

AI's Democratisation of Qual

The risks and rewards every researcher needs to know



By Tom Woodnutt, Founder  Feeling Mutual

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Introduction

AI's Democratisation of Qual

Introduction



Hugh Carling

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The questions on every researchers' mind

I've been working in qual technology for 15 years now and this year has been the most exciting by far. AI has unleashed incredible new opportunities for qual research to be used by, and to positively impact, many more people around the world. But there are also numerous risks in this change to consider, both for researchers and the industry as whole.

Tom Woodnutt is one of the leading practitioners of online qual and someone deeply immersed in the adoption of AI in the industry. He has spent much of the last year using different generative AI qual tools, in experiments and on live projects for his award winning consultancy Feeling Mutual. He also speaks with other qual researchers, has presented on the topic at various industry conferences and writes regularly about it.

In this ebook, I have asked Tom the questions about AI on every qual researcher's mind. But before we get into those many hot topics, first, over to Tom to explain his interest in the topic and his motivations for creating this ebook on AI's impact on qual research. I hope you enjoy listening to his expert insights as much as I did.



Introduction



Tom Woodnutt

FEELING MUTUAL FOUNDER

I've done qual for over 22 years, and specialise in online and mobile methods. We've just entered an exciting new age for the practice as AI technology offers tools that can do qualitative research tasks increasingly effectively - not necessarily as well as expert humans can but certainly as good as - if not better than - novice or untrained researchers.

The AI toolkit for qual can already save time and effort and help manage larger scale work with less investment. However, as with every decision you make in qual, there is always a trade-off. We may gain AI efficiencies but then we lose some nuance, detail, proximity to the participants and tailoring in our design, moderation and recommendations. So I think it's important to be aware of the trade-offs when using and selling AI powered methods.



DEMOCRATISATION FRIEND OR FOE?

Over time I believe this wave of AI powered tools for qual will inevitably democratise access to qual skills - just as technology has disrupted other industries by making expert skills more accessible, whether that be web design, holiday booking, video

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production or whatever.

While this may be a big opportunity for people who want to do qual but didn't necessarily have the budget or expertise to do so before - it can also feel like a threat to those who work in the industry and whose expertise can feel devalued by the rise of the machines.

I think we need to acknowledge this tension and be honest and open about the benefits and limitations that AI and Humans bring to qualitative research (both independently and when working in tandem) so that we neither over nor underestimate the potential of AI-powered qual. This is in the interests of all parties from clients, current qual practitioners to tech providers and new entrants to the industry - ensuring everyone can maximise the rewards while minimising the risks.

“There’s too much overclaim (on both sides of the pro and anti AI debate) and I think that balanced reflection will help us plot a path through it all.”

SHARING WHAT I HAVE LEARNED ABOUT AI

I'm not an AI evangelist blinded by shiny technology, equally I'm not closed to the potential it presents. In fact I feel somewhat conflicted towards AI myself. On the one hand I'm drawn to new ways to use technology to do better qual research. Way back in 2007 I collaborated with Liveminds to experiment with mobile video back when it took hours to upload a single clip! At the same time, I also prize old-school qual research values of rigour, validity and quality - having learned the craft over 20 years ago.

So when Generative AI and chat GPT burst on the scene promising short cuts, I felt a conflict between a focus on rigour and an appetite for innovation. I don't think I'm alone in having this reaction - many researchers today feel excited at AI's potential but also threatened at the idea of it doing bad job or even replacing us.

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GIVING YOU A BALANCED VIEW

AI is able to mechanise knowledge and address inefficiencies in qual, but what if human researchers are the inefficiency it automates? This tension sits at the heart of our evolving relationship with AI. The relationship can feel somewhat paradoxical - as the more researchers use AI qual tools, the better they get. And the better they get, the more likely it looks like they may replace us.

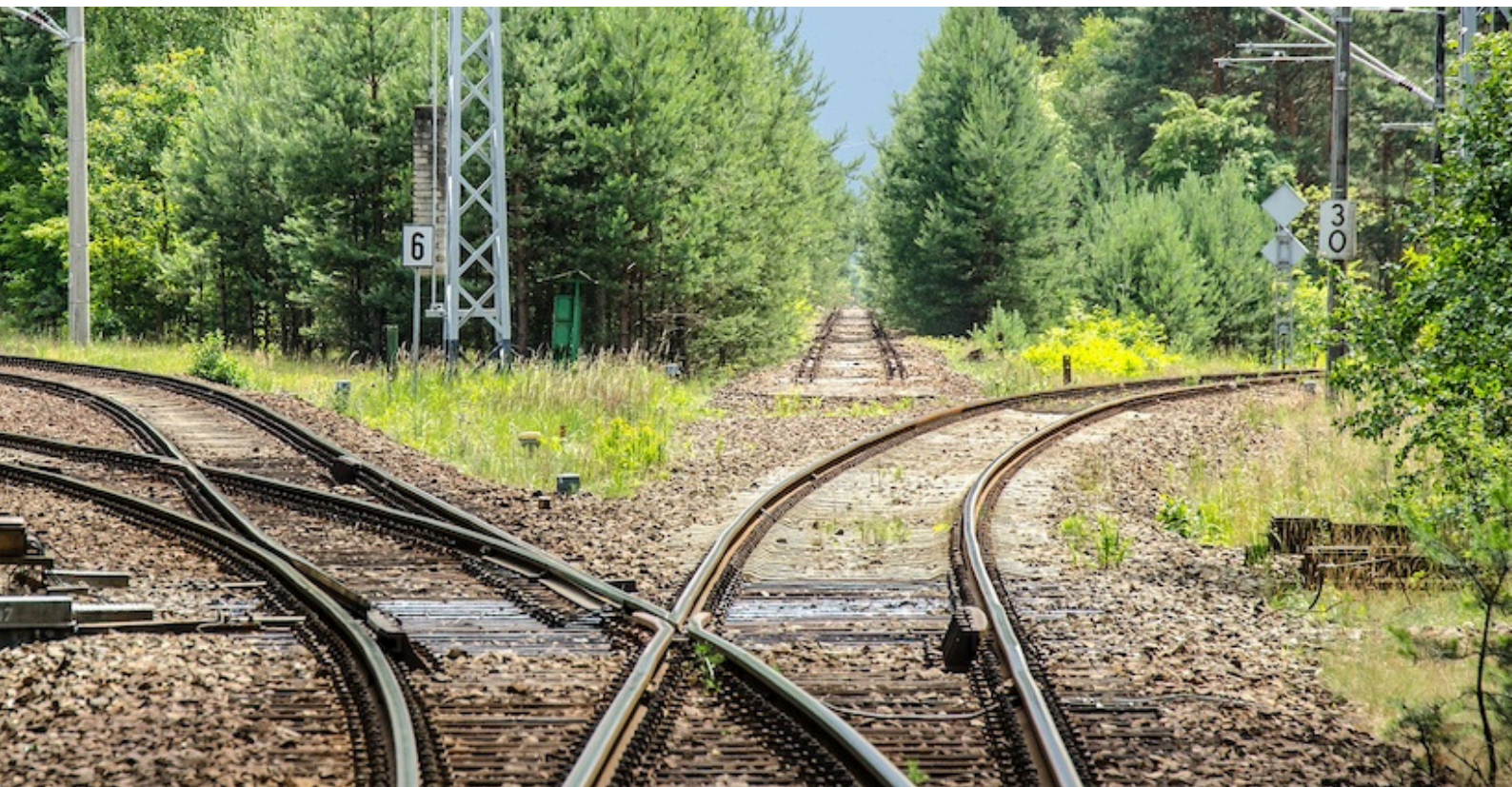
“This raises the question of whether by using AI for qual and helping it get better, qual researchers are sleepwalking into a future of self-driving autonomous robot researchers? But for me that’s not the question we should be asking.”

Rather than seeing it as AI VS humans, I’m more interested in how businesses in general and qual researchers in particular can thrive because of AI tools. So I’ll be sharing a balanced view on the risks, rewards, benefits and limitations in AI tools.

How will AI disrupt the qualitative research industry?

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Like many, I'm already convinced by the potential of Generative AI to offer significant support to qualitative research; it can already act like a fairly convincing researcher, by automating key aspects of research design, moderation, analysis and reporting. It can even act like fairly realistic participants by creating synthetic data..

This makes it easier for classically trained and novice researchers alike to do more projects that are faster and require less investment, than they ever could before. Overall, I see this as a net positive for classically trained qual researchers since they have the expertise to get more value from AI. It's also an opportunity for people who want to do research but didn't have the budget or expertise before.

However, as with every decision a qual researcher makes, there's always a trade off. The more we rely on automation in order to do faster, larger scale projects with less investment, the more we lose depth, rigour, nuance and tailoring. So clients and researchers need to be aware of the trade offs and know when it is appropriate to rely more or less on AI tools - and they need to price and resource appropriately.

How will AI disrupt the qualitative research industry?

What is 'qual light'?

So for me the first big impact of AI on the qual research industry is the emergence of what has at times been called 'qual light', which means projects tackling straightforward objectives that do not require as much nuance, depth or tailoring. The second big change at a more macro-level is the democratisation of qual, as more people with less expertise will start to offer more qual research services. These changes present both risks and rewards to both expert and novice qual practitioners - depending on whether and how they use tools. They highlight how critical it is that researchers popularise best practice principles to avoid the misuse of qual which could damage the industry's reputation.

IS THIS A RACE TO THE BOTTOM?

I believe a new wave of lighter qual briefs (with less budgets, faster time-lines and simpler reporting) will coexist alongside the more nuanced, traditional, complex, deeper qual briefs - which require more hands-on, human-led, deeper versions of qual.

Those "lighter qual" briefs can be answered with more AI reliant approaches, simple research designs, straight forward lines of questioning, resulting in a more reportage style of summary output. This doesn't have to be a race to the bottom as some clients will always need the more bespoke, nuanced, human reliant work that requires more investment to deliver properly, for example when dealing with complex concepts, subtle creative or deeper emotional models of humanity.

WHEN IS "GOOD ENOUGH" GOOD ENOUGH?

This is similar to what we have seen in other industries like webdesign as DIY platforms like Square Space and Wix offer simple templated websites that are often good enough and come at a fraction of the time and cost.

If AI-led lighter projects can offer 'good enough' qual that informs 'good enough' decisions at a 'low enough' price - then there will be a market for it.

How will AI disrupt the qualitative research industry?

If qual researchers want to be part of this lighter qual market (which presents obvious upsell potential for the deeper traditional qual briefs) then they should embrace AI tools and develop their own lighter qual products. AI led summaries may be enough to answer simple briefs. For example, objectives to develop basic hypotheses on the range of behaviours, attitudes, emotions on a straightforward topic or basic responses to executional details in simple stimulus e.g. the colour preferences. Perhaps to inform the development of survey questions or to inspire a deeper study design.

AI VS 6 MILLION YEARS OF EVOLUTION

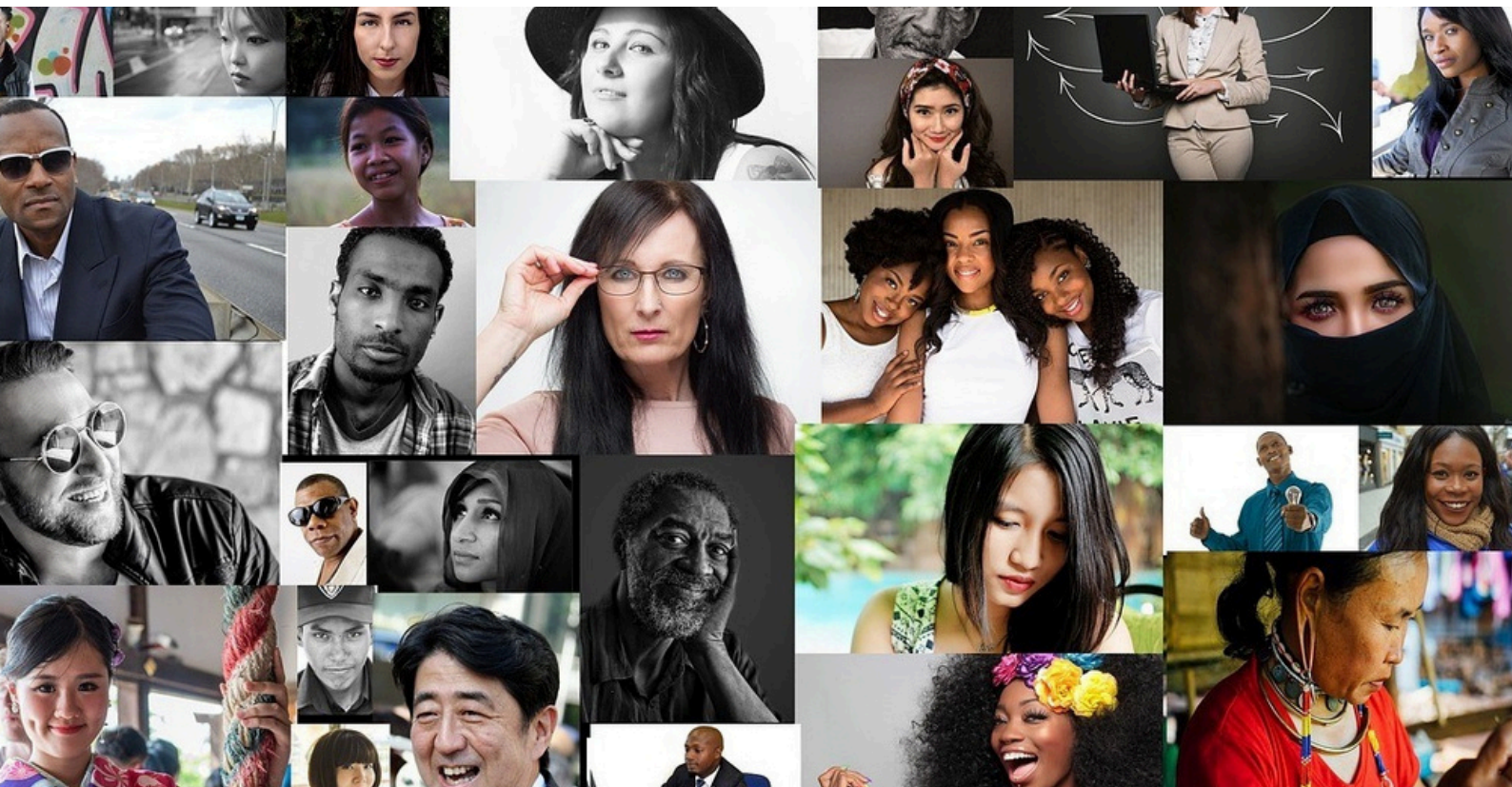
The emergence of 'Qual Light' does not have to be bad news for qual researchers - as these lighter versions of qual that lean more on AI - will still benefit from the expert human in the loop acting as a gatekeeper of quality, directing AI design suggestions, guiding AI probes and asking the right questions of AI summary tools in order to curate strategically valuable and valid narratives and recommendations.

“Thanks to over 6 million years of evolution and many hours spent doing qual research - it is difficult for algorithms to outperform an expert human researcher in terms of our empathy, storytelling, creativity, cultural sensitivity, tailoring, intuition and strategic interpretation. So qual researchers are well placed to offer these lighter qual projects.”

The democratisation of qual

The second big change is the democratisation of qual. I think we'll see more consultants offering more qual research services even though they aren't necessarily classically trained. That could be management consultancies, design, innovation and marketing agencies as well as in-house client teams. More people

How will AI disrupt the qualitative research industry?



without classical training or hands-on experience will be able to do more qual work. This could be a risk to the industry's reputation if the quality of work is over-reliant on AI, lacks validity and nuance and so leads to poor work and bad decisions. This is similar to what has happened with other democratising technologies that were once the preserve of experts; for example, you don't have to look far to find dodgy DIY survey designed on Survey Monkey, wonky websites built by Wix or skewed interfaces with SquareSpace. So expert qual researchers will still be highly valued in a democratised qual research market.

THE UBER PARADOX

At the risk of mixing metaphors, I think many qual researchers see AI as something of a double-edged sword of Damocles: On the one hand AI offers us efficiencies; on the other, it seems like an existential threat. We could call this the "Uber Paradox": in that Uber drivers use and benefit from the Uber app in the short term, despite the company's long term stated ambition to eventually replace them with autonomous self-driving vehicles. In a similar way, the more we use AI tools, and the better they get at qual, the more it feels like they could eventually replace us.

How will AI disrupt the qualitative research industry?

However, I think we need to get over this fear and embrace change. As AI improves, we can improve with it.



THE FARMER AND THE PLOUGH

That foreboding feeling towards AI is born from a distrust of the unknown in general and of automation in particular rather than necessarily reality. This distrust of automation is deeply ingrained in our culture and psyche - and goes back generations - all the way to the industrial revolution and beyond. While the Luddites of the 19th Century who sabotaged machines of production were heroes to some - the term has become pejorative, in a global economy driven by innovation. I don't think we're heading into a future of autonomous robot qualies doing all the work - AI is just another tool that practitioners need to master, like the farmer and the plough before it.

Rather than see this as a threat, because trained qual researchers are true experts, I think they will be able to get more value using them than novices can. Just as professional photographers can take better pictures than a non-professional using an iPhone.

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Or Jimmi Hendrix could knock out a better tune on a ukulele than I ever could on a Fender Stratocaster (if I knew how to play guitar).



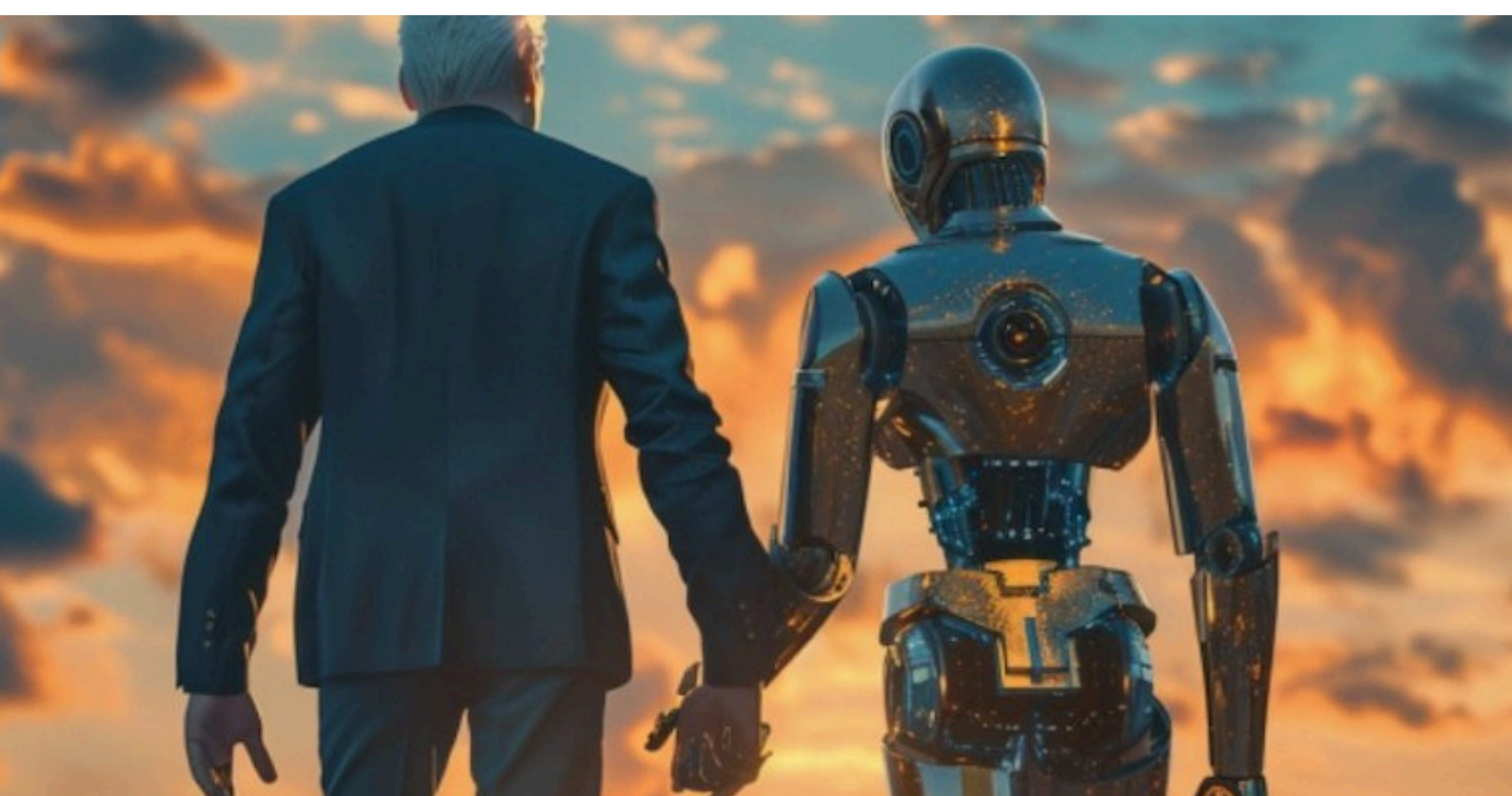
Qualities can get the most from AI

Some compare AI to the printing press in its radical democratising impact. At the time the printing press was opposed by religious leaders who feared it would make the monks who used to copy religious text by hand lazy and that they'd lose control over the dissemination of knowledge. AI could present similar risks as if used badly; it could encourage shortcuts and errors and therefore the dissemination of unreliable findings. Because the brain likes to conserve energy people may be tempted down the path of least resistance when using AI.

But qual researchers are a diligent breed by nature. Authenticity is the currency of our craft. We understand best practice and how to unearth authentic insight with diligence. So while AI might democratise qual just as the printing press democratised media production, the risk of error and superficiality from over relying on AI powered qual is lower when it's trained qual researchers at the helm.

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In this way, I see AI as more akin to something like laser eye surgery - in that the better your understanding of the human eye and surgery with scalpels, the better you'll be at using the laser technology. So the advent of laser eye surgery technology didn't destroy the careers of experts using scalpels for eye surgery - many of them retrained and still applied those same skills albeit using a different toolkit.



Therefore overall AI can be an opportunity for qual researchers who embrace it, since we are the ones who can get most value from it compared to non experts, as long as we maintain and promote the high levels of discipline required to do authentic qualitative research - which will help protect the reputation of the craft.

How will AI impact the set up and design of qual?

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Any qual researcher that has had a play with Chat GPT will know how you can ask it to act like a qualitative researcher and create documents like discussion guides and screeners and to come up with ideas for tasks.

INSPIRING DIFFERENT IDEAS

I have to say ChatGPT is pretty impressive and occasionally suggests something that your usual pattern of thought hadn't considered and so it can inspire a different line of questioning or tasks that you may not have come to without it. It can also be useful to generate hypotheses of what people might think, feel and do - this can also inspire questions you hadn't considered.

It can make research design suggestions for different types of qual research (from groups to depths and even mobile ethnography and online text based qual) and it is clearly drawing on expert learning data from professional resources as it's aware of how to maximise validity and maintain openness in the lines of questioning. So for a novice or untrained researcher I can see how this could now make a project possible - giving them a 'good enough' template to work with - in many ways offering something better than they would have had to work with.

How will AI disrupt the qualitative research industry?

GENERIC KNOWLEDGE NOT TAILORED EXPERTISE

I wouldn't say that it does a better job than a true expert researcher would. This is because it fails to adapt or tailor tasks to the unique circumstances of a given project. While you can brief it through a prompt you can't give it the level of briefing that we get from knowing the client's business, the real world, and all the political and human considerations that shape a great research design. For example, it doesn't really know how long it takes to complete an online task. It will also default to direct questions (unless told not to). Whereas it's often the more indirect questions which lead to the best insights in qual. But with some careful prompting (for example simply asking for open questions that elicit emotional disclosure) it can make reasonably good suggestions.

HOW MUCH CAN AI HELP WITH DESIGN?

So in terms of design, Gen AI can perform as well as a basic qual researcher - albeit with less judgement, tailoring, intuition and creativity. So it can help non-researchers design projects that they would have not been able to before. But those projects will have better outcomes, the more expert the qual researcher who is using its design ideas.

Where I have found it particularly useful is with specific questions for recruitment screeners. It can pull in best practice in questionnaire design for example it can churn out a bespoke question with a Likert Scale or other recognised best practices in questions. Or if you need to create a quick list of brands from a category that you may not know well, or other multiple choice lists, it can very quickly suggest them.

For now generative AI represents a useful assistant for qual researchers - and one that can save time and effort. Although again, the better the researcher using AI - the better its input into design will be.

What do AI moderation tools mean for the industry?

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What do AI moderation tools mean for the industry?



AI moderation can help you get more qual data from more people with less time and cost - but disintermediation of the human researcher from the participant does carry a price. It puts a distance between them which weakens their powers of interpretation. This price may or may not be worth paying depending on the brief at hand and the level of depth and nuance required.

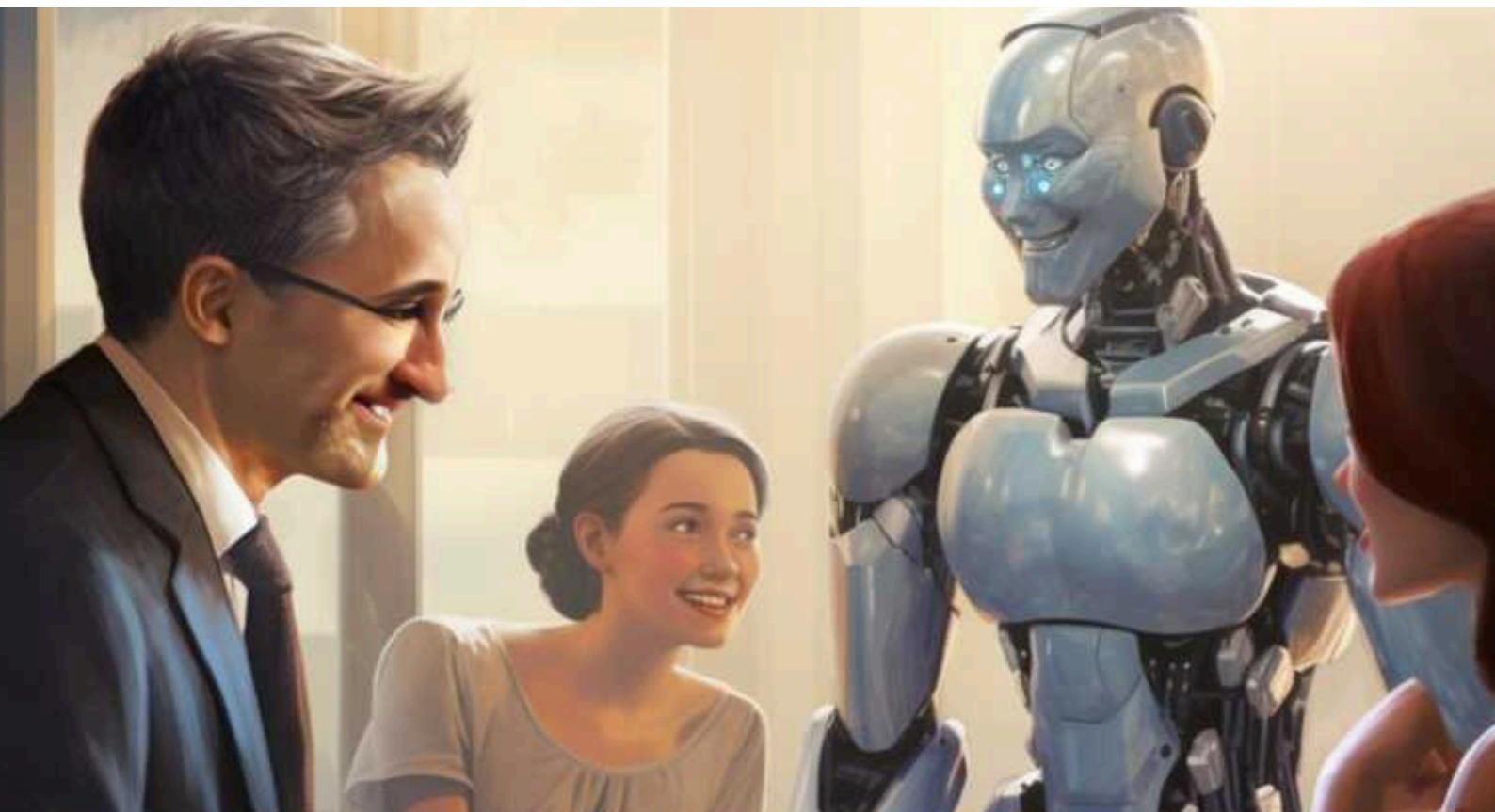
The rise of automated moderation

AI probes are already integrated to a number of qualitative research platforms. AI Probing that can be automatically deployed and triggered by what people say in near real-time are available in webcam interviews, and text base online qual discussions. (Although from what I've seen, they are currently limited to one-on-one discussions and I'm not sure they would work in a group context quite so well, as I imagine participants feeling compelled to subvert the AI if others are watching! I'm not sure robots have the authority or interpersonal skills to manage group dynamics, (although I'm happy to be proven wrong on this).

What do AI moderation tools mean for the industry?

CAN AI MODERATE AS WELL AS HUMANS?

As it stands I struggle to see AI outperforming a great qual researcher in terms of moderation. But I can see it performing better than a complete novice - as long as it's programmed to avoid closed or leading questions and can ask follow up questions which are appropriate to context. I can see effective automated AI moderation can generate a better, richer set of qual data than you would have without any moderation. Plus it makes qual more scalable - allowing multiple automatically probed discussions to take place at the same time with a larger sample size than was possible before.



HOW GOOD DOES AI MODERATION NEED TO BE?

The provocative question that AI moderation raises for the industry is 'how good does moderation actually need to be, in order to get useful data?'

Personally and perhaps controversially I think there is more value in the analysis and reporting skills of a qualitative researcher than there is in the moderation (That's not to say that moderation isn't important - of course it is. But I would rather have a

What do AI moderation tools mean for the industry?

qual researcher who is brilliant at interpreting what people said and making great recommendations, than one who is brilliant at asking questions but can't make sense of it properly).

WHERE AI FALLS SHORT

Ultimately there are some highly nuanced and strategic probes that I don't see automated moderation ever being able to do better than expert human moderators. Here I'm talking about the probes that subtly factor in the strategic nuances of the brief and are shaped by an innate understanding of humanity - they nudge people towards being more authentic, feeling motivated to open up and know when to reassure or even castigate.

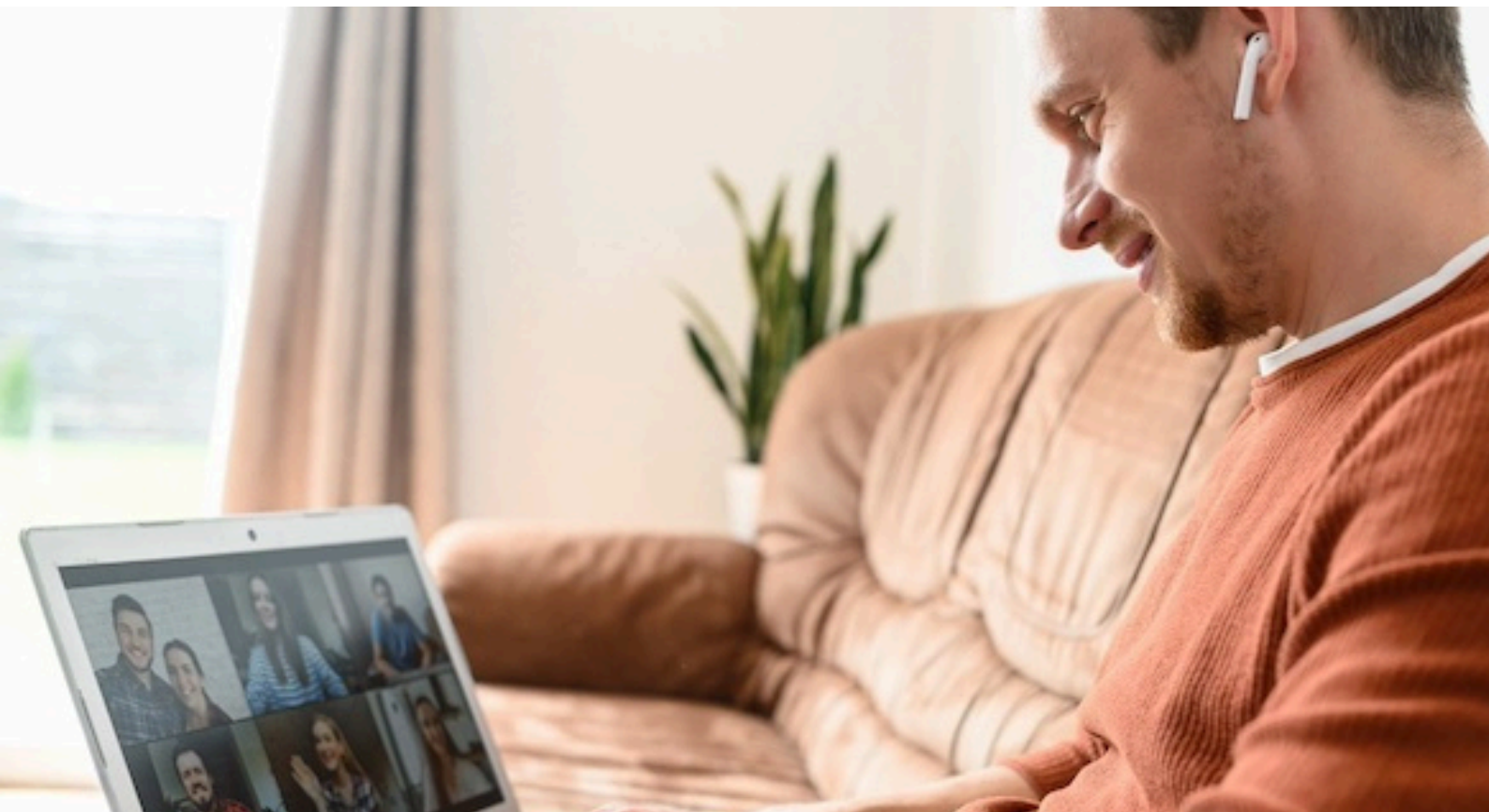
“Expert qual researchers intuitively process multiple considerations when working out a probe, using information that I don't believe AI would be able to process or necessarily get hold of from its learning data.”

For example we take on board multiple elements of the brief, what we know the client already knows and is most interested in finding out, what we intuitively believe to be the case, or instinctively feel might lead to useful insights. We also work with an empathetic model of what the participant might be feeling and what might be holding them back from answering honestly or openly. We do this through social skills that have been honed over not just 6 million years of evolution, but also many hours of moderating qualitative research. This is a type of expertise and intuition that relies on empathy and which AI moderation tools just do not have. So I think there will always be probes that AI simply won't be able to do as well as humans.

HOW DO PARTICIPANTS FEEL ABOUT AI MODERATION?

That said there is some evidence to suggest that participants may even open up more to AI moderator since they feel less judged and so may be more honest. So I can also see how an AI probe may unlock authentic emotionally open responses. We need more academic, scientific studies to say which is more likely.

What do AI moderation tools mean for the industry?



The key benefits of AI moderation

KEEPING THE DISCUSSION FLOWING

While AI may not reach the heights of an expert quallie it can do a number of lower order probes effectively. At the very least it can motivate people by thanking them and making them feel heard. It can play back what they said and show appreciation for their thoughts.

AUTOMATIC TAILORING

AI probes can also be sensitive to context and triggered by certain key words and responses. So if the participant talks about a particular theme some AI moderation tools can then craft bespoke probes (both pre-set and AI determined) to then explore these topics of interest. This is great because you often get the best insight when someone spontaneously mentions a topic of interest and you dig deeper into it there and then. Ultimately the purpose of most probes are to get an extra layer of relevant, authentic feedback and to therefore enrich the qual data that you have to work with in your analysis.

What do AI moderation tools mean for the industry?

The key benefits of AI moderation

So if the brief is fairly straight forward (e.g gathering a range of opinions, behaviours) and you don't necessarily need high quality human moderation - then AI moderation may well be good enough.

“On more complex, conceptually or emotionally nuanced projects - the need for human moderation is all the more pronounced. For example if you're evaluating stimulus with conceptual complexities, particularly sensitive topics with ambiguity. Or projects where clients have many sub-topics they want probed.”

Moderation is second nature for classically trained researchers. We know how to ask questions with validity, when to ask or listen (to keep within fieldwork timings), when and how to probe to get more useful responses. However it can be intimidating for novice researchers (who might ask leading questions, feel unsure as to when they should probe or how to stick with timings or struggle to apply the necessary probes at the right time). So for novice researchers AI moderation could make a big difference and enable projects to happen that didn't have the budget before.

AUTOMATED QUAL AT SCALE

AI moderation also enables what is sometimes called 'qual at scale' - which is essentially open ended survey style questions which can then be automatically probed. For me this represents a more open form of quant (which might uncover more things that you didn't know you didn't know because it's not so constrained by pre-set multiple choice answers). I see it as more of an adjunct to quant than a replacement of qual. Because for me the real power of qual is going into more depth with less people (and then extrapolating what was said to a bigger population on the assumption that with careful design it will be fairly representative.

What do AI moderation tools mean for the industry?



Disintermediating the researcher

Also I don't think we should forget that a huge benefit of the human researcher moderating is the depth of understanding that active listening provides which helps analysis. If you're the one in the field actively listening to what people say, your brain will make sense of it and develop narratives and ideas for what it means. So if moderation is automated and the human is disintermediated by the AI - we lose proximity to the meaning in what was said. This is a big loss and one which AI Analysis tools can't make up for. So ultimately the value of AI moderation depends on the demands of the brief and size of the budget.

How do AI tools impact the analysis proces in qual?

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How do AI tools impact the analysis process in qual?



Out of all the skills involved in qualitative research, it is analysis where most researchers want to see AI tools make the most progress. One of the biggest challenges in qual is having to process so much unstructured content within increasingly compressed timelines. AI analysis tools can instantly summarise what is said, from vast volumes of text and super-charge verbatim searches.

Since generative AI is fueled by Large Language Models and language is the currency of qual research - there is a high degree of competency in how AI can extract meaning from spoken word or written transcripts. In my view AI summary tools can supplement and support but not necessarily replace human judgement. We still need the human in the loop to decide what really matters.

AI is better at summaries than insight

I think it's important to make a distinction between a summary and an insight. For me a summary is a description of what was said. This is what a novice qual researcher might do and it's more reportage rather than interpretation. Whereas an insight is an interpretation of what people think, feel and do which is articulated in such a way that it points towards a useful recommendation. Or as Jeremy

How do AI tools impact the analysis process in qual?

Bullimore said: ‘An insight is like a fridge - once you open the door, a light comes on’. A great insight will shine a light on a particular course of action and it will inspire ideas. An insight selectively embraces one of many possible realities and discards the alternatives. It has to be valid, well articulated and properly supported. It’s only good if it’s ultimately useful for the user of that research!

“So while AI summaries can quickly tell you what was said it can’t necessarily quickly tell you what it means for the client or what matters most.”

It could also miss something of critical importance. To get the insight from the data you really need a human to curate what matters and what doesn’t.

IS THERE A SINGLE VERSION OF REALITY?

At a philosophical level, in many cases I don’t believe there’s a single valid interpretation in qual. It’s not as if there’s a single reality or truth. Reality is complex, subjective and open to interpretation. So it’s unlikely that AI can give you a single version of reality that happens to fuel the optimal recommendation and client decision, when there’s so many competing versions of reality. For me the most valuable skill of a qual researcher is in this curation of meaning - cutting through all the data and ignoring multiple competing interpretations and then honing in on the single version of reality that really matters and will inspire the optimal decisions. This relies on the strategic ability of the researcher (and the quality of the briefing).

Acceleration of substantiation

In my view, the main current benefit in AI summary tools for typical qual research study designs (like focus groups, depths, mobile ethnography and asynchronous text based studies) is the acceleration of substantiation, rather than discovering the story in the first place. AI summary tools allow you to scrutinise qual data more quickly and at a larger scale (without necessarily having to trudge through all the transcripts word for word). They quickly generate summaries of the themes in the text and remind you of things a moderator may have forgotten, which improves quality of output.

How do AI tools impact the analysis process in qual?



Humans should control the narrative

The expert human researcher in the loop is still valuable. That's partly because each client and their brief is unique and the optimal story of analysis will depend on many factors that are simply not in AIs learning data nor realistically in the user's prompts. For example, AI will struggle to factor in all that the client knows (and doesn't know), the stakeholders' political situation, the broader current cultural context, what can and can't be executed, what feels emotionally salient or creatively inspiring, and so on. Whereas the human researcher will know much of this both explicitly and intuitively, taking into account the unspoken or unwritten, when they craft and articulate appropriate, strategic narratives.

“In many ways the better someone is at qual research, the better they will be at use AI analysis tools. They can work out the right questions to ask of the data - just as they do in human-only analysis.”

How do AI tools impact the analysis process in qual?



Different briefs require different depth

Whether AI summary tools are good enough (and how much human intervention they need) depends on the context of the brief. If people doing research over-rely on AI summaries which over simplify or miss critical details then they'll be performing worse than a more human intensive approach. That said, if their summaries are good enough and the brief is relatively straightforward they can offer "good enough" top level summaries - and so ultimately represent a faster track to basic findings.

QUAL AT SCALE

AI also enables qual at scale - which refers to larger, quant-esque sample sizes with qual-like open-questions and automated probes. To those in procurement this may look like a better cost per head compared to traditional human intensive qual. No doubt it will uncover insights that a quant study - with its more closed lines of questioning - may not.

How do AI tools impact the analysis process in qual?

“So qual at scale can represent a more open version of quantitative research. But ultimately for me, the real benefit in qual is its depth.”

Qual is predicated on the assumption that careful recruitment of representative sample can reveal insights which can be extrapolated to a larger population. I think the true power of qual is in speaking to less people in more depth rather than the other way around.

THE LIFEblood OF QUAL IS AUTHENTICITY

We should not forget that the lifeblood of qual is authenticity. So if we blindly follow AI summaries without due diligence and without insisting on transparency, by which I mean the need to check conclusions against the source data - qual research's reputation could suffer. While I've not seen much evidence of the much lamented hallucinations that generative AI can do - it only takes one hallucination or error in a report to quickly lose integrity.

CAN AI MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS?

I must say Chat GPT is also impressive at making recommendations. The tighter the insights you feed it the more sensible its suggestions on what it means for the client. However again, I see AI recommendations as more food for thought rather than a valid substitute for expertise.

I'm excited by the progress in this space although I urge people doing research to go back to the data when they can to ensure they're capturing the true gold in what was said.

Accelerating your asynchronous qual with AI

AI's Democratisation of Qual

Accelerating your asynchronous qual with AI



I am a big fan of asynchronous online qual methods, by which I mean online text based methods like diaries, forums and communities. One thing I like about them is the way they give you so much detail and instant high quality data to work with - this meets the need for depth and enables rapid analysis and reporting within an agile project workflow.

4 ways AI works better with asynchronous online qual

In many ways AI tools are currently better placed to add value to diaries, forums and communities than they are in real time methods like depth interviews or groups.

GREATER DEPTH OF DATA

Asynchronous methods need AI summary tools more than other methods because they can create a lot more content. That's because in a focus group for example, only one person can speak at once. So when you invest in 2hrs of feedback per person in a 6 person focus group, you actually end up with less than a sixth of that (ie. less than 20 minutes per person). Whereas in asynchronous online qual they can all speak in

Accelerating your asynchronous qual with AI

parallel. So you get 6 times more feedback and a full 2hrs per person. This higher volume of data makes the need for AI summaries all the more significant.



MORE STRUCTURED DATA

Another reason is that asynchronous online qual organises the data by question or concept if applicable. So this means it's easier for the AI summary to target the relevant text. Whereas if it's working on an entire transcript or multiple transcripts - it sometimes struggles to focus on just the feedback associated with a particular concept or question. Some AI summary tools have work arounds for this (as you can break the content down by question or concept and run summary analysis on that isolated set of text). But this can be laborious.

HIGHER QUALITY VERBATIM

The data from text based asynchronous online qual is of such high quality - it doesn't have all the typos and misinterpretations that you get with AI transcripts from face to face or webcam discussions (and it doesn't take as long or cost as much as human transcription does). AI transcripts are impressive, fast and they save money but they

Accelerating your asynchronous qual with AI

do not give you the full, rich, high quality verbatim and you end up having to go back to the video source to fill in the blanks.

AVOIDS DELAYS IN AUTOMATED PROBING

Automated probing using AI is fairly impressive (although not as good as a human researcher). It can offer thanks, ask for elaboration and some platforms even let you train the AI moderator to ask particular probes triggered by particular responses. However there can be a frustrating delay if this is in real time as the AI works out its probe after the participant has answered. I think this creates some friction and reduces the flow of a discussion. So AI automated probes in asynchronous methods (i.e. discussions that are not in real time) could evade this issue..

AI adds more value to asynchronous online qual

So overall, I think AI tools are going to add more value to asynchronous methods like diaries, forums and communities than they will traditional qual research methods like real time focus groups.

For independent researchers, is AI opportunity or threat?

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For independent researchers, is AI opportunity or threat?



There are a few ways that I think independent qual researchers are well placed to benefit from the changes that AI will bring to the qualitative research industry - this comes down to the agility independents have and a probable new wave of qual research done by non-expert researchers that they can help elevate and deliver.

INDIES CAN RIDE THE WAVE OF QUAL

AI makes it easier for non-experts to design, run and analyse qual research. So AI innovation that supports DIY qual is likely to pull in new entrants from diverse worlds of management consultancy, design, through to innovation and advertising as well and more hands-on, in-house client research teams.

This trend will also be driven by the commercial pressure for consultancies to swim further upstream and get more control over strategy - which is something that delivering qual research can help with as it feeds directly into decision making.

Independents have the agility and ability to ride this new wave of cheaper, faster and perhaps more straightforward qual projects fueled by AI. That's because this

For independent researchers, is AI opportunity or threat?

new wave of lower priced, more straightforward work, will quickly reveal the need for expertise. As people who do research but aren't experts realise how specialist knowledge of how to design, run and interpret projects effectively will quickly elevate the value of the work.

INDIES CAN FILL THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

Qual can easily go wrong if it's designed wrong; for example by underestimating the time it takes to have discussions, the incentives required to encourage people to participate, designing a study with the wrong people or testing ideas in ways that corrupts the validity of the finding. Also the task of reporting is very challenging when there's so many competing interpretations available from the data. So this new wave of AI powered DIY qual will quickly reveal a gap for experts to manage some or all of the process - and this gap can be easily plugged by independent qual researchers who are willing to offer elements of a service (for example design or moderation or analysis). These gaps are less likely to be filled by full service research agencies as it is in conflict with their business models.

I'm not saying there will be a race to the bottom with all qual projects becoming simpler, cheaper and more AI reliant. I'm envisaging multiple races on different tracks of complexity, speed and budget - with lighter more AI reliant simple projects co-existing alongside more manual, nuanced, complex and human led, bigger budgeted approaches.



For independent researchers, is AI opportunity or threat?

DEMOCRATISATION IS INEVITABLE BUT NOT BAD NEWS FOR INDIES

This is not a new dynamic and it's something we've seen in many other sectors - you only have to look at web design which has seen DIY / cheaper / less tailored websites built by tech like Wix and Wordpress living alongside more bespoke, expensive websites built by experts. The same may happen in qualitative research - broadly speaking two different levels of depth, nuance and tailoring - one more reliant on AI, faster and more affordable, and the other more manual, requiring more investment offering more tailored, nuanced and deep qual.

As long as independents can get their hands on AI tools and learn how to use them effectively, their value in the ecosystem will become even more in demand.

Conclusions

AI's Democratisation of Qual

Conclusions

It is inevitable that Generative AI will make it easier for non-experts to do qualitative research projects that they could not before.

Just as easy-to-use semi-automated, templated website-builders have created a new wave of novice web designers - so too will Generative AI enable novice researchers to run their own projects.

This democratisation is possible because Generative AI is based on large language models and language is the currency of qualitative research. The technology can act like a competent researcher by generating research design suggestions, automatically moderating discussions, developing conclusions from large swathes of text and even drafting recommendations. In the hands of a smart novice, it can do tasks that previously felt out of their reach.

AI GENERATES MORE VALUE IN EXPERT HANDS

That said, a novice using AI may not use it as well as an expert qual researchers.

“AI is just a tool and is likely to generate more value when in the hands of an expert.”

Generative AI can offer expert qual researchers useful efficiencies that accelerate the process and carry some of the mental burden of running projects. At the design stage it can stretch our creative ideas for questions and tasks and it can automate screener or discussion guide questions which we then optimise. It can accelerate summaries and the sourcing of verbatim, especially when dealing with large volumes of text.

Expert researchers have thousands of hours of experience to know what research design works, how to ask questions that elicit valid, authentic and strategically relevant responses. Experts intuitively know what to focus on and what to ignore in the competing versions of reality that participants share. They also know more about the client business challenge and what represents a useful, realistic recommendation. This is based on implicit expertise and goes beyond the brief that a novice could feed a Generative AI tool.

Conclusions

GETTING THE BEST FROM AI

Therefore, the deeper novices get into using qual via AI - the more they'll realise they need to upskill to design projects that work, are valid and to extract the most strategically relevant insights and articulate them in the most compelling ways. This could represent a boon for independent researchers who can slot into non-traditional qual workflows to raise the quality of work they do. It also emphasises the importance that the industry promotes best practice, so AI hallucination or poor recommendations do not damage the hard-fought reputation of the industry.

AI IS ENABLING NEW METHODS AND SUPERCHARGING EXISTING ONES

“AI is not just democratising qual for novices and offering efficiencies to qual researchers. It is also enabling new qual methods.”

Qual at scale is now possible through automatic moderating and analysing bigger quant-esque sample sizes. This enables a more open form of surveying (albeit one with less nuance and emotional depth than an intensely moderated qual sample would provide). It can generate topline summaries of what was said more quickly. Although a qual researcher who is adept at asking questions with empathy and rigourously analysing text with humanity, will still want to stay hands-on in the process.

Text and video based asynchronous online qual methods are best placed to benefit from these tools as they generate near-perfect transcripts (better than real-time video / audio AI transcripts) and often rich high volume qualitative data. As platforms integrate AI tools, we will see the efficiency potential in AI truly come to life.

THE RISE OF QUAL LIGHT

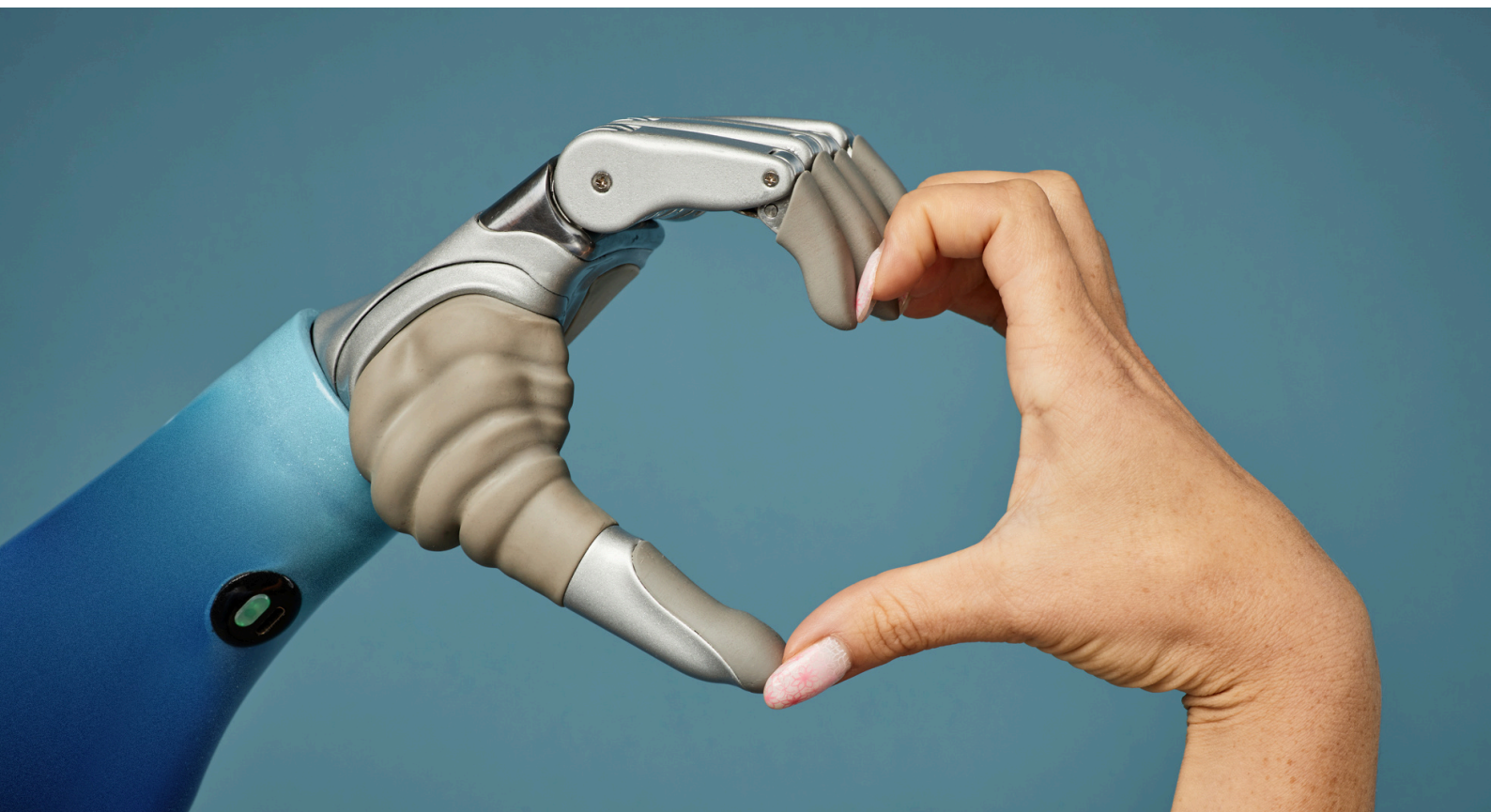
Not all qual briefs are equal! If a client just wants a basic level of reportage (capturing the range of responses rather than interpreting which ones matter most and what it all means) - then generative AI can offer significant efficiencies and cost reductions to simple qual research projects. So the rise of a more tactical 'qual light' is likely. This should sit alongside the more human-reliant 'deep qual' which is where most depth

Conclusions

and strategic value can be generated.

EXPLORE WHAT AI CAN DO FOR YOU

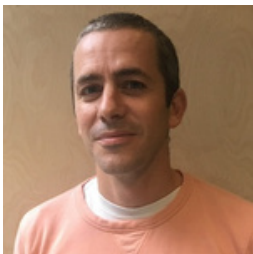
I believe all qual researchers and users of insight, should be exploring the ever changing boundaries of what Generative AI can deliver to the practice of qual research. The level of investment is unprecedented and so what it can do today is less than tomorrow. Therefore, qual researchers must stay abreast of developments and keep working hard to work out where and whether to integrate Generative AI into qual workflows. In so doing, it is less a case of Generative AI replacing human qual researchers and more a case of it supporting them.





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Connect with Hugh to discuss
AI-powered mobile qual



Hugh Carling
LIVEMINDS CEO



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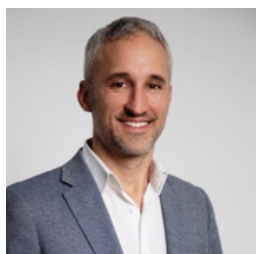
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