

# Community-based participatory research: A case study from South Africa

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## **Abstract**

Marketing research, often in the form of surveys, is one of the critical tools marketing managers use to guide decision making. Although this occurs in all environments, developing markets present problems in the paucity of information available and a desperate shortage of skilled information gatherers. This leaves

those needing information with two alternatives: to import and utilise developed-world researchers and interviewers to gather, input and process information, at exorbitant costs, or to adopt a community-based approach to gathering information cost-effectively. The community-based participatory research (CBPR) project discussed in this article trains, manages and pays reasonably well-educated, but previously unemployed, people to gather and input information in an attempt to provide a developing country (in this case South Africa) with information on markets and consumers. This has benefits besides information-gathering: creating employment for people who would have been jobless, training and developing them and giving them marketable skills and experience, so bolstering their resumés to aid them in their future job search. This article explores the basic premise of community-based projects, specifically community-based research projects, while looking into the benefits as well as the challenges inherent in using this research methodology.

**Keywords:** Community-based participatory research, developing country, South Africa, information scarcity.

## **INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS**

The engagement of community members in projects designed to benefit that community is by no means a new phenomenon. Two of the great pioneers of and believers in this approach were Gandhi and Freire. Gandhi believed that community-based projects make sense and also provide an antidote to the corrosive effects of modernisation, helping people to ‘design’ their own lives

(Mansuri & Rao 2004). Similarly, in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he argues that the 'oppressed' need to unite in order to find a way of improving their own destinies instead of relying on charity (Mansuri & Rao 2004).

Although community-based schemes face enormous challenges, some successful projects have paved the way for the concept's current popularity. Projects like the Self-Employed Women's Association in India, the Orangi Slum Improvement Project in Pakistan, and the Iringa Nutrition Project in Tanzania are generating interest as highly successful instances of community-driven development (Krishna, Uphoff & Esman 1997). These projects have been studied by many scholars and practitioners interested in using similar techniques and have also led to improvements in the management of community-based initiatives.

Over the last decades, community-based and -driven development projects have become an important form of development assistance, with the World Bank's portfolio alone approximating \$7 billion. These programmes focus on a more holistic attempt to induce participation through institutions that organise the poor while building their skills and capabilities to act collectively in their own interest. The World Bank's (2001) *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* focused on empowerment as a key priority of development policy. This has led to a broad-based effort at the World Bank to scale up community-based development and to make it an important element of programmes seeking to improve the delivery of services to such communities (Mansuri & Rao 2004).

Historically, CBPR has been used mostly in health-related disciplines. But the use of community-based projects and research has now gained popularity in

many fields. In the United States, both large and small philanthropic organizations, including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the California Endowment and the Aspen Institute, have begun providing substantial support for action-oriented participatory research approaches (Minkler, Blackwell, Thompson & Tamir 2003).

This paper describes a community-based approach to marketing research. It first defines and describes CBPR and levels of community involvement, explains some CBPR terminology, and discusses the benefits and limitations of the approach. Next, it illustrates an approach to CBPR in South Africa, and outlines an ongoing case study that is providing both commercial benefits and social and economic advantages to community participants. The problems and issues are explained, and the advantages and limitations for the various stakeholders are outlined. The paper concludes by considering future prospects and briefly outlines lessons learned that can be applied in other contexts.

### **DEFINING COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH (CBPR)**

What is community-based participatory research? The W.L. Kellogg Foundation's Community Health Scholar Program defines CBPR as 'a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings' (White 1999). CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community, with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change to improve a facet of community life.

CBPR is not a new research approach – it is just being used in more and more fields, particularly in developing countries, to approach traditional problems with a

new paradigm. As the definition implies, the essence of the approach is collaboration between researchers and community members, in a manner that allows the expertise of each to be shared in order to identify, study and address issues of importance to the community. CBPR has been referred to as a 'results-oriented philanthropy', as it has proved itself to be effective after many sponsors had become discouraged by the often modest and disappointing results of more traditional research and intervention efforts in low-income communities (Minkler, Blackwell, Thompson & Tamir 2003). The technique also gained popularity after much 'tokenism' was observed in developing environments, especially in instances of non-sustainable social investments (Cuthill 2002).

It has been noted that CBPR may be even more important when studies are conducted in racial or ethnic communities, or within communities that experience or have experienced forms of discrimination because of cultural differences or poverty (McAllister, Green, Terry, Herman & Mulvey 2003). An underlying premise of the approach is that including community members and community-based service providers as partners in the research process is not only a matter of respect but also increases the capacity of researchers to identify, understand and effectively address key issues. The inclusion of community members can also be beneficial in ensuring that cultural interpretation is not left out of the loop in the design and analysis of the research projects at hand (Banutu-Gomez 2002).

While the challenges of implementing and sustaining a CBPR programme cannot be denied and should not be underestimated, the settings in which these programmes are used usually necessitate the application of innovative research

models. The mere cost of traditional marketing research compels the use of alternative methodologies instead of an assumption that these are just markets with little or no information available. Several successful projects have proven that a participatory approach, if well-designed and well-managed, can actually improve the quality and usability of research findings in developing markets (McAllister, Green, Terry, Herman & Mulvey 2003).

### **LEVELS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN CBPR PROJECTS**

Different community-based projects use very different levels of community participation. This varies from projects that merely discuss the research that will take place in the community with community members, to projects where community members are used in as many of the phases of the research project as possible. A common model of CBPR, and one that uses very limited actual community participation, involves an initial consultation between researchers and practitioners to delineate the programme's objectives and services, and then a joint discussion where findings are evaluated at the end. In several cases of participatory evaluation, the execution of the research design, data collection and analysis remain solely in the hands of the researchers.

Other research programmes have employed a fuller spectrum participatory model, extending community partnerships throughout the research process. Programme partners can participate in decisions about the study design, help solve problems that arise in data collection, and assist in the interpretation of findings as they emerge over the different stages of the data analysis. The

ownership of this analysis is also shared and all findings are made available to the community in various ways.

An example of the methodology used in a comprehensive CBPR project is that of the Pittsburgh EHS (Early Head Start) Research Program (McAllister, Green, Terry, Herman & Mulvey 2003). This project studied the benefits enjoyed by children who were given an early 'head start' in their schooling. The following five primary modules were used in this project to build the community-based model:

- 1) A collaboration between researchers and community partners to develop the research focus, questions and design;
- 2) community-focused recruitment of study participants under the leadership of community-based programme staff;
- 3) the employment of community residents as research staff, and use of a team approach in research decision making and practice;
- 4) joint programme-research oversight of the research process; and
- 5) sharing preliminary findings and implications for programme practice.

The most salient observation of the Pittsburgh EHS Research Program is that it took place in a developed country and therefore had access to communities with high literacy rates and education levels. These aspects allowed extensive participation from the community. Unfortunately, these luxuries are not always available in most developing countries and participation is frequently dictated by the skills levels of the people living in the targeted communities.

## **TERMINOLOGY OF CBPR PROJECTS AND THE INHERENT BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS**

As becomes apparent from the levels of involvement described in the previous section, concepts such as participation, community and social capital are critical for the ways in which community projects are conceptualized and implemented (Mansuri & Rao 2004). Each of these terms will be introduced briefly, together with the benefits and limitations associated with it.

### **Participation**

The foundation of community-based development initiatives is the active involvement of members of a defined community in at least some aspects of project design and implementation. Although participation may occur at many levels, a key objective is the incorporation of local knowledge into the project's decision making processes. Community participation is expected to lead to better designed projects, better targeted benefits, improved cost-efficiencies and the timely delivery of project inputs. This, however, brings us to one of the most basic challenges of establishing a community-based research programme – a truly participatory project is immensely time-consuming (Jacobs & Price 2003). Buy-in from local leaders and the facilitation of research input from community members are continuous management challenges that need to be balanced with the benefits obtained.

### **Community**

Participatory projects are typically implemented in a unit referred to as a community. The term 'community' can denote a culturally and/or politically homogeneous social system or one that is at least implicitly internally cohesive and more-or-less harmonious. It is, however, important that the community of focus be well-defined before the onset of the actual project (Jacobs & Price 2003).

While there are many definitions of the term 'community' (cf. Muniz & O'Guinn 2001), a review of the sociology literature reveals at least three core components. The first and most important element refers to a consciousness of kind – this is an intrinsic connection that members feel with one another as well as their collective sense of difference from people who are not in their community. The second indicator is the presence of shared rituals and traditions that perpetuate the community's shared history, culture and consciousness. The third component is a sense of moral responsibility, which is a felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole and to its individual members. This shared responsibility is what creates collective action when it is needed. The one problem that does hamper community-based approaches is the modern-day phenomenon of highly diverse communities. Researchers therefore have to ensure that the project is not threatened by the different agendas of diverse community participants' eagerness to serve a sub-community within the larger population.

## **Social Capital**

The third key concept in the implementation of community-based participatory projects is social capital, which refers to individuals' ability to build 'bonds' within their own group and 'bridges' to other groups (Farquhar, Michael & Wiggins 2005). This term has strongly affected mainstream thinking on community-based and -driven development. It has become common, for example, to refer to such projects as building social capital or creating 'assets for poor people'. It is also deeply tied to the belief that the quality and quantity of group activity are key sources of a community's strength and its ability to work for its own betterment. Social capital is thus a stock from which people can draw to improve their income and also something that can be 'built' to facilitate economic growth and development. On the negative side, communities may have very set ideas about the people they would like to build bridges to. These likes and dislikes may have evolved over generations, and often offer very little rational substance to work with. The other limitation inherent in these projects is that of motivating people to improve themselves in the manner required (and/or offered) by the project. People have to want to create assets for themselves, and developed-world researchers should not assume that all people necessarily want that, or desire the specific assets offered by the projects.

CBPR projects therefore have to ensure that they optimise the constructs of participation, community and social capital if they are to be successful.

### **THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES OF CBPR**

One of the greatest challenges in conducting CBPR projects in the developing world arises from the levels of formal education. Several CBPR projects have

suffered the effects of facilitators' inadequate education. Facilitators tend to be poorly trained, particularly in rapidly scaled-up programs that operate under time and resource constraints. Furthermore, implementers of CBPR projects are often naive in their application of the concepts introduced above (participation, social capital and community empowerment). This can lead to poor design and implementation of the research projects. For these reasons, the evidence suggests that community-based and -driven development projects are best undertaken in a context-specific manner, one with a long time horizon and with carefully designed monitoring and evaluation systems.

Up to now, this article has offered insights into community-based participatory research projects in general. It now turns to describing a case where such principles and learning have been applied to the design and management of a continuous CBPR program running in South African townships.

### **INTRODUCING A TOWNSHIP-SPECIFIC, COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROJECT**

A CBPR project has been designed to focus on lifestyle issues within the South African township context, based on the learning from other CBPR projects, as discussed in the first part of this article. This project's objectives are to provide information, generate employment, stimulate market opportunities, improve service delivery, improve health, and decrease incidences of poverty through increased economic activities in South African metropolitan township areas. At its most basic level, it aims to address the lack of reliable, detailed consumer and lifestyle information in township markets. This is done via a research programme

that provides insights into a metropolitan township dweller's needs and wants by using a community network to access the information.

The remainder of this article will look at the design of the project, the reasons why it is important in South Africa, the types of information gathered, and major challenges and successes experienced since the project's commencement.

### **Project design**

The project is designed to partner with the communities in which it screens, recruits and trains unemployed township residents to fulfil two roles in a participatory research process. The first is to act as input agents in the design and interpretation of surveys, and the second is to act as fieldworkers, gathering data for surveys designed to investigate people's lifestyles. At a simple level, the project ensures quality by continuously screening and training community members as fieldworkers. At a more practical level, the quality of interviews is assured by contacting every tenth respondent to ensure that the interview was conducted, that it was done in the prescribed manner, and that the information is accurate. Community fieldworkers' remuneration is dependent on the results of the quality control. The quality control behind the process is further vetted and endorsed by the marketing research unit of a leading South African university.

The fieldworkers currently working on the project have all successfully completed high school, 65% are female, and they are between the ages of 23 and 55, with the average age being 28 years. Several of the fieldworkers are also enrolled in further post-high-school studies. The project helps them to pay school fees and

earn a living that allows them the flexibility to study. These people earn significantly more from the project than the South African minimum wage, while enjoying the additional training that makes them more employable. Several of the fieldworkers have been able, with the skills developed as part of the project as well as the income received, to find full-time employment after its completion, as they now have something to add to the 'experience' section of their resumé.

The information gained from these surveys assists firms in making better business and marketing decisions in order to address the needs of township residents effectively, thereby increasing the likelihood of business success in these markets. The rationale driving the project is that the success of the business ventures ensures the sustainability of their investment. In this way companies assist township communities by growing their economies, and gain growth and profit opportunities in return. Growing township economies will, of course, address the main secondary objective of the project - job opportunities for the people of the townships (more than just the research team and fieldworkers). This completes the circle whereby the community first provides business intelligence to businesses in exchange for income, leading to better business decisions and therefore a stronger economy with more opportunities for the township residents.

This business intelligence is sold to companies who, while trading successfully in the first economy, might not be fully exploiting the strong growth potential in the second. These firms also tend to be more socially responsible players, more sophisticated in their use of information, and more open-minded in searching for

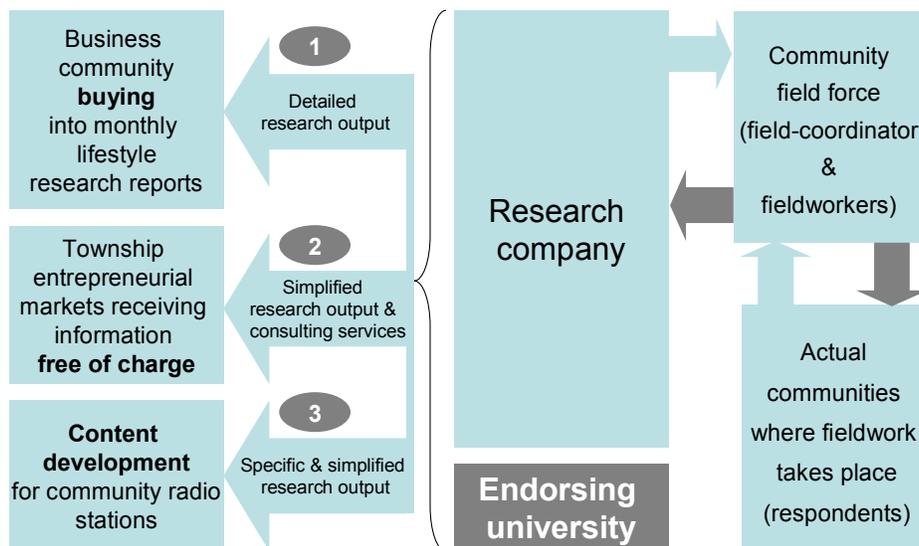
innovative approaches to the gathering of information from markets where very little information has traditionally been available.

The information is used to attract and serve the interests of national and multi-national firms, and is also provided free of charge to entrepreneurs living and operating in the township areas to help them grow their businesses. Information sessions, interviews on community radio stations and road shows are vehicles used to educate local businesses on the market they are operating in.

### Summary of stakeholders in the project

The following diagram provides an overview of the main stakeholders in this CBPR project.

## Stakeholder framework



The non-traditional nature of the project is emphasised by the dynamics of the stakeholder profile.

On the commercial side, large organisations fund the programme by buying research while the entrepreneurs and community radio stations receive the information free of charge. This potential problem is bridged firstly by transparency, as all stakeholders are informed of the entire process, but it must also be said that the reporting style, depth and detail offered to the various audiences differ significantly. The large organisations receive detailed analysis whereas the entrepreneurs and community radio stations receive local and very simplified 'advice' rather than detailed research reports that would offer them no value.

On the fieldwork side of the project, community leaders are involved in selecting appropriate people to work on the project while motivating all members of the community to provide information to help grow their township's economy. In this way several people feel that they are contributing directly and/or indirectly to the project. The image of the fieldworkers and that of assisting community members are also promoted through the community radio stations and the making of video programmes around each lifestyle project. A good example of one project attracting a lot of community attention was that of a recipe book that was compiled for one of the major food retailers – the names of the community members whose recipes made it into the book were listed together with their recipe and their township of residence.

### **Possible politics in the project**

Until now the novelty of the project has attracted a lot of attention. The greatest challenge for the next stage of the project, however, is that of a wider stakeholder audience. This wider audience will include among other, government, since the

project is highlighting several aspects that require investigation if these markets are to be optimised. For now, the project has stepped up to challenges made by government, that everyone is responsible for the growth and development of South Africa, but now that the project is running strongly and gaining support, all the findings may not be equally palatable for all involved.

Other challenges foreseen include:

- the fact that large organisations feel that they are investing in the growth of these communities yet entrepreneurs are getting the information free of charge;
- large organisations whom have supported the project from the start feel uncomfortable with the fact that their competitors can also benefit from the findings of the surveys;
- unemployed people living in the communities are earning a salary for the work done but respondents get no direct benefit for contributing to the surveys; and
- government supports the job creation part of the project but may, in the long-term feel differently as they have no control as to the information gathered via the project.

The way in which these issues are handled will determine the future success of this project.

### **The importance of the project**

The value of providing this information to the South African business community, as well as the township communities, arises from a number of factors. Firstly, South Africa has grown a middle class of black citizens, formerly disadvantaged under apartheid (<http://web.worldbank.org>), emerging out of poverty into a market with more options than ever before. Secondly, while companies are realising the strength and sheer size of this market, many marketing failures have occurred as

companies attempt to offer their products and services under the identical marketing strategies used to reach the country's 'first-world' population groups. Indeed, the markets studied and served by the community-based project are people living in what has been dubbed the 'second economy' by the country's president ([www.info.gov.za/speeches](http://www.info.gov.za/speeches)). The nature of the second economy is unknown to many established firms, and very little insightful consumer information is thus available concerning this market, which consists of 19 million people (<http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/statskeyfindings>). Furthermore, failures in this market have an adverse effect on the communities, who then believe that companies come in only to exploit and then leave them. Such failures hamper the economic growth of these township areas.

This phenomenon is not unique to South Africa, however. Several companies operating in developing markets around the world try to do business with the same mindset, and with business models used in developed countries or more developed economies. This challenge is currently attracting more and more attention, some of which has spread from C.K. Prahalad's book *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* (Prahalad 2005).

The information provided through the project attempts to describe the inherent identity of these communities and thereby offer insight to firms accustomed to operating in the first economy, to help them bridge the gap to the second economy, and create a market that will benefit the community, the firms, and the country in general.

### **Types of information gathered and funding of the project**

It is the sense of community that makes township areas in South Africa unique, and it can be seen in various aspects:

- People living in townships tend to be more collective than people living in cities.
- Large numbers of people who moved out of the townships as their economic wellbeing improved, have chosen to move back.
- People who still live in the suburbs show a tendency to socialise in the townships over weekends.

After the end of apartheid, many people believed that the townships would change into suburbs – but that did not happen and townships have retained a unique identity and sense of community. The project attempts to provide insight into this community via two information options:

First, a lifestyle research project is offered, providing insight into the context within which products and services compete in township markets. The lifestyle survey topics are My Money, My Shopping, My Talk, My Culture & Traditions, My Fun, My Health, My Circles of Influence, My Stuff, My Country, My Safety, My Education/Career/Future and My Lifestyle.

Secondly, contract research projects are conducted. Studies carried out in the past year have included research on insurance, retailing, micro-lending, marketing effectiveness, the effectiveness/impact of corporate social investment, and several studies into loyalty programmes. The contract research projects also benefit from the insight gained through the monthly lifestyle projects.

From a funding perspective, the project utilises a subscription model to ensure its sustainability. Companies which subscribe receive the twelve lifestyle research projects mentioned above, together with one custom-designed survey over the period of one year. Now that the project is in its second year, these companies also receive tracking information, and are now able to compare results over time. The fact that companies subscribe to an annual research programme funds the project and ensures a monthly income for the fieldworkers and community research staff. The contract research offers additional income opportunities to the team.

### **Success of the project**

This project was conceptualized in 2004 and ran five times during 2005. Initial surveys acted as a learning ground for the difficulties of conducting community-based participatory research projects using face-to-face interviews in township communities. The viability of the programme, from both a community/employment/SME perspective and that of business, became apparent very quickly. By January 2007 the project was conducting several studies each month in seven key townships throughout South Africa, employing 60 people and providing lifestyle insight to major firms as well as to small and medium-sized township entrepreneurs.

By the end of the first year of lifestyle research, the project had gathered more information on this market than had ever been available previously. More importantly, during this period, benchmarks were set for each of the lifestyle themes. With the lifestyle project now in its second year, the first trend data is

becoming available. An advanced aspect of information scarcity is the obvious non-existence of trend data on lower-end markets (Rosenzweig 2003).

### **Problems experienced in the project**

No research programme is without limitations or goes without challenges and this CBPR project has been no exception. The following are some of the most pertinent problems experienced in keeping the project viable:

- The South African townships attract diverse communities as people flock to the cities in the hope of employment, yet the economy is not able to provide sufficient opportunities. Some of these people are therefore together, not so much out of a sense of belonging but because there are no alternatives.
- The level of education is low and people speak English less frequently than is generally expected or believed. This increases the level and the type of training required to equip people for participation in the project. This challenge is compounded by the fact that South Africa has 11 official languages!
- The lower levels of English affect not only the fieldworkers but also the general participation, as more time is required to ensure that everyone truly understands the requirements of the research.
- Several of the fieldworkers and coordinators have died from AIDS-related illnesses (South Africa has one of the highest levels of HIV infection in the world).

- Community members are often sceptical of new ventures since they have been exploited before and are not always open to providing information to fieldworkers.
- The level of crime in South Africa also impacts on the projects, as women cannot always do fieldwork after a certain time of day.
- The last problem has been that of winning the trust of commercial companies to sponsor the project. These companies had to be convinced of the quality of the research they were buying into, especially due to the model being used.

### **Benefits of the project**

Potential benefits that spread from co-operative approaches (Cuthill 2002) include:

- 1) Lobbying power: larger efforts with more people involved have the ability to draw awareness on a much larger scale than fragmented attempts to attract attention.
  - a. For this reason the ongoing lifestyle project is used to continuously attract attention to the opportunities in the township markets while looking after the client's special needs through the contract research options.
- 2) Networking: it has been said that there is no better way to educate than to network, and provide more and more good examples of how projects can work based on a wide network's input and ideas.

- a. The project works with seven metropolitan township research teams to gain sufficient input into the project and clients are brought together in information sessions to share their experiences with, and usage of, the information obtained through the project.
- 3) Sharing of skills: through the project people have learnt communication, presentation and interviewing skills, and proficiency in handling the media as well as client interaction expertise.
  - a. The project runs continuous training courses for fieldworkers to improve their own skills in research and adjacent fields of business.
- 4) Providing direction and support to individuals: in the community people are genuinely interested and eager to help, but they often lack the insight or skills to know what needs to be done and how it needs to be done. The continuous involvement in the project and its process, and the use of community-based coordinators in each of the townships, teaches people to make appropriate decisions in challenging situations.

Involvement in these co-operative efforts therefore contributes to the personal development of community members working on and benefiting from the project, while it also adds value to the wider community. Several of the community members working on the township research project have commented on how the project has given them insight into their own communities, how the projects have helped them pay for their studies and helped them improve the quality of their lives and those of their families. On a broader scale, more South African firms are taking notice of township markets and are at least becoming curious about

them, while, for the first time, smaller- and medium-sized township entrepreneurs have access to information.

## **CONCLUSION**

The long-term perspective of the CBPR approach seeks to develop both a societal and business 'critical consciousness'. The rationale for such an approach argues that a foundation for moving towards sustainable community may be achieved through local citizens empowering themselves to take responsibility and action for their own 'backyards' (Cuthill 2002).

The project described in this article demonstrates one case where, through a CBPR project, people are getting involved in addressing the challenges facing them and their community. The problems faced by these developing communities are not unique to South Africa but are inherent to the developing world. Establishing similar community-based research initiatives in other developing communities can work as well as this project is working in attracting economic and investment attention to South African townships.

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