EMPATHY OR EMPTINESS:
Unravelling the Impact of AI on Human Connection in Qualitative Research

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our aim with this study has been to temper our instinctive enthusiasm for AI and VR with a solid dose of pragmatism and understanding. By bringing together experiments from three pillars of qualitative research: the moderator, the setting and the respondent, we can triangulate findings to gain a fresh perspective on what value these new technologies can bring us in the industry. For the *moderator*, we looked at how an AI Bot performs with real people in a one-on-one interview. For the *setting* we explored the effects of the virtuality spectrum and anonymity in discussion groups. And the for the *respondent* we compared synthetic respondents with human ones in a long term community. So, what did we find?

AI opens up new opportunities and new use cases

While AI moderators excel in reaching a broad audience quickly, they lack the depth of human expertise. They are ideal for simple probing, short surveys, digital diaries, and online community engagement. Currently AI moderation falls short in providing the nuanced understanding and empathy that human expertise offers. Synthetic respondents can be leveraged for initial ideation (followed up by human evaluation). Synthetic respondents can also be explored as a small part of sample blends to enrich human data with the expectation that whatever is generated by the synthetic will skew to the central tendency. Virtual environments and anonymity are good for ideation and exploration because they

stimulate a sense of creativity and wonder. The mask of anonymity creates a platform for richer self-expression. For some that equates to a freedom to talk about sensitive or personal topics. For others, it's a show where they can be someone new. Both of those are authentic in different ways.

It's easy to be deceived

So, what do we learn when we look at all these factors together and consider what happens when we replace human moderators with AI, when we reply on synthetic respondents for insight and when we play with context and anonymity? Firstly, it is astonishing what AI can already do – how real an AI Bot sounds and how convincing synthetic insight reads. But maybe we are deceived by our astonishment, we are duped by how real something sounds that we believe it's actually real. The mimicry is so good - like the stochastic parrot – we believe the surface is a reflection of what lies beneath. The Bot, especially, sounds so lifelike – it 'strokes' you with its humanlike language and intonation, it mimics reflection, conversation, and perspective. But only for so long; it cannot keep this up for long without the lack of real social contact beginning to dilute the chemistry between moderator and respondent. "You totally get me!" is soon replaced by a feeling of disjointed dialogue.

Insight comes not from answering the questions but from questioning the answers

An experienced moderator sees the discussion guide as exactly that – a guide. They can meet the objectives of the project without needing to ask specific questions in a particular order. Qualitative insight comes not from the respondent answering the questions but from the moderator questioning the answers. This ability to improvise, to pick up unexpected threads, is where the insight often lies. Going off-piste from the guide means discovery of new territory. The skilled moderator is able to shape the discussion more like a jazz composition than a predefined performance. The Bot tends to follow the script, sticking to the predefined questions. Although it *sounds* like they are listening in an empathetic way: "That's awesome! Your passion for Star Wars really shines through!", in reality that does not feed into the discussion or change the direction of dialogue in any way. It is just a response to the answer to the question, it does not question the answer to create new questions. It is essentially conversational quant. A conversational questionnaire has its uses but should not be confused with qual and what qual can achieve.

Conversational quant is not a qualitative conversation

In many ways the AI Bot acts like a junior moderator doing it for the first time – they miss opportunities to probe deeper, to pick up unexpected tangents, to trust their intuition.

They spend too much time looking down at the guide, and not enough time reading the room. They have not yet developed a 'nose for an insight' that intangible yet crucial qualitative skill that separates the informational from the insightful. We do expect AI moderation to improve, but just like the first time you let a child play with the neighbour across the street, a parent will walk them over. In the future, we might let the child cross the street on their own without watching, but the time for this with AI isn't today.

Don't sacrifice the fringes

Similarly, with the digital twins, the AI reads convincingly – it gives us information that mirrors the consensus within the community. But it lacks an element of empathy being too conceptual, continually synthesizing, lacking the nuance that the human members add. It represents centrist findings – again like a junior researcher – and pulls insight into the middle ground. This has a role in research and is not without value (especially as it's 'free') but is not the role of qualitative. Qual discovers the unexpected; unearths the unseen, the unsaid, the unheard. A practiced human moderator's ability to ask non-obvious questions often leads to more meaningful insights. We look for the fringes, the edges, individual experiences beyond the masses - fuel to inspire our clients to be distinctive in an increasingly cluttered market. That is the power of one – one person's story that changes how you see things. If you sacrifice the fringes, you're just left with the middle ground. There is a vast spectrum of colour in the world – why settle for grey? AI holds enormous potential for our industry, but it runs the danger of vanillarising

insight by being applied in the wrong places at the wrong time. Virtual and anonymous settings also provide the ability to leverage the fringes by attracting new audiences to research. VR plus anonymity is best for exploration and ideation – the setting stimulating respondents' sense of creativity and wonder and allowing them to express themselves more deeply and imaginatively. But less so for evaluation. It helps us understand *what **could be***, rather than ***what is.***

The ever-evolving AI and HI dynamic

AI does have many exciting applications, especially in areas such as open-ended surveys, longitudinal diaries, communities and curation. For ideation it's your endlessly enthusiastic verbose best friend. Rather than trawl through endless PowerPoints, get your AI to give you an overview. It will help you know things, but not necessarily understand them, and certainly not *feel* them. We should be cautious of simulating insight. AI should complement, rather than replace, human insights. The depth, empathy, and contextual richness that human respondents bring to the table are irreplaceable assets in understanding consumer behaviours and preferences. The dynamic between human intelligence and artificial intelligence will evolve rapidly in the research world from now on in - AI might do things we haven't even thought of yet, but for now we need to ensure balance between the efficiency and scalability of AI with the nuanced and empathetic understanding provided by human analysis.

Have we tempered our enthusiasm? Quite the opposite – there's so much more to explore and understand with AI and we'll never stop

experimenting. We can celebrate its potential for instant ideation, timely probing and always-on engagement. But we now know more about its current limitations; how it moderates like a novice and misses the non-obvious. The way it sacrifices the vibrant fringes and pulls insight into the middle ground, where it's harder to find distinct opportunities for our clients. How it lacks the nuance and 'nose for an insight' that distinguishes the expert human qualitative researcher. For now.

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