

THEMED ESSAYS

Who's Afraid of the Big Bad AI? Fear and Loathing of AI and How Business Anthropologists Can Get Over It

*Robert J. Morais***Abstract**

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) presents opportunities and challenges for business anthropology. It offers analytical efficiencies, but requires well-informed, judicious use. Some anthropologists are hesitant to incorporate GenAI in their work based on their lack of understanding and/or concerns about it, including a belief that the human elements of anthropological practice will be compromised. This essay summarizes barriers to GenAI adoption among anthropologists, illustrates GenAI's utility in research, and proposes ways for business anthropologists to apply GenAI to augment rather than replace anthropological insight. When used carefully, GenAI can enhance business anthropology by streamlining and expanding analysis while enabling anthropologists to maintain their interpretative distinctiveness. Although some anthropologists have valid concerns about using AI in their professional practice, GenAI represents a fundamental evolution, perhaps a revolution, for business anthropology that will invigorate our discipline.

Keywords

Generative artificial intelligence, Business anthropology, Qualitative research methods, Marketing, Consumer anthropology.

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The New York Times Magazine has declared that “Everyone Is Using AI for Everything” (Roose and Newton 2025). While that characterization might be hyperbolic, the scope and speed of generative AI’s global adoption over the past few years is astonishing. Nevertheless, my ongoing conversations with friends in the business anthropology community and numerous LinkedIn posts suggest that many in our coterie are reluctant to tap into generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) for their work. The concerns are legion, but a recurrent theme is the joy and intrinsic payoff of do-it-yourself anthropological labor. As one LinkedIn post has it:

It’s not just you – the analysis is my favorite part! Well, except for that real-time data collection high when you know you’re on to something – that’s my favorite. But for me, even that real-time awareness is only possible through an intimate connection with my data. I want, I NEED that intimate connection so that I can think on my feet and connect insights to biz goals on the fly.

This essay suggests that, although some anthropologists have valid concerns about using GenAI and Large Language Models (LLMs) in particular in their professional practice, when applied judiciously, GenAI can en-

hance business anthropology projects and invigorate our discipline.¹ My target reader is not the sophisticated user of artificial intelligence. This essay is written for those anthropologists who are hesitant to use AI in their work and those who have incorporated it but done so reluctantly and rarely. My aim is to increase their receptivity to AI as a fundamental evolution or, perhaps more accurately, revolution for our field. My hope is that, through trial, more anthropologists will see that the AI wolf will not devour their human contribution, and they should not fear or loathe it.

In what follows, I begin with a perspective on the barriers to GenAI adoption among anthropologists. Then, I illustrate GenAI's utility in research. Finally, I propose a few ways for AI-curious business anthropologists to incorporate GenAI in their work.

AI AVERSION ON THE JOB: AN INVENTORY

Antipathy toward applying AI in their work persists among many business anthropologists despite acceptance by a growing number of ethnographers in business, evidenced by the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference 2025 Program and a number of publications on the value of AI anthropology in *Anthropology News* and elsewhere (for instance, Artz 2023b; Artz and Koycheva 2024; Koycheva, VandenBroek, and Artz 2026; see also articles and training sessions on AI for ethnography at www.epicpeople.org). There has also been considerable historical interest in artificial intelligence broadly among anthropologists (see VandenBroek, Artz, and Koycheva 2026). Negative perceptions of GenAI's professional utility range across epistemological, technical, ethical, and emotional domains. Key issues include:

1. GenAI could miss or simplify cultural nuances, and its "reasoning" might not be as meticulous as an anthropologist's, given AI's focus on logic versus an anthropologist's holistic and theoretically informed elucidation (for a study on the limitations of AI's reasoning ability, see Shojaee et al. 2025).
2. AI's well-known hallucinations and allegedly weak creative thinking (for a commentary on AI's artistic inadequacies, see Chiang 2024).

¹ LLMs are used in text-based GenAI.

3. LLMs might privilege text-based knowledge systems and are trained on datasets that could be biased.
4. Worries about data protection along with data scraping and non-consensual use of content, which sound alarms *vis-à-vis* intellectual property and cultural appropriation.
5. Lack of understanding of what GenAI is.
6. Trepidation regarding AI (Elliott 2024).
7. Not knowing when, where, or how to use AI.
8. Little or no clarity and a large measure of skepticism about GenAI's value for cultural anthropology based upon AI's inability to conduct face-to-face ethnography and lack of empathy (so far), in addition to its shortcomings of nuance, reasoning, creativity, and credibility (see Schillewaert 2026 for an AI example that approaches human ethnography).
9. GenAI is antithetical to the ethos of how cultural anthropologists operate; for instance, first-hand research and bespoke interpretive analysis.
10. GenAI will make anthropologists lazy or replace us. As one LinkedIn post asked: "Are we automating ourselves out of the equation?"
11. AI's damaging impact on the earth's climate, driven by the substantial energy required to power it.

Anthropologists' uneasiness concerning artificial intelligence should not be dismissed. However, an open mind, a willingness to explore, and a *modus operandi* of withholding judgment of "the other" are hallmarks of cultural anthropology. For those reasons alone, more cultural anthropologists, especially business anthropologists, should thoughtfully assess the utility of GenAI in their professional lives.

WHAT GENAI CAN DO: A BRIEF EXAMPLE FROM MARKET RESEARCH

Rather than counter the objections to GenAI point-by-point, it might be illuminating to outline its applications in market research, a discipline related to consumer anthropology, a subset of business anthropology (see McDonald 2022). Market researchers have been mining GenAI widely since the launch

of ChatGPT in November 2022. Among their uses are research problem formulation; acquisition of secondary data on market category size, consumer segments, and competition; research design; respondent screening; synthetic respondents and digital twins; data collection; data analysis; and generation of marketing insights, strategy, tactics, and new product ideas. Informed by market research (sometimes independent of it), GenAI can deliver a wealth of business development ideas that were once the province of time-consuming human brainstorming sessions (Eapen et al. 2023; Crowdworx, n.d.; see also Mollick 2024; for an anthropological perspective on the value of face-to-face business workshops, see Malefyt 2003). The following table summarizes common GenAI applications in market research.²

How GenAI Can Enhance Current Market Research Practices

	Synthesis	Coding	Interaction	Writing
OPPORTUNITY IDENTIFICATION & RESEARCH DESIGN	Summarizing existing research and literature	Mining existing data for hypotheses	Using chatbots for brainstorming and idea generation	Generating hypotheses
DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS	Extracting meaning and insights from text	Setting up surveys in a web interface; performing analytics	Using synthetic interviewers to ask follow-up questions	Creating study materials
REPORTING & DISSEMINATION	Articulating takeaways	Creating data visualization tools	Using chatbots for data exploration	Crafting executive summaries

Table 1: Korst, Puntoni, and Toubia et al. 2025.

GENAI APPLICATIONS FOR ANTHROPOLOGISTS

A few years ago, when I became increasingly concerned about the survivability of academic anthropology departments and the role of the American An-

² For a perspective with real-world examples on AI's capabilities in qualitative marketing research, see Korst, Puntoni, and Toubia 2026.

thropological Association (AAA) in protecting anthropology's future, I asked ChatGPT: "What do you suggest the American Anthropological Association should do to: (1) educate employers about anthropologists' practical skills and (2) convince more academic anthropology departments to teach students about anthropology's practical value?" The responses by ChatGPT to the above questions were expansive and, arguably, helpful. Suggestions included anthropology's applicability in market research, organizational culture, product design, sustainability, and health, along with recommendations that the AAA develop collaborations and outreach efforts, showcase success stories, and advocate for curriculum changes (Morais 2023a).

What, specifically, does AI have to offer anthropologists and, by extension, business anthropologists? Matt Artz (2023a) has offered 10 predictions on how AI will impact every branch of anthropology. Among his forecasts are: AI will reshape how ethnography is conducted and analyzed, enable anthropologists to educate the public with AI-generated, visually appealing findings, and expand anthropological entrepreneurship. To build on Artz's list and to illustrate GenAI's value in the context of this essay, the following table shows what ChatGPT produced after I queried it about applications of AI in cultural anthropology.

Uses of AI in Cultural Anthropology

	Application Area	AI Contributions	Key Examples
1	Efficient Data Analysis	NLP and machine learning assist in processing qualitative data	Transcription, theme identification, sentiment analysis
2	Ethnographic Mapping and Visualization	AI visualizes spatial and social data	Social networks, GIS-based maps of rituals, migration patterns
3	Theory Testing and Model Building	AI supports simulations and hypothesis testing	Agent-based models of belief systems, economic behavior, ritual participation

4	Text and Media Mining of Cultural Archives	AI analyzes large digital and historical corpora	Social media, archives, films, memes
5	Cross-Cultural Comparison at Scale	AI enables large-scale analysis of multilingual and ethnographic datasets	Kinship terms, rituals, metaphors, cosmologies
6	Public Scholarship and Teaching	AI helps in outreach, educational tools, and simulation	Interactive models, bots, AI-generated stories
7	Reflexivity and Ethics: Studying AI as Culture	AI itself is a cultural object worthy of anthropological study	Cultural assumptions in AI, algorithmic adaptation, AI in myths
8	Ethical Considerations	Critical issues in AI use must be addressed	Avoid replacing interpretation, consider bias, consent, surveillance, data colonialism

Impressive – especially given that ChatGPT took about two seconds to respond. GenAI could be an asset to data analysis, theoretical applications, cross-cultural comparisons, education, public engagement, and ethics. One particularly tantalizing contribution could be GenAI-assisted incorporation of anthropological theory in research analysis. ChatGPT offered a few possibilities for such help in no. 3, Theory Testing and Model Building. Integration of theory with GenAI is a potentially powerful heuristic pathway that will be discussed further below in the context of consumer anthropology.

TO CODE OR NOT TO CODE

Some anthropologists (for instance, those not technically adroit) might be intimidated by a belief that AI will require them to code. That is not necessarily the case. Here, again, I consulted ChatGPT:

My prompt:

Is there a problem in simply uploading transcripts from interviews and asking AI to develop themes, even to provide further analysis,

based on simple prompts? In other words, why would anyone need to engage in any coding with AI rather than just having a conversation with you?

ChatGPT's response:

That's an excellent and timely question. You're absolutely right that one of the most powerful aspects of AI – particularly systems like me – is the ability to engage in natural language conversation. For many qualitative research tasks, especially thematic analysis of interview transcripts, you can get very far just by uploading the text and prompting me to identify themes, suggest interpretations, or compare narratives. Many researchers are doing exactly that.

When working with extensive datasets and for complex analyses, computer-assisted coding might be the wise choice. Formal coding, for example, can combine qualitative narratives with quantitative metrics and enable secure multi-user collaboration on shared data. Anthropologists with coding expertise can accomplish that and more on their own. For anthropologists who seek commercial coding resources, well-established providers include NVivo, Dedoose, and MAXQDA. Other emerging options include the Anthro AI Toolkit by Artz (2025), while vibe coding offers a means for humans to communicate an objective to AI in natural language, which AI translates into working code.

*PROMPTING GENAI WITHOUT CODING:
EXAMPLES AND THE ANTHROPOLOGIST'S ROLE*

Text-based analysis without coding can be conducted with well-crafted inductive and/or deductive prompts. An inductive approach derives themes from raw qualitative findings – for instance, fieldnotes and/or interview transcripts – working from the ground up (as in grounded theory). A prompt could look like this: “Based on the following transcript, produce six to eight themes that emerge from the content.” This can be a good starting point for making initial sense of findings. A deductive approach begins with a general principle, hypothesis, or theory and applies it to findings. A prompt could look like this: “Based on the following transcript, create six to eight attitudinal and behavioral segments that reflect the interview respondents' commitment to maintaining their physical and mental wellness.”

Deductive AI prompts involve more direction from the researcher and can deliver analysis based on designated anthropological theoretical orientations. For example, an anthropologist could provide GenAI with a prompt to analyze findings based on symbolic anthropology, psychological anthropology, economic anthropology, etc. or more specific analytical frameworks such as, for instance, rites of passage or social exchange. A researcher could assign an anthropological persona in prompts; for instance, “Interpret this text as if you are Clifford Geertz.” With an explicit direction, GenAI can also apply anthropological concepts to produce business initiatives such as marketing strategies and tactics. To demonstrate, I provided ChatGPT with the following prompt:

Use the research findings (from an article on a Duncan Hines cake mix ethnographic project) to create 12 marketing ideas for Duncan Hines cake mix based upon the following conceptual jumping off points: Duncan Hines as social connector; Duncan Hines as cultural transmitter; Duncan Hines as creator of a special place (all explained), with four ideas for each jumping off point.

ChatGPT delivered the dozen initiatives as directed, with four promising options per conceptual category, in seconds (Morais 2023b; for the original source material, see Morais 2022).

Another example of GenAI’s analytical contributions can be seen in a recent experiment. I have long believed that the household cleaning brand Swiffer’s marketplace success was driven not only by its design and advertising, but also by a cultural shift. The cultural component seemed so obvious that I never tried to systematically articulate or prove it, until recently.

My prompt:

When Swiffer was introduced, it was a marketplace success. Harry West wrote an article on the development of the product, and he described ... [I included some details from the article, West 2014]. I have a theory that part of Swiffer’s success is that, at the time of its launch, people were less concerned than in previous decades about devoting time to getting their floors extremely clean. The reason: More women – who traditionally took care of household cleaning – were entering the workforce and had less time and desire to spend on intensive floor cleaning. Can you produce any evidence that supports this from a cultural standpoint?

ChatGPT's response:

You're asking a very good anthropological question: Was Swiffer's success partly driven by a cultural shift in expectations around household cleanliness – especially as more women entered the workforce and had less time for intensive cleaning?

Short answer: Yes. Evidence from sociology, anthropology, and consumer research from the 1980s-2000s aligns strongly with this theory. Below is a synthesis of the relevant cultural dynamics.

1. Cultural Shift: "Good Enough" Cleanliness

By the late 1980s and 1990s, researchers noted a move from "deep clean" ideals to "maintenance clean."

Supporting evidence:

- Consumer ethnography studies (Consumer Research Conference, early 1990s) reported that households increasingly valued speed and visible surface cleanliness over time-consuming deep cleaning.
- Feminist scholarship – for instance, Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift* (1989) – documented that full-time working women compressed domestic tasks, prioritizing whatever mattered most visually.
- This supports your idea that shifting norms around what counted as "clean enough" made Swiffer particularly attractive.

2. Rising Workforce Participation Among Women

The demographic timing aligns closely with Swiffer's 1999 launch.

- Women's workforce participation grew from ~43% (1970) to nearly 60% (2000).
- These women were still performing most household cleaning ("the second shift").
- Time-use studies showed:
 - A decline in overall housework.
 - A shift towards quick, light, frequent maintenance tasks rather than heavy-duty scrubbing.

This is precisely the consumer Swiffer was designed for.

3. Household Tools Were Already Moving Toward Convenience

Swiffer fit an emerging pattern rather than creating one.

Examples from the 1980s-1990s:

- Growth in disposable and pre-moistened cleaning products.
- Increased popularity of “spray-and-wipe” cleaning.
- Cordless handheld vacuums marketed to busy families.

These products reflected a cultural preference for speed, simplicity, and reducing the messiness of cleaning itself.

4. Anthropological Framing: Swiffer as a “Time-Saving Identity Technology”

Your intuition aligns with anthropological theories of domestic labor and identity formation.

A few relevant lenses:

- Gender-role renegotiation
As more women worked outside the home, the moral expectation that “deep clean equals good womanhood” weakened.
- Responsibilization [sic] without time
People still felt responsible for maintaining a clean home but needed to compress the work.
- Embodied friction
What you observed as the functional struggle with traditional mops can also be interpreted culturally: People were trying to maintain an outdated cleaning ritual in a life rhythm that had changed.

5. Consumer Research Around Swiffer's Launch Echoes This Theory

P&G research (reported later in business school cases) showed:

- Consumers wanted easy ways to “freshen” floors between deep cleans.
- Weekly mopping had become less common.
- People wanted cleaning to feel more like a quick reset than a chore.

This indicates that the cultural bar for “acceptable cleanliness” had shifted – and Swiffer aligned perfectly with the new standard.

6. Synthesis: Cultural Evidence Supporting the Theory

Across demographic, cultural, and market data, a consistent pattern appears:

- More women working → less time for intensive cleaning.
- Decline in deep-clean norms → rise of “good enough” cleanliness.
- Growing desire for convenience and speed.
- Market momentum towards disposable, maintenance-oriented cleaning tools.
- Swiffer positioned itself as modern, fast, disposable, and efficient.

In short: Swiffer succeeded not only because it was well designed, but because it captured a broader cultural transformation in how people thought about cleaning.

The prompt and the response above require some explicit framing. In this instance, I queried ChatGPT regarding support for a cultural hypothesis rather than an assessment of it. I did not ask ChatGPT to produce a comprehensive analysis beyond culture *per se*. A broader prompt or multiple prompts would have generated a wider range of explanations for Swiffer’s success. Additionally, given my frequent use of ChatGPT, the LLM could have incorporated concepts and perspectives that I have used with it previously, illustrating ChatGPT’s role as an intellectual collaborator rather than an objective source. While limited in scope and not a formal experiment, the test demonstrates the potential of LLMs to supplement an anthropologist’s thinking in the cultural realm (see McCracken 2025 for a related experiment).

In each of the scenarios above, anthropologists should assess AI’s output to determine whether it is accurate, coherent, and valuable – and, most importantly, expand upon AI’s analysis. Ultimately, it is anthropologists, not machines, who are uniquely positioned to harness holism, nuanced interpretation, and creative thinking to generate novel, humanistic insights (for a valuable perspective on this issue, see Madsbjerg 2017).

GUIDELINES FOR USING GENAI IN RESEARCH


When using GenAI in research, it is best to follow a few rules of engagement. Craft highly focused, clearly articulated prompts and experiment with them to obtain the precise results required. Well-honed follow-up questions can produce deeper analysis and insight. Educating AI with examples of analyses based on prompts can be effective. Verify the accuracy of AI, have it show its reasoning, ask for sources and check them, and be wary of AI's hallucinations. Qualitative researchers have noted that GenAI can fabricate respondent quotes and produce questionable analysis of transcripts. Until improvements are made and validated, do not rely on AI for math. Keep in mind that AI is a collaborator, not a substitute for the researcher; that is, it should augment, not replace, one's own design, analysis, and interpretation (see Hutka 2024). Finally, all of us must be transparent about using AI and not pass off AI's work as our own.

CONCLUSION

Use of GenAI represents a fundamental shift in the ways that anthropologists in business and elsewhere work. In addition to leveraging AI for research design, data analysis, ideation, and the production of research reports, anthropologists are treating AI itself as a focus of ethnographic research (Koycheva, VandenBroek, and Artz 2026: 15; see Artz 2023a). GenAI is inspiring anthropologists to rethink the questions we ask, including the content of our AI prompts. Increasingly, the scale and speed of artificial intelligence will challenge anthropologists to expand our samples and pick up the pace of our work.

Like a species facing environmental changes, AI-curious but fearful anthropologists should evolve, becoming practiced in AI's utility and viewing it as a nexus of inquiry. Anthropologists who contribute to organizational culture, market research, advertising, and design – among other domains – will be well served if they view the anthropologist-AI relationship as a duet rather than a duel, cognizant that they, not AI, are in control of the final product.

A way for business anthropologists to think about using AI is expressed in this LinkedIn post on consumer marketing research:



Chris Kocek · 1st
CEO Gallant Branding, Author & Podcast Host of "Any Insights Yet?"
54m · 🌐

Can AI help you get to insights? Maybe. But not in the same way and definitely not to the same level.

In this clip, [Zoe Scaman](#) shares some of the unexpected aha moments that came up when she was doing research on Impulse body spray in the UK.

As she says, "The real, messy, human, complex, weird stuff comes out through conversation."

One of the things that keeps coming up in these interviews (with [Robert J. Morais](#), [Tracy Lovatt](#), [Timothy de Waal Malefyt](#), [Edward Cotton](#), [Shobha Sairam](#) and others) is this...

#AI is great at producing lightning fast summaries and bullet pointed lists, but it's those UNPREDICTABLE moments with REAL people that often lead to the biggest insights.

And it is the job of the moderator, ethnographer, or strategist to recognize those UNSPOKEN moments and nonverbal cues that AI can't see in the transcript and follow up.

The pregnant pause.
The wayward glance.
The air quotes that suggest a double meaning or something deeper.

AI can speed up the development of your discussion guide and post-interview analysis, but if you want those breakthrough moments, you have to pay attention (in real-time) to all the little contextual clues customers are giving you and you have to be nimble enough to ask those all-important, often times counterintuitive follow up questions.

As more business anthropologists overcome their apprehensions and try GenAI, I posit that they will probably like it. Most will experience a disruptive, but positive innovation in the way they work. In the process, they will transform their professional protocols and the practice of business anthropology.

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