The Campaign for Real Qual

Retaining the Craft of Qualitative Research in an AI-driven world

* Also available as a custom GPT and a podcast

By: Craig Griffin, FUEL Asia

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The Campaign for
Real Qual

Is qualitative research at a crossroads? When I talk with other qualitative practitioners, it feels like we are at a turning point – where rapid advancements in research technology and AI are reshaping what qualitative research even means.

That's why I'm launching *The Campaign for Real Qual*. This isn't about resisting technology; it's about asking the right questions:

- What does great qual look like in 2025?
- How has research tech changed qualitative methods – for better and for worse?
- Where is the industry headed, and how do we retain the craft of qualitative research in an AI-driven world?

Why This, Why Now?

My agency, FUEL Asia, in January 2025 co-hosted the Asia Digital Insights Summit, which made me reflect – more than ever – on where qualitative research is going. At the same time, I've been trying to keep up with developments in AI, and the pace of change is staggering. Many predict that 2025 will be a transformative year for AI, with the potential emergence of AGI on the horizon. If true, the pace of change in research technology could accelerate faster than we've ever seen.

Some of you may find this exciting, others unsettling, but one thing is clear: every qualitative research agency needs to be planning for this shift. Sticking our heads in the sand is not an option.

A Balanced Perspective

The title, *The Campaign for Real Qual*, might sound like a pushback against AI, but that's not the intent. This is about defining what good qualitative research looks like, understanding the trade-offs we're making, and ensuring we don't lose the very essence of what makes qual valuable.

I also keep hearing whispers that qualitative skills are in decline - but is that really true?

I won't pretend to have all the answers, but my goal (together with you) is to raise the right questions, highlight key challenges, and start a meaningful conversation among qualitative practitioners.

About the Campaign

Each article in this book was originally published as a weekly newsletter on LinkedIn, inviting qualitative researchers to join the conversation. What began as a written series has since evolved: aside from this ebook, The Campaign for Real Qual is also available as an interactive podcast, and an interactive Custom GPT. So you can engage with the content on your own terms.

This spirit of experimentation is core to the campaign. It reflects our belief that innovation in research is not just about adopting new tools - it's about finding new ways to engage, deliver, and challenge ourselves as practitioners.

Topics in the Series

Eight different topics, with a summary of each, so you can jump to what's of most interest:

1. The Essence of Good Qual

What defines great qualitative research, and how to evaluate it in an age of AI and research tech

2. Tech Evolution in Qual

A review of major innovations (from mobile ethnography to AI) and their true impact on insight vs. efficiency.

3. Real Qual in a 'Good Enough' World

How business culture and AI are reshaping what counts as insight — and the role qual must play.

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Using AI to improve the design of qual studies — from briefs to guides to stimulus.

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The pros, cons and limitations of AI as a moderator — when it works and when it doesn't.

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Guest article on staying authentic in an era of AI-generated sameness

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The Essence of Good Qual

What defines great qualitative research, and how to evaluate it in an age of AI and research tech

Introduction

Qualitative research is changing fast. As AI and Research Tech reshape the industry, what happens to the essence of good qual? Before we assess the impact of these innovations, we need to step back and define what makes qualitative research valuable in the first place.

The Campaign for Real Qual was launched to spark an important conversation: what happens to qualitative research as AI and Research Tech reshape the industry.

At its best, qualitative research is not just a method – it's an art, a way of seeing, and a discipline of deep human understanding. As humans, we live in the landscape – the physical environment, and the culturescape – man-made meanings, rules and codes that we abide by, often unconsciously. Our work is to uncover what is hidden from view – the social and cultural forces that shape whether brands and movements deeply connect with people.

But good qual must also be practical – recognising evolving client needs for speed, budget constraints and client preferences for working. If qualitative research is too slow, expensive, or difficult to integrate into decision-making, it risks being sidelined in favour of faster, more scalable methods that may lack depth.

So, what are the foundations of good qualitative research? After reflecting on my own career, here are five core principles I think are important:

1. Experienced Practitioners Bring Skill – and Subjectivity

Early in my career, I worked with some great qualitative practitioners that were in high demand from clients. They were highly experienced and masters of their craft – and it was their experience and their ability to offer a clear point of view that set them apart. Their expertise was not just as researchers – they understood marketing, branding and strategy – and were able to connect insights to the commercial world.

These practitioners weren't neutral and entirely objective, they shaped the conversation, the interpretation and ultimately what was seen as important. They demonstrated that good qualitative research is as much art as it is science – as much about what the researcher brings as what the participants say.

The most skilled practitioners don't just uncover insights - they shape them into something commercially meaningful. Their subjectivity is not a flaw – it is their greatest strength. Their ability to draw from psychology, sociology, anthropology, and behavioural economics means they don't just describe people's behaviour; they decode the forces shaping it and translate that into business impact.

2. Time & Immersion – Giving Research the Space to Breathe

The longer we spend with participants, the more we can get beyond their first initial (usually rational) response. We have more time to go where the conversation naturally leads – allowing the participant to discuss what's important to them. We have time to see (and reconcile) contradictions in what they say or between what they say and do – these are often where the richest insights emerge. If we have more time with people, we can include observation or get them to do tasks. This gives us a depth of understanding that goes beyond what people can tell us.

But sometimes we only have a short time with people. In those scenarios, we can still create time and space for our participants – by not overloading the discussion guide and trusting the moderator to go where they feel is necessary.

3. The Art of Listening

Not all qual these days has moderation, but most of it still does. A good moderator understands that good qual is built on trust – and trust is developed by a moderator that can quickly build rapport and empathy. If people don't feel comfortable, they won't reveal their deeper thoughts, emotions or uncertainties. The best moderators don't just listen, they connect, building genuine human-to-human engagement, rather than transactional questioning.

Good (live) moderation requires listening with all your senses (and your intuition) and is exhausting! You need to be able to read the room, picking up subtle changes in mood and energy, pick up on any contradictions and create a safe space for people to reveal their authentic selves. In group settings, you need to be aware of the group dynamics, often managing participation so that everyone contributes.

And of course it's not just about what is said, but how it's said, what is left unsaid and the emotions behind the words. Observing tone and body language are critical.

4. Understanding the Social & Cultural Context

Qualitative research is sometimes framed around individual consumer psychology, with a focus on needs, attitudes, motivations and behaviours. But people do not exist in isolation - our choices, preferences, and identities are shaped by the social and cultural environments we navigate.

Much of this influence is invisible to us - we internalize cultural norms, social hierarchies, and meaning systems without realizing it. Social anthropology teaches us that people are not fully independent decision-makers - they are influenced by the structures, norms, and shared meanings embedded in society.

For brands, understanding social and cultural structures is not optional - it's a competitive advantage. Staying relevant means recognizing how meaning shifts, where trends originate, and how consumers adapt to new cultural realities.

Semiotic analysis is part of the practitioner's toolkit and is often weaved into qualitative projects. It helps us understand how meaning is created through signs, symbols and cultural codes. It goes beyond what people explicitly say to examine how visual elements, language and social narratives shape perception and influence behaviour. In qualitative research, semiotics helps uncover the deeper, often unconscious associations that consumers have with brands, products, and cultural trends.

By exploring the social and cultural context, qualitative research moves beyond surface-level descriptions of consumer attitudes and behaviours and provides a richer, deeper and more nuanced understanding of human behaviour.

5. Storytelling: The Power of Narrative in Qual

In the commercial world, insights are only valuable if they get internalized, influence thinking, and drive action. This has led to an increased emphasis placed on the need for great storytelling in market research. But in qualitative research, it's always been a necessity. In quant, the numbers tell the story. In qual, there is no dataset to fall back on - only the researcher's ability to craft a compelling, commercially relevant narrative.

If findings don't drive decision-making, they have failed - no matter how interesting they are. The best qualitative researchers don't just observe and interpret - they connect the dots, craft commercially powerful narratives, and make insights impossible to ignore.

These foundational principles are tech-neutral – they define what makes qualitative research powerful, regardless of whether we use traditional or digital approaches. We'll return to them in future chapters as we explore what is gained and lost through tech-enabled research.

Tech Evolution in Qual

A review of major innovations (from mobile ethnography to AI) and their true impact on insight vs. efficiency.

Let's now examine the key technological shifts that have shaped qualitative research since the turn of the century – asking whether these innovations have truly advanced insight, or simply optimized efficiency.

Mobile Phones: Making Ethnography Commercially Viable

For as long as qualitative research has existed, ethnography has been considered the gold standard. But for most commercial market research, it was simply too expensive or time-consuming to implement.

That changed with mobile ethnography. In 2008, while working with MESH Experience, I saw firsthand how mobile phones could reshape how we captured people's behaviour. Even before smartphones became mainstream, a simple text message could capture a brand interaction in real-time – removing the researcher's presence, and with it, potential bias.

As smartphones became ubiquitous, this shift accelerated. Participants could now document their experiences through photos and videos, providing researchers with a richer, more contextual view of real-world behaviour. And they could now express themselves on their own terms, in their own time.

This marked a fundamental shift - from researcher-led inquiry to participant-led insight generation.

From Bulletin Boards to Online Communities & Co-Creation

The early 2000s saw the rise of bulletin boards - an early attempt at asynchronous qual. For the first time, researchers could engage participants over days or weeks rather than a single session, allowing for wider geographic reach and more considered responses (although System 1 thinking teaches us that considered responses are not always better!).

The full power of asynchronous qual wasn't realised until online community platforms emerged, allowing for a mix of individual and social tasks, image and video-based activities, and iterative discussions, giving researchers a deeper, more flexible way to engage participants.

As Tom Woodnutt, an expert in asynchronous qual, highlighted in January's Asia Digital Insights Summit, this method brings:

1. Greater depth – Participants engage over multiple days, rather than a single session, leading to more input from everyone and richer, more reflective insights

2. <u>More authentic responses</u> – Without group pressure, people feel freer to express their real thoughts.

3. <u>More iterative learnings</u> – Researchers can adjust questions and explore ideas based on early responses, making studies more fluid and adaptive

More than just a new format, online communities reshaped the role of participants. No longer just respondents, they became co-creators - actively shaping product development, testing brand concepts, and engaging in real-time digital workshops.

Social Media and Other Passive Research Methods

One of the biggest shifts in qualitative research was the rise of passive data collection - where instead of asking questions, researchers could simply observe behaviours, conversations, and interactions as they naturally occurred.
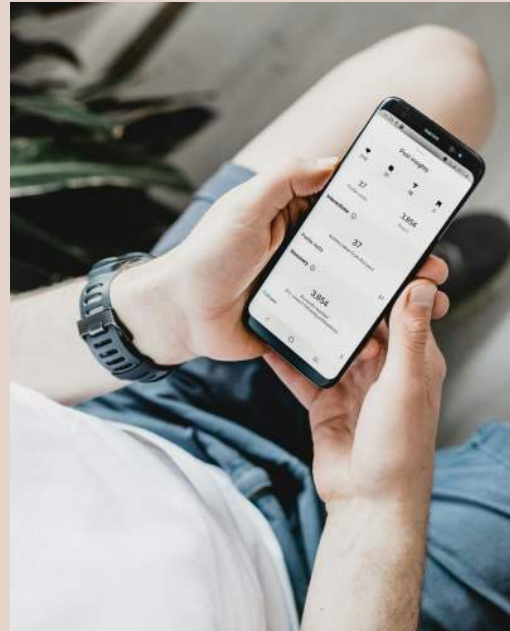
While social media listening, search behaviour tracking, and passive mobile data collection expanded the ways we could observe behaviour, they lacked the depth and meaning-making central to qual. These tools are undoubtedly useful, but rather than replacing qual, they have ultimately served as complementary sources of data and on occasions, generate qual briefs when we need to understand the 'why' behind the 'what'.

These methods marked the industry's first step toward automation, a pre-cursor to today's AI-powered qualitative tools.

The Covid Impact: The Forced Shift to Online Focus Groups & IDIs

Before Covid, online platforms that could host focus groups and IDIs existed, but adoption was limited. Many clients and researchers still preferred face-to-face groups and depth interviews, believing in-person interaction was irreplaceable.

Then came 2020. And suddenly, we had no choice.

Almost overnight, Zoom, Teams, and purpose-built qual platforms became the default. Sessions that once took place in carefully curated viewing facilities were now happening from participants' living rooms and home offices.

While researchers could quickly pivot, it became clear that moving online had changed the dynamic (especially for focus groups):

- A loss of in–room energy. Focus groups thrive on spontaneity, body language, and group dynamics. Online, discussions felt more structured, less fluid.
- Harder to read non–verbal cues – without physical presence, researchers had to rely entirely on verbal expression and tone.
- A more transactional feel – online sessions felt like a series of Q&A exchanges, rather than natural discussions.

There were of course benefits – convenience, lower costs (and no client travel budgets needed) and inclusivity of a wider range of participants. Some participants, less influenced by the presence of others, were also more open and honest.

I'd hypothesise that the shift to online impacted research design beyond geographical reach; where previously a moderator would be trusted to internalise the objectives and was trusted with a large degree of flexibility in the discussion, modern discussion guides seem more structured and lengthier.

Reflecting these limitations, researchers increasingly turned to pre-tasks - an approach influenced by mobile ethnography and online communities. Over time, pre-tasks became a fixture in both online and face-to-face qual.

The shift to online has become entrenched. While in-person research has returned, online groups and IDIs remain a permanent fixture - not because they're better, but because they're easier and more cost-efficient.

AI & Automation: The Next Frontier in Qualitative Research

AI is already influencing every stage of a qualitative research project. In the coming chapters, we'll explore AI's impact across research design, moderation, analysis and reporting.

What Have We Gained, What Have We Lost?

Over the past two decades, qualitative research has gone through seismic shifts - some that have genuinely enhanced our ability to generate deep insight, and others that have made research more convenient but not necessarily better.

Few would argue against the benefits of mobile ethnography and asynchronous qual. These approaches have given us richer, more contextual insight, allowing us to capture real-world behaviours as they happen rather than relying on memory and post-rationalisation. They have made qual more inclusive, more scalable, and more participant-led, providing researchers with the opportunity to design more creative and engaging studies – much needed when participant engagement is at an all-time low.

But other changes have been more about efficiency than quality. The widespread adoption of online focus groups and IDIs, particularly post-Covid, has been driven more by cost, logistics, and accessibility than by a belief that they offer better insight than in-person discussions. The energy of a room, the subtlety of non-verbal cues, and the richness of a natural, face-to-face exchange - these things don't always translate well to a screen. A new generation of qualitative researchers watching focus groups and IDIs via Zoom may never fully appreciate the felt sense you get as a moderator (or even an observer) when face to face.

Then there are passive methods, which promised a new kind of qual - one where we wouldn't need to ask questions at all, just observe behaviours and conversations at scale. A useful addition to the researcher's toolkit - they tell us what people do but not always why, complimentary to qual rather than replacing it.

These technological shifts have reshaped client expectations. Many brands now prioritize speed and scalability, sometimes at the expense of richer, more exploratory insight. As a result, qualitative researchers increasingly need to educate stakeholders on the trade-offs. Bridging this gap between research rigor and client demands will be crucial as the industry continues to evolve.

Which brings us to the next major shift in qualitative research - AI. For early adopters, AI is already changing how we design, moderate, analyse, and report qual.

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Real Qual in a 'Good Enough' World

How business culture and AI are reshaping what counts as insight — and the role qual must play.

The first two chapters in The Campaign for Real Qual focused on context: we defined what makes qualitative research valuable, reviewed how technology has reshaped it over time, and began to surface key tensions. With this article, the tone shifts.

Here, we begin a more direct interrogation of the cultural impact of AI on qualitative research. The rise of AI has done more than transform methods. It's reframing what counts as 'insight.' Speed, scale, and automation are now often equated with value. In this climate, the nuanced, interpretive, and sometimes messy nature of real qualitative research can feel out of sync.

In this chapter we ask: Are we settling for 'good enough'? And if so, what is the cost - not just to the research, but to the decisions that follow?

AI is Helping Clients Get More from Existing Data

With the 'big data' revolution of the last decade, new data streams emerged and presented insight teams with a big challenge – how to break down data silos and integrate data and insights in a way that was accessible to a variety of stakeholders. Now, AI-powered platforms act as knowledge hubs, aggregating and structuring data from multiple sources.

This shift makes existing knowledge instantly accessible and re-purposable, aligning with businesses' growing preference for fast over forensic insight. If an answer is available internally in hours, many stakeholders may see it as 'good enough' — valuing speed over depth.

The Expansion of 'DIY Research'

According to ESOMAR, about one half of all research projects are conducted in-house, marking a significant departure from the traditional model where external agencies led most projects. This shift has been fuelled by the rapid growth of DIY research platforms and the increasing number of non-specialists conducting their own research. In the qualitative space, platforms like Yasna and BoltChatAI have made qualitative research more accessible than ever, allowing businesses to run large-scale qual at speed and scale.

Traditionally, qualitative research was led by trained specialists — professionals who spent years honing techniques in interviewing, observation, and interpretation. Today, AI-assisted platforms allow non-specialists to bypass these steps, producing research at scale without necessarily understanding the complexities of qualitative inquiry. The appeal of speed and accessibility is undeniable, but what is being sacrificed in the process?

The Impact of Generative AI

Perhaps the most profound cultural shift is the influence of Generative AI on research users. A new generation of marketers and decision-makers are growing up with AI as their default tool for insight generation. The expectation is not just that information will be readily available, but that AI-generated insights are inherently valid and actionable.

This shift was evident in a recent 'AI for Marketing Professionals' training course I attended, where participants were taught how to use ChatGPT to generate synthetic respondents and conduct AI-driven focus groups in minutes. The underlying message was clear: "You don't need a research agency; AI can do this for you." This shift is already positioning AI as a substitute, rather than a supplement to human-led inquiry.

At the same time, OpenAI, Google & Perplexity are revolutionising desk research, allowing users to:

- Conduct comprehensive research in minutes rather than hours or days
- Aggregate insights across sources with AI–generated citations
- Customise searches across academic, social, and industry-specific databases

If logically structured, well-presented AI-generated insights become accepted without question, what happens to critical thinking and intellectual scrutiny?

Living in a Culture of Immediacy and 'Good Enough'

The rise of AI-driven knowledge management, DIY tools, and GenAI is not just a technological shift – it's altering the mindset of decision-makers. Expectations of what is necessary for decision-making are shifting – with a stronger focus on immediacy and cost, 'good enough' has become the prevailing mantra.

In Chapter 1, we explored what makes qualitative research valuable. We highlighted that great qualitative research is about understanding human complexity, capturing emotional nuance, and turning insights into compelling narratives that drive change. But as AI transforms the research landscape, qualitative practitioners must rethink their role and adapt to stay relevant.

Here are three possible directions that qualitative practitioners can adapt:

1. Meet Clients Where They Are – But on Your Terms

Speed and efficiency now drive business priorities. Rather than resisting this shift, qualitative researchers can expand their toolkit to offer fast, scalable approaches while embedding their expertise where it matters most.

- Hybrid approaches that combine qual–at–scale with traditional methods will ensure that speed does not come at the expense of depth and nuance.
- AI–driven workflows - from AI–assisted analysis to qual–at–scale - can be powerful tools, but expert oversight is needed in research design, analysis, and reporting to ensure rigour.
- Clients must be educated on the trade–offs of AI–powered research - when it's 'good enough' and when human insight is essential.

2. Reclaim the Role of Qualitative Researcher as an Interpreter of Human Meaning

AI-powered moderation platforms like Yasna and BoltChatAI can adapt to responses, but they currently lack true human interpretation beyond language. AI can process words, but it cannot understand context, create empathy, or read tone, emotion, or contradictions in the same way a skilled moderator can.

In Chapter 1, we explored how great qualitative research is not just about gathering responses, but about probing deeper, reading between the lines, and understanding what isn't being explicitly said. While AI can structure and categorise information efficiently, it cannot replace the ability of a skilled researcher to interpret meaning, pivot discussions in real time, and push beyond surface-level answers.

3. Strategic Storytelling – Turning Insights into Influence

AI can summarise data, but it does not persuade. The power of qualitative research lies in how insights are framed, contextualised, and made compelling to drive business decisions.

Qualitative researchers must position themselves as strategic storytellers, ensuring that research findings do not just sit in reports but actively shape decision-making. The ability to connect the dots, synthesise complexity, and bring insights to life is what will continue to set human researchers apart.

The future of qualitative research isn't about rejecting AI, nor racing to match its speed - it's about demonstrating where human expertise is irreplaceable. AI can automate, aggregate, and accelerate - but it cannot interpret, empathise, or disrupt conventional thinking. That remains the role of an experienced qualitative researcher.

As AI reshapes the research landscape, qualitative practitioners must reclaim their role as interpreters of meaning, ensuring that insights remain not just fast - but transformative.

In the next chapters, we'll explore how AI is reshaping research design, moderation, analysis, and reporting - diving deeper into how qualitative practitioners can evolve their methodologies to remain indispensable.

04

Research Design in the AI Era

Using AI to improve the design of qual studies — from briefs to guides to stimulus.

Last week, I explored how AI is reshaping research – driving a shift towards immediacy and 'good enough' insights. One of the biggest developments is 'Qual at Scale' - which I will unpack in the next chapter.

In this chapter, I will examine how GenAI tools can enhance the research design process for qualitative projects - helping to refine research briefs and proposals, write recruitment screeners, discussion and activity guides and create research stimulus.

Shaping the Research Brief – Understanding the Problem

A well-designed research project begins with a clear articulation of the business problem and an understanding of what's already known on the topic. Some briefs are well written, others less so – but ultimately, it's the agency's responsibility to extract the right information to ensure the research delivers real value. GenAI tools - whether used by researchers themselves or those commissioning research - can help develop clearer briefs.

Firstly, let's talk about guidance. A research brief is typically shaped around key business decisions that must be made within a defined timeframe and budget. In recognising the need for research, there will be things already known, things partially known, things felt to be true but still not fully known (hypotheses) and things unknown. There may also be constraints, parameters or protocols that needed to be followed in the research design or outcomes. A GenAI workflow can easily be created to prompt with a series of questions to create a research brief (and potentially methodological preferences).

Identifying 'what is known' in a complex data ecosystem that is 'always on' is not always easy. AI can assist in this stage by analysing large volumes of existing data, such as past studies, customer feedback, or social media content. This can help to identify knowledge gaps and be used to formulate hypotheses, sharpening the research objectives to ensure the study addresses current and relevant issues.

Once the background to the research is known, GenAI tools can help agencies create better research proposals - by framing the research context in creative and structured ways – for example by doing a Situational Analysis or using a PEST framework. The new ability to use GenAI to do 'deep' desk research means agencies can easily build upon the knowledge shared in the client's brief.

Designing Discussion/Activity Guides & Screeners

Traditionally, discussion guides are crafted through experience, intuition and iteration – part of the craft of a qualitative practitioner. Indeed, some experienced practitioners may balk at the idea of using GenAI in research design, however, with the rise of DIY research, more people from a range of educational and professional backgrounds, who don't have (much) research experience, are conducting research and will look for 'guidance'.

Even experienced practitioners can use GenAI – not to replace their expertise, but as a 'sparring partner' to challenge thinking and streamline processes.

GenAI can support the development of discussion and activity guides by suggesting relevant themes, topics and questions aligned with the research objectives and target audience. This doesn't replace human creativity but provides a structured starting point, allowing researchers to focus on fine-tuning the guide to the specific cultural and contextual nuances of the target audience. Conversely, AI tools can be used to make suggestions to improve the final guide. Whether using at the front or back end (or both), better results will be obtained if the AI tool used is trained on previously used guides.

Screener design - less of an art and more about best practice - is one of the easier wins for GenAI. Its impact will be strongest when trained on a standardised library of previous screeners.

Using AI Personas for Research Design

I'm sure many of you will have heard of AI personas, and some of you have experimented with developing or using, if so, I'd love to hear about your experience. For those unfamiliar, the basic idea is that we either:

- Take the data and insight behind an existing persona(s) and use it to train the AI model
- Create new personas from existing data

Once built, these personas can be interacted with using either text or speech (depending on the model used to build the persona). At FUEL Asia, we've built AI personas using a custom GPT in ChatGPT, and we see real potential in specific use cases. But there are clear limitations - while AI personas can simulate demographics and psychographics, they can't reflect lived experience and the full cultural context.
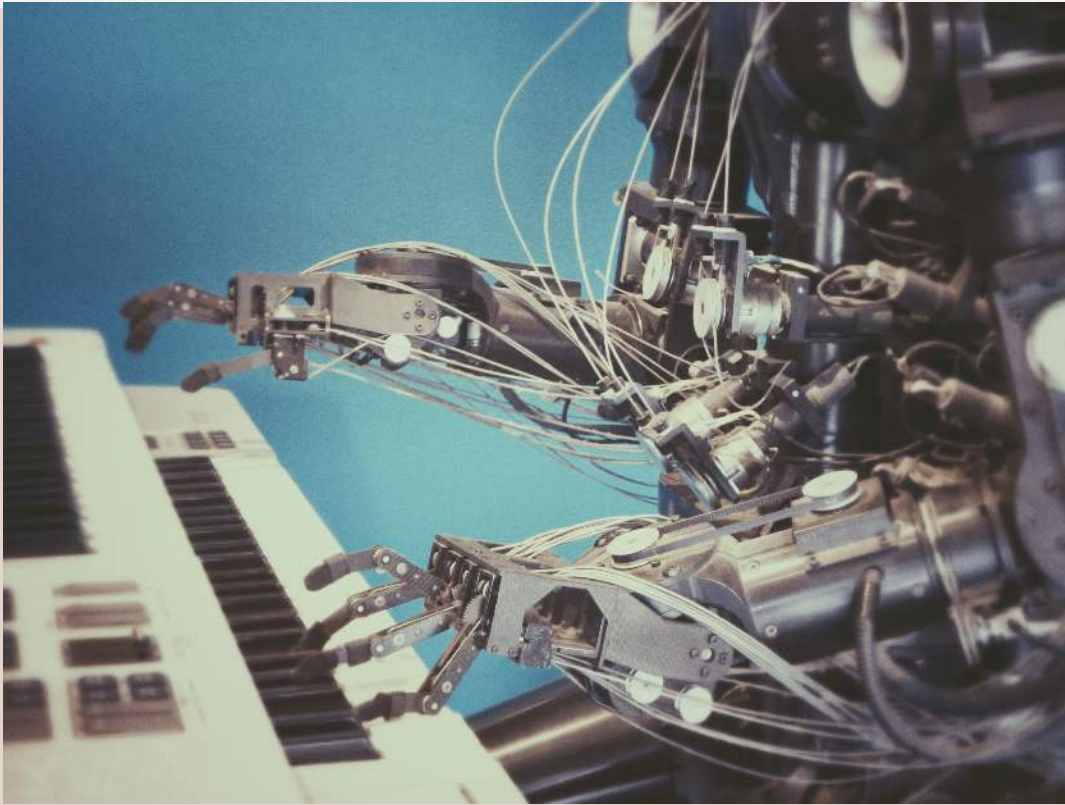
This means they can't replace real qualitative participants. While there are AI training schools teaching marketers how to create synthetic participants and invite them to an AI moderated focus group (and no doubt some DIYers will experiment with this), we don't believe that AI can currently replicate the full context of people's lives - the messiness, the contradictions, the System 1 thinking and irrationality that good qualitative research looks to uncover.

The use cases we currently see are at the front and back end of a project – to shape the research design and stimulus (which we discuss here) and to deliver insights (Chapter 7). AI Personas can help researchers think through potential participants' mindsets, refine hypotheses and even pressure-test very early stage ideas. In other words, help fine tune the research design. When developing stimulus, they can be used as valuable 'co-pilots' to fine-tune stimulus, crafting language and visuals that resonate with the intended audience. This approach can also be used to localise stimulus for global projects, where ideas have the potential to get 'lost in translation'.

Where AI Can Add Value in Qualitative Research Design

AI is becoming an invaluable tool in research design - not as a replacement for qualitative expertise, but to enhance efficiency, structure, and strategic thinking in the research process. Whether it's structuring a research brief, refining discussion guides, or developing stimulus, GenAI can streamline processes, provide fresh perspectives, and create frameworks that support better decision-making. I've shared some possible use cases for AI Personas as part of this process – firmly in the design stage, simulating humans to create a sharper design, before we talk to the real humans.

AI's role in research design is evolving, and every researcher will integrate it differently. The key is to experiment - finding ways AI can complement your approach while maintaining the integrity of qualitative inquiry. At its best, AI is a tool to enhance thinking, streamline workflows, and free up time for what matters most: human insight.

AI Moderation

The pros, cons and limitations of AI as a moderator — when it works and when it doesn't.

At the last three research conferences I attended, AI-powered qualitative research - often called 'Qual at Scale' - was everywhere. Research tech companies are positioning it as a way to make qual more scalable, efficient, and cost-effective. At the heart of this shift is AI moderation - chatbots conducting real-time interviews via text or voice. The pitch is compelling: AI moderators work 24/7, never get tired, and scale research at a fraction of the cost of human moderation. But does this still deliver real qual?
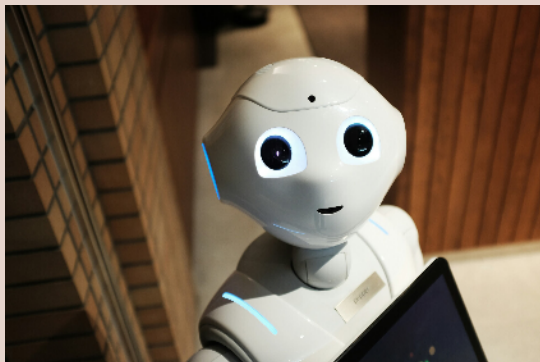
This article explores what the evidence so far suggests that AI moderation can and can't do. We'll look at the gains in efficiency and scale but also at what's lost when the human moderator is removed from the conversation. AI moderation is already being used in a growing number of studies - so how do we work with it effectively while maintaining research quality?

AI Moderation vs. Human Moderation

In Chapter 1, we explored the skills that define the best moderators – the ability to use all their senses and intuition and subjectivity to guide conversations where they naturally need to go, which can differ for each participant.

AI moderation is built for efficiency. It can run hundreds of interviews at once, follow a structured guide, and apply the same prompts consistently. It's scalable, fast and cost-effective - particularly useful for large-scale studies where speed and structured analysis are priorities.

But moderation is more than just following a guide. A skilled human moderator listens between the lines, detects contradictions, probes unexpected responses, adapts dynamically – letting the conversation unfold naturally. AI, in contrast, follows a script. It can analyse sentiment but doesn't truly understand emotions. It can probe but won't detect hesitation or discomfort. It can ask follow-up questions, but it won't challenge an assumption or spot an insight buried in an offhand remark. And it can't pivot when a topic is well understood, or a new issue emerges. In many ways it acts like a novice moderator – structured, but inflexible.

There's also the issue of cultural nuance. AI moderators work by processing language patterns, but of course they lack lived experience. They don't understand humour, irony, or how cultural references shape meaning.

One provider in this space is claiming to offer conversational agents with "emotional intelligence", that can "truly perceive, listen, understand and engage in a deeply human way". I'm sure the models will get better – whether they can get close to matching the emotional intelligence of an experienced human moderator remains to be seen and feels a long way off (but I could be wrong!).

Where AI Moderation Works Best

Despite its limitations, I believe AI moderation should have a place in the researchers' toolkit. There are clear cases where its strengths in scale, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness outweigh its lack of depth. In Chapter 3, we discussed the cultural shift towards immediacy and 'good enough' research, which is also driving the move towards quicker, cheaper methodologies.

At the heart of identifying potential use cases is the question "How much depth is needed?". Some briefs are straightforward, don't require deep exploration, and lend themselves to the semi-structured approach often referred to as 'Qual Light'. Here are some of the strongest use cases we see:

- Some UX testing is one area where AI moderation works well, guiding participants through digital experiences or assigning online tasks.
- Rapid exploratory research to unpack a topic – where quick answers matter more than deep probing
- Iterative concept testing where brands need quick feedback loops on ideas, messaging or creative executions
- Conversational surveys can bridge the gap between a traditional survey and an in–depth interview, providing more engaging participant experiences and greater depth than an online survey, at the scale of quantitative surveys.
- Online communities often require a light touch – either to keep engagement high or to probe answers provided to tasks and questions.

We shouldn't just think about use cases but users. One of the biggest advantages of AI moderation is accessibility. Because it's built into DIY research platforms, it allows a broader range of people - marketers, product teams, and UX designers - to run qualitative studies without needing formal research training. This means more people conducting qualitative-style research, though not necessarily at the same level of depth or rigor as traditional qual. If this allows more people to experience the benefits of qualitative insights (albeit a light version), this may not be a bad thing for our industry.

How to Use AI Moderation Effectively

If we decide to use this method, how can we get the best possible outcomes? Quite simply – the best outcomes will be achieved by using an experienced qualitative researcher at every stage – by designing the discussion guide, monitoring the interviews, adjusting the questioning as needed during the project, and being involved in the analysis and reporting.

While any single experienced human moderator can iterate during their allocated interviews, this has traditionally been a challenge in multi-country design, using multiple moderators. The centralisation of 'Qual at Scale' platforms allow a centralised team to review early interviews across markets and pivot as needed. Indeed, the research can even be rolled out in stages, to build in moments of reflection and iteration.

Hybrid approaches hold real potential for studies requiring both depth and scale. This is where experienced qualitative practitioners can lead - integrating human-led and AI-led interviews. Just as we mix qual and quant in the same study, there are endless possibilities, including designs that combine human moderation with 'Qual at Scale' in place of Quant.

A Blurring of the Boundaries

Hopefully by now it's clear that AI-powered moderation doesn't fit neatly into either qual or quant terminologies. It's more open-ended than traditional quant, but it lacks the depth and adaptability of human-led qual. It can be analysed qualitatively or quantitatively (or both).

This is perhaps a new category of research that introduces a new kind of trade-off. The depth, emotional intelligence, and contextual sensitivity that define real qual aren't fully there - but in exchange, a 'lighter' form of qual research can be conducted at a scale, speed, and cost that was previously out of reach.

For clients and research buyers, understanding this trade-off is key. AI moderation isn't a substitute for human moderation – rather it's an addition to the researcher's toolkit, offering a lighter-touch, scalable option that works well in the right circumstances. The challenge for researchers is to position it correctly - to educate clients on what it can and can't do, and to ensure that when depth is required, it's built into the research design.

Conclusion

AI moderation is already being used by clients and agencies. It offers scale, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness, making qualitative-style research more accessible to a wider range of users. But it comes at a cost - losing the human depth, contextual sensitivity, and nuanced interpretation that traditional qual provides.

This isn't about rejecting AI moderation – it's about knowing where it fits. The best qualitative projects will always be led by experienced qualitative researchers, ensuring that AI is used strategically rather than as a blunt instrument. As AI evolves, so must the role of the qualitative researcher. We need to get comfortable working alongside AI, understanding its strengths and limitations and expanding our toolkit accordingly. If we do that, we'll continue to thrive.

Using AI for Qual Analysis

A deep dive into using platforms, LLMs, and DIY workflows for qualitative insight generation.

In this chapter, we explore one of the most actively discussed areas in qualitative research today – using AI for analysis. The attraction is clear – analysis time can be significantly shortened. But how does AI analysis, even when guided by a human, compare to traditional methods? And how do specialised Qual analysis platforms compare to general LLMs such as ChatGPT? Should either have a place in our toolkit?

To address these questions, at FUEL Asia, we did our own pilot in October / November 2024. We selected a study that we felt suitable for AI assisted analysis - a project where the business issue and the topic of discussion were straightforward.

Of course, 4 months is a long time in the world of AI and things change fast – so we'd encourage you to try your own experiments to see the possibilities for your own unique workflows.

Experiment Overview: Three Approaches to Qualitative Analysis

This case study explores three approaches to qualitative analysis on a dataset of 10 online in-depth interviews of 30 minutes each, conducted in Thailand.

1. Human-Only Analysis: As our baseline, we utilised the skills of an experienced qualitative researcher to interpret the data manually. This traditional human-led approach remains the gold standard, providing nuanced insights and setting a clear benchmark for quality.

2. Commercial Qualitative Research Tech Platforms: These specialised platforms are specifically designed to handle qualitative data at scale. In this case study, we tested 3 platforms. They offer user-friendly interfaces and often claim compatibility with diverse languages, allowing for streamlined analysis, quick deployment, and transparency in sourcing findings.

3. 'DIY AI': For our third approach, we adopted a more flexible 'DIY AI' strategy, combining AWS for transcription* and ChatGPT 4o for analysis.

* Since this experiment, Zoom has introduced free transcription for online meetings, which automatically delineates speakers through their individual logins. However, it struggles with face-to-face sessions where a single audio channel is used, in which case dedicated transcription services offering speaker delineation are preferable.

Human-Only Analysis

Our researcher watched the interviews live, capturing subtle cues and contextual nuances in detailed notes. Using a blend of thematic and narrative analysis, the researcher systematically identified recurring themes while also weaving in the narrative flow of each interview. This approach set the bar for quality, providing a rich, detailed understanding of the data and serving as a valuable benchmark for comparing the AI-driven methods.

Commercial Qualitative Research Tech Platforms

Commercial qualitative research platforms are designed specifically for streamlined, efficient analysis. We only tried 3 in our experiment, but a quick search on Insight Platforms reveals over 100 platforms offering AI assisted analysis. As an aside, the sheer volume of providers can feel overwhelming to potential buyers, especially when many appear to offer the same solutions. I assume as the market matures, the differentiation between providers will become clearer.

Again, a reminder – this experiment took place a few months ago and the platforms we tested will no doubt have received numerous upgrades. This was our assessment at the time:

- <u>User–Friendly Design</u>: These platforms are made for quick deployment and typically require little to no training. They're intuitive and designed to guide users smoothly through analysis, making them appealing where speed matters, a quick topline read is needed, or when the user isn't an experienced qualitative analyst.

- <u>Transparency and Segment Analysis</u>: Unlike some DIY approaches, commercial platforms allow users to trace findings back to their sources, increasing transparency and giving users confidence in their analysis. They also simplify segment–specific analysis and streamline the production of supporting media, such as video reels, which of course can be incredibly useful during reporting.

- <u>Language Development Gaps</u>: However, when it comes to the Thai language, these platforms revealed a notable development lag. Different platforms presented different challenges; one platform could not recognise Thai speech in Zoom audio files, despite claiming language support. Another platform required us to split the analysis into two parts (due to token limits of the platform), which meant we had to create two reports and later combine them manually (using ChatGPT as a workaround).

Every AI tool is of course now a 'work in progress'. I suspect the language-specific issues we faced may have already been addressed.

'DIY AI' Approach: Flexibility, Customisation, and Price

The flexibility of a DIY AI approach quickly became clear. Using AWS and ChatGPT, we tailored workflows specifically to our project's needs and our approach to qualitative research. These workflows can be easily adapted to different projects or client needs by developing custom GPTs or using the Projects function within ChatGPT - both straightforward options even if you haven't experimented yet.

Here were some ways we were able to customise our workflows:

1. We ran different types of qualitative analysis (content analysis, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, grounded theory) – credit to Ray Poynter for suggesting this in his training. We found this helped our thinking.

2. Similarly, the ability to use well known frameworks (e.g. Maslow's hierarchy or Jobs to be Done) to frame the findings. Again, experiments that can be run quickly and with the potential to quickly look at an issue through a different lens.

Compared to specialised platforms, setting up 'DIY AI' requires initial adjustments to workflows and prompts, along with a lot of trial and error to get the best results. However, this flexibility can be a major advantage, allowing us to quickly adapt analysis and reporting to meet the unique needs of each project. This approach is inexpensive – a ChatGPT Plus subscription at USD30 per month and about USD15 of transcription costs.

When using LLMs, it's critical to have robust QC mechanisms in place to identify potential inaccuracies, hallucinations or questionable interpretations. In practice this means asking for evidence from your LLM – and if necessary, asking exactly which transcripts they used to report a specific finding. LLMs also tend to make inferences that a human would not necessarily make, based on its training with other data (even when you instruct it to only work with the information provided in the project). We previously referred to AI chatbot 'moderators' acting like a novice moderator, the same can be said at times with analysis, especially with some of the inferences being made. The experienced qualitative practitioner's ability to frame a learning in a business context still feels a very human endeavour. Even when AI analysis appears accurate on the surface, its lack of contextual grounding means it may miss the deeper, more strategic interpretations that clients value most.

Of course, language models can analyse language quite well but understand meaning less well. The experienced qualitative practitioner, as we highlighted in Chapter 1, can understand someone's context – the often hidden forces shaping their responses, spot the contradictions, the tone, the body language etc to uncover what they mean, not just what they say. As qualitative practitioners, we know never to take what someone says purely at face value. While language models continually improve, the subtlety required to interpret nuanced cultural and situational contexts remains a distinctly human skill.

Conclusion

In summary, AI assisted analysis, in our experience, can't come close to that of a skilled human – because it analyses language and not meaning. That's not to say it's not useful - we currently see four use cases:

- Analysing standalone textual data, such as social media content or customer reviews, where text alone represents the entire dataset

- Quickly summarising conversational surveys or AI chatbot–led interviews

- Supporting standardised analysis and reporting on international projects, especially where transcripts are used in a non–native language

- As a supportive analysis assistant, to do tightly defined analyses, under the guidance of an experienced qualitative researcher (as used in our pilot)

We all differ in how we approach analysis. Self-experimentation is necessary to understand the models well enough to create your own use cases and workflows.

One area we're keen to explore further is AI's potential in analysing visual materials collected through pre-tasks or online communities, or perhaps even supporting semiotic analysis of categories or visual social media data. We're seeing other agencies experiment with this, and it's an area we plan to explore.

Deliverables Reinvented

How to upgrade reporting using AI-powered tools — from visual storytelling to dynamic assets.

In this chapter, we explore what I believe is one of the most exciting and perhaps overlooked areas for innovation available to qualitative researchers today - our deliverables.

Our deliverables are what our clients are left with, and ultimately what create change within our clients. As qualitative practitioners, we've long recognised the power of storytelling, even before it became fashionable. Good deliverables bring you close to participants and inspire and incite you to act.

It's true that some research agencies (for many years) have come up with innovative ways to deliver their insights. However, for many, the default deliverable remains the traditional static PowerPoint deck. In this article, I'll offer some ideas on new possibilities that we see through AI advancements.

I'll cover three key areas:

1. Improving current visualisation workflows to efficiently create more impactful presentations.

2. Exploring innovative ways to deliver and embed insights, aligning with how modern audiences consume and interact with content.

3. Extending the strategic value of our deliverables by cross-referencing existing knowledge and highlighting future opportunities.

Streamlining and Improving Current Workflows

Anyone who has spent long hours creating PowerPoint presentations from scratch knows the challenges well — time-consuming largely manual processes, repetitive visual elements, and often limited creative scope due to creeping deadlines. But today we have AI-powered tools that can dramatically streamline this workflow, making presentations quicker, more creative, and impactful. "Automation? No thank you," you might say. But please bear with me.

One tool I've found particularly impressive is Gamma. With Gamma, qualitative researchers can quickly transform textual reports or outlines into visually engaging presentations. There are two straightforward workflows for researchers:

When Speed is More Important

Feeding a topline text summary directly into Gamma for immediate visualisation. This is particularly useful when you have used AI for your analysis and gives the potential to produce a visual topline in hours, not days. This option gives less initial control over the slide production - however all slides are easy to work with and adjust (once you have got used to working with Gamma).

When Control is More Important

Creating a text outline of the slides and then giving the outline to Gamma to work with. This is a great way to get 'the story' clear in your head before visualising - two stages that often get collapsed when under time pressure. If you have a text topline already available, then optionally you can use ChatGPT (or similar) to help create a first draft of the outline, from which you can then iteratively work with ChatGPT to finalise.

ChatGPT Image Upgrade

We've all used stock images that are clichéd or just don't communicate quite what we are trying to say. The recent ChatGPT update, which integrates DALL·E fully into the platform, is a major upgrade and can help solve this problem. Forget the gimmicks — we've all probably seen on our LinkedIn feeds its outputs of action figures and Ghibli-style animation — it has some seriously useful new functionality. You can easily create infographics, photorealistic images and seamlessly combine different visual elements.

Want that logo on that building? Sure! Got the ideal image of a person but want to place her in a new setting? No problem! Want to change her attire to look more casual? You got it!

I believe there is an opportunity here to create distinctive brand assets which can get re-used. Imagine creating an image of a persona, which the client loves and wants to re-use to embed in the organisation. Here is an example I created below (purely fictional):

May — The Striving Self-Healer

Age: 42
Location: Bangkok
Occupation: Freelance Graphic Designer
Marital Status: Married, one child
(~60,000 THB/month household income)

Psychographics & Beliefs
- Tries to eat organic and cook at **home**, but often slips due to work deadlines
- Has a yoga mat gathering dust, but intends to use it weekly
- Visits an alternative medicine practitioner more than mainstreeam doctors
- Keeps a health journal daily

Aspirational | Real

…I know what I need to do feel better— I just can't seem to do it

Firstly, the creation of photo-realistic images conveys the sense of a real person. Using other tools, this person can also be brought to life and interacted with. This can bring 'consumer closeness' to a new level.

Exploring New, Innovative Ways to Deliver and Embed Insights

Beyond simply improving current workflows, AI tools give us completely new and creative ways to deliver insights. It's not just about being more efficient or tech-savvy — there's a deeper reason why we need to rethink our deliverables. Stakeholders today are overloaded with information and short on time. To truly land insights, we must match the formats and styles they naturally engage with — interactive, visual, personalised. Deliverables that speak their language are more likely to be acted upon, shared across teams, and remembered long after the debrief.

These approaches might not yet be mainstream, but for qualitative researchers open to experimentation, they represent significant potential for differentiation and impact.

GPT-Based Deliverables – Interactive Reports & Personas

One area we are already seeing the industry embrace is creating custom GPTs (in ChatGPT) to deliver interactive reports and/or personas. These are relatively easy to set up and can significantly deepen stakeholder engagement with insights. Rather than passively receiving static reports, clients can directly interact with the reports or personas, through dynamic conversational exchanges. This approach can make insights more memorable, personalised for different individuals, and ultimately more actionable. If you want to experience how this works, we've created a Custom GPT for this report.

Video

Many qualitative researchers are already leveraging participant videos effectively in their presentations, typically for participant quotes or observational insights. However, modern text-to-video tools like Runway, Leonardo or Luma now make it possible to add a new level of creativity to transform textual insights into visually compelling video narratives. This shift reflects broader changes in how we all consume content — think TikTok, Instagram Reels, and short-form educational videos. These formats are sticky, emotionally resonant, and designed for sharing — exactly the qualities we want in our insights.

Another fascinating development is the use of multilingual video avatars, created via platforms such as Synthesia and HeyGen. Again, this represents an exciting area for experimentation to determine effective use cases. Here are some scenarios we could see this being useful:

1. Earlier, we discussed creating a photorealistic persona. Imagine now bringing that persona to life - a lifelike avatar describing her life, her aspirations, her stresses and the tensions between her aspirational and real behaviour.

2. Presentation delivery - in global studies, an avatar can be used to 'present' key insights, the main advantage being that the avatar (unlike most humans) can present in all major languages, making this an attractive option for global studies.

Something Quirkier...

Finally, some more experimental formats that might be fun to explore - podcasts and interactive quizzes. Automated podcasts, though still experimental in qualitative research delivery, offer clients and stakeholders an accessible and convenient way to engage deeply with insights (on the morning commute?). Using AI summarisation tools like Notebook LM, podcasts can be produced quickly, efficiently, and engagingly.

Want to experience this? We've created two versions of a podcast for this book - one you can interact with, and the other just listen to.

Interactive quizzes similarly provide stakeholders with a gamified, engaging method to reinforce key insights, ensuring deeper internalisation and prompting practical action. These can easily be created using ChatGPT or similar platforms.

While these tools offer exciting new possibilities, it's important to approach them with a balanced view. Not all clients will immediately embrace AI-generated content or avatars. Budget, data security, and legal compliance (especially around synthetic media) may be limiting factors. Experimentation is key — but so is dialogue with clients about what adds value and feels credible to their stakeholders.

Extending Value – Cross-Referencing and Future-Proofing Insights

We see a third opportunity. Deliverables can move beyond purely project-based outputs and deliver additional strategic value by contextualising insights and highlighting future opportunities. AI tools enable qualitative researchers to swiftly cross-reference their findings against existing research, greatly enriching the context and strategic depth of deliverables. This may of course be the remit of the client researcher, but presents opportunities for agencies, with a body of work already in place for a client. As an example, it is quite simple to set up a custom GPT, or a Notebook LM, to store all knowledge (although there are limits on the number of documents). With many LLMs offering agentic Deep Research functionality (including ChatGPT and Perplexity), primary research can also be contextualised within available public secondary data. Again, an opportunity to experiment and see what's possible.

AI tools can also help suggest unanswered questions or future research opportunities arising from current findings. This continuous integration and learning reinforce the strategic value of qualitative research, maintaining relevance and encouraging long-term client engagement.

Another powerful capability is facilitating the transition from qualitative exploration to quantitative measurement. AI tools can be used as an aid to questionnaire development, ensuring the correct language is used and referencing house styles. Synthetic respondents can also be generated from the qualitative study to pilot and refine the questionnaire (in cases where a pilot with humans isn't feasible). The intended spirit once again is highlighting the possible and encouraging researchers to experiment to see what works for them.

The Future of Qualitative Deliverables

Qualitative deliverables, at their core, are powerful storytelling tools designed to inform, inspire, and support evidence-based decision making. They way we engage with and consume information is evolving rapidly evolving - shorter attention spans, reduced reading time and a growing preference for visual and interactive content (this is why this book is also offered as an interactive podcast or custom GPT).

If you've made it this far in a largely text based article – well done! There are several AI tools that enable new possibilities, from creating more efficient workflows, to truly delivering something new and innovative and to amplify the impact and strategic value of our work.

Ultimately, innovative qualitative deliverables represent a significant strategic advantage, enabling us to better connect insights to action and meaningfully embed them within client organisations. As qualitative researchers, embracing these innovations ensures our insights remain compelling, impactful, and indispensable in an increasingly digital and interactive world.

Maintaining your #original voice

By: Dave McCaughan
davidcmccaughan@gmail.com

Guest article on staying authentic in an era of AI-generated sameness

This final chapter has been written by my friend and long-time collaborator, Dave McCaughan. Over to you Dave.....

Hey thanks Craig for asking me to be a part of this important discussion.

Context: almost exactly a decade ago I left the corporate world to freelance and got a project from Shiseido that involved doing research in the USA, China, France and Italy... with no time and little budget. Fortunately, a friend introduced me to an AI-driven platform that uses the whole of the internet as what we now fashionably call a synthetic audience. I was able to do in-depth studies on key issues in all four markets in a week. Detailed analysis of what were the key narratives driving the category, the brands, the reputation of Japan in each market and more.

GREAT results and a great response from the client who used the study to re-write a key strategy document.

BUT even in that first involvement with an AI platform (it was Significance Systems who I still partner with) I learnt my most valuable lesson. How we used the platform and more importantly how I explained the platform and even more importantly how I presented the results and even more importantly how I used it to create ideas for the clients needed to be done in my own style... my original voice.

Be different, explain different, analyse different.

Because qual research, at least in my 30 years practicing it, has always been about how the practitioner originally voices technique, findings and applications.

Now my own history of being an "AI" unit goes way back. I started my working life as a public librarian in Sydney*. Near a dozen years working the "reference" desk, which actually meant having people, mostly kids, asking me endless questions, and expecting an answer. Just like Google, or GPT or Perplexity or whatever AI platform you are using right now to find out exactly who I am.

And what I learnt... style! Answering a question is good, doing it in a way that people remember is better. Attention, response, memorability. Isn't that what we want as practitioners?

Or maybe we should start with the move from what was "secondary" to now what is primary qualitative research.

Over a decade ago we started to see a number of excellent AI (or more correctly LLM) driven platforms come on the market that allowed us to enter a subject, qualified by country and language, that then scan, read and analyse the whole of the internet for anything mentioning the narrative around that subject. Platforms like Significance Systems or SQREEM. Not social media monitoring, which of course is actually just a poll of those that choose to react... qualitative tools that drew on all internet-based content as a proxy for human knowledge.

Literally reading millions of pieces of content on say TESLA in Japan, or "Coming beauty trends" globally or whatever. And getting reports that told us what was happening with the subject, how it related to other subjects, what emotions were being driven, what was the future of the subject, how would it increase or decrease in relevance. All in context of a specific market, language, background.

More learned colleagues would be able to explain better than I but I know enough to have recognised that the seemingly new and trendy term "synthetic audience" is actually about something that has been around for statisticians for decades and as a concept for centuries. Using collected data to project what people might think. Old news. As always of heightened interest only when a new technology makes it maybe more accessible.

Now in reality new "artificials", or technologies that allow for human intelligence enhancement, have always been greeted with cynicism by "the learned".

Socrates raged against the idea of a uniform alphabet being taught in schools because he felt it would "limit original thinking and only encourage copying", the intellectual "letter writers" of the late 15th century saw the printing press as a true threat to the value of new thinking and interpretation because it just made reading other ideas easier, again limiting creativity. The same with say "crib notes" when I was in high school all those decades ago, and of course the same with the introduction of the internet.

Similarly, we now see debate raging about the use of various tools in the qual research world. AI-driven moderators guides, virtual analysis, summaries, translations, facial tracking, reports writing… heck, Craig has covered it all.

None, in my experience, are perfect. All are good to experiment with. Learn from. Trial. After all, qual research has been using tech to enhance itself well since the first time someone used audio tape recordings to listen back to interviews, or the guys at my old company, McCann, invented eye tracking, or how amazing it was in the early 90s when I first used edited video to create a "report" of a qual project.

IT IS NOT THE TECH that matters.

What matters is HOW you use it. Yes, you can try to be the first to use a new tool, someone else will have done it already. But you can be the first to use it differently.

Try this:

- Don't worry about how to prompt (copy someone else's guide)
- Don't get carried away with efficiencies (everyone is doing that)
- Focus on being different
- Use and create new jargon, overlay multiple techniques, re-write any report in a way that seems thought provoking for its style as much as its content
- Please continue to use human interaction and intuition to aid and increase the value of AI tools (no platform will ever make the leap from the moderators guide that a good qual researcher will make, or draw a conclusion from my writing style as to what I am afraid of)

AI is not the problem for qual research. Just the latest in a loooooong line of tools. Those that win do it with an **#originalvoice.**

Use the tools. BUT make sure you use your voice to be original.

*Full disclosure: as a trained librarian who only moved into the market research world in my early 30s I never could and still cannot understand why what we call "secondary research" is called secondary when logically it should be the first and usually primary or only needed form of research. And of course, it is purely qualitative. Because whenever you read a collection of reports, documents, articles, books and analyse them it is all a qualitative experience. Valuable lessons in my near thirty years doing 100s of qual projects across Asia.

Wrap-Up & Looking Ahead

Innovative ways to experience the Campaign and how to stay involved

Thank you for reading *The Campaign for Real Qual*. This project began as a personal experiment — a way to explore what's happening to qualitative research as AI and research tech reshape the landscape. It's been energising to see so many people engage with the ideas, challenge them, and contribute their own perspectives.

If there's one thing this journey has made clear, it's that many of today's AI tools still don't truly understand how qualitative researchers work. That's something I'd like to change. Over the coming months, we'll be experimenting with building new tools — designed specifically for qual practitioners — tools that respect the complexity of what we do, and help us do it better.

If you're a fellow practitioner who wants to test ideas, co-create features, or simply share frustrations about what's missing from today's AI tools, I'd love to hear from you.
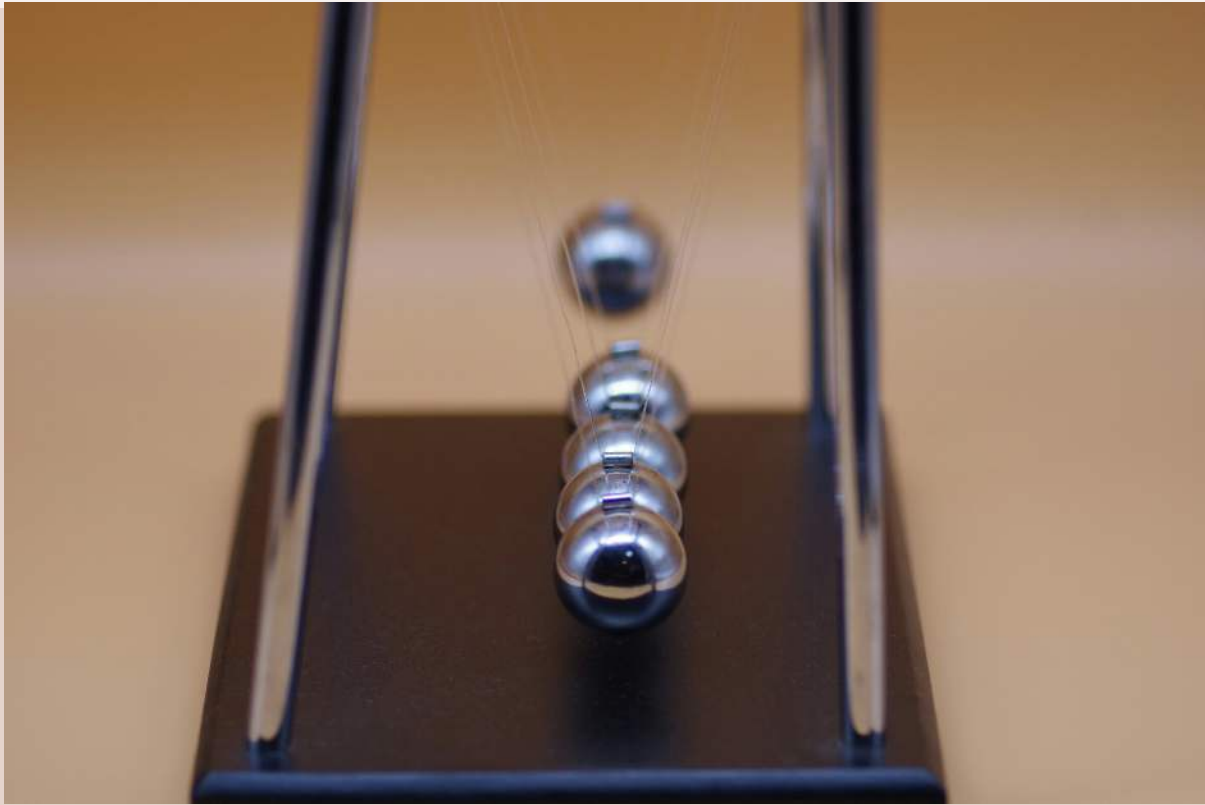
> "Innovation happens when people are free to think, experiment and speculate."
>
> **MATT RIDLEY**

If you're curious to explore more:

🎧 Listen to the interactive podcast (Google account needed) or listen as a standard podcast

🤖 Try the Custom GPT trained on this eBook

💬 Join the LinkedIn Group – AI Experiments in Qualitative Research

This campaign doesn't end here. It continues in the work we all do — in how we ask questions, interpret meaning, and hold space for depth in an increasingly automated world.

And of course, if you or your team need support with qualitative research or cultural insight in Asia — in any capacity — do reach out. That remains the core of what we do at FUEL Asia.

Let's keep the momentum going.

About the Author – Craig Griffin

LinkedIn Profile

Craig Griffin is a UK national with 25+ years of global experience in market research and insight, based out of Asia since 2003. He previously held MD roles with GfK, InsightAsia & MESH Experience. In 2016, he founded his research consultancy FUEL Asia, specialising in qualitative research and cultural insight across Asia, through a strong network of best-in-class moderators, recruiters and translators.

With a western upbringing, a formal education in both marketing and social anthropology, professionally trained in semiotics and a research career largely in Asia, Craig acts as a bridge between cultures for Western clients and agencies wanting to understand Asian markets.

Craig has actively contributed to the research community through voluntary roles with ESOMAR and the Thailand Market Research Society, sharing his extensive knowledge and experience.

He regularly speaks at Conferences and writes articles about market research. In January 2025, he partnered with Insight Platforms to launch the Asia Digital Insights Summit, the first dedicated research tech conference for Asian audiences.

Currently, Craig is exploring how AI can be used effectively in qualitative research – not just quicker, but better.

Craig holds an MSc in Social Anthropology from London School of Economics, a BA (Hons) in Retail Marketing from Manchester Metropolitan University and a Post Graduate Diploma in Market Research from De Montfort University, Leicester. He has also taught Research Design at postgraduate level at School of Global Studies, Thammasat University.

About FUEL Asia

FUEL Asia is a qualitative research and cultural insight consultancy founded by Craig Griffin in Bangkok in 2016. With 25+ years of experience in Asia, Craig built FUEL to serve global clients who want more than just answers — they want clarity, cultural relevance, and strategic direction.

We specialise in qualitative research and cultural insight across all major Asian markets, with expertise spanning mobile ethnography, online communities, semiotics, and in-person fieldwork. Our work is grounded in social science and designed for commercial impact — helping clients unlock deep understanding and apply it with confidence.

Our model is lean, senior-led, and network-driven. We curate expert local teams — moderators, recruiters, and translators — based on two decades of trusted relationships, ensuring quality execution and cultural depth across markets. All projects are personally led by Craig, ensuring insight quality and seamless communication with Western clients and agencies.

We don't just run research — we help clients navigate complexity. FUEL integrates behavioural science, anthropology, and marketing expertise to make insights not just clear, but actionable. From foundational exploration to concept development, communication testing, or cultural strategy — we design research that inspires growth.

In 2025, FUEL co-founded the Asia Digital Insights Summit with Insight Platforms, the region's first dedicated conference on research technology. As early adopters of online qual and now active experimenters with AI, we're helping define what "real qual" looks like in an AI-driven world — not just faster, but better.

If you're looking for a trusted partner for qualitative research in Asia — or exploring how to evolve your qual practice — we'd love to hear from you.

Bangkok-based | Asia-wide | Let's talk
craig@fuelwithinsight.com |
 www.fuelwithinsight.com

Let's Stay Connected

Podcast – Listen & interact with the Campaign (through Notebook LM) or just listen

🤖 *Custom GPT* – Explore the Campaign interactively

🔗 LinkedIn Group: AI Experiments in Qualitative Research h

📬 *Contact Craig Griffin*

Email: craig@fuelwithinsight.com
Website: www.fuelwithinsight.com
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/craig-griffin-thailand/

Thanks for reading. Let's keep the momentum going.