

VIEWPOINT

REFLECTIONS ON COLLECTING AND DISSEMINATING RESEARCH DATA: A JOURNEY THROUGH KENYA

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Introduction

Results from research are often put into a convenient and accessible format for the intended audience. But who determines what is important, who the audience is and the format to disseminate that information? An immediate response may be—the research team. However, how does the research process and the learning that takes place affect them? What do they learn along the way? This article provides a perspective to illustrate how the research process itself can impact those who are part of the process—the research team—during the fieldwork preparation, data collection, data analysis and dissemination of results.

Here we share viewpoints from five team members who were part of a unique project exploring the perceptions and usage of mobile money among the Jua Kali or informal sector in eight counties of Kenya. Mobile money is the transaction of money using a mobile phone which involves a pin-secured app and an agent to facilitate the transaction. The research project focused on M-Shwari, a mobile-based product and service provided by the Commercial Bank of Africa (CBA) through Safaricom's M-Pesa platform.

Launched in 2012, M-Shwari is a newer banking product, for M-Pesa customers, which allows an individual to save and borrow right from one's mobile phone while earning interest on money saved (Safaricom, 2013; Morawczynski, & Miscione, 2008). Simply put, M-Shwari is a paperless form of financial transaction that offers access to credit and savings facilities to its subscribers. The research team set out to explore the views of both users and non-users of the M-Shwari product.

The Challenge

Cook, Cook, & Landrum suggest that one of the challenges in the research process is that, “scholars often constitute an insular group that disseminate research findings primarily through outlets and venues targeting like-minded researchers

using traditional approaches” 2013, p. 163). This can result in the exclusion of important actors in the research process. This lack of inclusion and participation is also highlighted by Chu, Jayaraman, Kyamanywa and Ntakiyirua, when they push for more deliberate partnerships with local collaborators (2014).

Relebohile Moletsane, a professor in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, has for years maintained that research can sometimes have a limited impact on social change because it is often carried out without any substantial participation and contribution by the people we research, who are frequently outside of the academy:

Critics, particularly those aligned to the indigenous knowledge systems and social justice frameworks, have often argued that academic research tends to marginalise the ways of knowing dominant among the local communities being studied, and to silence the voices of those most impacted by the social phenomena targeted for change (2015, p. 37).

Increasingly, within the international development arena, we’re continuously reminded that as researchers we need to broaden and diversify our collaborative efforts to include the local populace, policymakers, educators and others who are either affected by the outcome or make decisions using the data. In taking on this challenge, the research process can often impact the research team.

The Research Process

The use of mobile money banking services, like M-Shwari, can play a critical role in the process of Kenya’s growth. To some extent, M-Shwari was started with the informal sector in mind. Safaricom argues, “Research has also shown that M-Shwari loans are essential in providing quick cash-flow for the Jua Kali businesses” (Safaricom, 2013, p. 7). The research team wanted to find out the informal business sector’s experiences. Thus, the study sought to better understand the perception and use of the M-Shwari product amongst Kenya’s growing informal or ‘Jua Kali’ sector.

The various aspects of the research process often are inter-connected even when carried out by different individuals (see Figure 1).

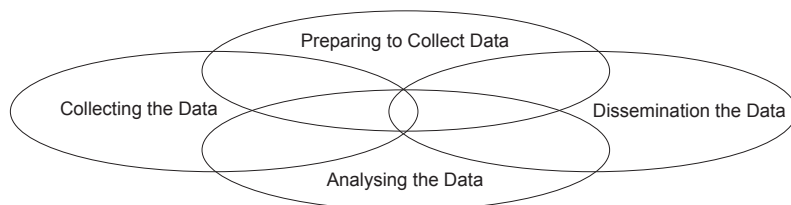


Figure 1: Merging of Four Aspects of the Research Process—Preparation, Collection, Analysis and Dissemination

The following section highlights reflections outlined in these four broad components of the data collection process for the M-Shwari study. The views shared are those of two researchers who led the training and data collection process; two analysts who did the transcribing, cleaning, reading, coding and analysis of the data; and the videographer who filmed and produced the dissemination video.

Preparing for Data Collection

A researcher once described his fieldwork preparation as such: *“I treat my field team like soldiers; they need to be trained to fight the ‘battle’ with you”*. This sentiment is critical in that preparing to collect field data requires intensive training of the field team who will be on the front line of data collection. They not only need to have the data quality as their core focus but also need the skills to collect quality data and strategies to manage challenges faced during fieldwork. However, training a field team is never a one-way delivery of knowledge from researcher to the field staff. It is always an exchange – both of skills and cultural capital.

A team of 15 field staff, made up of mainly current students and graduates from four Kenyan universities, participated in a one week training session to collect data for this study. All were fluent in Kiswahili, Kenya’s national language, and several regional languages that were spoken in the study sites. Three of the field staff owned small businesses and were users of M-Shwari. The content of the training engaged the team in methods of research inquiry, basic research skills, cultural awareness, knowledge of the specific product (M-Shwari) and other logistical field issues. While the researchers may provide methodological skills, the field team also contributes important social and cultural skills needed to navigate the research setting – and both of these are critical ingredients to successful fieldwork. As Gupta has argued, research assistants do a lot in the field; *“they fundamentally configure the process and results of data collection, and our notion of ‘the field’ itself”* (2014, p. 397).

Well-trained and culturally sensitive local field staff is also critical in another way. They can help capture and amplify the voices of those who are impacted by the research. Why is this so important? Molestsane (2015) argues that field staff must ensure that the voices of the people they research—who are often outside of the academy—must be taken seriously.

...it is only when knowledge is co-created, co-analysed, and co-communicated with research participants that we can hope to transform the unequal power relations that exist when we approach research contexts as outside experts and the knower (2015, p. 35).

We approached the training of the field team in Kenya for the M-Shwari project very much from this standpoint – as a mutual exchange of skills and knowledge. This exchange enriched the training sessions and provided a strong field team for data

collection. Our field team valued not only the methodological training they received but also exposure to new approaches to teaching, particularly the participatory learning approaches we use in field training. Several comments from the training reflected this view. Below we share one that summarises the perspective:

All professors steered the training smoothly. There was always something different to learn from each one of them every single day. The teaching methods were excellent in that the classes were not boring at all. The class activities that were incorporated helped me in understanding what had been taught in-depth.

In return, the researchers also learned from the Kenyan field team. They had insights on diverse cultural contexts, the Jua Kali sector, the perceptions of mobile money and the field challenges to expect in the study sites. Their knowledge of the local languages made the interview process much more engaging and participatory in nature. This supports what Hennink, Hutter and Bailey have highlighted in their book, “It is always recommended to consult local research collaborators to identify what is permissible, appropriate and safe within the local context of the study” (2011, p.70). After the preparation stage, the field team was ready for the data collection.

Collecting the Data



Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected across eight counties in Kenya. The objective of inquiry was to better understand experiences, perceptions, exposure, knowledge, and usage around the M-Shwari product. In each county, 20 interviews (10 with product users and 10 with non-users) were conducted and eight focus group discussions. There were many significant aspects of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. We will share only two.

As researchers, conversing with and observing individuals in the Jua Kali sector gave us a new appreciation and pride for the resilience and creativity of the Kenyan people. Additionally, the richness of the culture and diversity of the people, in each context, really amplified the different experiences of using mobile money across the country. M-Shwari must be understood in each specific context—town to town; community to community; business to business; individual to individual. That is the only way we will ever decipher whether the products being offered within the mobile money market are effective and ultimately encouraging financial inclusion and not perpetuating financial exclusion.

The investment in training local field staff was invaluable in this process. While we traveled between research sites, it was fascinating to debrief with the

field staff—often in the form of debates. It was clear that they had grasped the knowledge during the training and were able to apply it in the research process. This gave them confidence which led to a rich discussion based on what they observed and heard from county to county. At the core of each heated debate were these issues: How was M-Shwari being used and why? If the respondent was a non-user, why didn't the individual use M-Shwari? Overall, does M-Shwari have a positive or negative impact on the Jua Kali? The answers would only begin to thematically emerge during the data analysis process.

Analysing the Data

The ability to participate in this project provided opportunities for the data analysts to learn different skillsets in the analysis process. The analysis of the quantitative data was much more straight forward since it was mainly demographic data. However, the process of qualitative data was extremely complex. It involved hundreds of pages of reading, coding and analysing text.

The process began with transcribing interviews and, in some instances, translating these into English. The field supervisor who oversaw the data review and cleaning had been on our research team for prior studies on mobile money and women's empowerment in Kenya. So, she had been well trained and prepared to manage and handle the data. She reflected on her experience, as part of the research team, and how it has helped develop her skillsets for her higher education endeavors:

It has been pleasure working in your projects in data collection, transcribing and cleaning. It's an experience that has given me more insights and greatly improved my data analysis skills. It takes time to transcribe but through that I have expanded my knowledge which is very useful in my master's degree which I am currently undertaking. I look forward to working with you in your future projects.

The qualitative data analyst also narrated her experience from a learning perspective:

Qualitative data analysis allows you to interact with the data in a unique way. In fact, it demands it. As a result, conducting qualitative analysis gives opportunity to take away new knowledge and perspectives, from an emic viewpoint.

These experiences of learning were further explained by the analyst.

First, she felt like she learnt the basics of business. The M-Shwari data were interesting, because it was through the lens and perspectives of entrepreneurs.

Analysing the data—interviews of men and women from the Jua Kali sector—taught her some of the basics of business especially while answering one of the primary research questions: How does M-Shwari benefit the Jua Kali sector? In the initial transcripts, some would say M-Shwari helps the Jua Kali grow their businesses, but it wasn't clear how. After reading through numerous transcripts, she started connecting the dots. M-Shwari helps individuals; especially young entrepreneurs access both savings and loans. One M-Shwari user explained that he used to rent a compressor to carry out his work. However, with a loan, he was able to buy his own compressor and rent it to others. In turn, he made a profit. “As simple as it may sound, the “aha!” moment was gratifying as I started to read through the perspectives of the Jua Kali as they explained how savings and loans support individual and business growth” explained the analyst.

Second, the data analyst really gleaned a glimpse of life in Kenya, especially from the lens of the Jua Kali sector. This is the first time she had read and analysed data from Kenya. As she read, she tried to understand the nuances of the language and picture the context in Kenya which conveyed culture and context a little bit at a time. As she described it, “I am only getting a glimpse in, like trying to look through a stain-glassed window where the image on the other side is partial, tinted, and blurred. By looking past my own worldview as Guatemalan-American, the image becomes clearer but there is still a lot to learn”.

Finally, the analyst was challenged to break down assumptions and privilege for non-subjective reading of the data.

When I first thought of mobile money, I could not help but refer to my own experience of opening up my banking application to move money from my checking account to my savings account using my smart phone. As I began to untangle all my assumptions, I began to see the privilege I experience around money – from a basic checking account, to being able to think about income in terms of months (not days), to being able to spend, send, share and save money with ease.

Recognising, accepting and breaking down that privilege was essential to looking at the data through different eyes and being ready to discover and construct how money works in another context.

The Art of Disseminating Data

Disseminating research is a key part of doing research. By dissemination, we refer to an organised, planned and systematic approach intended to make information or innovations more widely accessible and available—not in a passive way (Cook, et. al, 2013). Increasingly, researchers are seeking ways to share their findings and often, with the individuals who can use the information to make decisions from a programmatic and policy perspective. A videographer



was engaged with this project and understood that task from previous studies we had carried out. He highlighted this: “One reason I was brought onto this project was to tangibly communicate research to practitioners while connecting results to individuals outside academia”. Besides technical challenges like recording interviews in the middle of a noisy metallurgy sector of the Jua Kali, the videographer and other members of the team also fought against the participants’ perception that the interviewee’s image may be potentially ‘sold’ for money. The team had to consistently work at communicating the purpose and platform for this video and establish respectful and

research-conscious video practices. For the videographer, this was an excellent reminder that using a camera gives him tremendous power not to be confused with a right to film.

As someone outside of the policy sphere, the videographer also clearly understood that video makes complex social and technological ideas approachable. He saw video as a way to reconnect the humanity of research that often becomes numbers and stats to actual human beings. “Video is not a disenfranchised statistic; it is people expressing an experience”. This view is also supported in literature. Shaw posits that participatory video needs to be understood as:

...a longer-term community development process, which provides the relational context to build more inclusive and collaborative relationships within communities, and responsive exchange with influential decision makers back and forth over time (2015, pp. 628-629).

Cook et al have argued that if dissemination gets too detailed, it can become easy to “miss the forest for the trees” (2013, p. 165). Video isn’t meant to comprehensively detail each element of research but to provide a tool to contextually discuss problems and solutions. Henze contends that video, unlike text narratives, adds meaning through movement, activity, visual imagery, voices laden with emotion and sometimes through music to affect the mood or context (2016). To create this context, filming occurred on-location in Kenya for three weeks.

There were key highlights in this process of filming, especially for the videographer:

On a personal note, my favorite part of producing these videos is seeing a (Western) audience confronted with a reality that disagrees with their paradigm of the ‘developing world.’ Watching this video provokes an auditory, visual, and intellectual experience that cannot be ignored.

Presenting a complex reality instead of a sensational snapshot is rare in media today making video like this is all the more necessary.

Summary

The research journey, outlined in this article, captured the voices of the researchers, field team, data analysts and videographer to highlight the many ways preparing, collecting, analysing and disseminating data can impact the individuals on the research team. We must not limit the impact to just the scientific outcome that is often seen as the ‘purpose’ of the research process; it is also about the personal growth that happens among the field team in this complex process. However, as researchers, we must always keep the main challenge in mind: how can we, as privileged travelers on a research journey, be best positioned to learn and engage, in a deliberate way, while using the research to improve the many lives that we encounter in the process.

Policy Implications

As researchers in Kenya, we have found that the use of video is an effective way to draw policy makers and service providers into the research process. Video has a way of putting a ‘human face’ to the research findings using the voices and faces of those who are integral to the process. We encourage each reader to watch the video to clearly hear some of the challenges (e.g. financial literacy; language; etc.) and opportunities (e.g. efficiency; savings and loans tool; etc.) of the M-Shwari product expressed by members of Kenya’s informal or ‘Jua Kali’ sector.

*Note: For an overview of the key study findings, please watch the research video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XipCyDO15ns>.

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