

A point of view

Beyond Qual and Quant: Five modes of inquiry

Beyond Qual and Quant: Five Modes of Inquiry | We Live Context

Introduction

In the Age of Intelligence we have moved beyond the constraints and limitations of traditional market research. The idea of ‘Quant or Qual’ is well past its sell-by date but what replaces it?

This article sets out an exciting new way of using market research based on what researchers can actually do with the tools now at our disposal.

In it we cover:-

01 Why the traditional “qual vs quant” divide no longer fits modern research

02 The five proposed modes of inquiry: Ask, Listen, Watch, Contextualise, and Experiment

03 How documentary filmmaking provides a useful analogy for each research mode

04 How AI-powered and emerging research methods fit into the new framework

05 Why effective research often combines multiple modes within a single study

06 What this shift means for research design, evidence standards, and commissioning research

1 Ask

2 Listen

3 Watch

4 Contextualise

5 Experiment

Why we are retiring “qual” and “quant”

The language of qualitative and quantitative research was built for a world in which words and numbers came from different instruments, at different scales, with different sample sizes, and answered different kinds of questions. That world has gone. A conversational AI survey produces words at the scale of a tracking study. A video diary produces structured emotional codings alongside open-ended narrative. Semiotic analysis runs across thousands of images in an afternoon. Synthetic respondents produce survey-shaped data without a survey.

The qual/quant divide cannot carry the weight of these methods, and forcing them into one bucket or the other obscures more than it reveals. We propose a different framing - not a new taxonomy of tools, but a description of what researchers are actually doing when they do research.

There are, we think, five of these. We call them modes of inquiry. They are not categories of method; they are stances the researcher takes toward the world.

Documentary film-making, which has wrestled with most of these stances for the best part of a century, offers a useful set of parallels - and we draw on them below to anchor each mode in something readers will already recognise. The fifth mode, Experiment, takes us out of documentary entirely and into reality television, for reasons that will become clear. A note of caution: the analogies make the stances easy to see, but tend to imply that application is easier than it is.

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The five modes

01	Ask.	We pose questions; they answer.
02	Listen.	They speak; we attend.
03	Watch.	We observe what people and institutions do.
04	Contextualise.	We read the world around the person.
05	Experiment.	We change something and measure what happens.



01 Ask.

We pose questions; they answer.

This is the stance of Louis Theroux or Jon Ronson - the camera rolling, the question posed, the long pause held until the answer comes. The researcher initiates the exchange and sets the frame. Whatever the instrument - a focus group, a survey, a one-on-one interview, an AI-moderated conversational study, or a query to a synthetic respondent model - the defining feature is that we have decided what to ask, and we are interpreting answers given inside that frame.

Theroux's gift is that the questions feel artless; the discipline is in their construction, in knowing when to ask the next one and when to wait. Good Ask research has the same quality.

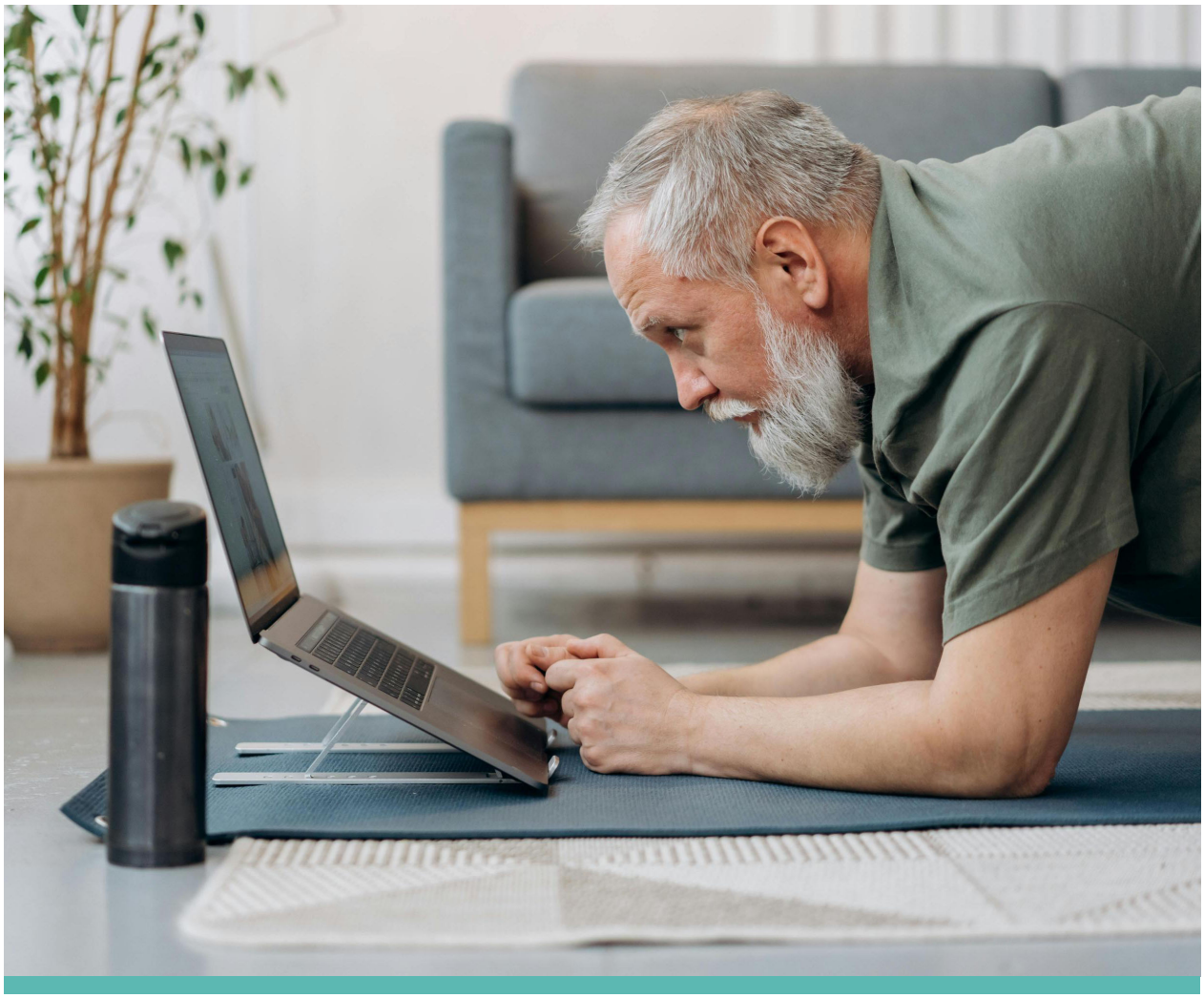


02 Listen.

They speak; we attend.

This is the stance of cinéma vérité and the fly-on-the-wall tradition - the Maysles brothers, Direct Cinema, the filmmaker who has resolved not to prompt and to trust that what people say unprompted is itself the story. The data exists because people are already talking - in reviews, complaints, communities, support tickets, social posts, podcasts, press.

The researcher's job is to receive and make sense, not to elicit. The discipline of this mode is resisting the urge to ask, and accepting that the act of choosing where to point the microphone (which subject, which platform, which time window) is where the craft lives.

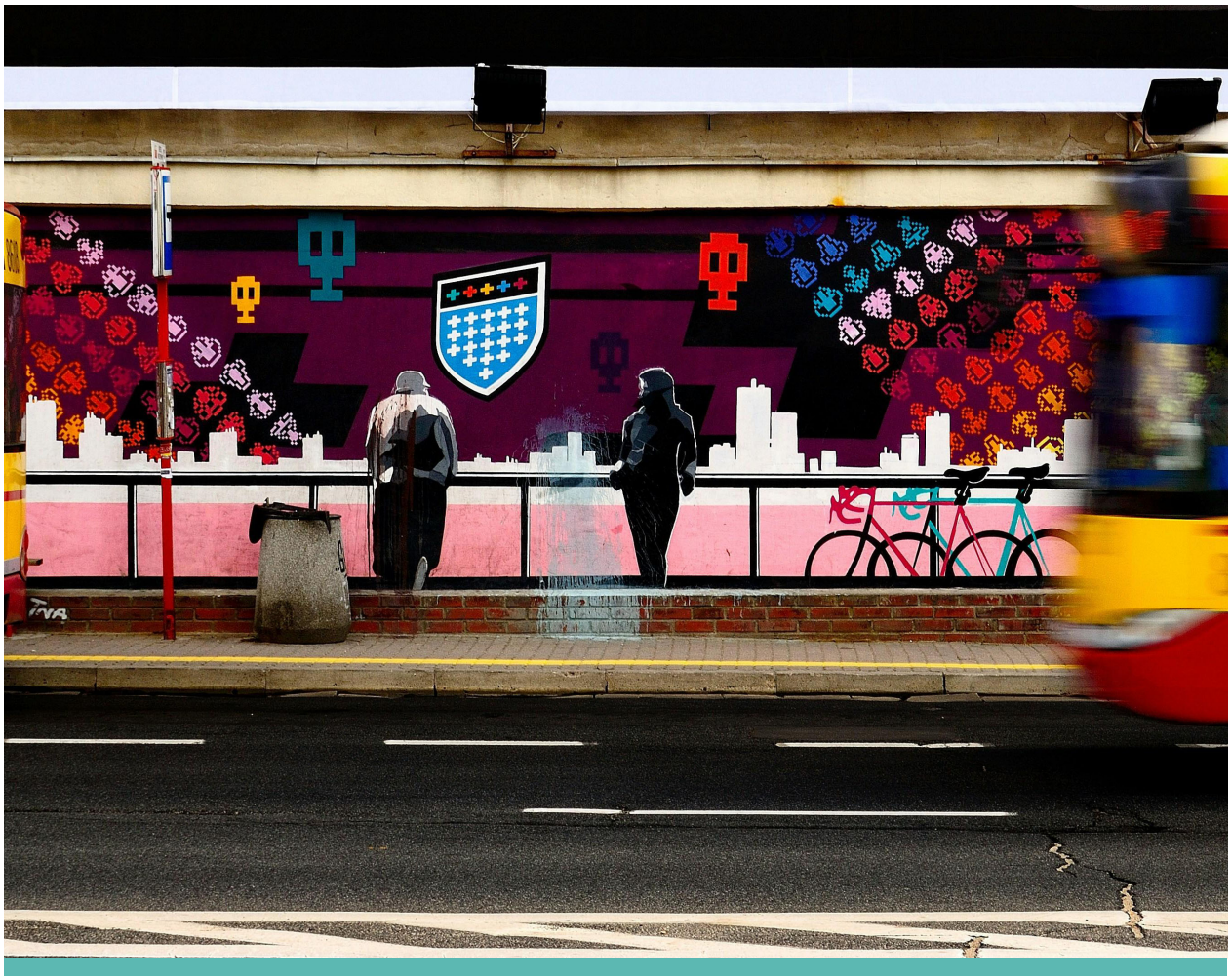


03 Watch.

We observe what people and institutions do.

This is the stance of Adam Curtis in HyperNormalisation - assembling archive footage of politicians, press conferences, crowds, and institutions, and finding meaning in what people did on camera rather than in what they said about themselves.

The Watch mode is about reading behaviour, not about being physically present with a camera. In market research this means in-home ethnography, shop-alongs, usability sessions, eye-tracking, passive metering, video diaries, behavioural log analysis. The premise is that people are unreliable witnesses to their own live and observation is often a truer reflection than what they say they do - and that the gap between the two is itself one of the most valuable insights research can deliver.



04 Contextualise.

We read the world around the person.

This is the stance of the foreign correspondent who has lived in a country long enough to stop reporting events and start reporting the place - the journalist who can tell you what a particular kind of silence means in Tehran, or why a price-board in Buenos Aires reads the way it does this month. The unit of analysis here is not the individual but the cultural and category environment they inhabit.

Semiotics, cultural analysis, trend work, category audits, competitive teardowns, expert interviews. Modern AI-assisted semiotic and visual tools AI tools that can read images and cultural artefacts have made this mode dramatically more scalable, but the stance is unchanged: we are decoding signals from content and culture, not from people directly. The correspondent's authority comes from immersion; the semiotician's comes from rigour. Both are reading the world, not the person.



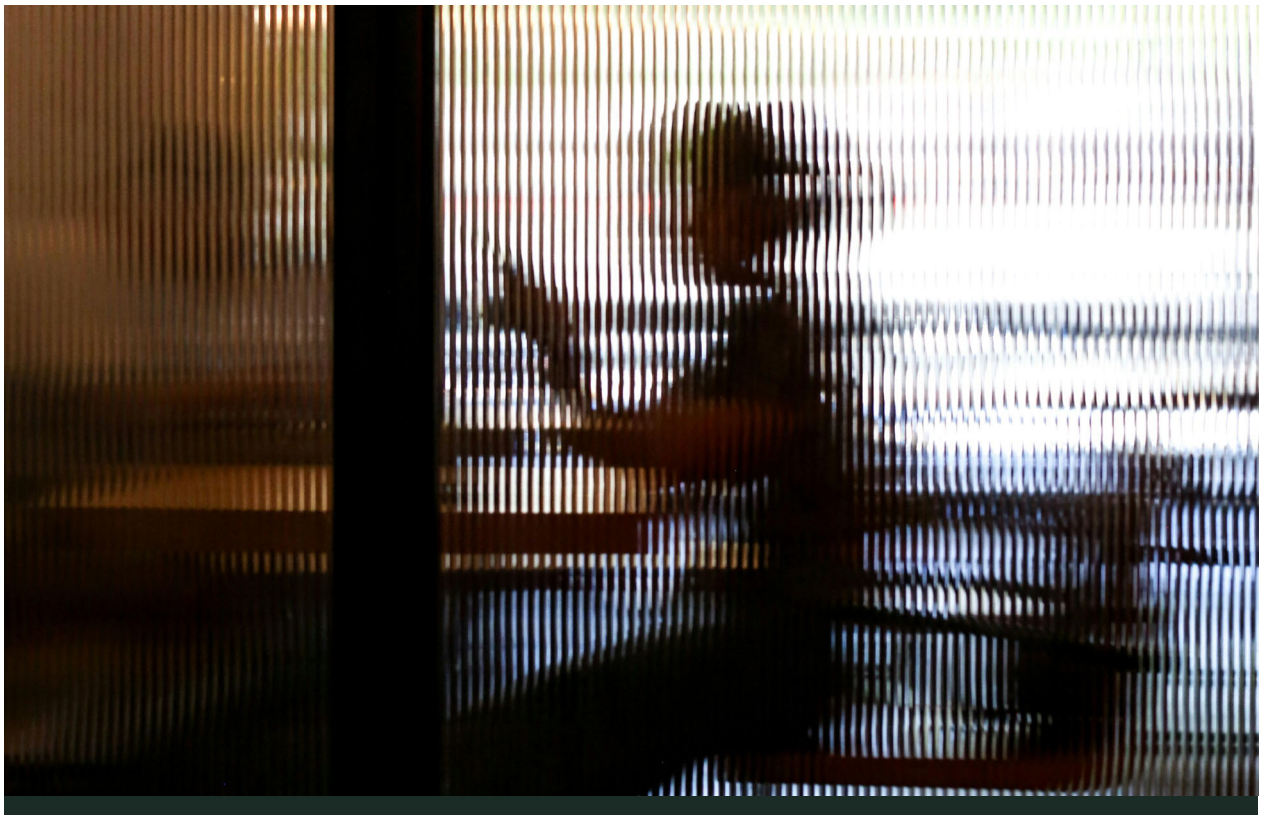
05 Experiment.

We change something and measure what happens.

For this one we leave documentary behind and reach for reality television - because the defining feature of Experiment is what documentary refuses to do: intervene. Think of The Traitors. The producers do not simply point cameras at a group of strangers and see what happens; they design the conditions. They assign secret roles, isolate the group in a controlled environment, introduce structured games, and observe how trust and deception unfold under those constraints. The show is, in effect, a behavioural experiment dressed up as entertainment - a controlled manipulation designed to surface responses that would not be visible in ordinary life. The Apprentice works the same way at a smaller scale: each week's task is an identical stimulus given to every contestant, and the interest lies in the variation of response.

05 Experiment, continued

That is the Experiment stance. The researcher introduces a manipulation - a change to price, copy, layout, formulation, exposure - and observes the outcome. A/B tests, in-market trials, controlled lab experiments, simulated test markets, agent-based market simulations. This is the only mode that supports genuine causal claims, and it is the mode whose modern tooling - rapid digital experimentation, synthetic market modelling - has perhaps changed the fastest. It is also the mode whose stance is fundamentally different from the other four: the researcher is no longer attending to the world but acting on it, and recording the response. The discipline lies in designing the conditions cleanly, so that what we observe is the effect of the manipulation and not the effect of producers whispering in someone's ear off-camera.



This is the only mode that supports genuine causal claims.

These are mindsets, not boxes

The most important thing about these five modes is that they describe what the researcher is doing, not what tool is in their hand. The same tool, in different hands or at different moments in a study, can operate in more than one mode. This is a feature of good research, not a flaw in the framework.

Take conjoint analysis as a worked example. A naive taxonomy would file it under “quantitative methods” and stop there. The mindset view is more interesting. When we hand a respondent a series of trade-off screens and record their choices, we are unambiguously in Ask - we have set the frame, the attributes, and the levels; we are recording responses within that frame.

But the whole point of conjoint is that we have systematically varied those attributes in order to isolate the causal contribution of each one to choice. That is Experiment - a controlled manipulation designed to attribute effect. A skilled conjoint practitioner is moving fluently between both stances inside a single study, and the analysis depends on understanding that they are doing both.

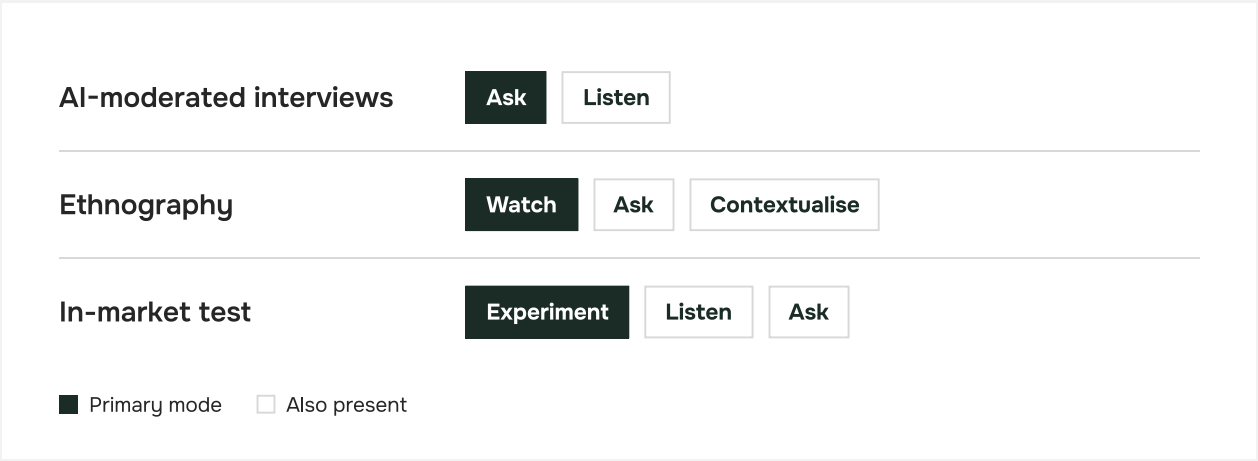
Conjoint analysis: one study, two stances

01 Ask
we have set the frame, the attributes, and the levels

+

05 Experiment
a controlled manipulation designed to attribute effect

Conjoint is the clearest example, but it is not the only one. AI-moderated interviews are primarily Ask, but the way participants speak - pace, hesitation, emotional register, what they volunteer when not asked - is genuine Listen data hiding inside an Ask method. Ethnography is Watch by default, but the conversation that happens in the kitchen while you watch someone cook is Ask, and the artefacts on their fridge door are Contextualise. A well-designed in-market test is Experiment, but the social listening you run alongside it to understand reception is Listen, and the post-test interviews are Ask.



The mindset framing makes this fluidity legible rather than embarrassing. We are not failing to file methods cleanly - we are recognising that good research moves between modes deliberately, driven by experience and curiosity, and that being explicit about which mode we are in at any given moment is what lets us make defensible claims from the data.

Where the modern tools fit

The framework's real test is whether it accommodates the tools that broke the qual/quant divide. Briefly:

01
Ask

AI-moderated interviews and conversational surveys are Ask methods. They scale Ask in ways traditional interviewing could not, but the stance is unchanged: we set the questions, they answer.

01
Ask

Synthetic respondents are also Ask. We pose a question and receive a response within a frame we have set. The respondent happens to be a model rather than a person, which raises serious and separate questions about what the answers correspond to - but it does not change the mode. Naming synthetic methods honestly as Ask forces the right comparison: against other Ask methods, on the criteria that matter for Ask (representativeness, validity, calibration to ground truth).

02
Listen

AI-driven theme extraction across unstructured text, social and review corpora is Listen at scale. The mode is identical to traditional social listening; the instrument is more powerful.



03 Watch

Multimodal video and emotion analysis is Watch, even when the video was recorded by the participant themselves. We are attending to behaviour and expression, not to articulated answers.

04 Contextualise

AI-assisted semiotic and cultural analysis is Contextualise. The artefacts are now images, frames, and content at scale rather than a curated set of magazine covers, but the stance - decoding cultural signal - is the discipline it has always been.

05 Experiment

Synthetic market simulation and agent-based modelling are Experiment. We are introducing a manipulation (a price change, a new SKU, a competitive entry) and observing modelled response.

Each of these new tools earns its place in the toolkit by being honestly named - and the mindset frame makes honest naming easier than the old qual/quant binary ever did.

Why this matters for how we commission and consume research

01

Study design becomes a question of which modes the question requires, in what order, with what handoffs. "We need Listen first to surface the territory, then Ask at scale to size it, then Watch to validate the self-report, then Experiment to test the intervention" is a more useful conversation than "we need a qual phase and then a quant phase."

02

Tool choice becomes downstream of mode choice. Once you know you need to Ask a hard-to-reach B2B audience about a new concept, the choice between recruiting twenty real respondents, running an AI-moderated study at scale, or querying a synthetic panel becomes a comparison on the criteria that matter for Ask - not a turf war between qual and quant teams.

03

The standards for evidence become mode-specific. Listen data should be judged on coverage and bias of the source material. Watch data on observer effects and coding reliability. Ask data on sample, frame, and instrument. Experiment data on design validity and effect size. Contextualise data on the rigour of the interpretation. These are different standards, and the mindset framework makes the differences visible instead of hiding them behind "qual" and "quant."

04

Synthetic methods get held to the right standard. Because they sit inside Ask, they are judged against other Ask methods — not as a magical new category exempt from the usual questions about whose answers these are and what they correspond to.

A closing note

We are not arguing that the words qualitative and quantitative should disappear from the language overnight. They are useful shorthand, and most of the industry still uses them. But as a framework for thinking about the modern toolkit, they have run out of road.

The toolkit has changed. The language should change with it.

Replacing them with a description of what researchers actually do - ask, listen, watch, contextualise, experiment - gives us a vocabulary that fits the tools we now have, holds those tools to the right standards, and makes the genuinely fluid nature of good research design legible rather than awkward.



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