



Digital Community Engagement in Protracted Crises: A Methodological Framework for Longitudinal Research using the Upinion Platform

Dr Pinar Okur – Head of Partnerships & Growth, Upinion

Augustine Hacques – Research Coordinator, Upinion

Abstract

Traditional data collection methodologies often struggle to safely and consistently engage hard-to-reach migrant populations over extended periods. Extracting data through intermediaries frequently introduces bias and fails to provide reciprocal value to vulnerable groups. This working paper analyses the implementation of digital longitudinal community engagement – leveraging secure, two-way mobile technology to collect from and share back data directly to affected communities. Using a twelve-month pilot as a proof-of-concept, this paper examines the capacity of digital engagement platforms to maintain panel integrity, ensure ethical duty of care in digital spaces, and overcome the 'extractive' nature of traditional humanitarian data collection. Ultimately, this paper argues that participatory digital engagement mechanisms can support safer, more continuous, and less extractive forms of longitudinal research, provided that researchers adapt to the practical and ethical realities of engaging displaced populations over time.

Introduction

In the current geopolitical landscape, migration is often viewed by national authorities through a security lens rather than a humanitarian one (Bourbeau, 2011). This securitisation of migration policies frequently marginalises the lived experiences of displaced individuals, prioritising border control metrics over nuanced understandings of human vulnerability and resilience, leaving also a gap in the literature. Traditional academic and humanitarian research struggles to capture the authentic, evolving realities of these populations, particularly regarding the compounding consequences of migrant victimisation during and after their journeys. When researchers attempt to investigate these sensitive topics, they are often constrained by logistical hurdles and a fundamental lack of trust from communities that have been repeatedly let down or exploited by official institutions (Krause, 2017).

Standard methodologies frequently rely on cross-sectional surveys that extract data without offering a safe, reciprocal avenue for participants to voice their ongoing needs. This unidirectional flow of information risks positioning vulnerable populations as passive subjects of data extraction rather than active contributors to knowledge production (Clark-Kazak, 2017; Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway, 2007). Addressing this gap requires the humanitarian and development sectors to critically reconsider how data are collected from populations affected by displacement and protracted crises.

However, digital engagement should not be understood as a neutral or complete solution to the challenges of researching displaced populations. Even where digital platforms reduce reliance on formal institutional gatekeepers, trust-building often still depends on human intermediaries, local facilitators, or community networks. Furthermore, structural constraints associated with displacement — including legal precarity, unstable connectivity, language barriers, trauma, and distrust toward institutions — continue to shape participation regardless of whether engagement occurs digitally or in person. This paper therefore approaches digital engagement platforms not as replacements for relational fieldwork, but as complementary tools with both significant opportunities and clear limitations.

This paper examines the practice of *two-way digital community engagement*, defined here as the use of accessible, mobile-first technologies to facilitate participatory and ongoing data collection. Drawing on a longitudinal study of mental wellbeing among refugee populations in Greece and the Netherlands, the paper reflects on both the opportunities and limitations of digital data collection platforms. In particular, it explores how these tools navigate the challenges of sustained engagement, support the monitoring of psychological wellbeing over time, and create more participatory and ethically responsive environments for academic research.

The Limitation of Extractive and Cross-Sectional Data Collection

Data collection among migrant and refugee populations has relied heavily on one-off surveys, short-term interviews, or highly structured data collection exercises that can struggle to capture the evolving realities of displacement. While necessary in certain contexts, this approach introduces "intermediary bias," where information is filtered through the perspectives or capacities of gatekeepers who may unintentionally shape the narrative (Infantino, 2023). Such approaches often provide only static snapshots of experiences that are dynamic, emotionally complex, and shaped by ongoing uncertainty.

A one-hour interview conducted in a transit camp, for example, cannot capture the fluctuating nature of post-traumatic stress, nor can it track how coping mechanisms evolve in responses to changing legal status, shifting security conditions, or processes of familial reunifications (Silove, Ventevogel and Rees, 2017). For academic research concerned with the long-term impacts of migration and victimisation, such cross-sectional approaches are therefore insufficient, underscoring the need for a longitudinal approach. However, maintaining contact with mobile populations introduces immense logistical and ethical challenges. Individuals on the move frequently change phone numbers, cross borders, and may deliberately evade institutional traceability due to legitimate fears of deportation, harassment, or restrictive border policies (Bloch, 2007; Jacobsen and Landau, 2003).

In addition, many displaced individuals experience research fatigue or distrust toward institutional processes, particularly when participation does not result in any visible benefit, feedback, or ongoing communication. This can reinforce perceptions of research as extractive, where information is collected from communities without sustained engagement or reciprocal value. In this context, researchers need methodologies that can move beyond extractive modes of data collection towards continuous, secure, trust-based dialogues.

Case Study: Mental Wellbeing in Refugee Populations in Greece and The Netherlands

The primary aim of this study was to collect and analyse the experiences of Arabic-speaking refugees and asylum seekers, with participants distributed between Greece and the Netherlands. The research employed Upinion's Digital Engagement Platform (DEP) to maintain a consistent, secure, and human-in-the-loop connection with respondents over a twelve-month study period.

This approach aligns with recent findings suggesting that smartphones serve as essential "lifelines" for refugees, providing a familiar medium for emotional expression and memory-making (Lintner, 2025). In this context, the Upinion DEP serves as an

online platform designed to facilitate secure engagement with marginalised and hard-to-reach communities. It enables real-time interaction through interfaces that resemble commonly used messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, while maintaining anonymity and compliance with data protection standards. By embedding standardised academic questionnaires within a conversational interface, the platform allows participants to respond in their preferred language within an environment designed to reduce the extractive nature of conventional survey methods and improve accessibility.

Rather than functioning solely as a data collection tool, the DEP acted as a communication platform that supported sustained engagement over time. Participants could engage with the study asynchronously (they had a week to fill in the questionnaire) and within their own routines, rather than through rigidly scheduled interviews or one-time survey encounters. This flexibility was particularly important in contexts where participants' daily circumstances, connectivity, or emotional capacity to engage could fluctuate significantly over the course of the study.

Through the DEP, Upinion maintains ongoing communication with crisis- and displacement-affected communities, enabling the research team to share tailored information regarding relevant services or initiatives available in participants' local contexts. This establishes a reciprocal exchange between researchers and participants rather than a solely extractive research process. Crucially, all data are processed in strict accordance with General Data Protection Regulation, ensuring that participant privacy is protected throughout the research lifecycle.

The project featured several innovative components:

- **Targeted digital recruitment:** The study employed targeted social media campaigns (Facebook) alongside community-based facilitators (“Upinionators”), who were active members of relevant communities and helped build trust and support onboarding in complex settings. Once enrolled, participants joined the project’s digital cohort and received communications through the same platform as digitally recruited respondents.
- **Real-time mental health monitoring:** Using a conversational interface, researchers deployed validated monthly questionnaires – specifically, the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10, Kessler et al., 2003) and the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptom trackers, aligned with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders’ criteria (PTSD-DSM, American Psychiatric Association, 2013) – to monitor psychological distress over time.
- **Gamified intervention:** To explore potential cognitive effects on trauma recovery, the project incorporated a monthly Tetris-based task, followed by brief check-in questions regarding its perceived impact on intrusive trauma memories.

- **Informational exchange and reimbursement:** Participants received up-to-date, verified information on available mental health services and relevant contact points to assist them in their current situation as part of their engagement in the study. By embedding this "reciprocity loop" through a structured form of informational exchange, the project addressed the critique that refugee research is often a unidirectional extractive process (UNHCR Innovation Service, n.d.). Participants were also reimbursed for their time via mobile data top-ups upon completion of each full engagement cycle, ensuring that resource constraints did not impede participation.

Strengths of Real-Time Longitudinal Engagement

This project demonstrated several distinct methodological advantages for academic research, particularly regarding participant retention and ethical duty of care.

Long-term retention of hard-to-reach groups. Engaging vulnerable, mobile populations over an extended period is notoriously difficult. However, the project successfully concluded its longitudinal phase by retaining forty highly engaged participants over a twelve-month period. This level of sustained participation suggests the potential viability of two-way digital engagement approaches for longitudinal and participatory research designs involving hard-to-reach groups.

Anonymity and psychological safety for sensitive disclosures. Topics related to trauma, victimisation, and mental health are often associated with stigma and self-censorship in face-to-face research settings, where respondents may withhold information due to concerns about judgement, cultural norms, or legal precarity. The use of a digital platform allowed participants to share their personal stories in a private and anonymised environment. This increased perceived confidentiality may have reduced barriers to disclosing experiences of psychological distress, allowing researchers to capture richer data regarding respondents' mental health trajectories than might typically be captured through in-person interviewing (Lintner, 2025).

Duty of care and human-in-the-loop support. While the project prioritised continuous engagement, the experience highlighted a critical path for future ethical frameworks in digital studies. During this cycle, duty of care was upheld through follow-ups triggered by qualitative indicators of participant distress. Future iterations of similar studies may benefit from formalising these mechanisms into structured protocols, rather than relying on ad hoc interventions, to ensure consistency and scalability of ethical responses.

Weaknesses and Methodological Challenges

While the methodology proved highly effective for gathering rich qualitative and quantitative data, internal project reviews highlighted critical challenges that must be addressed in future applications.

Recruitment bottlenecks

Digital recruitment paired with on-the-ground "Upinionators" proved effective in certain contexts, such as Greece. However, in the Netherlands, fully digital recruitment proved more challenging, highlighting contextual variation in trust dynamics and access. While the initial project design set an ambitious target of 200 respondents per country, reaching the intended demographic required navigating significant barriers related to digital trust and engagement. These findings point to the importance of designing digital research with flexibility in recruitment planning. In practice, this may involve assessing local conditions early in the design phase, anticipating variation in response rates across contexts, and adapting recruitment timelines and expectations accordingly. It also reinforces the value of clear communication about the purpose of the study and the use of trusted entry points into communities where appropriate.

Beyond recruitment challenges, participant retention and disengagement patterns also revealed important methodological considerations for future longitudinal studies.

Dropout monitoring

While some level of attrition is expected within a twelve-month study period, the research highlights the importance of formalised dropout monitoring mechanisms. The use of real-time dashboards could improve engagement tracking by enabling researchers to identify patterns of disengagement.

Operational Design Principles for Digital Longitudinal Research

To transition the Digital Engagement Platform (DEP) from a project-specific application to a replicable research framework, Upinion has solidified three core methodological pillars. These principles serve as the blueprint for ensuring that future longitudinal engagement remains ethically sound, operationally viable, and protective of participant privacy:

Pillar 1: Reciprocity. Research design should consistently leverage two-way communication, where data collection is balanced with the provision of verified, actionable information. This "reciprocity loop" is essential for maintaining panel integrity, as it ensures the platform provides ongoing, tangible utility to the participant throughout the research lifecycle.

Pillar 2: Anonymity. A foundational requirement for engaging vulnerable populations is the strict separation of personal identifiers from research data. To support strong standards of participant protection and anonymity, the platform is designed to securely store research data independently from personally identifiable information. This approach helps reduce risks associated with participation in sensitive research contexts, while still enabling researchers to provide participation reimbursements, such as mobile data top-ups, and respond to potential safety concerns without directly linking individual identities to specific responses or personal narratives.

Pillar 3: Accessibility. To accommodate varying levels of literacy and digital proficiency, this methodology prioritises reducing the cognitive effort required for participation. By adopting a conversational format rather than a conventional questionnaire structure, the platform seeks to minimise the formal and potentially intimidating nature of traditional survey methods. The inclusion of voice- and image-based response options further supports participation among individuals with differing literacy levels and communication preferences. This emphasis on accessibility is central to fostering sustained engagement and facilitating the collection of more consistent long-term insights from participating communities.

Recommendations for Future Longitudinal Engagement with the DEP

In addition to the operational design principles for digital longitudinal research, the following steps are recommended to refine digital community engagement for future academic research:

- **Standardised dropout protocols:** Implementing automated follow-up mechanisms to understand respondent fatigue. This allows researchers to calibrate the length and scheduling of future longitudinal inquiries.
- **Enhanced duty of care protocols:** Implementing an automated real-time monitoring system within the platform to flag alarming messages and instantly notify researchers for human-in-the-loop intervention. Future digital engagement studies could leverage this feature to immediately trigger automated informational responses and alerts, effectively bridging the gap between anonymity and timely intervention.
- **Agile hybrid onboarding:** Improving recruitment adaptability by further incentivising local collaborators and "Upinionators" through dedicated training and info sessions. These sessions should cover platform security, safety protocols, and the project's added value to strengthen trust within the community.
- **Strengthen feedback loops:** Expanding the practice of sharing preliminary findings to maintain panel investment, while pairing these updates with structured wellbeing check-ins.

Conclusions

Ultimately, participatory research demands that we push beyond traditional methodological binaries and think creatively. This project serves as a demonstration of how longitudinal academic inquiry can be augmented by innovative digital engagement tools, which are nimble enough to provide a robust yet adaptable methodological approach. Whether in academia, humanitarian programming, or policy-making, meaningful engagement with affected populations remains a critical lever for true community engagement.

While the case study presented here focuses on Greece and the Netherlands, it is essential to recognise that the vast majority of displaced people and refugees transit through and are hosted in regions outside of Europe. Upinion's DEP is highly adaptable to these non-European contexts. Over the past six years, the Upinion platform has operated in twenty-seven countries globally. This includes prominent host and transit nations across the Global South and conflict-affected regions, such as Syria, Türkiye, Lebanon, Yemen, Libya, Iraq, Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, Jordan, Kenya, South Africa, Bangladesh and the Democratic Republic of Congo, alongside Ukraine. Currently active in seventeen countries, the platform has proven its scalability and operational viability in regions where protracted crises and displacement are most prevalent.

This research shows the added value in utilising the Upinion platform to translate specialised academic instruments - such as validated mental health scales - into intuitive, conversation-like questionnaires. This approach not only facilitates immediate, live insights but also leverages the capacity for longitudinal messaging to maintain long-term contact with respondents. Furthermore, the platform's ability to generate real-time, disaggregated results with automated visual analytics allows for rapid iterative feedback. By identifying emerging patterns as they unfold, researchers can adapt, refine, or pivot the investigative approach in response to the data, effectively allowing respondents to co-create the project's trajectory.

References

- American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association Publishing.
- Bloch, A. (2007). Methodological Challenges for National and Multi-Sited Comparative Survey Research. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(2): 230–247.
- Bourbeau, P. (2019). Detention and Immigration: Practices, crimmigration, and norms. *Migration Studies*, 7(1): 83–99.
- Clark-Kazak, C. (2017). Ethical Considerations: Research with people in situations of forced migration. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 33(2): 11–17.
- Jacobsen, K. & Landau, L. B. (2003). The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some methodological and ethical considerations in social science research on forced migration. *Disasters*, 27(3): 185–206.
- Infantino, F. (2023). Intermediaries and Opacity: Understanding refugee family reunification through migration infrastructures. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(12): 1–18.
- Kessler, R. C., Barker, P. R., Colpe, L. J., Epstein, J F., Gfroerer, J. C., Hiripi, E., Howes, M. J., Normand, S. T., Manderscheid, R. W., Walters, E. E. & Zaslavsky, A. M. (2003). Screening for Serious Mental Illness in the General Population. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 60(2): 184–189.
- Krause, U. (2017). Researching Forced Migration: Critical reflections on research ethics during fieldwork. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 36(3): 29–52.
- Lintner, C. (2025). Connected Journeys: Exploring refugee lives through digital tools and mobile research. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 25(1): 45–60.
- Mackenzie, C., McDowell, C. & Pittaway, E. (2007). Beyond 'Do No Harm': The challenge of constructing ethical relationships in refugee research. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(2): 299–319.
- Silove, D., Ventevogel, P. & Rees, S. (2017). The Contemporary Refugee Crisis: An overview of mental health challenges. *World Psychiatry*, 16(2): 130–139.
- UNHCR Innovation Service (n.d.). *Communicating with Communities*. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/communicating-with-communities/> (Accessed: 5 May 2026).

About the authors

Dr Pinar Okur is a specialist in the disclosure of sensitive topics through online digital engagement. Currently the Head of Partnerships & Growth at Upinion, she is dedicated to amplifying the voices of crisis-affected and marginalised communities. Her work bridges the gap between vulnerable refugee populations and global decision-makers.

To contact the author: pinar.okur@upinion.com

Augustine Hacques is the Research Coordinator at Upinion, specialising in participatory data collection methodologies across the development, environmental and humanitarian sectors. Focusing on ethical, digital-first engagement, she works to support the meaningful participation of communities affected by protracted crises in decision-making processes shaping their lives.

Citing this work

Okur, P. and Hacques, J. (2026) Digital Community Engagement in Protracted Crises: A methodological framework for longitudinal research using the Upinion platform. *HADRI Global Development Working Paper Series*, No.2. Sydney: Humanitarian & Development Research Initiative (HADRI), Western Sydney University.

[HADRI Global Development Working Paper Series](#) is edited by Dr Valentina Baú.

