impact

ISSUE 44 JANUARY 2024

Using evidence & insight to make a difference

Meeting seldom heard and niche audiences where they are takes skill and a spot of creativity

In sharper focus

MRS™

MRS Evidence Matters™

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Impact is free to MRS members.
Subs: UK £50pa,
overseas £60pa

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Celebrating strengths

A January issue leader is perhaps a slightly unusual place to reflect on challenges. The first magazine of the year is typically a time to celebrate successes, not hurdles. Barriers. Setbacks.

I would argue that challenges are worth thinking about, and January is the perfect time to do it.

In society, it seems we have become more open to discussing difficulties. LinkedIn is suddenly full of people sharing their experiences and reflecting on how they overcame adversity. High-profile figures are slightly more open to being vulnerable and discussing things that have gone wrong. It's rare to see true vulnerability in business, however.

Journalist Elizabeth Day's 'How to Fail' podcast is one of my favourite listens, because she delves into a subject I think we tend to hear less about – not only the failures, but how interviewees including Bernie Sanders, Jane Goodall and Greta Thunberg have overcome their challenges.

Humans gravitate towards stories of adversity, because it suggests learning on the part of the individual, or organisation. Addressing it suggests honesty, pragmatism and a creative willingness to learn and move on.

On page 38, Liam Kay-McClean explores research industry career setbacks. We hear about some of the challenges individuals have faced, and how they addressed them, ultimately moving forward. As I said, to do that takes pragmatism. But the second part of that is learning – sometimes new skills are needed to address gaps you may not have realised were there.

One of the industry's most undervalued skills is communication. 'Never let the truth get in the way of a good story,' the cynical tabloid quip goes. But those working in insight know that the truth and a good story go hand in hand. They understand that research communication is as vital as the insight itself: a truth needs to be told to make the right things happen, at the right time. The most compelling insight risks being confined to the forgotten PowerPoints of history if it is not accompanied by the right communication. (A quick aside, on that note: the *Impact* and *Research Live* editorial team receive press releases daily from companies. Not enough of them are from research businesses.)

Drawing on the skills we already have can also help to reframe difficult challenges. This issue's report, the subject of our front cover, focuses on research with seldom heard and niche groups (page 20). In the report, Shazia Ali, founder of Mint Research, says: "What many may call a challenge or barrier to recruitment is not that at all, but an opportunity to use our skills as experts in connecting with people and to find a different way. We need to reframe the situation, research and how the individual is being approached."

Georgina White, director of customer experience and insight at Holland & Barrett, is an advocate for researchers honing their business skills. In an article on the retailer's approach to insight on page 28, she argues that without understanding how an organisation works, the challenges it faces, or how it needs to make money, insight teams will fail to make an impression.

It's January. A new start, and so the perfect time for an audit. Before rushing headlong into the year, why not take a moment to consider your strengths and your skills? You might also figure out whether it's time to sharpen your pencils and learn a few new ones. Happy new year.

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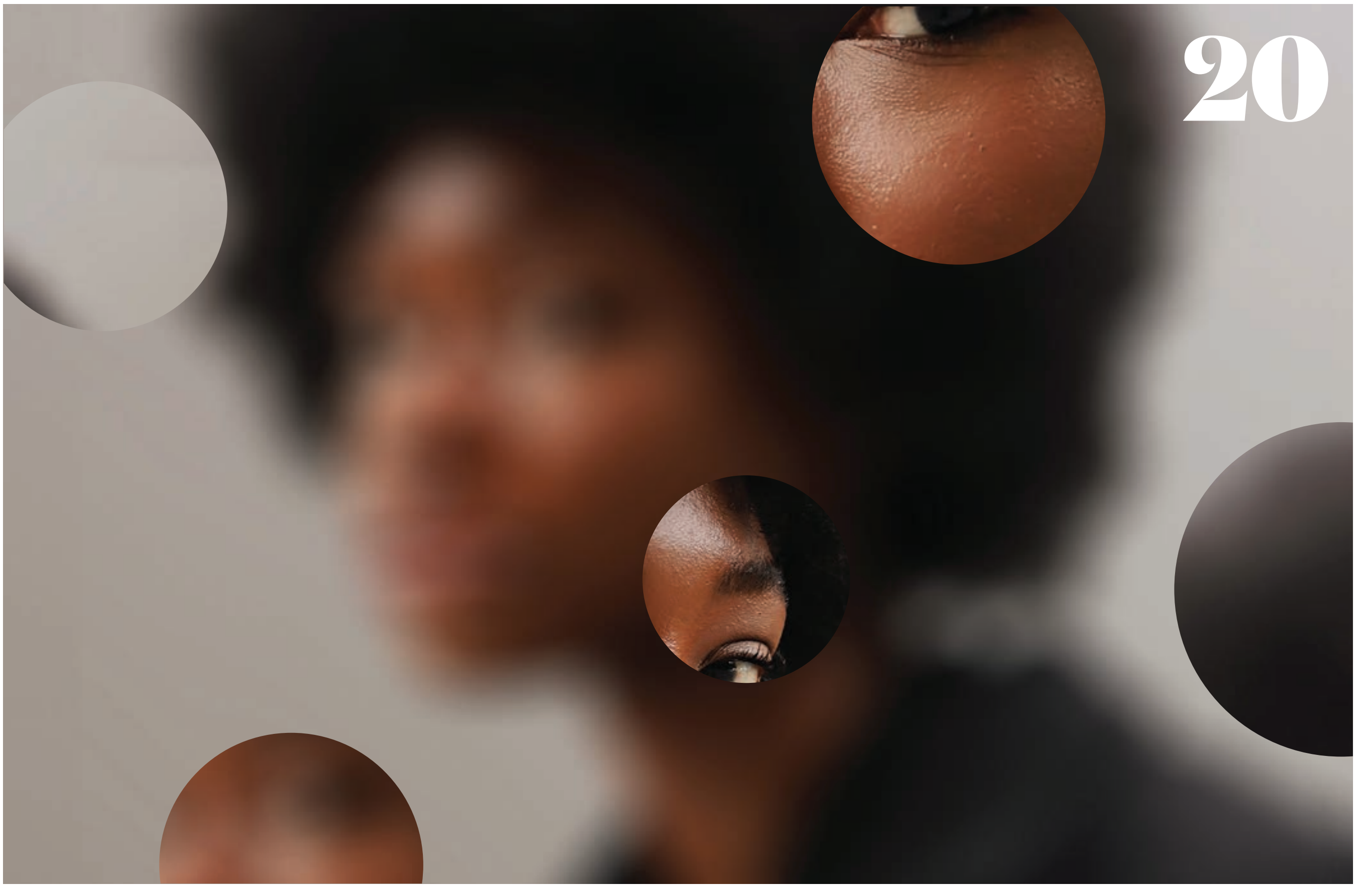

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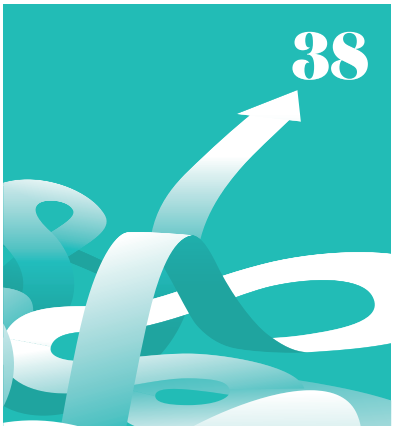

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Feel-good factor

There are a few fine exceptions – Volkswagen's 'Surprisingly ordinary prices' campaign, for example. Or Aldi's 'Like brands, only cheaper'. But there are markedly few great campaigns promoting low prices. This dearth of such work may reveal a wider misconception: that it takes a lot of work to build premium brands, whereas low prices speak for themselves.

I don't think they do.

Until a few years ago, I had always wanted to test something which would have been completely unethical, not to mention illegal. I wanted to put '50% extra free' on an item on sale in the shops... and then increase the price by 50% to see what the effect would be on sales. I wanted to see how much of the uplift was created by an actual reduction in price, and how much by the implication that there was a deal on offer – even in the absence of any material reduction. To perfect the experiment, you would also test an identical product that was 50% bigger at the original price, in the absence of any promotional flash.

Obviously, it was impossible to perform this experiment. But thankfully, someone I met at a dinner did the job for me. I had explained that I wanted to know what part of the uplift from promotions was emotional not economic, only for him to reply: "I do know the answer to that question." He had worked for a very large, packaged goods company, which will remain nameless. As he explained: "A few times a year, of all the thousands of promotions we run, once or twice we mistakenly put the price up by 50% on an item which says '50% extra free'."

"Wow," I said, hoping naively for some data. "I'm not going to share the data with you, obviously," he went on. "But you wouldn't believe how much money we make." So, even though I could never perform my experiment, I was at least partly vindicated. It seems that trumpeting a discount is bizarrely effective, even if there is no discount to be had.

Now, here's the thing, if you believe conventional economic theory – where people are trading off price and utility – you wouldn't expect to see such a market effect, because every time someone buys something, supposedly they're comparing the price they pay with the utility they gain. What this informal and technically illegal experiment shows is that isn't the case at all. They like the feel of a deal. Those 'three for £8' deals at M&S – do you add up the cost of the three items first? Me neither.

This brings me to Black Friday. A Which? report found that very few items are actually on sale on that date for a lower price than at some other point in the year. Prices are often ramped up beforehand and reduced with great fanfare. In purely economic terms, Black Friday ain't all that great. As I am writing this, an email arrived from a pen company offering two free refills if I spend £100 on pens. Seriously?

But that, I think, bears out my point. Black Friday succeeds effectively by creating emotional excitement around the idea of bargain hunting, rather than through real economic discounting. It is a time-limited 'festival of fomo' combined with other potent emotional cues: there's a lot of social proof with many people shopping simultaneously, creating the fear that if I don't buy that £100 pen, someone else will. It's the razzmatazz that's driving behaviour more than the savings themselves. Similarly, if Harrods reduced its prices by 50%, but didn't tell anybody, I think the uplift in sales would be remarkably small. What makes the sale work are the queues outside, the bags with 'sale' on and the narrow window of opportunity.

"Black Friday is a time-limited 'festival of fomo' combined with other potent emotional cues"

The psychology of low prices is just as interesting as the psychology of high price. Fifteen or so years ago, KFC in Australia was selling chips for $1, in a limited time promotion. The most effective way it found of promoting this was by imposing a limit: 'maximum four per customer'. Exploiting the idea of scarcity made the promotion seem much more valuable.

In many cases, businesses are guilty of reducing prices, expecting consumers to care or notice. Yet, in most cases, unless you make a noise, they really don't. Consequently, much of the effort businesses put into achieving operational efficiencies is wasted in the marketplace. Finance folk think that no marketing is needed because low prices speak for themselves. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As Black Friday shows, the way to get people to buy things is to make them excited by a low price, not just to offer low prices. As I put it recently, 'to economists, price is a number; to consumers, price is a feeling'.

World view

News, analysis and insights from around the globe, edited by Liam Kay

"Most people don't want to be polluting the air. But car ownership is very ideological"

(p9)

"People can't connect what is happening to them to policy issues"

(p14)

"The link between climate change and health is not straightforward"

(p10)

"There are 5.9 million Ukrainian refugees registered in Europe"

(p12)

"75% of London transport emissions are from road transport"

(p9)

"We wanted to give the impression of being sheltered in Europe"

(p12)

Mapping a new route

With London seeking a greener transport system, a study has examined the role of financial incentives in creating a more sustainable city. By Liam Kay-McClean

Transport in London has been big news over the past year. The expansion of the ultra-low emission zone to cover the city's outer boroughs has become a political football, and the mayor, Sadiq Khan, wants 80% of all journeys to be made by active or sustainable travel by 2041, requiring a 50% cut in car journeys every day.

Think tank Centre for London undertook research to examine the city's transport policies and explore whether changing the cost of transport might encourage people to switch from using their cars. "London, like every city in the world, is facing a climate crisis," says Millie Mitchell, senior researcher at Centre for London and co-author of the 'Moving with the times' report. "Transport is one of the largest-emitting sectors – it accounts for a quarter of greenhouse gas emissions in London and, of that quarter, 75% is road transport."

In addition to qualitative interviews with policymakers at different levels of government, the researchers carried out financial modelling, and modelled the impact of possible policies on nine typical individual and family personas, based on the Transport for London (TfL) classification of Londoners. The research also modelled the costs associated with a specific journey – such as trips to visit family or commuting.

To understand the costs for each persona, quantitative analysis was used to identify their most likely borough of residence, age, children, income, and the price of their cars.

Among the recommendations from the research was that the government and TfL should help people to know the cost of driving relative to other modes of transport, such as car clubs, trains, cycling and buses, and help residents find out about financial incentives of not owning a car.

The researchers also recommended emission- and distance-based road user charging – a hypothetical policy that would put in place a minimum charge, equivalent to at least a single bus fare, to keep driving more expensive than public transport. This policy is similar to the Ulez – whereby cars are taxed for not meeting emissions standards – but looks, instead, to tax those who are the heaviest road users or causing the most emissions.

"It is important that we don't consider that a financial policy will impact everyone in the same way," Mitchell explains, "but look at who are the winners and losers, and whether that is a fair and equitable outcome, as well as providing a sustainable outcome."

Infrastructure is key when discussing public transport and cycling, and researchers explored this in the modelled journeys analysis. "We can financially incentivise and make it easier for people to access alternative transport, and we absolutely should be doing that to make it fair and accessible. But if the infrastructure is not in place, you probably won't do it, even if it is more financially viable," says Mitchell.

Most importantly, she adds, politicians should not simply use the 'carrot' or the 'stick' approach when designing policy, and instead look to have a good mix of effective ideas that work in tandem to bring about a more sustainable transport environment.

Top five methods of transport in London:

40% - Car

31% - Walk

12% - Rail*

11% - Bus/tram

4% - Cycling

**London Underground/Overground/DLR/national*

Source: Transport for London, Travel in London Report 2022

Framing is key, given the car's position in society as a status symbol. Communication can also help people to understand the true cost of driving, which is often the most expensive transport option available. However, many people find it difficult to compare driving costs with public transport fares because of the differences in fuel consumption between vehicles.

Mitchell says: "Car ownership is very ideological – some people will see themselves as a car person or a bike person. It is important how we frame policies so people buy into them and don't see them as an attack on themselves."

As London continues working towards a more sustainable future and that 2041 transport target, these ideas will be to the fore. The question is whether they can take root among the public and policymakers.

Climate in context

Ethnographic research has explored different understandings of health and climate change in several countries globally, finding that one definition does not fit all. By Heidi Hasbrouck

The Wellcome Trust approached Ipsos with a challenge: motivate the public to take action on climate change through their own health. The organisation was planning to roll out a new communications and public engagement strategy, relying on key assumptions about how people worldwide understand 'health' and 'climate change'; how relevant these concepts are to themselves and their communities; and how much they prioritise personal health.

To grasp the public's perception, we recognised the need to step back and understand the contextual experiences of different communities in lower- and middle-income countries. We wanted to explore how these communities perceive health and climate change, and how these concepts fit into their lived realities.

Changing dialogue

The Wellcome Trust funds science and health research to promote knowledge and understanding of science and the value it brings. Within global health research, this dialogue has historically been top down, with the global north funding what it deemed necessary to support the global south. This is steeped in a colonial history of patronage, and centres one side's knowledge over another. It is now recognised that this funding model can further marginalise communities and disempower development, and does not always answer the questions or needs of the community that it is intended to serve. Wellcome is moving towards a dialogue-oriented approach, listening to those on the ground and recognising existing workarounds that can be built upon.

Methodology: a model to engage communities

We decided that a traditional qualitative research method would only cover values and perceived beliefs, without giving the necessary context. So, we designed a participative ethnographic approach to engage with communities on their own terms.

We hired local ethnographers in six countries – Brazil, South Africa, Kenya, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), South Korea, and Thailand – and they became the linchpins of our research, shaping its design and findings. This approach also offered an opportunity for our community ethnographers to engage with their wider communities on climate change and health, making the research itself an engagement tool.

Throughout the research process, we held remote analysis sessions with Wellcome's biological and social scientists, allowing us to build on each phase and incorporate their expertise into the emerging findings. Additionally, these discussions uncovered opportunities for the Wellcome Trust beyond the scope of the study.

During one analysis session, we noted three participants from different countries making connections between fertility and climate change:

"We don't even think that being pregnant with global warming affects them, [but] it affects the foetus because it's hot . . . someone was sending me a message a few minutes ago. . . 'Mam, I can't breathe, Mam, what must I do?' I'm like, 'the issue here is the environment.'" (Woman, South Africa)

One scientist's initial reaction was to correct them, as they did not believe that being pregnant at a time of global warming affects individuals directly. This led to a broader discussion among the scientists from different disciplines, untangling individuals' truths and exploring the concept of 'scientific proof'. As a result, the Wellcome Trust called for international scientific research to understand the links between heat and maternal and foetal health, building research from the ground up.

Redefining climate change, questioning the myths and rethinking the public's role

Our research found variations in the contextual understanding of climate change in different countries. For example, in Kenya, there is no direct translation for climate change, but people have noticed the shift in the environment. The impact of droughts on maize production is particularly prominent, leading participants to say: "The maize is dead." Similarly, in Thailand, there is no single word for climate change, but participants associate global warming with rice production and water quality. Climate change in Brazil is deeply political, conflicting with Brazilian values of progress and indigenous values of preservation.

The understanding of who causes climate change and how to solve it also varies across cultures. Some participants believe Allah won't allow climate change to become too severe, while others see it as God's punishment for human actions.

"I think this is also part of God's will. God sees that we have destroyed nature. He realises that we don't know how precious nature and air is." (Retired woman, South Korea)

These nuanced perspectives influenced the global monitor survey questionnaire, which removed the term 'climate change' and focused on experiential knowledge. Recognising the importance of cultural

"The public's role in addressing climate change is not homogeneous, even when considering local communities"

context, the Wellcome Trust aims to support global grassroots movements in tackling climate change.

The link between climate change and health is not straightforward. While some participants in certain countries understand the connection between heat and health, awareness of a direct link is uncommon. However, they do recognise indirect links, such as air and water pollution, as examples of climate change's impact on health.

Interestingly, individual physical and mental health are not always the driving factor for action. For example, a Bangladeshi migrant construction worker in the UAE regularly suffers from heat stroke because of extreme weather conditions. He does not prioritise his personal health, however, or see it as a motivation to demand change. He migrated to provide financial support to his family back home, sacrificing his own wellbeing for the sake of his wider community. This demonstrates the complexity of factors that influence individuals' actions and priorities.

The public's role in addressing climate change is not homogeneous, even when considering local communities. Within the Amazon, tensions arise between indigenous communities and cattle farmers. Both groups prioritise economic needs, but their motivations and actions differ significantly. Indigenous communities view their relationship with the land as linked to their responsibility to ancestors and future generations. On the other hand, a farmer supporting Jair Bolsonaro (former president of Brazil) sees his role as providing opportunities and jobs to an otherwise impoverished community. So, addressing climate change requires meeting diverse communities where they are and responding to their specific priorities.

Economic migrants in the UAE may not have the time or mental space to contemplate climate change, but they are greatly affected by its consequences. This poses a significant question for the Wellcome Trust: how can it innovate to support these workers in mitigating the impacts of climate change, while also motivating those who have the luxury of prioritising halting climate change?

This research highlights the importance of understanding cultural context in addressing climate change. By debunking certain myths and provoking new questions, it identifies opportunities for future scientific innovation. It also serves as a tool for engagement with the communities involved, fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Heidi Hasbrouck is a director in the ethnography practice at Ipsos. Also on the project team were Sophie Mathison, Sunny Sharma, James Bell and Lizz Bradley

A new place

Almost two years since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, a longitudinal survey with refugees is documenting their migration paths, needs and expectations for the future.
By Katie McQuater

Mothers carried children in their arms. Crowds of people waited in train stations. Families were separated. In February 2022, the world watched as people fled Ukraine, but those first days were only the beginning of what would be the largest displacement of people in Europe since World War II. Russia's invasion triggered an ongoing refugee crisis with, according to UN estimates, around 5.9 million Ukrainian refugees registered in Europe.

In June 2022, public policy evidence and advisory business Kantar Public (formerly part of Kantar, the business has since rebranded to Verian as of November 2023) began its 'Voice of Ukraine' research with displaced Ukrainian people. The company has since produced several more quantitative waves. It is worth noting that the panel is 88% female, with men aged between 18 and 60 deemed fit for combat prohibited from leaving the country.

The research, with panellists in the 27 European Union member countries, aims to assist policymakers and organisations to meet the needs of displaced communities. As well as better understanding of the migration pattern, it offers insights into daily challenges.

"At some point, we decided that we had to do something," says Yves Fradier, director of surveys and methods at Verian. "Nearly 100% of our work comes from our clients – clients ask us to produce surveys and that's how we make a living. But in this situation, we decided that we had to go on our own, produce some data, and find some potential sponsors after."

The company sought to cover all of Europe, rather than focusing on individual countries, and wanted to take a longitudinal approach to examine the issues over time. The researchers used an online survey, partly because of language considerations – a lack of Ukrainian interviewers in Europe – and partly because of the prevalence of the smartphone, with displaced people either already owning one or receiving one from a charity when they entered a host country.

> **"The phenomenon of displaced populations is growing, so our responsibility is to give them a voice"**

"The smartphone is considered one of the basic needs for refugees," says Fradier. "For us, it is an opportunity to reach them – to try to make contact to produce surveys, and to give them a voice."

To recruit participants, the researchers ran Facebook adverts in Ukrainian and Russian (the language of 10% of the panellists), targeting countries with a high prevalence of Ukrainian refugees, including Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, France and the UK, and defining the target group through Meta's advertising manager.

Visuals for the ads featured a logo created with the stars of the European flag, says Fradier. "We wanted to give the impression of security, of being sheltered in Europe. The most important message was: 'We are not Russians.' I don't know to what extent it worked or not, but with that first wave of recruitment we had more than 12,000 interviews across Europe."

The end of the initial questionnaire included a recruitment question and, once people became panellists, the company began incentivising them and interviewing the same sample over time. As well as being able to keep the payment for taking part in interviews, panellists can opt to donate their incentive to associations such as the Ukrainian Red Cross. The percentage of panellists choosing the latter? 70%. "The question of the incentives is revealing of their mindset," says Fradier.

In addition to the quant, the researchers invited 500 panellists to take part in a

Language lessons

The third wave of the 'Voice of Ukraine' study (published in July 2023) found:

82% of participants had started to learn about the culture and society of their host country

66% had begun a local language course in January 2023, **up 9%** compared with the previous wave

20% of participants had sufficient reading skills in the host country's language

(Source: Kantar Public/Verian)

qualitative study via WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, with 62 agreeing to participate. The chat apps added a personal dimension, with participants sharing their thoughts, photographs and videos in a conversational setting. According to Fradier, the level of engagement surprised its researchers. "Ukrainian women – because they are mostly women – clearly want to be heard," he says.

One testimony stood out in particular, he adds: "I remember this verbatim from a woman who told us: 'I am not brave, but when I heard the bombs falling on my city, I packed a bag with basic things, documents and money in just 30 minutes.'"

Addressing barriers

As the war persists, however, encouraging political decision-makers to listen to the findings has been challenging. The most recent research at the time of writing suggests displaced Ukrainian nationals have become more uncertain about the possibility of returning. The third wave, in January 2023, for example, found 45% of participants 'definitely' wanted to return to Ukraine to live after the war is over; down from 49% in October 2022. A third (34%) reported actively preparing to return.

Fradier says: "The difficulty is to be heard by the politicians. What we see and document, wave after wave, is the fact that they are here to stay for a while. They don't go back to Ukraine for different reasons. First, the war is not over; second, their country is destroyed. Third, they left with children, and the children are back to school for the second year, so they are settling in the host countries. But politicians in France, at least, still think they will go back. We keep telling them our data shows they want to stay."

In addition to being in touch with politicians at various levels across different countries, Verian has formed partnerships with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Ifo Institute, based in Germany.

The business is also in contact with the University of Sussex, which manages the Mass Observation archive, to explore a potential joint project that would compare the experience of women in Britain during World War II with displaced Ukrainian women today, with a focus on the impact of migration on relationships.

Fradier explains: "What we observe with the Ukrainian women is, after the first wave – a migration wave – we now have a wave of divorces, because they are away for more than one year. Life is completely different."

Of course, in the post-war period, Mass Observation participants wrote letters and diaries. "Now, they write text messages," says Fradier. "It is basically the same thing, but with modern tools."

The company hopes to continue the survey as long as the war lasts, and Fradier says its methods could be replicated with other displaced groups.

"The phenomenon of displaced populations is only growing. We have people from Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, South Sudan – all over the world this phenomenon of displaced populations grows, and now we know how to produce such surveys, so I think, once again, our responsibility is to give them a voice."

Seen and heard

One Swedish city has used citizen engagement to understand the hopes and fears of local people – and how they think wellbeing should be measured. Liam Kay-McClean **reports**

What are your priorities in life? Do you treasure time at home with family? Is safety and security paramount? Is positive mental health number one? Do public sector investment decisions accurately reflect those priorities, concerns, hopes and dreams?

An experiment in Skultuna, part of the city of Västerås in Sweden, sought to examine people's priorities through a citizen engagement project. It was carried out in partnership between community engagement non-profit Dark Matter Labs and Samhällskontraktet, a partnership between Mälardalen University, Västerås and the municipality of Eskilstuna, which acted as the 'community anchor'. The premise for the experiment was to build on the 'beyond GDP' movement, which seeks to examine metrics for people's wellbeing, alongside more traditional economic measures, to determine the strength of a local or national economy and society.

Numerous nations have attempted to build on this concept (see boxout), but all of these projects took a 'top down' approach. In Sweden, the research team wanted to use civil engagement to allow local people to set their own wellbeing indicators and, therefore, use a much more 'bottom up' process.

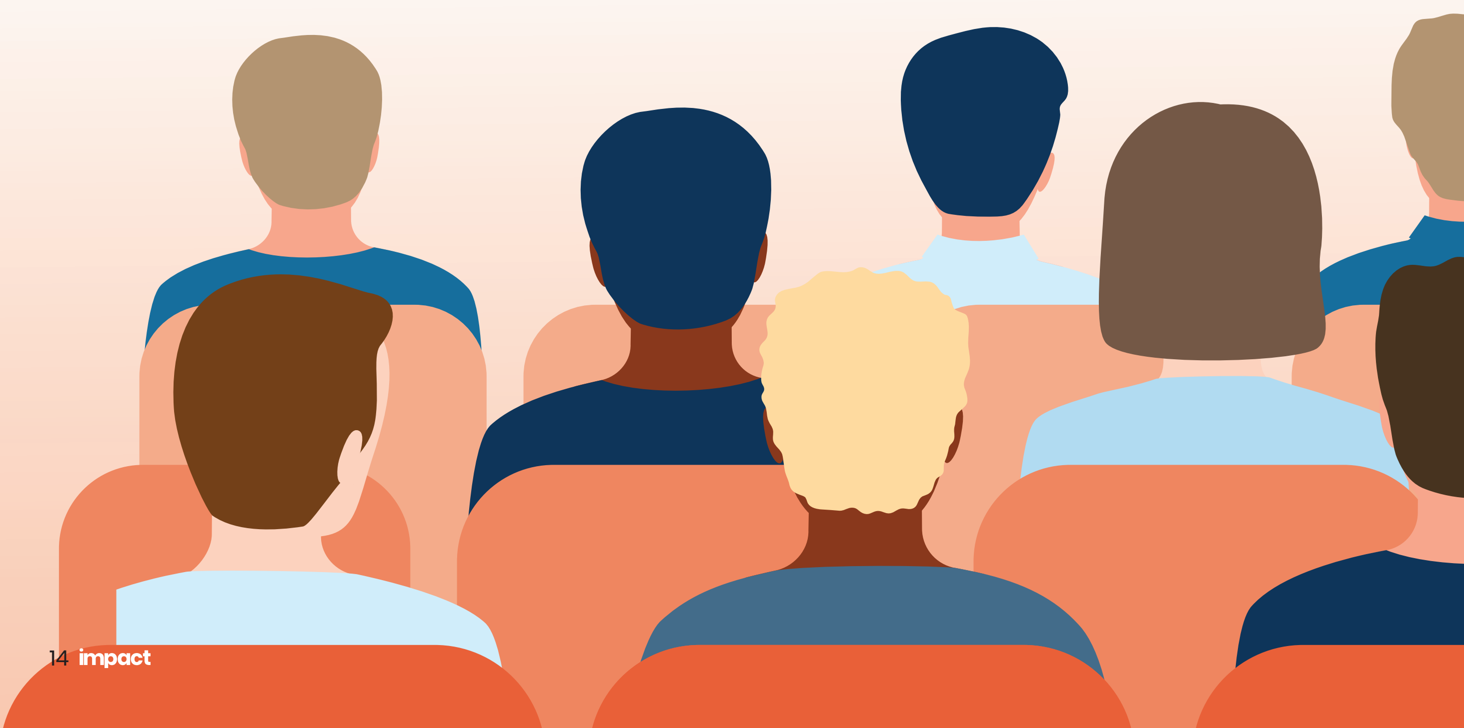
The researchers began by identifying a local authority team in Skultuna that was looking to run scenario-planning workshops based around a theme of what Skultuna could look like in 2035, together with potential strategies to achieve goals and mitigate threats. The researchers worked with the local authority to run workshops with citizens in Skultuna, examining what wellbeing indicators local people prioritised.

"We really wanted the indicators to be social connectors," explains Emily Harris, finance and economic innovation lead at Dark Matter Labs. "We thought we should go out there and do it in person. There is no point in only having theories about why things are not progressing."

Engagement is an issue in many civic engagement projects, and, as a potential problem, it was firmly in the minds of the research team. "One of the big challenges we had was communicating to people about why it should matter," Harris adds.

"People like to talk about what they want in their communities up to a certain point. Then there's always the questions of 'where is it going?', 'what is the point?' and 'is it actually going to have any impact?' Our challenge was working out how to express the idea of community engagement in a way people could really connect to. People are scared, people are worried; there's lots of polarisation. But a lot of the time, people can't connect what is happening to them on a day-to-day basis to policy issues. They think it is completely irrelevant."

The team mitigated this issue by connecting issues such as housing affordability with government policy and banking policy, which helped make the ideas seem more relatable, according to Harris.



Several key themes emerged in Sweden. Safety, a good work-life balance, life satisfaction and health were the most popular, and, according to residents, feeling safe and having trust were seen as important for a thriving Skultuna. Personal autonomy, meaning and purpose were more important factors in wellbeing than happiness or self-expression. The local population's biggest areas of concern for the decade ahead were war, the economy and climate change.

This led to the agreement of a number of indicators – metrics that would help people determine how wellbeing was performing in the local community. The five indicators chosen by the people of Skultuna were:

- the proportion of the population that had taken part in regular activities with non-family members once a week
- the number of people on a Sunday evening feeling positive for the week ahead
- the percentage of people who would recommend moving to Skultuna
- the proportion of people who do not own a car; and
- the number of people who have a dream or plan more than one year into the future.

Harris says the results show that citizen engagement, when done properly, can have a positive impact.

"There's definitely appetite. Citizen engagement has some negative connotations and it seems like an add-on or a nice-to-have. But when people can run it themselves, and think about what is really annoying or what they really want, and then see it taken forward – helped by an intermediary – it is good."

The project has since been repeated and expanded upon in Scotland and Canada. In Scotland, Dark Matter Labs worked with Carnegie UK, Northumbria University and Foundation Scotland to create a guide to building an automated framework for people to run their own groups and then feed the analysis into a central database.

In Canada, the team will work over the next couple of years with the David Suzuki Foundation, carrying out a similar project with five communities simultaneously, with participation particularly sought from indigenous communities. Communities will be asked to self-select into the project, rather than use the approach taken previously to work with a chosen community.

Most importantly for Harris is the need for wellbeing to feed into government investment decisions, and to give people real say and power in the decisions made locally and at a national and regional level.

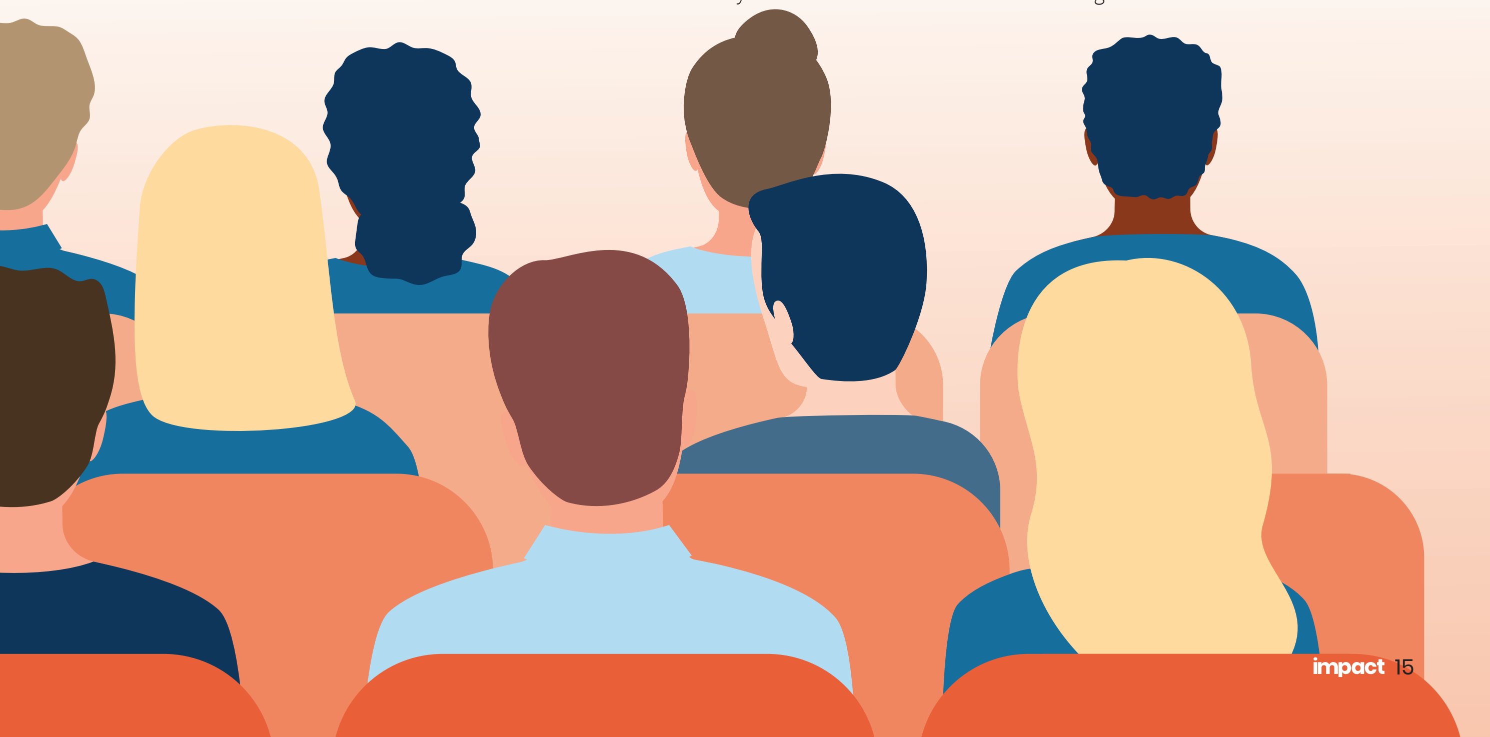
"The indicators were never supposed to be the end goal," she says. "The aim was not to create a lot more data points. Although the indicators are important, and we want people to have ownership of them, the process of them getting to those indicators, understanding what is beneath them, and caring and feeling connected is a huge part of it. What I am really interested in doing is then linking them to public investment decisions.

"We need a new economy, but, so far, I don't think the political logic of that has been built or thought about properly.

"There are all sorts of movements, and they have great aspirations, but if it is going to happen it has to come from the people. That's the goal."

There have been previous attempts to build on the 'beyond GDP' movement:

- The Scottish government's National Performance Framework, set up in 2007, seeks to improve people's wellbeing
- Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index, created in 2008, measures factors including health, living standards, community vitality, and environmental and cultural resilience
- New Zealand's wellbeing budget in 2019 measured wellbeing and safety, as well as economic indicators.



GENERATIONAL ANALYSIS

Changed days?

Generational labels have contributed to some of the laziest stereotypes ever perpetuated, and their misuse risks undermining research. Is it time for a rethink?
By Katie McQuater

The avocado-toast guzzling lazy millennial has been usurped by the workshy Gen Z-er who never wants to come into the office, if clickbait headlines are to be believed. Cultural discourse continues to feed off stereotypes and apparent differences between the generations – even if those variations are marginal, or don't actually exist at all.

In May 2023, American thinktank Pew Research Center announced it would conduct generational analysis only when it has historical data that allows for comparison of generations at similar stages of life. Even then, it would attempt to control for other factors beyond age in making generational comparisons.

Pew had been in the process of rethinking how it approached its analysis of the new adult generation – Gen Z – when a groundswell of criticism over generational research, mainly from academics, started to gain steam.

"People had started to look to us for very specific definitions of generations, such as where does millennial end and Gen Z begin, and so on, and that's not really where we wanted to be," says Kim Parker, director of social trends research at Pew.

"At the same time, academic critics were making a lot of valid points – that a lot of people doing marketing research, or even people who just aren't doing careful statistical analysis, will take age differences and slap a generation on, just because it makes for a more interesting story."

Parker has been at Pew for a while, and says when it first began conducting research on millennials, it wasn't as 'gimmicky' or as much of a marketing tool. "But in the 15 years or so since then, it's become so clichéd and there are a lot of stereotypes," she says. "We didn't want to be perpetuating that."

Parker believes the crux of the problem is that you don't know if what you're seeing are generational differences or lifestyle ones. "Young people are different from older people, but it doesn't necessarily mean it's unique to their generation," she explains. "It is only possible to know if generational differences are meaningful if you can compare with previous generations at the same age."

> **"You look back and you always see people thinking young people are the worst"**

One critic, sociologist Philip Cohen, wrote an open letter to Pew – signed by demographers and social scientists – calling on it to stop using generational labels. Addressing the issue in a 2021 column for *The Washington Post*, he said such labels had "no basis" in social reality.

Parker says Pew brought in a series of speakers over the course of a year, including critics and proponents of generational research, to "get a grip on the issue", before changing its direction.

One of the challenges Pew has faced, along with others in the polling industry, is that, over time, the organisation has shifted from telephone to online surveys, meaning earlier data is not necessarily comparable with surveys conducted today.

"We were hoping we could go back to our surveys in the late-80s and see how Gen X-ers felt when they were young, and compare with other generations at a similar age," says Parker. "But we realised we couldn't do that."

Are generational labels still relevant? Parker thinks they can be, but with the big caveat that you must be able to control for age and life-cycle. Again, this requires robust historical data. However, Parker adds: "I'm pretty persuaded by the fact there's so much diversity within generations – sometimes an older Gen X-er might have more in common with a young boomer than they do with the youngest Gen X-er. It can be useful in some contexts, but you really have to treat it with care and come at it with some sort of theoretical underpinning."

Bobby Duffy, professor of public policy and director of the Policy Institute at King's College London, and author of *'Generations – Does when you're born shape who you are?'*, thinks generational markers are still relevant, notwithstanding the issues raised about how they are used. But he says most generational analysis is not useful, and can be harmful.

"I am a big believer in understanding things generationally being a really vital tool in understanding where we've come from, where we are now, and the future," he says. "If we can think of things generationally, it gives a really good understanding of history and the future, and about why we've seen the changes we've seen, and what we might see next.

"But that's not where we've ended up with most generational analysis, which is useless or misleading, or dangerous, or just a waste of time – because it's not true generational analysis; it's just applying these labels to cross-section snapshots that don't tell you very much.

"Worse than that, particularly in the marketing and employee research space, there is a vast amount of very spurious research under these very catchy labels. The labels have taken hold and they are a headline writer's dream. It's very useful shorthand, but very misleading, mostly."

However, Duffy comes to a slightly different conclusion to those in the open letter. "We should defend the space, rather than abandon it to the bad analysis," he says, "and only use it if shedding light on genuine changes, not as snappy labels."

Does age matter?

Part of the problem is the way in which age groups have been conflated with generations. It's one of the main causes of generational myths and stereotypes, with repeated examples of a characteristic being assigned to a whole generation when it is just people behaving in the way young people behave, and they will change as they age, as others have before them.

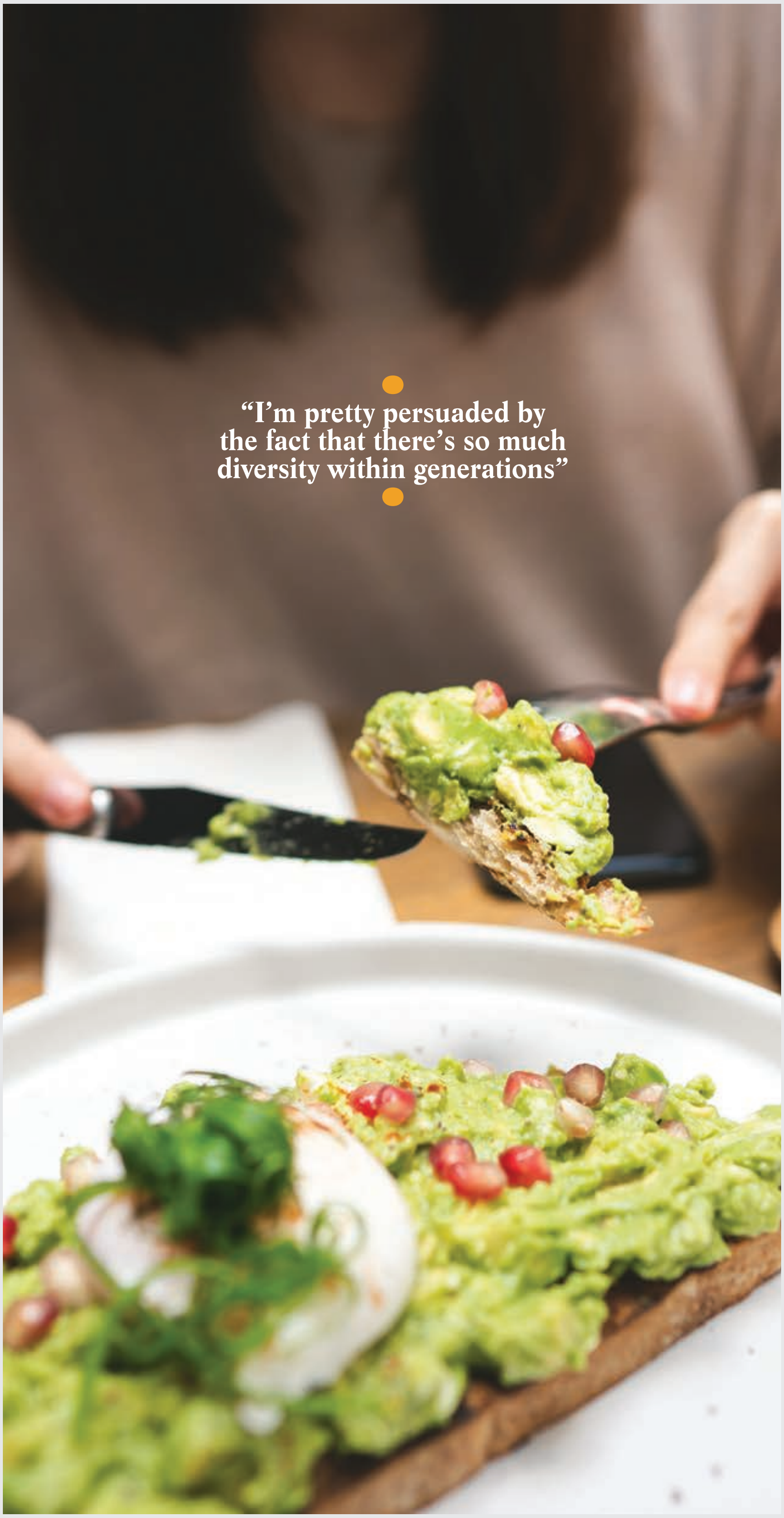
The mixing up of age and cohort also plays into a "deep human prejudice", adds Duffy – of always thinking badly of the youngest generation.

"Go back to Socrates and his long diatribes on young people," he says. "You look back and you always see people thinking young people are the worst, but that is what older people always think, because we were socialised at a time with different norms.

"One of the great joys of looking at this over time is that it's essential for society that you do have this generation of young people without all the baggage – or else we'd never change as a society. One of the big determinants of how societies change over time is having big changes between younger people and older people in repeated generations."

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) tends to use more arbitrary age groups in its research, such as people born in any given decade, or within any five-year period.

Curtis Jessop, director of attitudinal surveys at NatCen, says the advantage of this is the groups tend to be narrower and a bit more precise. "[People are] more likely to have a more similar set of experiences, at least temporally," he says.



"I'm pretty persuaded by the fact that there's so much diversity within generations"

"Within each generation, over time, attitudes have become more progressive"

That's useful for unpicking long-term trends. "When you do age-cohort analysis, it's a way of looking at a particular age group over time; how they have developed or how they compare with another age group when they were the same age."

Jessop discusses the example of NatCen's examination of the liberalisation of attitudes within society. "We see a long-term decline in people who say people who want children ought to get married, and a more liberal attitude to same-sex relationships," he explains.

"On both, we see attitudes becoming more liberal and we see differences by age, where younger people are more liberal than older people, on average. When it comes to 'people who want children ought to get married', within each age group, over time, that has remained relatively stable.

"So, people who are now aged 50 to 54 have similar attitudes to those they had 20 to 30 years ago."

However, if you examine views on same-sex relationships, there is a generational difference – within each generation, over time, attitudes have become more progressive, according to Jessop, who says: "Now, 50 to 54-year-olds are much more accepting of same-sex relationships than they were 20 to 30 years ago," he says, adding that when you see some changes over time across all age groups in parallel, at a similar rate, it suggests that it is not because of life-cycle, but because of something happening more broadly in society.

Technological impact

With the rapid proliferation of technology impacting how people are experiencing the world, some have made the argument for introducing smaller generational categories – because something that shaped someone who is 30 now may be very different from what is impacting someone aged 15 now.

Says Parker: "There is a lot of change now occurring demographically and technologically, which makes you wonder, if there are things that shape a generation, whether that can really be sustained over a 15-year period."

One online trend is that of young people expressing apathy towards work through memes and videos ('Gen Z does not dream of labor', by Terry Nuyen for *Vox* in April 2022). Some have intimated that these expressions could indicate a wider generational attitudinal shift, possibly because of precarity in the post-pandemic economy.

However, social media didn't exist for Gen X-ers when they were the same age as Gen Z-ers today, and this makes it more difficult to understand what type of effect this is.

Online culture also seemingly reinforces generational stereotypes, through memes such as the catchphrase 'OK boomer', typically used to dismiss attitudes associated with baby boomers. Has the growth of social media affected how different generations view themselves, or others?

Superficially, perhaps, according to Tom Johnson, managing director at Trajectory. "It feels like generational markers are a big part of the discourse, especially online," he says. "But our data has shown people generally don't know what generation they or other people are in. So, for marketing or communications, it's pretty useless. For younger people, virtually everyone older than them is a boomer. It's become quite reductive."

In terms of any significant generational shifts resulting from the pandemic, it will take time to tell, says Duffy. "I think there will be some horrors uncovered over time of the impact on people who were children during that period, particularly those going through transitions such as starting university or high school."

However, he adds: "Covid is a generation-defining event, but like all of those types of things, they take a while to fully reveal themselves. Their immediate effects are only part of the story."

Oversimplification

Many of the problems of generational analysis boil down to the same issue: misrepresentation or incorrect reporting of research. Generations are a target for clickbait journalism at a time when many, including politicians, are determined to draw on the so-called 'culture war' narrative.

"One of the fake breaks we have among young people and older people that is presented as a generational difference is around the culture war issues of 'snowflakes' or 'social justice warriors'," says Duffy. "That is just not true in a very particular sense – young people always have different views on emerging social issues compared with older people. And the key thing here is that, today, they're not proportionally any bigger than they were in the past."

In the 1980s, for example, boomers were the youngest generation and were half as likely to agree that women should stay at home and men go out to work than their parents.

Today, meanwhile, Gen Z are half as likely to be proud of the British Empire. "There is a constant ratio of the young always being twice as comfortable with whatever is emerging as the old," says Duffy. "That is a classic age and generation mix-up effect.

"That's driving a wedge between young and old. Those types of things are really important to get right, and generational labels and these types of analysis are actively working against that sometimes."

Jessop urges caution against using labels to talk about an entire group of people as if they are the same group of people, irrespective of whether labels such as millennial are involved, or whether you pick an age group. Even using tighter age groups doesn't solve the problem.

"Even within the context of saying people born within a five-year age band are more likely to have experienced similar things, for example – well that might be true, but even if people have experienced the same event, it doesn't mean they experienced it in the same way," Jessop says.

Stakeholders in commercial research and marketing don't necessarily have access to historical data; they need insights in the here and now.

Sarah Sanderson, managing director of TGI at Kantar Media, notes that, while it can be interesting to look at cohorts over time, it is "not the be all and end all", and marketers should avoid relying too heavily on one source of data.

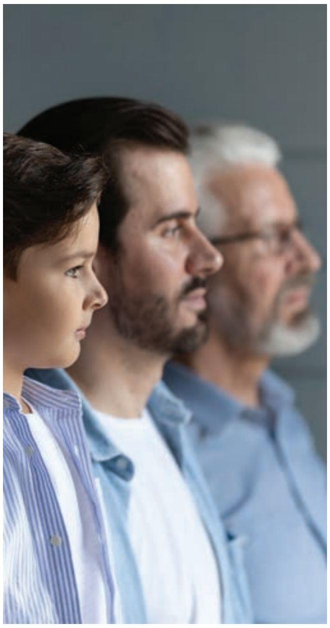
"The richness of the insight comes in when you're looking at how homogeneous or diverse this generation is on different axes – for example, in concerns about the economy – and then overlaying that with people's circumstances and behaviours," she says. "It's a starting point, but there's so much more we can do.

"For brands to be distinctive, they have to be carving out a position for themselves based on consumer insights that go beyond just appealing to a demographic – chiming with people's values, priorities and needs."

The fact remains that research needs to group people somehow.

"There's a big fallacy at the heart of thinking that, just because people were born at the same time, they have a lot in common," says Tom Johnson. "But the same is true for any single lens you use to view people – region, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, housing tenure. They're all limiting.".

Jessop echoes this point: "It's absolutely right that we want to dig deeper and understand the nuance and complexity of individuals' experiences, but – from a quant research perspective at least – we need to draw that line somewhere."



Understanding change over time

Age-period-cohort analysis is a statistical method that attempts to determine effects of generations over time.

There are three effects that explain changes in attitudes or behaviours over time:

- Age effects, or 'life-cycle effects': changes in people as they age
- Period effects: changes that occur consistently across all age groups – often a response to major events affecting everyone, such as a pandemic or war
- Cohort effects: changes in a generation that remain distinct as they age.

"Age-period-cohort modelling tries to split out those effects of generations over time," says Bobby Duffy, who uses it in his book, *Generations*. "There is something called the identification problem – if you know two of them then you know the third, and you can't fully untangle them. You can get a really good idea from the stats, but also just from plotting things by generation as opposed to age – but you need to do that over time."

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Meeting people where they are

Research with seldom heard and niche populations – people who have historically not been heard from, misunderstood, or, in the case of niche research, have something uncommon in common – requires creative, flexible approaches and a willingness to immerse. Rob Gray **reports**

Reaching the right people at the right time is a crucial tenet of good research practice. But over the years, the research industry has sometimes struggled, and often come up short, when seeking to understand and include the views of niche and seldom-heard groups.

In this report, we explore various challenges around identifying the right people in the first place and highlight some creative approaches taken by practitioners. Before we get on to that, however, a couple of points regarding terminology.

To begin with, the rise of the phrase 'seldom heard'. Until recently, the sector generally talked about the struggle to engage with 'hard to reach' audiences. Increasingly, the language has been reframed as 'seldom heard', rightly placing the onus for inclusion on the researcher and the research buyer, not the participant.

Second, although seldom-heard and niche participants may share some characteristics and challenges, they are not the same thing. 'Niche' is where a research project specifically wants to speak to people who have something in common, and the thing they have in common is particularly uncommon. For example, this might be high-net-worth individuals, people who have a very specific job title, or people currently attending university. When talking about niche audiences, it normally means that the entire basis of your research project is speaking to these people – so you know that your total sample is made up of people who have an uncommon characteristic in common. The cost of recruiting and interviewing 'niche' participants is often higher.

Seldom heard is different, in that these groups are often not represented, even in a project looking to speak to a representative sample (such as nationally representative – 'nat rep' – research). Examples are people from certain ethnic backgrounds or with disabilities. These people are seldom heard, because even a project that claims to be representative of the nation as a whole is probably not including quotas on ethnicity, physical disability, mental health conditions, etc, meaning these people don't get a voice.

That can be a failing, as Cobalt Sky managing director Rebecca Cole, who chairs the MRS Representation in Research steering group, points out. She highlights a case study from the group that it has called the 'commercial benefits study'. "This took a traditional omnibus survey and ran an A/B test with the same study, but one using 'traditional' or non-inclusive quotas, and one running with fully comprehensive quotas as suggested as best practice," explains Cole. "We were able to demonstrate what insights are being missed by not doing the latter, while also myth-busting a lot of commonly held concerns: it will cost more, take longer, the sample isn't available."

Strangers to research

Shazia Ali, founder of qualitative specialist Mint Research, recalls being approached for a project for which she was told recruitment was proving tricky. The potential participants were an audience for whom research wasn't familiar and English wasn't a first language.

Ali considered this an opportunity to navigate the whole process in a different way. "Before asking someone else to share, we first have to open up ourselves," says Ali. "It's something we are hearing more and more about, particularly when understanding great leadership skills. Recognising and respecting people's vulnerabilities is important to gain trust."

Ali reached out to the potential participants beforehand, to introduce herself. She shared her full name and spoke in the language of their choice where she could. Some asked about her family background

and Ali shared that she is the eldest, where she was born, and where she grew up in the UK. This was enough to establish trust and understanding, and for the participants to agree for her to visit them.

"Qualitative research is about building respect, trust and relationships," expands Ali. "What many may call a challenge or barrier to recruitment is not that at all, but an opportunity to use our skills as experts in connecting with people and to find a different way. For far too long, research has been driven by a fixed-mindset approach. Making participants fit into methodologies when, in fact, we should be creating approaches to fit around who we want to engage with. It's important to apply the growth mindset to the way in which we design and navigate our studies."

Brandspeak managing director Jeremy Braune says that technology can be a barrier when recruitment requires a more personal approach in order to create trust and openness. In the case of certain groups, however, the prospect of taking part in an online interview or community, for example, can be particularly attractive if it provides the opportunity to contribute while remaining anonymous.

"Artificial intelligence [AI] provides the opportunity to anonymise the market research process further – for example, by replacing the moderator with a bot during online research," adds Braune. "However, in the case of the seldom heard, I think that would be largely counterproductive, as it removes the personal touch that is essential if this audience is to have a voice and be heard."

In the case of people with serious health conditions, Brandspeak may approach relevant charities (Mind or Age UK, for example), associations and support groups, to enlist their help in recruiting members of the target audience. If these organisations regard the research as important and non-commercial, they are often keen to lend their support, particularly if there is likely to be an indirect benefit to the people they support.

Fear of offence

Kathryn Hall, director of True Insights, has a hidden disability. She says the insights sector has come a long way in the past few years, with a growing acceptance that 'hard to reach' was a bit of a cop out and that such participants were simply underrepresented in research. Yet some agencies still lag behind the curve, and shy away from seldom-heard audiences through a fear of getting it wrong and embarrassing themselves or offending somebody because they use the wrong language.

"There are still a lot of small companies I know that will not touch it [seldom-heard groups] because they won't put themselves into what they consider a vulnerable situation," says Hall. "They say they can't afford consultants. They don't realise that you don't have to spend a lot on consultants. You don't have to get them to write the whole thing."

As well as considering the importance of intersectionality, and having somebody on your team who can identify with participants, Hall says it's not expensive to have a consultant cast their eye over the language used. As well as her own network of contacts, Hall sometimes accesses relevant expertise through the Independent Consultants Group of insight professionals (the ICG).

Steven Lacey, founder of The Outsiders, describes himself as an "archetypal outsider", being working-class, physically disabled and neurodiverse. Where researchers can go wrong, he says, is believing they possess the "superpower of empathy" to understand people with whom they have little in common.

Lacey argues that there are more and more groups in the UK that we do not understand. The best approach when researching such audiences, he believes, is to treat it like an international project. "With international, we don't make the same kind of judgements or have the same kind of biases. We immerse ourselves in a culture we don't understand, which is really vital." For seldom-heard research, that equates to reading "the right literature on the world of the teenage mum or young black males on estates; then consulting with experts who have regular contact with those kinds of people", says Lacey. After conducting the group research and identifying the insights, he recommends running an immersive session with people who understand that audience to "make sure that we've got it right".

Inclusive design

There is growing awareness that if research has historically been designed by and for a certain group of people, researchers may need to revisit the process to make it suitable for seldom-heard audiences.

The best way to do this, says Cobalt Sky's Cole, is to follow the four basic principles of inclusive research:

1. The research is designed by researchers who understand their own bias
2. The research avoids making assumptions about the participants
3. The project is explicitly designed to ensure diversity at all stages
4. The research is designed in consultation with those who have a lived experience.

"You also need to ask yourself, why are they seldom heard?" says Cole. "Do you know how and where to find them? How to engage with them and incentivise them? If they are not used to engaging with research, they may not trust it, and you might need to behave differently to gain their trust. Be transparent and talk like human beings: what is the purpose of the research; how will their information be used; why are you asking them about certain things such as ethnicity?"

C Space has developed an inclusive screener, using a new questionnaire format that makes it easier for everyone to feel included, according to Ella Majava, practice director, innovation, C Space Europe, Middle East and Africa. It also runs tailored campaigns to recruit specific groups.

"Being more inclusive gets us to insights and understanding that working with mainstream, homogenous audiences simply cannot, because their lived experience is often so different," she says. "They can help us understand and explore the innovation, adaptability and resourcefulness – often in the form of 'hacks' – that they are forced to employ. This enables us to design solutions that are better for all audiences.

"Where researchers go wrong is believing they possess the 'superpower of empathy'"

"A diverse sample, by definition, leads to diverse data, and given that it is empirically proven that diversity breeds creativity, it informs and inspires more diverse possibilities. Plus, the scale of the audience means they must not be ignored. For example, one billion people around the world live with some form of disability, making up around 15% of the global population; 20% in the UK."

C Space has worked with Liberty Global (LG) to help it understand where and how to remove barriers to connectivity, entertainment and smart home tech for people with disabilities. Taking an ethnographic approach, C Space pulled apart connectivity, entertainment and smart home 'jobs', enablers and barriers. Coached by inclusive design experts and the Research Institute for Disabled Consumers on the best language to use, it created a more inclusive research 'space'. To overcome the barrier of multiple forms

Elizabeth Webb, head of research, Age UK

"Offering a choice of response method – including phone, paper-based and face-to-face methods alongside an online option, as Age UK does with our own Your Voice survey – is the optimal choice to ensure an unbiased sample, as this enables older people of all abilities to participate. Beyond the steps that need to be taken to ensure a sample is unbiased, it is imperative that researchers also remember that older people are not homogeneous; there are important subgroups of older people who are unlikely to be sufficiently well represented in a random population sample to be analysed separately.

"One key example is older people of minoritised ethnicities, whose experiences systematically differ in many ways from those of the white British majority.

"Census 2021 data shows that one in 10 people aged 65+ in England and Wales – 1.1 million older people – are of a minoritised ethnicity.

"To gain a fuller understanding of the intersecting impacts of ethnicity and age, researchers require sufficiently large numbers of participants of each minority ethnicity, but this is seldom offered by research agencies beyond the few specialist organisations that are doing excellent work in this area.

"Most research agencies offer samples that limit researchers to comparing a 'white' group of older people with a 'BAME' (black, Asian and minority ethnic) group, thus disguising many of the interesting and important differences and inequalities between the UK's minority ethnicities."

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Applying anonymity

Technology can play a pivotal role in breaking down barriers that often make it difficult to connect with niche groups. François Leprêtre, chief executive at Smart Connect Research, says digital platforms and social media networks allow for a broader, yet more targeted, reach than traditional methods, tapping into communities and groups that were previously inaccessible.

Advanced search algorithms and data analytics tools aid in identifying potential participants, while secure and user-friendly interfaces ensure that these audiences are more comfortable engaging in research activities.

"One notable example from our own practice involved using a specialised app to engage with high-level executives," says Leprêtre. "This app provided real-time updates, and allowed for anonymous, but traceable, data collection. The technology eased apprehensions about data security while ensuring a high response rate."

For a healthcare consultancy client, Smart Connect conducted research among health policymakers. Given the intricacy and sensitivity of the topic, it was essential to approach it with a level of sophistication and rigour that would yield actionable insights while maintaining utmost confidentiality.

Smart Connect took a blended approach of in-depth interviews and AI-based sentiment analysis on policy documents. Secure video conferencing tools were used for virtual face-to-face interactions, and blockchain technology assured participants that their inputs were anonymous and secure. This approach yielded actionable insights that Leprêtre says were instrumental in shaping the client's advisory strategies.

of disability, participants were given freedom to choose the mode of expression (video, voice memo, photos). A checklist was created, with 15 ways to overcome physical, sensory and cognitive barriers, and 26 'all-inclusive' solutions were mapped to pain-points. The work shifted how LG thinks about inclusive design, from a tick-box accessibility requirement to a way to create better product experiences for all.

Darren Horne, senior user researcher at Made Tech, which works with public sector clients on modernising technology and accelerating digital delivery, has conducted user research with people who have experienced crime, from 'severe' to 'lesser' offences. "When discussing user groups who have been impacted by crime, a project team with which I have worked made assumptions that the victim of the crime would be harder to speak to. I believe their own biases and wider social stereotypes led them to think that this group may not want to talk about an emotionally distressing time. However, the team hadn't considered that it would also be challenging to get representation from those accused of a crime, because the stigma attached to being 'accused' meant people would not want to come forward and research with us."

Horne found that the best way to overcome this issue is by encouraging open-minded thinking in kick-off sessions. Removing all biases is impossible, but certain tools can help with these issues. For example, visual work platform Mural's 'private' mode, which hides each person's contribution from the group, can help reduce groupthink. It is also imperative to be careful with language. For example, someone who has suffered a sexual assault might not want to be sent a 'consent form' because of the connotation the word 'consent' has with sexual assault. In previous work, this was changed to 'permission form'.

"A diverse sample leads to diverse data... and informs and inspires more diverse possibilities "

Going the extra mile

While technology is increasingly to the fore, good old-fashioned legwork still has its place, and can yield great results. When looking to recruit owners of high-end luxury cars, for example, market research fieldwork specialist Indiefield will sometimes do 'car park walks', leaving little notes on the windscreens of Bentleys or whichever marques or vehicles are in line with the brief. One hour's car park trudging might generate three or four responses. "It's a low response rate, but it doesn't matter," says Indiefield managing director Tara Lyons. "Once you've got one, you have a chat with them and they'll know someone else who fits the bill. They'll belong to a club, or they'll put you in touch with an Instagram page. It just mushrooms from there, and that's how you end up recruiting them all."

The DVLA also publishes a list of vehicle-owners clubs and Indiefield has used this as a starting point for automotive research. "You'll get some Maserati fan who just happens to be a multimillionaire with a fleet of seven luxury vehicles – and he gets a new one every couple of years, which is perfect. We'll get to him and he is delighted to take part, because no one in his family wants to hear him talk about his passion. Then you snowball through him.

"It's about having a grasp of how to get people – where they go, what magazines they read, where they live."

For some niche groups, such as high-net-worth individuals, a financial incentive is unlikely to be particularly motivating. Instead, the researcher needs to find something that person will value more than money. Brandspeak's Braune suggests a private dinner, theatre tickets or a track day may have far more appeal. Or perhaps the subject being researched is of particular interest to them.

In another challenge for niche research, there can be instances when the population size falls short of meeting the client's specific needs.

Kelli Hammock, strategic communications director at L&E Research, which has offices in seven US cities, cites a hypothetical example of aspiring to interview a

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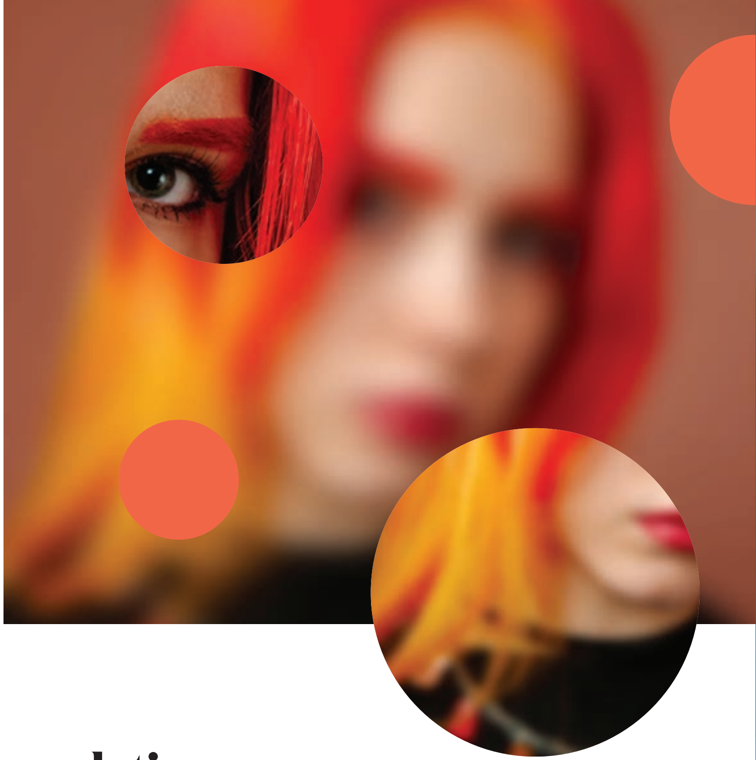


low-incidence patient group comprising 50 individuals across the US, where budget constraints might limit the research to just two US markets.

"In such a scenario, finding 25 niche or low-incidence patients in a single market could pose a significant challenge, whereas spreading the effort across five markets could prove more feasible," says Hammock.

Reaching niche and seldom-heard audiences usually requires extra effort, and often highlights some of the extremes found in our society. But the process is aided by considering the needs of participants first and foremost, thinking creatively, and taking the time to truly understand how best to engage.

Accessing seldom-heard populations

Whether it is because of vulnerability or their living situation, or simply a lack of desire to participate, there are many reasons why some people are seldom heard in research. It may be that the population of interest may not wish to disclose they are members of a specific group – perhaps because their behaviour is illegal; or it may be that an investigation of a group with relatively low numbers is perceived as too expensive to research.

Obvious recruitment solutions involve invoking the saying 'where you go I will go', in order to find the participants, which means searching in the right places for the people you need. This may require engaging voluntary services, including clubs, food banks, churches, asylum services, and community groups – in person and online – to maximise access.

Of course, you must allow enough time for the recruitment to take place, because building pathways into niche communities takes time. By their very nature, hidden populations can be hard to find. Such studies either require some previous knowledge of the target sample to identify initial respondents or sheer hard thinking on the part of the fieldwork agency to develop a strategy.

It goes without saying that relevancy and incentivisation matter. The incentive must be appropriate and timely – most people have a 'here and now' bias, and prefer their reward for participating sooner rather than later. The subject matter must also be tailored to pique the interest of the respondent – without engagement, any chance of participation is lost, so rapport is critical and establishing trust is essential. This requires igniting an enthusiasm in your potential respondent and having robust privacy assurances in place.

Having identified one eligible respondent, we can build upon our original saying and add 'your people will be my people'.

Snowball sampling from a base respondent allows researchers to access seemingly impenetrable social groupings and take advantage of identified respondents to provide an expanding set of potential contacts. The premise is that a bond exists between the original recruit and others within the same population, allowing referrals to be made.

Of course, there are limits, especially if the respondents you are looking for are isolated, with a poor social network. However, working with respondents as informal recruiters serves as an aid to accessing vulnerable, socially stigmatised, or other groups.

It is easy to trivialise this method and argue that a 'refer a friend' approach only applies to qualitative research and brings with it selection bias that means extrapolation is not possible. But this respondent-driven sampling can be carefully tracked by limiting referrals from one base respondent. Each referee is treated as a new base respondent (again, limiting the number of referrals each time) and you can turn your snowballing efforts into multiple snowballs, thereby increasing confidence levels through weighting.

Such a bottom-up approach to fieldwork and recruitment is a far more efficient way to uncover hidden populations (as opposed to top down, and hoping they appear in your large samples) and by mathematically limiting – and, subsequently, tracking – referrals, it is possible to build robustness into the final data.

Tara Lyons is managing director at Indiefield

Working on wellbeing

Holland & Barrett has used insight to refocus on what matters to customers, shifting its approach to pricing and informing how it communicates. Georgina White **talks to** Katie McQuater

When I sit down with Holland & Barrett's director of customer experience and insight, Georgina White, she is 18 months into the role. In spring 2022, when she joined the health and wellness retail business from BT, the insight team had five members. As of November 2023, it had 23.

Set up to both guide core business performance and to drive the strategy and transformation of the business, the team is agile, covering research, market intelligence and customer analytics.

"We're pretty young as a team – there's a huge amount of transformation to be done in terms of capability," says White. This includes building a new market insight capability – something the business hasn't had in the past – and establishing how to better leverage its own customer data, as well as bolstering customer experience, implementing how it measures and improves marketing effectiveness, and assessing what the company's strategy means from a customer perspective.

On top of this, among White's key areas of focus for the next financial year is the need to ensure the team is driving customer performance; making sure customers are embedded into overall strategic priorities; extracting the value out of capabilities including customer data; and establishing an inclusive, supportive environment for the team – one that helps them act as partners to the business.

"That's a pretty broad list. Arguably, it's probably similar for a lot of insights teams," White says of the four priorities, but adds: "The bit that makes us perhaps a little bit different is where we are in our maturity, as such a new team, and the fact we're probably trying to do it all at once. There are lots of plates spinning because we're trying to become a source of competitive advantage as quickly as we possibly can, and that means a lot of things that we are building from scratch."

A question of cost

Not long after joining Holland & Barrett, White was faced with a challenge. At the end of 2021, the business had changed its pricing and promotional strategy. At the time, there was a small insight team, so the decision was made without robust testing.

"Fast-forward into 2022 and there was a belief that sales had been impacted by that decision," explains White. "So, as a team, we rallied round to figure out what was going on, what was driving our pricing and promotional changes and what needed to happen. And, as in all good stories, we had a very short period of time to do it. I think we had two weeks."

White's division wanted to understand the role of promotions and pricing for customers – what was appealing for them, and examine what, if any, impact the previous changes had made.

"Inside the organisation, there was a lot of noise as to what action should be taken and we wanted to cut through that noise," says White.

The team carried out an evaluation that involved reviewing existing data – including market intelligence and owned customer data – as well as commissioning primary research and brand tracking. It also examined the potential impact of the cost of living, carried out a monadic test over a two-week period – via one of its agency partners – and surveyed customers no longer shopping with Holland & Barrett. As a result of the evaluation, White says the team identified that the company did need to change its promotional strategy. They then modelled the change before taking the insight to the senior leadership team, to help them understand the impact.

The insight team recommended a range of new mechanics that the business has implemented, and that have increased performance "quite significantly", according to White. They also busted some myths: "We killed some of the ideas that were running around the business that weren't customer-led. We were able to stop an incorrect decision being made."

In addition to these recommendations, the team found an opportunity for a new range of own-label value vitamins, which was launched in December 2022 and highlighted the company's response to the cost-of-living crisis. The move also contributed to an improvement in price perceptions and sales performance, according to White.

"What started as a relatively simple but fairly contentious, 'What's the impact and what should our promotional strategy be?' came back to a customer-led range of promotional mechanics that were deployed successfully. It led to development of a new product range and having more clarity on the strategic problems and opportunities facing our customers, and it resulted in the business getting behind what was a simple piece of work of what insight could do and how it could work successfully," she says.

Lastly, White says the research also showed an opportunity to improve how Holland & Barrett communicates its value as well as the efficacy and relevance of products – an insight that

the business took forward in terms of its marketing. "What our brand stands for and how our marketing operates now is very different to how it's been in the past," says White.

Examples of this are the recent 'Every Menopause Matters' campaign, which featured women talking about what they had lost because of the menopause, and its 'Move Well to Live Well' campaign. Holland & Barrett also relaunched its food range with more than 500 new stock keeping units (SKUs) in September 2023.

Understanding needs

When it comes to methodologies, White prefers to figure out the right approach on a case-by-case basis – but she emphasises the importance of the retailer's research being inclusive. This means leveraging MRS best-practice guidelines on inclusive research and working closely with agency partners.

She says the aim is "deliberately making it part of our strategy", but adds that this is a work in progress. For example, White is looking at whether the team should be doing more work for people with certain needs, and what inclusive research looks like when it's 'business as usual' rather than an ad hoc project.

"What our brand stands for and how our marketing operates now is very different"

The emphasis on inclusion is important from a strategic perspective, she notes. "Our purpose as a business is how we can be a trusted partner to help our customers reach their health and wellness goals. We need to understand what that means across different parts of society, different needs, different segments etc., and we therefore must make sure we are inclusive in that."

This includes identifying simple but important insights on where societal needs are not met, for example, women from some ethnicities engaging less in conversations around menopause.

For the menopause campaign (see boxout, overleaf), Holland & Barrett translated its advert and offered access to its advisers in multiple languages. "Enabling people to have the conversation with somebody that understood them; as an insight, that was very clear as the opportunity. Then the marketing team and the business team took that through into the execution in our operation.

"It's an example of where we've identified – based on insight we'd already leveraged, either from working with agencies or from our own datasets – a gap in the market, and where the business really got behind what this could mean and executed it."

Holland & Barrett relaunched its food range in September 2023, which includes 'Plant Points' on the labelling, aimed at encouraging customers to eat more plants

Profile

Georgina White is director of customer experience and insight at Holland & Barrett, chair of the MRS Senior Client Council and a member of the MRS Diversity, Equality & Inclusion Council.

- 2018-2022: Group insight director, BT
- 2017-2018: Director-marketing, customer and insights, Centrica
- 2014-2017: Head of insight, British Gas
- 2012-2014: Head of consumer insight, British Gas
- 2010-2012: Head of consumer insight, Capital One

Prioritising partnerships

Another challenge for White is the team's relationship with agencies. "I've always passionately believed, and still do believe, that agencies are strategic partners. They should feel like an extension of the team. The reality is, in the past 18 months, we've not treated them like that.

"So, it's something that hurts me personally, knowing that. There are good reasons as to what we needed to do, but ensuring we improve those relationships is really important."

White is also focused on tackling the age-old challenge of ensuring staff have enough time to work on differing projects, whether it's a short-term tactical piece of insight or more strategic work.

"One of the things I love about what we do, but is also a real challenge, is that on a given day, you can be going into meetings that are talking about trading right now, to the next quarter, to the next six months, to the next year, and going from current trading through to strategy of what we are delivering in market in 18 months' time or what we need to be doing in three to five years' time. As an insight team, you need to be able to adjust to that."

White continues: "This is an insight team that's driving everything, from our strategy to supporting how we optimise campaigns or activity, and everything in between – that's a lot for people to be juggling with. It brings brilliant opportunity, but you don't do your best thinking when you're going from right now to longer term and we've got to make sure we give people the time that they need on the correct things."

White has hired a mixture of ex-agency staff and former client-side insights managers but has also placed a heavy focus on developing colleagues internally. For example, some of the team are former

contact centre employees, "which helps on the customer experience side", she says.

The team takes a "business partnering approach" to working with stakeholders internally, but White appreciates that the skills needed to be a good researcher are not necessarily the same as having the business nous needed to drive influence within an organisation. A framework used by the team identifies the different aspects needed to be commercially successful and where more skills are needed: credible expertise, commercial savviness, clear communicator, decision influencer, and inspiring leadership, with the latter relating to the ability to see a bigger picture and balance the short and long term.

White says: "A lot of insight teams or individuals stop at credible expertise: 'I am the right person to do this detailed methodology' – and that's hugely important, I'm not saying it's not, but a lot of our focus, as a team, is on all the other areas. To have that impact on the business, to be a leader, it's got to start with asking whether you really understand what's going to shift the dial for the business, what your stakeholders are going through, and what makes money."

These are broad questions beyond Holland & Barrett, and White feels that the industry in general still has work to do to improve how research engages with the wider business challenge.

"As a sector, we have got to improve our commercial savviness and our commercial engagement," says White. "It is amazing how few insight professionals put the outcome of their work on their CV: 'I drove up business results by 20%', for example. Instead, it's: 'I do lots of qual, quant, methodologies', which is hugely important, but what are you doing because of it?

"As a sector and as individuals, we've got to do much better at telling that story. For me, all this stuff about 'getting a seat at the table' – you're not going to do it unless you're demonstrating to the business, agitating, pushing and being clear on how you're driving that value. Since I came into insight many years ago, it's been consistent, but it's not acceptable any longer."

The menopause conversation

Holland & Barrett worked with partner agencies including Trinity McQueen, One Picture and Walnut Unlimited to understand the needs in women's health.

The business conducted a programme of qualitative and quantitative insight involving a range of methods, including social media, secondary analysis and primary research, and identified a commercial opportunity around menopause specifically – covering unmet needs, proposition and communication.

The work highlighted that the conversation around menopause was increasing, but taboos and stereotypes still influenced the conversation and there was an opportunity to break those.

Holland & Barrett then ran a study with YouGov, which found that more than half of women from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds felt that they were not represented in the current menopause conversation. The company identified the need for work to be done to create awareness and generate conversation around menopause, and offer support, advice and recommendations.

As a result, Holland & Barrett launched a multi-language online consultation service through its trained menopause appointments, offering support to women in Punjabi, Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu, as well as English. The company is continuing to develop its proposition and consumer insight in the menopause space.

Another round

With the beer industry undergoing numerous changes in recent years, Zuzana Heleyová tells Liam Kay-McClean **how Asahi is keeping up with trends and democratising data**

There's a strong chance that, if you are a beer drinker, you've had an Asahi beer. The company, founded in Japan in 1889, is the largest in its home nation and the owner of numerous major beer brands worldwide, from Peroni to London Pride, and Grolsch to Pilsner Urquell and Asahi Super Dry.

Asahi stands among a beer industry that has seen immense change over the past two decades. Craft beer upended the market, with independent producers emerging to take on traditional breweries and lager makers. This was coupled with a profound crisis in the on-trade market, with around a quarter of British pubs having shut since 2000, according to the British Beer and Pub Association.

Years of austerity, a cost-of-living crisis and the pandemic have seen switches in consumption, especially considering liberalised off-trade reforms in the UK, which benefit supermarkets and other organisations focusing on the home market for beer. Globally, the beer industry has been hit, like many others, by financial pressures stemming from the war in Ukraine, particularly energy prices that have affected the production cycle, but also consumers' spending power. Now, the rise of zero-alcohol and low-alcohol products pose another challenge; one the industry has generally embraced, with non-alcoholic alternatives a common sight on store shelves and in pub fridges.

Zuzana Heleyová is group strategy planning and insight director at Asahi Europe and International. She believes the raft of recent changes in the market have made it a fascinating industry in which to work.

"The changes in the past three years have been more visible than those over the previous 10 or 15 years," she says.

"The one big change is on-trade; staying close to the house and limiting on-trade consumption as a consequence. Humans do change habits. People are not drinking more, but drinking better. Drinking better in terms of quality and looking for stuff that helps them moderate; zero per cent beer. This is quite a nice change in style."

Brewing success

Heleyová is based in Prague and has worked for Asahi for more than six-and-a-half years. In her role, she helps to orchestrate and lead strategy planning at Asahi, making sure that processes align across functions and markets and that teams work as closely together as possible. The insight director role is part of her remit, supporting knowledge management across the organisation.

The insight team has seen a lot of organisational changes in the past year. A new structure incorporates group insight, which sits centrally and supports cross-market projects and the global Asahi brand, using knowledge gathered from all the markets in which Asahi operates.

Then there are local insight teams located in the various countries or regions – important for an industry that is determined by local market trends. "It is important to have people who are in touch with what is happening locally," adds Heleyová.

To address this further, Asahi's insight department has given data democratisation a huge level of focus in recent years. Beer consumption trends and consumer attitudes can be wildly different depending on the market, and there was a need to make sure there was cross-company access to insight reports and analysis to feed into more locally focused research.

The company established an insight library that acts as a one-stop shop for reports and analysis. The bank started as a repository for research at a more universal or global level within Asahi, but it has since branched out and now gathers research from regional and local projects. It covers a myriad of issues – from pricing development to the firm's position versus competitors – and many of these are applicable to a large number of markets of differing sizes.

Full measures

Insight is at the heart of strategic discussion, helping to determine new products and markets on which to focus.

Heleyová explains: “Insight is crucial in understanding the situation, both in hindsight (to understand the past and current situation) and, more importantly, to address the foresight – about future development. Asahi’s insight work incorporates internal and external data, and how these two link together.”

A broader part of the data democratisation agenda – and one of the priorities of insights at Asahi – has been increasing the understanding of the role of data in the organisation. One of Heleyová’s aims is to help staff at all levels understand that collecting data is the beginning of a research project, with insight, knowledge and action at the end point.

“If you are in the kitchen, you will first decide if you want to make a cake or a soup, and then look in your fridge for the right ingredients,” says Heleyová. “It is like that with data. The role of insight is to transfer the data into actionable knowledge. It is not our role to confuse our stakeholders with confusing data.”

To do this, the team has tailored its approach to communicating research findings and experimented with new mediums for sharing insights.

“The role of insight is to transfer the data into actionable knowledge”

“The ways we used to share insights in the past needed to be revised,” says Heleyová. “We often saw insight mistaken for data, which is wrong, or reports mistaken for insight.

“In a nutshell, what we are trying to do is find an effective way [of sharing research] for a specific audience – the way we share insight with young marketers is different from how we share it with senior managers in sales, or people dealing with the sustainability agenda. The focus is on the stakeholders.”

They have also moved from what Heleyová terms ‘tell mode’ to ‘dialogue mode’, avoiding the use of PowerPoint or monologues when working with stakeholders. “We try to engage people in provocations or interactive sessions. If you are good enough, and provoke discussion and questions, it is much more impactful.”

The insights team has also experimented with podcasts to engage colleagues in the role of research in Asahi. “People told us that being able to listen to the learning is much more impactful than any other source of learning,” Heleyová adds. “Is it universal? Definitely not, but for some people it can be a good way to get the information.”

Local flavours

For a large global organisation spanning various markets worldwide, with very different levels of market maturity and consumer trends in each location, insight inevitably needs to work across national boundaries, as well as within nations and regions. That brings its tensions from time to time, but Asahi has worked to bring the different local insight teams together and have them pulling in the same direction. The insight function has teams based in places including Prague, London and Hong Kong, and employs 11 nationalities, requiring efforts to bring the function together as a team.

“What was a real game-changer for us was connecting the teams – when we created one Asahi Europe and an international insight organisation,” Heleyová explains.

The advent of Covid-19 ushered in an increasing focus on remote working techniques, which at Asahi has also helped bring disparate teams together across the globe. Virtual communication tools have also had a profound impact on the research techniques used.

Heleyová says that the main lesson learned from the switch to remote working during the pandemic, when face-to-face qualitative work was impossible, was that the team was “very comfortable” with a digital-first approach to interviewing and running research projects. This has helped and has been retained post-Covid, given Asahi’s global presence, the need for multi-market research projects and the diverse research team it employs, with staff in locations ranging from Canada to Hong Kong.

“We are also starting to use AI-based tools for speeding up qualitative work. For exploring some topics, instead of finding 20 people and talking to them in each market, we are doing much more

AI work to understand specific topics before we jump to the people. We are also using unstructured data. If you are limited in the old approach to research, it can be a nice boost to us to find a more colourful and interesting way to deal with new stuff."

Unstructured data can be very useful, especially in understanding new trends in emerging markets for Asahi. "The beer category is quite traditional, but, at the same time, it is a vivid category in certain areas and very local-specific," muses Heleyová. "We started to use unstructured data for mapping segments that are changing quickly, specifically in markets where we do not have such a heavy presence."

One example is in Canada, where Asahi has examined the growth of the no- and low-alcohol movement in the country. Canada is behind many other nations in its embrace of low-alcohol beer – for example, Slovakia's beer market,

"It can be a nice boost to find a more colourful and interesting way to deal with new stuff"

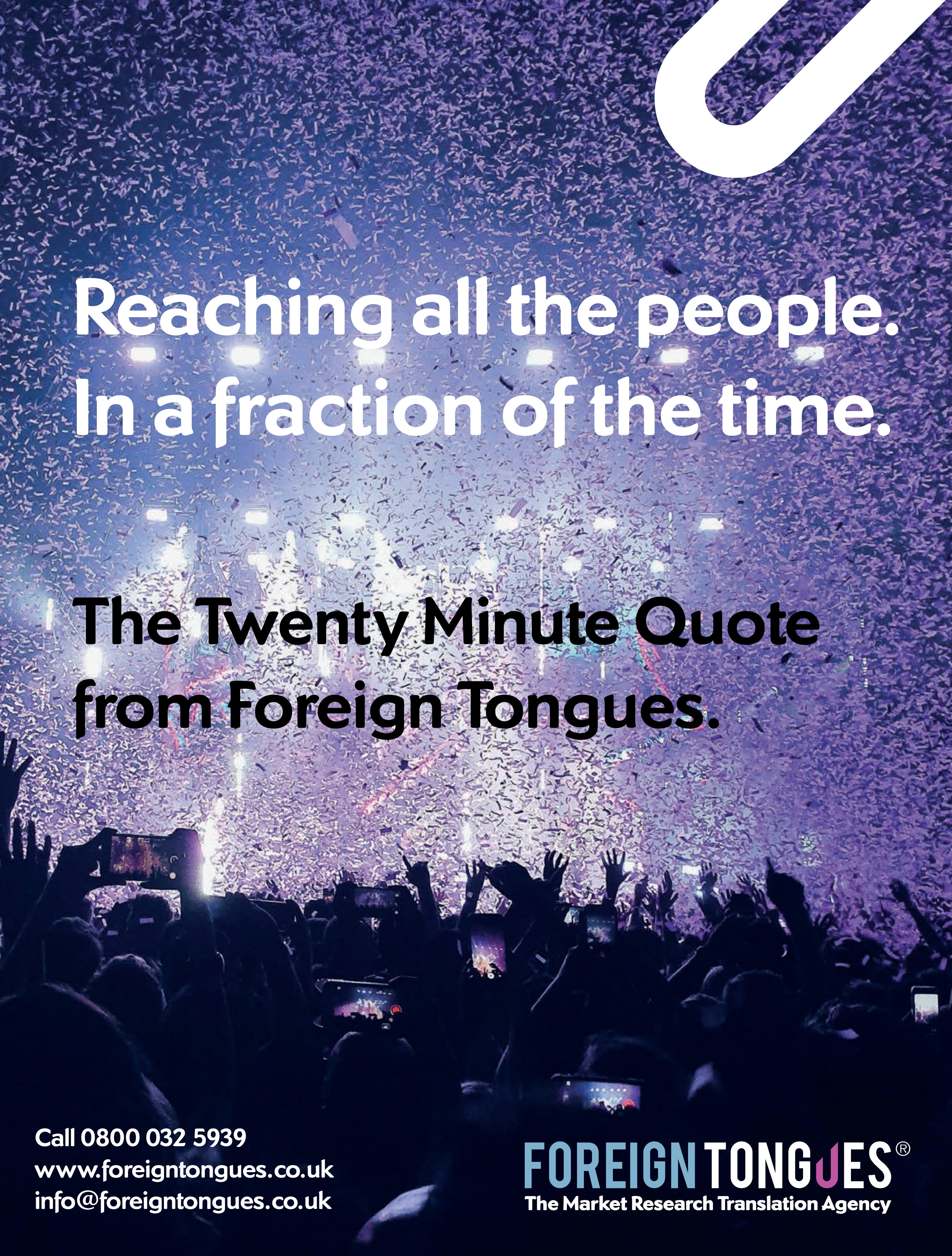
according to Heleyová, has as much as a fifth dedicated to zero-alcohol products, far higher than in Canada. However, she adds, part of Asahi's problem was that 'Canada is a complex market that is not well covered by data sources we have currently'.

The company conducted a three-week research project to analyse existing and available data to understand the drivers behind the growth of zero-alcohol in Canada. The research found stigma towards non-alcoholic beer around whether the quality was as high as alcoholic beers, and a feeling that low-alcohol should only be drunk when there is an inability to get 'real' beer.

However, for many younger Canadians it was viewed as a positive choice to opt to have non-alcoholic beer. Others saw zero-alcohol products as a positive choice on occasions when a lower-alcohol beverage might be useful, such as when driving. "No- and low-alcohol has different levels of maturity in different markets," says Heleyová. "Canada is a market where the category has started to boom. It was interesting to see the occasions and drivers for where people see the specific category as suitable and welcoming for them."

Trends come and go, but a product that has existed since 1842 – the date when the first pilsner beer was brewed in Plzeň, Czechia – remains a cornerstone of the world beer industry.

For Asahi, its role is to help lager continue to find new customers as the 21st century rolls on.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Embrace the team sport

I love team sports. I love watching them (apart from cricket, because who has time for that?), and I love playing them. I love the mentality – coming together to achieve something, with each individual playing their own important role.

It wasn't until recently, however, that I was introduced to the idea of thinking about your work as a team sport. I'm not talking about the standard drivel of "we're a team, we're a family, we work together, blah blah blah" that all companies seem to peddle nowadays (we'll park that rant for another day). I'm talking about specialist skills. Expertise. I was having my usual imposter syndrome-fuelled panic of "I'm not good enough at X, Y, Z; I need more training in A, B, C; I'll never truly succeed until I master this, that and the other." And it hit me. What if I didn't need to master all of those things to be successful?

Standing on the hockey pitch, I would never expect myself to be goal hanging like a forward, tracking the ball in midfield, defending the 22 and padded up in goal as the last line of defence. I never expect myself to be any good at playing all of those positions (anyone who has seen me play in goal can absolutely vouch for that). The thing is, nobody else would ever expect me to play all of those positions either, or to be remotely good at them.

"Perhaps I don't need to understand the intricacies of data governance to know that I understand data"

I know they all exist, I know what they do, I know what their specific roles are and how they come together to form a team. I know how to play my position even better because of what they do, and I know the team objective and how we're going to get there. What if it's the same at work?

Maybe I don't have to be an expert at qual, quant and advanced analytics. Maybe I don't need specialist experience across all different sectors. Perhaps I don't need to understand the intricacies of data governance, data engineering and data modelling to know that I understand data.

That's why all of these different roles exist, right? It's why a data engineer is different from a data scientist. It's why a semiotician is different from a social listening expert. When you look at the world of data and research, it is huge, overwhelming, and I always find myself getting stuck with the classic problem of "the more I know, the more I know I don't know".

Within our industries, in particular, you'll also often find the perfectionists, the keen learners, the knowledge-thirsty, the curious. The people whose job it is to answer questions often tend to ask the most questions.

It's important to remember, however, that it's how these roles work together that makes the difference – and (the bit I struggle with) the acceptance that these different roles exist for a reason. This becomes even more obvious in client-side data teams. When I was a part of one, there were so many people who worked tirelessly behind the scenes – each of them like a perfectly functioning part of a single entity.

The data architects designed the perfect data warehouses, the data engineers built those visions. The data scientists or analysts were the ones dipping into those databases to run analysis and answer business questions. Then you'll often have certain individuals across the data teams who have a specific useful skillset – your data visualisation experts, consumer insight experts, stakeholder engagement experts, strategic thinking experts. You could never expect one person to be an expert in all of these different areas. You don't have to know it all. It's normal, and productive, to lean on your other team members, to draw on their strengths as they draw on yours.

James Miller, director at Pragma Consulting, put it perfectly in a recent LinkedIn post: "As you progress in your career, especially into leadership roles, it's crucial to remember that it's OK not to know it all. You have your strengths, and others have theirs. The key is to remain open to learning and to recognise that expertise is a collective effort.

"Don't burden yourself with the expectation of perfect knowledge. Instead, embrace the power of collaboration."

Bump in the road

‘Failing fast’ may be the culture of Silicon Valley, but most of us are uncomfortable with failure. Yet setbacks are a part of life, and how we respond can determine how we learn. By Liam Kay-McClean

“I lost two jobs over the course of about two-and-a-half years and, to be honest, both times I eventually saw it as a great life opportunity, though how soon after varied between the jobs.”

Peter Lane, who now works in user research at YuLife, tells us that the first job was lost because of the financial fallout from the Covid-19 lockdown, which resulted in him being made redundant, followed by a period of freelance work. The second was a dream role that turned sour.

“The dream quickly faded; there was mounting pressure on me and I was out of my depth, writing and editing at pace, and in bulk,” says Lane. “Stress mounted and I became increasingly anxious. After a few months, they pulled the plug. This was both a knock to my confidence and a kind of relief – at first from the stress and then, more slowly, a relief that I had given it, my ‘dream’, a go, ticked the box, and could move on.”

Setbacks happen in all walks of life and, at some point, most people will face challenges and deem themselves to have failed, or not have achieved the success they expect. Regardless of whether setbacks are work-related or rooted in personal life, they can be difficult to navigate.

What went right?

Zoe Fenn, founder at You Burn Bright, is a leadership coach for research agencies, who launched her own business after being made redundant. She says that the first step is reassessing your relationship with 'failure'. "We say success or failure, but they are too ends of an extreme and there is so much in the middle," she explains. "The reality of a setback is that it is often somewhere in the middle. One strategy is to identify what element was actually a failure – there will have been a lot of things that have gone well."

There is a difference between a failure in terms of something you did that you want to do differently, and something not going your way, she adds. "There's so much good you can take from the experience of trying. If we get too attached to an outcome and not wanting to fail, we stop going for things."

Other setbacks can simply be the result of changing circumstances. Sinead Jefferies, senior vice-president at Zappi, moved to France eight years ago and went freelance, before returning to agency life last year. Freelance was great at the beginning, she says, but that changed over time.

"I got to a point where I didn't always love what I was doing," Jefferies says. "I worked on some amazing projects, but I also ended up doing some stuff that I thought was 10 years ago in my career, not now, which was a bit frustrating. I also felt lonely and on my own, having to continue to make connections to find the next project. The upsides I got from the flexibility and freedom started not to be worth it."

Jefferies says she would not take back her time as a freelancer, but feels she is now in her ideal work environment. "There's something to be said for the learning you get from those experiences," she adds. "If you make a decision about your career for reasons that are, at the time, important to you and feels like the right thing to do, you will always get something from that."

Growing pains

The shift into a management role can also cause setbacks for some, as in the case of Hannah Rogers, business development director at Kokoro. In a previous role, she says she had to adjust to the new demands of management and change her approach following feedback from a more junior colleague after a request to work on a new methodology.

"I couldn't understand that, for them, it wasn't easy and was scary – they didn't have the benefit of experience," Rogers says. "I hadn't explained it very well, appreciated their fear, or understood that – if a senior director asks them to do something – they wouldn't want to let me down and would be worried about their career prospects [if they didn't understand something]."

It is important for senior staff and employees to have honest conversations and move beyond hierarchical constraints, according to wellbeing coach James Pickles.

"When managers and team leaders are checking in with their team, we need to break the pattern of the 'fine thanks, how are you?' game," he says. "If a manager genuinely wants to check in with someone, someone has to go first, and that someone will probably have to be the more senior of the two. To ask someone to open up, you might have to give a little bit to create a trusting environment."

Pickles recommends talking through any issues with others to help address underlying problems. "Find somebody you feel comfortable and safe talking it through with," he says. "It is the opposite of what most people do, which is some form of struggle in silence. Remain silent until you find, by yourself, the solution to it.

"Find someone you can have a conversation with about the issue – not a conversation that asks for advice necessarily, because to be receptive to advice you have to have a real grip on the problem. People put pressure on themselves to have real clarity before we speak up, and that prevents us from speaking openly in order to get clarity."

"Learning from experiences and seeing it all as a test is a valuable life lesson"

Perhaps most importantly, concludes Fenn, is making sure that you take feedback well from any conversations that you have, and think about any lessons that can be gleaned from a setback.

"It is about getting as much information as you can, asking questions and understanding what you need to demonstrate," she says. "Do I want to be right, or do I want to learn and develop?"

The ability to learn from past problems is key, adds Lane, who recovered from his previous two experiences to return to the world of research in his current role. "You must see it as an opportunity to learn about yourself. For me, it was a chance to test and validate what I do and don't like. I'd recommend anyone who loses their job to try a few things that they couldn't do when they were in work.

"Taking this sort of attitude, of learning from experiences and seeing it all as a test, is a really valuable life lesson."


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Farewell, Numis

Finance columnist Lorna Tilbian reflects on the role research played at investment bank Numis, as the organisation becomes part of Deutsche Bank

Friday, 13 October 2023. An email pops into my inbox from Deutsche Numis announcing Deutsche Bank's acquisition of Numis, the investment bank I co-founded. It is a bittersweet moment. Sweet for the pride I feel that we created, organically, a business that was acquired by one of Europe's largest banks for $511m (£410m), and sad that Numis has lost its independence. It took me back to our very first day, Monday, 4 September 2001, when I walked into our newly rented offices and we set about building a new bank and brokerage – a tall order, as City peers never failed to point out.

A research-based brokerage for a new millennium

We had been through the dotcom bubble and seen the advantage of being nimble and agile, so we pointed out how Reuters had been challenged by Bloomberg, ITV by Sky, and British Airways by easyJet, to name but a few. A new millennium demanded a new approach: globalisation and the emergence of China, and technology – with the dawn of mobile telephony and the internet – were changing the world. We wanted to create a research-based brokerage that would capture this industrial revolution.

Research, the key to our future success

We would start by focusing on research that would sit at the heart of the business. We would assemble a research department of highly ranked analysts who would be key opinion formers in the market, and whose investment ideas and recommendations would be keenly followed by institutional investors. The top-rated analysts would be recognised specialists in all the key sectors, informing and educating the market by publishing research on the top-down drivers and dynamics of their industries, as well as bottom-up, in-depth research and forecasts on the companies in their universe.

A differentiated research product

Each sector would create a weekly 'guide to fair value', with target prices for each stock based on revenue multiples, earnings growth and cash generation. These target prices would indicate if a share was a buy (> +20% upside), a hold (+/-10%) or a sell (> -20% downside). Although these are now widely used valuation metrics and recommendations, they were not commonly used then. Each sector would also produce an annual sector 'bible' that clients would keep on their desks as a ready research resource.

Research, the fuel that drove the engine

Research would drive sales and execution by building leading market shares in our chosen companies. This, in turn, would enable corporate broking to pitch for the brokership of these companies. As corporate brokers, we would be the companies' eyes and ears in the marketplace, marketing and trading their shares, and liaising with their shareholders – for which we would ask an annual retainer. Once corporates paid a retainer for our services, we would super-serve them, which would help build a strong relationship and enable us, in time, to act as their trusted mergers and acquisitions advisers in corporate finance.

> **"We would be the companies' eyes and ears in the marketplace"**

Two research sectors were our making

A week into our new venture, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States shook the world. From the outset, our first strategic move for Numis was to combine two complementary research sectors – defensive insurance broking with cyclical media. Our plan kicked into action sooner than we could ever have imagined. We were corporate brokers to many of Lloyd's of London's insurance brokers that had exposure to the World Trade Center, previously viewed as a low insurance risk.

Research recognition

Between September 2001 and the so-called 'Baghdad bounce' in March 2003, we raised funds from institutional investors to recapitalise Lloyd's' underwriters after the heavy insurance losses from the destruction of the Twin Towers and related casualty claims. At that stage of the economic recovery in 2003, the early cycle media sector kicked in and took over the running. In February 2004, we did the first accelerated initial public offering, of Centaur Media Plc. By the top of the cycle, in 2006, we ranked first in the Thomson Reuters Extel survey for research, execution and corporate access for companies with a market capitalisation of up to £1bn. Our research-first approach had won the day.

A question of **bias**

Research has identified biases against minority groups when it comes to certain financial products. Phoebe Ward **and** Carol McNaughton Nicholls **examine how AI could potentially exacerbate the issue**

Debates about how new technology impacts our lives are not new. However, the pace of this debate has changed recently, fuelled by increased access to generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools; technologies that raise fundamental questions about knowledge-making, decision-making, and what it means to be human.

As insight practitioners, we think about these challenges constantly. We need to understand how insight and evidence can help society navigate new challenges. We know how important a rich evidence base can be in cutting through complex landscapes. Crucially, evidence allows us to have informed discussion and truly examine who is impacted by change.

New insights on complex topics can trigger the need for more research and debate. In 2022, Citizens Advice explored how personal data and algorithms could be leading to discriminatory pricing for people of colour buying car insurance. The research shone a spotlight on the use of new practices in financial services specifically, and raised the question: are similar trends happening elsewhere?

The findings from the Citizens Advice research, in the report *Discriminatory pricing: Exploring the 'ethnicity penalty' in the insurance market*, raised important considerations for the Financial Services Consumer Panel, an independent statutory body representing the interests of consumers in financial services via advice and challenge to the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).

The panel wanted to look at this issue in greater depth and understand whether the patterns identified exist elsewhere. To do so, Thinks Insight & Strategy was commissioned to examine the evidence base, exploring whether there is evidence that the use of personal data and AI in financial services decision-making is causing detriment to groups with protected characteristics.

To answer this complex question, we analysed almost 70 sources, from published academic pieces to thought-leadership articles. Sources included in the evidence base originated from Canada, Australia, the US, Europe and the UK. To reflect the global nature of the debate, we also interviewed thought leaders across each of these locations.

You won't be surprised to hear that there is no straightforward answer to the panel's question. However, three findings shine a light on the pressing need to use this evidence base for further debate:

1. Some biased outcomes

Some groups are experiencing biased outcomes in financial services, as the Citizens Advice study shows – and it's concerning.

A year after its initial research, Citizens Advice re-ran the study, finding again that customers from ethnic minority backgrounds in the UK pay more for their car insurance. Another report – *Improving access to insurance for disabled people*, by Scope – found disabled people sharing their experiences of travelling abroad without insurance because of the unaffordable prices they face. Ongoing legal cases in the US show black customers having to work harder to claim on their insurance. Something is happening.

2. More evidence required

It is strongly suspected that these biased outcomes occur as a result of the use of personal data and AI in decision-making. But that's the key word: suspect.

We are familiar with the argument that bias can be reinforced and embedded into new decision-making tools using historical and 'proxy' data. These practices are part of the reason experts suspect bias is inherent in the technology used to make decisions by financial services – and that these practices lead to different outcomes for certain groups in a way we might not be comfortable with as a society.

However, the challenge is categorically evidencing the link between efficient, technology-led practices and biased outcomes. The use of this technology has evolved so quickly that firms cannot always be sure about how AI is being trained to make these decisions and the data points being used. Because companies do not always have personal data on protected characteristics, they cannot 'reverse check' for biased outcomes. This is concerning, and means experts are calling for greater emphasis to be placed on governance and transparency for those holding data and using AI.

AI and research

The principles we suggest for using AI in research are:

- Use AI to expand reach, making research more creative, expansive and engaging
- Challenge to get the best out of a project, regardless of AI involvement
- Be transparent about how AI is used in research
- Include the widest range of voices in research and address bias.

3. Agreement needed

Whatever the impact of new practices, we need to take a step back and form agreement about how fair, or unfair, we perceive different outcomes in financial services at a societal level.

Technologies aside, society needs to explore: what are fair and reasonable outcomes in the context of financial services? Who are they fair for? Is it right that older people pay more for insurance than younger people? Maybe so. Should mental health records be considered when making decisions about risk? What about physical health records? To what degree?

This type of conversation and agreement is core to any social contract that sets the rules by which we live. Our research shows it is especially needed in the context of AI development. We need to understand how technology impacts notions of fairness and influences outcomes. In the context of the new consumer duty, it is even more important.

What is the impact of our work?

The panel has used the insights to inform recommendations to the FCA. Specifically, the panel highlights the importance of transparency between firms and consumers, calling on:

- The FCA to embed the consideration of algorithms and AI – and their potential to affect consumer outcomes and cause harm – as a cross-cutting theme, relevant to all of its workstreams
- Financial services businesses to show how consumers' personal data is used in their algorithms and AI, and how this drives decisions and outputs that affect consumer outcomes.

If implemented, these recommendations could lead to heightened protection for consumers.

These types of considerations also matter for our own industry's practice, and must evolve as technology, the societal context, and our awareness of the impact of AI evolves. We are on the cusp of a new point in time when none of us can afford to not explicitly reflect on what it all means. This requires evidence and debate in society, which, as an industry, we can be pivotal in providing – while considering the evidence and impact on our own industry, too.

Phoebe Ward is associate director and Carol McNaughton Nicholls is associate partner at Thinks Insight & Strategy

Making sense of numbers

We all know the importance of plain English for improving consumer understanding and decision-making. Much has been written on how to write effectively. Most recently, Harvard behavioural scientists Todd Rogers and Jessica Lasky-Fink published *Writing for busy readers: Communicate more effectively in the real world*.

Sadly, we have not seen the same focus when it comes to tackling numerical blindness, yet many lack basic numeracy skills, with the UK one of the worst performing nations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. A 2011 survey found that nearly half the working-age population has the numeracy levels expected of a child aged 9 to11. Only a fifth are what we call functionally numerate – the equivalent of a GCSE grade 4 (C) or above.

Chip Heath, professor of organisational behaviour at Stanford School of Business, has said: “Maths is no one’s native language. At best, it is a second language, picked up at school through formal training.”

Just as behavioural science has highlighted how plain English can increase comprehension and action, it has also shown how to communicate ‘plain numbers’ – making numerical information easier to comprehend. Simply disclosing numbers to consumers is not enough, particularly in the context of the consumer duty that took effect from the end of July 2023.

Two behavioural science-inspired principles can help us tackle number blindness: cognitive ease and anchors.

Building cognitive ease

We experience cognitive ease when information is presented in a way that requires minimal mental effort to absorb and understand it. When it is presented in this way, allowing the ‘reader’ to make decisions using more of their automatic or effortless (System 1) thinking, we can say information is high in ‘cognitive ease’. Conversely, if people are forced to engage System 2 – where it takes more effort to comprehend information – they are less likely to act on the information and may give up trying to read it at all, particularly if they are busy.

“We can add emotional meaning by framing numbers, which can help people focus on the most important aspect”

1. Where possible, avoid using numbers

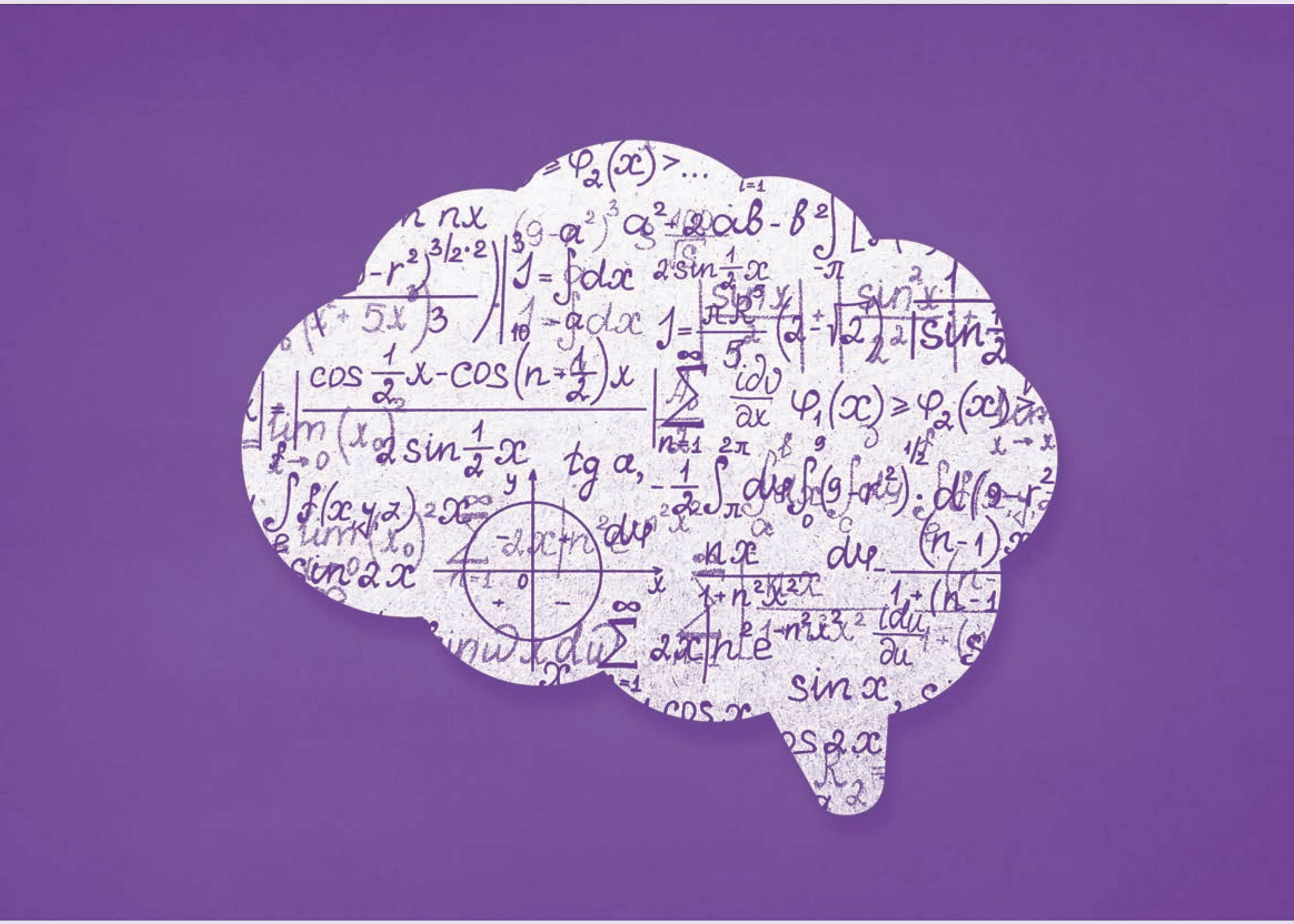
The first rule of thumb for communicating numbers simply is actually not to use them at all. Take a Bloomberg headline from April 2023: “Women CEOs (finally) outnumber those named John”. It is equally possible to make the statement using numbers: “For the first time, there were 41 female CEOs in the S&P 500 and only 23 Johns or Jons out of a total 500 CEOs”. However, the key message to convey is that the number of female CEOs is still small but rising, and this doesn’t need numbers. A simple verbal comparison is clearer and more memorable. Make your point without numbers if possible, but, if they must feature, identify only the key figures, and cut the rest.

2. Make numbers simple or shorter

There is a long-standing debate about the trade-off between precision and comprehension when it comes to rounding numbers. On the one hand, it feels intuitive that people would prefer rounded numbers. Indeed, research has found that people find single-digit numbers easier to remember than teen numbers, and double numbers – for example, 33 – easier than other double digits. Yet, there is also evidence that we are more likely to believe a precise number is true – the likelihood of being able to precisely measure an unfamiliar quantity with round numbers is extremely low. When an expedition team measured Mount Everest to be 29,000ft, they opted to report it as 29,002ft to remove any doubt that they had rounded it.

A recent study (Nguyen, Hofman and Goldstein, 2022) set out to test the impact that rounding has on people’s ability to remember numbers. Researchers asked participants to read news snippets that cited numbers in either a precise or rounded format and then recall them. For example: “Among the admitted students were 28,752 (30,000) transfer students who were offered spots at UC campuses”. When researchers compared recall accuracy, less than 50% of responses in the precise condition were approximately correct, versus nearly 70% in the rounded condition. People were also more likely to make faster estimations in the rounded condition.

Many people fall into the trap of using big numbers to sound



impressive. Politicians tend to use phrases such as “we will spend a further £200m on the health service”, knowing this sounds like a large increase to most people, whereas, in reality, it is a meagre amount in a government budget. Some neuroscientists argue that our brains were probably not built to comprehend the differences between large numbers, as 1,000, 1m or 1bn are all ‘big’.

Give numbers anchors for context

We need reference points or anchors to put a number into context and aid understanding, particularly when the context is unfamiliar. We can also add emotional meaning by framing numbers, which can help people focus on the most important aspect, such as key benefits or drawbacks.

Make numbers meaningful by providing comparison points. Chip Heath believes that we need to paint a picture with numbers and make them emotionally meaningful. In an interview for a January 2022 episode of Stanford University’s Graduate School of Business’s ‘Think Fast, Talk Smart’ podcast, he said: “We have to make data emotional because emotions are what drive us to act.”

In 2016, researchers from Microsoft and Columbia University (Barrio, Goldstein and Hofman) set out to make headlines more meaningful by adding contextual perspective clauses. For example, “The storm killed thousands of people in Honduras, left one million homeless... To put this into perspective, one million is about 12% of the population in Honduras”, and found that people were more likely to recall the number accurately.

Summary and implications:

- Consider starting by assuming people likely struggle with numbers
- When exploring communication that involves numbers, keep in mind different levels of numeracy, and design your sample, or use the screener, to ensure you can research a good spread of numeric ability
- When thinking about your audience, it is best to measure both objective and subjective numeric ability, as people often think they are better (or worse) with numbers than they actually are
- If you need to communicate numbers, think about how best to communicate them, or how to bring the numbers alive. Remember there are many ways to communicate the same number – behavioural science is your creative friend.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Navigating AI regulation: the EU vs the UK

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a rapidly evolving technology, transforming industries at a significant scale, automating repetitive tasks, and improving efficiency and decision-making. With the advancement of AI, the regulatory and legislative landscapes have quickly adapted to appropriately respond to the market and produce frameworks and standards for ensuring civil rights, ethical practices, and fostering innovation.

There are two notable approaches to date: the European Union's AI Act and the UK's 'pro-innovation' approach (this document will not be implemented on a statutory footing initially, but the government anticipates introducing a statutory duty on regulators, requiring them to have due regard to the principles).

So, what are the key differences between the documents, and what are the implications for market research?

The EU approach

The EU Artificial Intelligence Act is a comprehensive and ambitious framework introduced by the European Union. The act is the first of its kind in Europe and the first AI legislation in the world.

The objective of the rules is to ensure that AI systems are overseen by people, rather than by automation, to prevent harmful outcomes. The cornerstone of the act is the classification system – it aims to govern AI systems, addressing a wide range of applications, from chatbots to complex machine-learning algorithms.

The EU classification system is as follows:

- Unacceptable risk
- High risk
- Limited risk
- Minimal or no risk.

Unacceptable risk AI systems are ones considered a threat to people and will be banned. They include:

- Cognitive behavioural manipulation of people or specific vulnerable groups – for example, voice-activated toys that encourage dangerous behaviour in children
- Social scoring – classifying people based on behaviour, socio-economic status or personal characteristics
- Real-time and remote biometric identification systems, such as facial recognition.

All high-risk AI systems will be assessed before being put on the market and throughout their life-cycle. Generative AI systems, such as ChatGPT, would have to comply with transparency requirements:

- Disclosing that the content was generated by AI
- Designing the model to prevent it from generating illegal content
- Publishing summaries of copyrighted data used for training.

Market research agencies using high-risk AI systems, such as those affecting fundamental rights, will need to undergo conformity assessments, maintain detailed documentation, and provide explicit user consent. This can lead to increased operational costs and potential delays in project execution.

Limited-risk AI systems should comply with minimal transparency requirements that would allow users to make informed decisions. For example, an individual interacting with a chatbot must be informed that they are engaging with a machine so they can decide whether to proceed or request to speak with a human instead.

Minimal-risk applications are already widely deployed and make up most of the AI systems we interact with today. Examples include spam filters, AI-enabled video games, and inventory-management systems.

The UK approach

The UK white paper was published for consultation on 29 March 2023. It sets out an innovative and principles-based approach to regulating AI and defers to regulators (market/industry expertise) to implement the principles and issue guidance and resources. The objective of the UK approach is to drive growth and prosperity, ensure public trust in AI and strengthen the UK's position as a global leader.

The UK approach is aimed towards improving business and innovation, rather than enforcing rigid and onerous legislative requirements, which could hold back AI innovation and reduce the UK's ability to respond quickly, and proportionately, to future technological advances. Instead, the direction makes use of regulators' domain-specific expertise to tailor the implementation of the principles to the specific context in which AI is used.

The five principles of the UK approach are:

- **Safety, security and robustness:** AI systems should operate "in a robust, secure and safe way throughout the AI life-cycle", especially considering the autonomous nature of AI decision-making. Risks present at each stage of the AI life-cycle should be spotted, assessed and managed
- **Appropriate transparency and 'explainability':** Transparency is defined as the provision of appropriate information on AI systems (eg, the purpose of the system and how and when it will be used) to relevant parties. Explainability relates to a relevant party's ability to access and understand the decision-making rationale of an AI system
- **Fairness:** This pertains to protecting the legal rights of individuals and organisations. AI systems should not weaken these legal rights, nor should they result in discriminatory market outcomes. For example, errors in an AI-generated credit score can negatively affect an individual's livelihood
- **Accountability and governance:** Governance measures should be implemented to oversee the supply and use of AI systems, and lines of accountability should be clearly demarcated throughout the AI life-cycle
- **Contestability and redress:** Affected third parties and actors within the AI life-cycle should be able to make a complaint about, or contest, AI that creates harm or a material risk of harm.

Conclusion

There is large disparity and divergence in approach to AI regulation between the UK and EU. On the one hand, the EU AI Act introduces a degree of liability for both AI developers and users. For example, market research agencies may be required to re-evaluate their contracts, privacy notices and partnerships to ensure they are not unduly exposed to legal risks. Furthermore, organisations will be required to disclose which AI systems they use, and provide transparent information about the types and functions of algorithms, sources of data, and decision-making processes.

Conversely, the UK approach fosters innovation and advancement. However, in the absence of legislation and enforceable rules, there may be a lack of trust from consumers and increasing concerns around privacy protections.

"There is large divergence in approach to AI regulation between the UK and EU"

It is important, though, to have harmonisation between the UK and EU approach, so that there is congruence for those working across different markets – this is something MRS has encouraged in our consultation responses to the UK government. For now, market research agencies operating in the EU must be mindful of the regulatory requirements of the EU AI Act. Failure to comply may limit their access to the European market.

The industry must adapt and quickly invest in compliance, innovate ethically, and navigate the complexities of the global market. The future of AI regulation is likely to involve a measured balance between these two approaches, ensuring that responsible AI deployment and economic growth coexist harmoniously.

MRS has published guidance on the use of AI in research, which can be found at mrs.org.uk

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NOTE for all MRS Company Partners and Members

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Reasons to be cheerful

It is always tempting in these febrile times, and surrounded by so much change and frankly appalling news, to talk or write ourselves into a depression. It can be difficult in the short days of winter not to respond to the gloom of dark evenings with our own mood of pessimism.

Which is why it is nice to be able to report some positive news about our market. While most people are not expecting market growth in the next 12 months, MRS research published in the Research Live Industry Report 2024 shows there has been an increase in business optimism. The numbers of businesses responding to our survey that predicted business growth reached 50%, while the number predicting business decline fell by more than half. It seems that many of you are confident you have the right product and relationships to succeed in the next year.

In the coming year, MRS promises to continue to support you, wherever you are in the sector, to deliver the best research and to build your business or your professional expertise. While many hundreds of thousands of pages were written on the promise or threat of AI last year, MRS delivered practical, authoritative advice and guidance. We delivered new standards AI guidance, an MRS Delphi report with a new framework proposition for the use of AI in research, as well as practical training and a dedicated AI conference this month.

This year, we will keep all this guidance and training updated, and continue to drive the support we give for the development of equality, diversity and inclusion in the sector. As spring brings new growth, we will be bringing you radical new developments to the Net Zero Pledge.

I look forward to a spring crowded with 'new', focused as ever on our Annual Conference on 12 March.

Happy new year, everyone.

Sector and MRS news

Positive Retention Report

Published by the MRS People and Talent group, the *Positive Retention Report* provides inspiration, stimulus and practical prompts to help guide managers and employers on what 'positive retention' best practice looks like in today's insight sector.

RAS: equity, diversity and inclusion module

A new training module for the Recruiter Accreditation Scheme (RAS) has been developed by MRS and AQR on equity, diversity and inclusion. It is available as an optional module to the core RAS accreditation.

MRS Unlimited resources

The MRS Unlimited Steering Group has compiled a range of resources to help guide you through disability-inclusive research, including case studies, inclusive research, and workplace practices. Available on mrs.org.uk

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- The benefits available in your MyMRS account include: GDPR resources; pre-recorded webinars; the Sage Research Methods; guidance on the Code of Conduct; case studies; and *IJMR* (for CMRS and Fellows)

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1 How is qualitative research methodology evolving?

It has definitely evolved to respond to the increased diversity of data sources that are available, especially online sources. Given the preponderance of visuals on social media, I still find it surprising that researchers don't do more analysis of visual data.

I'm quite excited about the advent of computational theory development in my own discipline of information systems, where people are actively thinking about how to leverage large data sets from various digital sources and use them in conjunction with qualitative data to build theory.

2 What role can grounded theory play in the current research landscape?

Grounded theory shows no sign of stopping, and has become much more popular in business and management disciplines in recent years. It endures because it is a proven method of building new theory and, at the same time, providing deep insights into the data.

Because grounded theory is useful where little or no previous theory exists, it's perfect for the 21st century, where we find ourselves surrounded by fast-paced technological change that has huge impact on our everyday lives. Grounded theory also regards different types of data as entirely legitimate for sampling – Barney Glaser famously said 'all is data' – so we can sample social media data with ease.

3 Has the pandemic permanently altered qual research?

I'm not entirely sure. It inspired researchers to collect qualitative data online when there was no other way, and some will have found that this widens their data-collection options. Of course, these online options tend to strip valuable context from the data, so a face-to-face opportunity for data gathering will always give more richness.

4 What impact do you think artificial intelligence (AI) will have on qual methodologies?

One of the first things I asked ChatGPT to do was code some data for me. I was sorely disappointed with the results. Possibly I could train it to do better, but qualitative analysis is still more of an art than a science. While ChatGPT is relying on natural language models, it's going to be limited to examples of coding on the internet – of which there are not many.

All that said, I am optimistic that as AI becomes embedded in our practices as an everyday tool, we can use it to further automate analysis tasks. In my experience, however, grounded theory is successful because of close engagement with the data – and, at the moment, it's human engagement that allows grounded theory to make a solid creative contribution.

5 How can social media help address social challenges?

I think it depends on the social challenge you are talking about. Social media is a great leveller; it gives people a voice, but, at the same time, it is open to manipulation. It also allows like-minded people to find each other and organise for social change. At the same time, it can polarise people – X (formerly Twitter) being a great example.

6 Are you optimistic for the future potential of technology to address societal challenges?

The climate crisis is an existential one, and I think human behaviour has to change, rather than putting our faith in technological solutions. I worry that we think of all technology as a silver bullet, especially when it comes to climate change. Governments need to act. Internet use is actually responsible for 3.7% of carbon emissions, which is similar to air travel. Given that these emissions will go up, it is incumbent on us to think about how to reduce them.

7 Do you feel businesses are taking societal issues seriously enough?

Businesses vary tremendously in how they treat societal issues. One problem, especially with regard to sustainability, is that green products are marketed in such a way that consumers might feel they can make a difference by making green purchases, when, in fact, no amount of individual action will make an impact on climate change without social and political change.


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