

MO ZHOU, DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL ANALYTICS

Mo Zhou is the Director of Analytics for Ipsos Online Communities (SMX) and Social Intelligence Analytics (SIA) in North America. Since joining Ipsos in 2016, she has been dedicated to innovating analytical approaches for research, while staying focused on her personal mission to develop data-driven solutions for greater empathy and social impact. We sat down with Mo to learn more about her inspirations and the evolving role of analytics in market research today.



Hi Mo. Thanks for taking the time to chat today! Can you start by telling us a bit about your background and how you found your way to Ipsos?

Yes, happy to! I would call myself more of a “hybrid” researcher as I had a pretty diverse set of experiences before coming to Ipsos. I studied Electrical Engineering, specialized in optics and signal processing, and got my first job as a software engineer. Engineering training greatly influenced my systematic approach to problem-solving today – i.e. breaking down the problem, building hypotheses, and identifying creative solutions based on data and evidence. I expanded my view on the various types of problems and solutions when I went to business school at Yale, where I learned about marketing strategy and organizational behavior. I went on to do management consulting at IBM in their advanced analytics group, which provided an opportunity to solve a variety of business problems while leveraging my quantitative background. Finally, I gave entrepreneurship a try and founded “Daycare Discover,” a SaaS platform to better connect parents with daycare. These experiences all fueled my growing interest in solving problems and decoding human behavior through data and insights, which eventually led me to discover market research and Ipsos.

I know you started off in the Global Modelling Unit (GMU) at Ipsos, which is the team responsible for providing advanced analytics solutions across the company. You then moved into a dedicated role for social and community analytics. Can you tell us about that journey?

Absolutely. When I was still in consulting, the Executive Director of the Yale Center of Consumer Insights introduced me to Colin Ho at Ipsos. Colin Ho, who is now the Chief Researcher Officer of our Marketing Strategy & Understanding and Innovation Service Lines, was the head of the GMU in North America at the time. We hit it off right away with our shared interest in decoding human behavior and unstructured data. Colin eventually brought me to Ipsos, where I learned how to apply my quantitative and business knowledge to market research. Our group was just beginning to dive deeper into research methodologies for social data, and I became fascinated by the possibilities of applying advanced analytics to the unstructured data sets found in both social and online community research. Menaka Gopinath, who leads both those business units in North America, invited me to join her team, and I jumped at the opportunity!

What would you say is the main purpose of the analytics role in social intelligence and online community research?

What the analytics role aims to do day-to-day is to bring rigor and systematic approaches to human-centric research. I truly believe this is how we are able to better amplify peoples’ voices. By integrating text analytics and other techniques such as mental networks and correspondence analysis to the methodology, we can connect the dots to ultimately tell an authentic, people-driven story. There are also a few specific ways we can apply analytics to social and community research in particular. For example, the mental network framework we developed is particularly useful in understanding how concepts are naturally connected in consumers’ minds – e.g. how concepts are connected to a brand. This is essential in looking at social media data, of course, and is also useful in an online community context to discover organic insights that often pop up through the dynamic of member-to-member interaction. We also regularly integrate behavioral science when implementing choice-based models to surface more of the subconscious in terms of needs and wants. Analytics helps take this one step further by looking at collective choice data to evaluate true decision-making behavior.



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Fantastic. What advice can you share with research teams and clients to ensure they are leveraging analytics in the right way to tell that authentic story, which is of course of utmost importance?

I’d say there are a few things to keep in mind. First, there needs to be a clear objective followed by a set of clear questions to answer. This is really important as it establishes the framework for the research and guides the process of not only collecting the right data in the right way but also analyzing it in such a way that will surface the authentic insights we want.

Second, analytics needs to be fully integrated into every stage of the research process. I am a big advocate of the “well-rounded researcher.” I believe that we develop better insights when the researcher is closely involved from beginning to end so there is a clear through-line from the methodology we employ, to where to collect the data, to how to integrate all the different data sources. The ability to make these connections is what enables you to tell the story and to ensure more rigorous, human-centric research in the process.

This leads me to my last point, which is that analytics needs to meet empathy in order to be truly impactful. For example when collecting data – HOW you are collecting that data informs which analytics methods you’re going to use next. Empathy helps ensure you are more immersed in peoples’ experiences to really discover what they need and what the root cause of the problem is and how to solve it.

The idea of analytics meeting empathy sounds very compelling. Can you expand on this? How would you say it plays out from a more tactical research perspective?

Yes definitely. There are so many places where empathy comes into play in daily research. For example, on the social intelligence side, empathy is applied when you are creating the query. Without first establishing a connection with the audience – which is often done through secondary research or even primary interviews – it’s difficult to gain the kind of deep understanding of who they are, and how to approach the research design. This connection is what enables the query design to result in data that is more holistic, which you can then dig into to find the insight. In online communities, empathy is deeply tied to how you ask the question and how you moderate the discussion, live chat, or activity. Moderation is an art and you can’t get to the heart of the data – the real revealing data – without that connection or without that empathy.



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Great. Now for our last question – when thinking about the future of market research and analytics, what is most exciting to you?

What is exciting to me about the future of market research is its purpose – fully realizing its purpose. I hope to live up to Yale School of Management’s Motto “Educating leaders for business and society.” I believe the purpose of research is to amplify and elevate peoples’ voices to influence how corporations innovate and operate to truly create a positive impact on people and on society. The more we can observe the issues and think about the solutions to put into place to make just a little bit of impact at a time, the better!

Wonderful, thank you! Do you have any parting words for our readers?

Yes! My hope is that we will all continue to explore new research methods across disciplines - explore and be curious and not be afraid of experimenting with analytics from other disciplines outside market research. I believe this curiosity will really help to shed new light on new possibilities for better human insights.