and how we learned from it and maneuvered successfully. The findings presented in this case study are therefore twofold. On the one hand, they reveal the complexities of doing digitally mediated remote research among hard-to-access and at-risk populations. Such limitations are frequently conditioned by local context, resource settings, and access and power asymmetries within the specific research group. On the other hand, learning from such embedded constraints, they offer alternative strategies for researchers embarking on similar research settings.



### Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, students should be able to

- Comprehend the challenges in conducting online research in low-resource settings with at-risk populations.
- Recognize the structural barriers that may limit the scale and scope of digital research.
- Evaluate and better prepare to pursue online research despite the logistical, sociopolitical, and spatial constraints.

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## Project Overview and Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has exponentially increased scientific literature and publications around the world, triggering “covidization” of the research enterprise ([Ioannidis et al., 2021](#), p. 2). Encompassing almost all fields of scientific research, the pandemic has provided “a comprehensive test bed for studying all possible theories and mechanisms on crisis preparedness, response capacity and agility, decision-making, communication, coordination, accountability, and endless other core themes” ([Kuipers, van der Wilt, & Wolbers, 2022](#), p. 304). In a similar vein, research in social science and the conventional way of addressing the concerns of hard-to-access and at-risk populations has been profoundly shaped by the global pandemic. Data collection in community-based studies, particularly in low-resource settings, has been facing unprecedented challenges amid the global standstill ([Chen et al., 2020](#)). Traditional mechanisms for primary data collection, such as visiting households, face-to-face conversations, participant observations, and conducting focus group discussions, have been severely disrupted by the health risks and protection measures introduced by the respective governments. To compensate for such offline constraints, researchers are pivoting to various remote and online strategies such as telephone and email surveys and video conferencing, thus expanding the scale and scope of empirical investigation methods. Academic studies and reports by nongovernmental organizations and policy organizations have increasingly acknowledged the importance of digital methods and have applied them in data collection. It has already become a common phenomenon that we are becoming digital scholars to the extent of our ways of communication in everyday academia. Moreover, the pandemic triggered significant dependency on digital learning, teaching, academic exchange, and research ([Adnan & Anwar, 2020](#)). The changing dynamics admittedly symbolize a larger shift in social science research methods. Digital research continues to be an effective strategy as we slowly recover from the rupture caused by the pandemic. Amid such ongoing transformations, it is pertinent to contextualize this phenomenon by taking notes from regions and situations that lack digital competitiveness to facilitate such digital endeavors. In this context, this case study brings to the fore the case and experiences of conducting remote research among the displaced Rohingya refugee community living in peripheral Bangladesh, right at the southeastern border with Myanmar.

Since August 2017, Bangladesh has been hosting more than a million Rohingya who fled from Myanmar following a brutal military crackdown, violence, and persecution in neighboring Rakhine ([Ansar, 2020](#)). As the displacement gradually turned into a protracted crisis, we developed a research project to study the state of everyday life of the Rohingya community in Bangladesh refugee camps. To begin our fieldwork, we moved to the field in February 2020. As we nearly completed the necessary administrative permissions to pursue field-

work inside the refugee camps, the sudden rupture caused by the pandemic changed our plan. Beyond the problem of traveling, “cancel culture,” and the danger of contracting COVID-19 lay the practical challenges of conducting actual field research. It was safe neither for us or for our respondents. Then came the nationwide lockdown, and there was no possibility to travel and gain entry into the refugee camps. Our long-anticipated fieldwork went into an involuntary hibernation. After nearly 6 months of waiting, hoping for a miraculous change and being able to get back to normal, we realized that it was about time to rethink our strategy. Like everyone else, we switched to digital alternatives to carry our research forward. Embarking on a strategy without adequate assessment of the research site and population inevitably brought the first practical challenge.

The Rohingya refugees are confined within fenced camps heavily guarded by security officials. Under Bangladeshi law, Rohingya are not allowed to have local SIM cards, and the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) prohibits telecom companies from providing services to refugees, citing security reasons ([Ansar & Khaled, 2023](#), p. 11). Authorities regularly confiscate mobile phones from the camp population. For those who still possess SIM cards, the internet shutdown has effectively rendered their devices useless. Although the ban on the internet was lifted in August 2020, network coverage remains poor, and the government’s discretionary practices frequently disrupt services. At first glance, such embedded technological, logistical, and structural challenges in the refugee camps appeared to be a barrier to leveraging remote data collection.



#### Section Summary

- Due to the restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, researchers had to switch to digital data collection from the original conventional method of on-site interviews.
- The host country policies on refugee governance created stumbling blocks to pursuing digitally mediated research with the Rohingya refugee community in Bangladesh.
- Lack of connectivity and inadequate digital literacy remain crucial issues in leveraging remote data collection among the camp-based refugee community.

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## Research Design

Data collection using digital platforms is as complex as on-site strategies irrespective of the researcher's identity as a cultural insider/outsider to the researched community ([Joseph, Earland, & Ahmed, 2021](#)). In social sciences, particularly in conflict settings, researchers' and respondents' multifaceted identities often shape the research process, particularly in conducting qualitative life-course studies. However, as we decided to go digital, certain aspects appeared rather expedient compared with traditional qualitative research processes. For instance, conducting in-person interviews usually involves building trust through the development of social relationships, which involves additional preparation, time, and resources. On digital platforms, it was rather "straight to business"—an error we realized over the course of our data-collection process that we discuss in a later section.

The first step was to select two local research assistants whose roles progressively extended beyond identifying respondents. With the help of research assistants, snowball methods, and prior contacts inside the camp with the first author, a total of 80 respondents was selected from diverse age and gender groups from three different Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar district. For data collection, a three-step strategy was employed. First, a brief telephone exchange through conversation via mobile phone was made between the researchers and respondents to inform them about the research topic, purpose, and any concerns that respondents might have regarding their security and privacy issues. We anticipated that this phone call also would serve as the icebreaking required to pursue the data collection. However, it was conditioned by the surroundings of the respondents, where they were often interrupted by the lack of privacy in their living spaces. It was not necessarily affected by the presence of other family members but simply by passers-by in the narrow colonies and blocks in which they live, where the walls of the houses and the narrow streets where people socialize, walk, and talk are blurred. In the second step, the respondents were given a semistructured online survey questionnaire consisting of six broad issues: general information about camp life; livelihood options; pandemic-related challenges; access to education, healthcare, and psychosocial well-being; community support mechanisms; and opinion on government initiatives. In the third step, mobile interviews were conducted via WhatsApp with respondents who preferred to speak instead of filling out the online questionnaire.



### Section Summary

- A three-step digital strategy consisting of a brief telephone exchange to inform participants about the research objective and to get the respondents' consent, a semistructured online survey, and a mobile interview via WhatsApp were employed for data collection.
- Several structural and situational constraints act as stumbling blocks when performing virtual icebreaking in camp settings that lack the space and privacy required for building rapport.
- Ensuring comprehensive responses from diverse age and gender groups has been daunting due to the lack of access or familiarity with digital methods by specific age and gender groups within the camp dwellers.

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## Research Practicalities

### Challenges with Remote Data Collection from Hard-to-Access Refugees Camps and the Learnings

While collecting data with the displaced Rohingyas in Bangladesh, methodologic and situational contestations over using remote technologies compromised our expectations to some extent. Several factors conditioned the *access* to the research participants, the *scope* of engagement, and the *quality* of information obtained via digital data-collection methods. These include but are not limited to the lack of motivation to participate in online surveys, weak digital infrastructure, inadequate skills and capacities of a sizable section of the camp dwellers, and the discomfort with and fear of engaging in digital platforms to discuss sensitive issues. In the following section, we categorically unpack the myriad challenges we encountered while interacting with the Rohingya respondents in Bangladesh refugee camps.

**Lack of Motivation to Complete the Survey Form.** Following communication via mobile phone and receiving verbal consent from participants, researchers sent out a 10-page survey questionnaire with additional 3-page instructions. It was written in English because the Rohingya language is mainly a spoken dialect without any written script. After 4 weeks, we only received 22 responses, 7 of which were identical, meaning that

respondents completed the form together simply for the sake of response. A lack of motivation was tangible that most likely resulted in a reluctant response to the questionnaire. For most of the respondents, it was their first experience of self-responding to an online questionnaire, which perhaps created both confusion and tension as to how and where the responses would end up. The language was another major obstacle to responses to the survey questionnaire. Only a minority of literate refugees had decent English skills. Framing the questionnaire also caused some confusion. While the Rohingya language has a considerable vocabulary for emotional and behavioral problems, in everyday conversations and expressions, there is a limited correspondence between many Rohingya terms and Western (or academic) concepts of psychosocial challenges ([Tay et al., 2019](#)). Some of the respondents had to seek assistance from the local research assistants to fill out the questionnaires. In such cases, responses to the open-ended questions were mainly missing. Seeking support from the local assistants also elicited a risk of exposing respondents' opinions and the confidentiality of their statements, which led to their selective responses sticking mostly to general questions.

**Lack of Diversity.** A lack of diversity in terms of age and gender of the respondents was conspicuous. Initially, we attempted to have an almost equal representation of male and female respondents. However, in the end, nearly 70% of the respondents appeared to be male and aged under thirty. Despite our attempt to diversify the demographics of respondents, our efforts did not yield the representative sample for which we had hoped. Most respondents were known to the local assistants who supported our study. These limitations on sample diversity revealed an unconscious bias in our research methodology. The exercise appealed mainly to tech-savvy young males who were already active on digital platforms and could navigate the restrictions and surveillance of the state. In the case of the online survey, in which they were asked to elaborate on their opinion, respondents avoided the open-ended questions and opted for the multiple-choice questions.

**Logistical Challenges.** Despite official restrictions on using mobile phones with Bangladeshi operators, a section of the refugee population successfully maneuvered around the policy and registered their devices under local Bangladeshi names. Though they may have possessed their own devices, when approached for an interview, many respondents used the local assistant's number rather than risk a revelation of their own (undocumented) number. The presence of an intermediary to exchange views significantly compromised the quality of their responses. For instance, respondents who participated in the call via personal phone talked more extensively about their experiences than those who used the local assistant's number. We had to reschedule interviews on numerous occasions due to power outages and dying phone batteries. Weak internet coverage and limited exposure to digital technologies also discouraged many respondents from ad-

equately completing the online survey. In five cases, there was a sudden withdrawal of the respondent in the middle of the interview without any reason being cited and no contact method by which we could reschedule the conversation provided.

**Lack of Openness.** For marginalized populations in a politically volatile context, revealing personal data and being opinionated on digital platforms can be counterproductive. In addition, for the vast majority of Rohingyas, digital tools are a luxury they can hardly afford. Responding online using a smartphone and articulating their opinions therefore was an “out of the box” effort for most of them. For example, despite a general sense of dissatisfaction in the refugee camps about the way the government of Bangladesh had dealt with the pandemic, only seven respondents detailed their concerns about mobility restrictions, arbitrary lockdowns, and lack of social services in the camps. Remarkably, except for one female, all other respondents who elaborated on their struggles were males. Two interlocking potential explanations exist for this hesitancy to disclose personal responses to government activities. First, the fact that many Rohingya are unaccustomed to communicating through digital communication technologies presents frequently insurmountable obstacles to the data-collection process. Second, respondents fear potential repercussions for voicing perspectives that contradict the government’s actions, the perspectives of family members, and the broader community’s public stance.

**Discomfort With and Fear of Digital Engagement.** A palpable trust deficit is typically common among vulnerable communities around information sharing. Apparently, the use of digital technology is frequently associated with risk due to fearful preconceptions and the constant flow of rumors in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. Except for four young males, all respondents who talked to us on WhatsApp preferred not to do a video call. Respondents also avoided answering questions about topics that seemed both personally and politically sensitive. They hesitated to comment on issues concerning the host government’s policies, the role of refugee community leaders, and mental illness and incidents of abuse while in confinement. Insufficient reaction time also led to a hasty exchange without the possibility of going deeper due to the prearranged remote and virtual nature of the conversation. Another obstacle was the presence of male family members when we talked with female respondents. On several occasions, young Rohingya women who previously agreed to talk to us suddenly insisted that we conduct the interview with their older male relatives instead of them, presumably out of fear of being labeled as “opinionated” in the presence of their cultural seniors.





### Section Summary

- Several linguistic, logistical, and intersectional challenges disrupted the data-collection process.
- A sense of precarity was palpable regarding how participants responded to the online survey questionnaire.
- While there was keen interest among younger males, ensuring a diverse response from various quarters of the refugee population was unattainable through digital alternatives.

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## Method in Action

Within a month, we came to realize the fact that the strategy was not functioning as anticipated. Switching to digital devices was a hasty decision without appropriate background checks. Several factors needed to be carefully revisited when using technology to conduct research with at-risk populations in low-resource settings, which was conspicuously missing in the initial strategy. Apart from logistical and technical constraints, a crucial limiting factor for research efficacy was culturally engrained hierarchies and power imbalances between the researchers/technical experts and the refugees and among household members. Halfway through the data-collection phase, we were able to underpin the challenges and redesign the data-collection strategy by adapting to the reality on the ground. We came up with six concrete strategies to improve the quality and quantity of the responses:

1. Digital rapport building
2. Rerouting the communication pattern
3. Devising a household interview strategy
4. Expanding the role of local research assistants
5. Narrowing the research focus
6. Extending the data-collection period

Recruiting participants, convincing them about the research aims and objectives, and achieving the best possible responses requires mutual respect and trust ([Joseph, Earland, & Ahmed, 2021](#)). With the quick transition to digital methods, the aspect of rapport building was largely missing. In this context, we decided to have

rounds of conversations, allowing participants to know more about them, the intention of the research project, and the fact that it was a choice, not an obligation, to participate in the study. During this rapport-building process, we managed to convey the issues that we were looking for and why we see the importance of such narratives emerging from the research participants' contributions.

Initially, access to digital tools and flexibility to reply at respondents' convenience were limited. The online questionnaire was designed in a way that respondents needed to fill out the form in one step. There was no option to save the progress and enter another time to fill out the rest and submit. To ensure easier access and uninterrupted communication, we dropped the digital questionnaire survey plan and decided to conduct mobile interviews only. We came up with three ideas. First, instead of us calling the respondents, we asked them to call us at a suitable time with prior arrangements. Second, we decided not to complete the interview immediately but through several phone calls at the respondents' convenience. Third, we framed the mobile interviews as informal exchanges so that respondents would not feel pressured as if they were taking part in an interview rather than having a casual conversation. This provided us with more freedom to go beyond the fixed points and encourage discussion. Similarly, it allowed us to be frank and comfortable with the researcher over time.

The cramped spatial context also resulted in limiting our initial data collection. The lack of a safe space in the overcrowded and congested camps was a persistent challenge. To address this, we came up with a household interview strategy, meaning that although we were focused on a single respondent from the household, nevertheless, we pursued conversations with other family members of the respondent who were curious and also wanted to give their opinions. This yielded a positive outcome because family members were more or less informed about the purpose and objectives of the study. It also allowed us to cross-check opinions within the household. In addition, an arrangement was made with a local nongovernment organization to use office space where respondents could go and speak with us via the help of the local research assistants.

Thus the role of local research assistants was expanded beyond technical assistance and locating respondents. They were encouraged to conduct follow-up communications with respondents to validate the information and make the best use of their presence on-site. While the discipline's literature has paid increased attention to the power imbalance between the researchers and researched population in recent years, less work has been done on hierarchies. However, privilege also lies *within* the subject population itself. For instance, who among a population can participate in remote research is determined by their capability to own a device such as a smartphone and have internet purchasing capacity and exposure to the digital life in their every-

day interactions and gender and social identities. Such conditionality significantly limits the scale and scope of research while also calling into question the quality of findings based on digital research. To compensate for such unintentional bias, we decided to actively involve local research assistants to support the process and conduct the interviews themselves. This allowed us to collect responses from community members who would otherwise skip the digital interactions to make their points.

The large research questionnaire also was a major stumbling block for participants' response to the online survey. In the redesigned second phase, the questionnaire was reduced in size significantly. This also avoided less relevant politically and socially sensitive topics. The questionnaire also increased multiple-choice question options and offered respondents the opportunity to choose one or several responses instead of detailing the responses.

Finally, the research team extended the fieldwork to allow it to further unfold from the respondents' perspective. This was an attempt to not take any situation for granted. The process, in many ways, is a vivid reminder of how migration regimes, including researchers with positive intentions, are preoccupied with how to govern and address refugee community ([Häkli & Kallio, 2021](#)). By extending the data-collection process, it was also possible to revisit the fault lines and binaries in data collection that can have far-reaching consequences for researchers and research populations.



#### Section Summary

- Despite the political and situational challenges, digital data collection in a situation of resource constraints with at-risk populations is possible with a sincere effort.
- There is no shortcut to ensure responses from diverse demographic groups such as women, older people, and people with disabilities.
- Some pervasive trust and communication challenges in remote data collection need additional arrangements.
- Sticking to the minimum required information when pursuing remote data-collection strategies is ideal.

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## Practical Lessons Learned

Despite the gradual rebound, the impact of the pandemic will be felt for years, and online data collection is here to stay. Even though we may slowly go back to conventional prepandemic research methods, the level of flexibility that has been presented as part of remote alternatives will certainly keep influencing the research landscape in knowledge production across disciplinary spectrums. Our experience with the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh suggests that any decision to employ technology for data collection in conflict-sensitive and low-resource contexts requires careful assessment. Attempts to incorporate technology-based research methods should in no way overshadow the sensitivities of the researched population or compromise the critical objectives of the endeavor. There are several factors, we believe, that require particular attention:

- It is important for researchers to evaluate and consider the local context of the researched population, infrastructural and situational predicaments, preexisting vulnerability, and potential negative consequences before approaching technology-based data-collection strategies.
- The localization of data collection is another mantra to compensate for the current predicaments in collecting information. There needs to be greater collaboration in data collection through building the capacity of community volunteers and local researchers to take on leadership roles in data collection.
- Behavioral and participant observation is extremely important while talking to representatives of vulnerable populations, which is simply impossible via digital technologies. Researchers must develop new skills and conceptual frameworks for addressing the limitations imposed on human observation by digital media.
- When operationalizing an online survey, limiting the questions to the minimum required for the study is also ideal. Whenever possible, a hybrid mechanism that blends online and offline research should be prioritized over going digital on data collection in conflict and humanitarian crisis contexts.



### Section Summary

- An apparent shortcoming of digital data collection is the absence of behavioral and situational observation—a crucial feature in social science research.
- A hybrid mechanism blending online and offline methods is pivotal in data collection among at-risk populations in a volatile context.
- Depending on the research context and embedded predicaments, the localization of da-

ta collection is a befitting arrangement.

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## Conclusion

Digital platforms have been a key vector in unpacking ground realities in volatile humanitarian contexts in many hard-to-access parts of the world. With its initial and rudimentary reflection, this case study on the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh also reiterates the inevitability of looking into new alternatives to address the contemporary sociocultural and political contexts unfolding. However, at the same time, we also need to carefully consider the general applicability and the missing links to such alternatives. In such a dilemma, a critical take on the digital methods in data collection is proposed when addressing disadvantaged and risky populations such as the Rohingya refugees. Again, the debate about balancing scientific rigor and the conflict sensitivity of the researched population is nothing new. There is a growing appeal to the positionality and responsibilities of researchers that they hold to the research in such a conflict-sensitive research context. Notwithstanding the profound impact of digitalization on reimagining social science research, there are several reservations in order—as this case study reveals. Connecting with the community beforehand to assess levels of digital connectivity is crucial to comprehend and anticipate potential challenges in conflict- and displacement-related research settings. Researchers also need to consider the context of the researched population, infrastructural and situational predicaments, preexisting vulnerabilities, potential negative consequences, or lack of personal benefits from their involvement in research where these are expected.



### Section Summary

- Digital methods have yielded new opportunities to unpack narratives of the communities living at the margins of society.
- Nevertheless, a critical revisiting of digital data collection is imperative when setting out for online research with at-risk populations in a volatile political and social context.

- Rushing to enter the “virtual social research field” risks compromising research quality and integrity.



### Discussion Questions

1. How does digital data collection push us to rethink conventional methods of conducting research?
2. How can researchers best navigate digital platforms in resource-constrained situations? How should the concern regarding a potential fracture in knowledge generation be addressed?
3. How can ethical issues be incorporated into the research design when setting out for on-line research in a volatile political and social context?



### Multiple-Choice Quiz Questions

1. The main difference between digital data collection with people at risk vis-à-vis other target groups is

- ☐ a. digital inaccessibility and insecurity in online information sharing.

**Correct Answer**

**Feedback:** Well done, correct answer

☐ b. that the findings often conform to the hypothesis.

**Incorrect Answer**

**Feedback:** This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

☐ c. that the researcher enjoys more flexibility while interviewing people at-risk

**Incorrect Answer**

**Feedback:** This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

2. The major concern about using the snowball technique in data

collection is

☐ a. a lack of representative and diverse samples.

**Correct Answer**

**Feedback:** Well done, correct answer

☐ b. that researchers lose grip of the research topic.

**Incorrect Answer**

**Feedback:** This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

☐ c. that it takes more time to conduct research and process collected data.

**Incorrect Answer**



**Feedback:** This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

3. Two key challenges for researchers in employing digital methods for data collection in conflict- and displacement-related research settings are

☐ a. inaccessibility to digital tools and security concerns.

**Correct Answer**

**Feedback:** Well done, correct answer

☐ b. the high cost and lack of interest by respondents.

**Incorrect Answer**

**Feedback:** This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

☐ c. the risk of data manipulation and digital surveillance.

### Incorrect Answer

**Feedback:** This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

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## Further Reading

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