JBA
JOURNAL OF BUSINESS ANTHROPOLOGY

THEMED ESSAYS

Anthropology in Market Research and Artificial Intelligence: Crossroads of Opportunity or Forthcoming Pitfalls?

Autumn D. McDonald

Abstract

The market research industry has eagerly embraced artificial intelligence (AI) along with the promises of it bringing greater speed, reduced costs, and less laborious work. Advocates recommend the use of various forms of AI across the entire research process: design, execution, analysis, and reporting. While there are, indeed, benefits of utilizing AI, a critical gaze should be leveraged to ascertain appropriate uses and avoid meaningful pitfalls.

Anthropologists working in market research have a vital role to play as it pertains to the use of AI. As the ongoing frequent use of AI impedes critical thinking skills, anthropologists are well situated to illuminate dimensions of the utmost importance. These include how a reliance on AI in market research may impact both the product and functioning of market research teams, how AI may impact the quality of market research, and how the use of AI in market research may amplify imbalances of power.

Beyond critique, anthropologists should feel empowered to take constructive steps that will help mitigate the pitfalls of AI use in market research, while simultaneously reaping its sound benefits.

Keywords

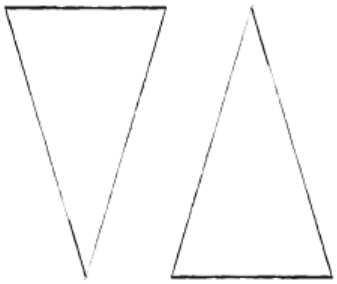
Market research, Artificial intelligence, Business anthropology, Research processes, Human data.

JBA
Early View

ISSN 2245-4217

www.cbs.dk/jba

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.22439/jba.v15i1.7810



The market research industry functions in a constant state of change, and it is worth noting that the sector has grown by 37.25% during the last three years (Backlinko Team 2026). During this growth, market research, as both a field and an industry, has experienced revolutionary change with its embrace of artificial intelligence (AI). The market research industry has embraced AI along with the promises of it bringing greater speed, reduced costs, and less laborious work. In a recent survey of 3198 market researchers across 15 countries and spanning over 10 industries, 83% of the respondents claim that they "plan to increase investments in AI" (Henriques et al. 2025: 6). As representatives of the discipline that expertly studies humans and cultures and from which market research derived approaches such as ethnography, anthropologists working in market research have a vital role to play pertaining to AI, because "the use of AI in market research is not just a passing fad; it's a fundamental shift here to stay" (Henriques et al. 2025: 2). In this essay, I examine both the opportunities and pitfalls associated with the integration of AI into market research. Drawing on recent research and my experiences as both an anthropologist and market researcher, I suggest that anthropologists are positioned to add unique value assessing AI use for market research, identifying appropriate and inappropriate applications, and developing practices that pre-

serve research quality, depth of insight, audience inclusion, and organizational effectiveness as AI usage expands.

Benefits of AI for Market Research

Advocates for the use of AI in market research recommend leveraging various forms of AI across the entire research process to realize meaningful gains and efficiencies. In research design, proponents suggest utilizing AI to craft surveys for quantitative studies and discussion guides for qualitative interviews. During the execution phase, individuals working in market research have begun to leverage AI for the scheduling of study participants, the creation of literature reviews, the development of auditory and visual content for research stimuli (McDonald and Matus forthcoming), and the transcription of research responses. Stakeholders in market research are also leveraging AI in the reporting phase to create codes for qualitative data, uncover patterns in data sets, and summarize results. Champions of AI use in market research assert that integration of AI across research processes frees the researcher to focus on other more demanding tasks as cognitive offloading with AI enables "delegating tasks such as memory retention, decision-making, and information retrieval to external systems" (Gerlich 2025: 5), which then "can enhance cognitive capacity by allowing individuals to focus on more complex and creative activities" (Gerlich 2025: 5). Anthropologists and others working in market research are, indeed, seeking to reap the benefits of AI usage as 89% of market researchers surveyed in 2025 "are already using AI tools regularly or in experimental phases" (Henriques et al. 2025: 16).

I want to highlight two ways of using AI during the execution phase of market research that are worthy of particular attention by anthropologists. These are AI-moderated interviews and the use of synthetic respondents. Claims surrounding the adoption of both include the ability to work faster and at lower cost. While currently only 5% of surveyed market researchers regularly use automated interviewing via AI systems (Backlinko Team 2026), a variety of suppliers are seeking to change that by offering free trials of AI moderators for qualitative research. Benefits of AI-moderated interviews include ease in scheduling, simultaneous execution, inexpensiveness, and multilingual capabilities. Similarly, synthetic respondents can provide researchers with cost-effectiveness, speed to results, avoidance of respondent fatigue,

and simulated responses for hard-to-reach targets. The majority (69%) of surveyed market researchers worldwide "have used synthetic respondents in their research" during the last year (Henriques et al. 2025: 5), and increased usage is likely as more than "7-in-10 market researchers claim that, within the next 3 years, synthetic data will account for over 50% of data collection" (Backlinko Team 2026).

Negative Impacts of AI Integration

While there are a variety of advantages to leveraging AI in research design, execution, analysis, and reporting, there are downsides as well that should not be overlooked. With their training in holism, in operationalizing complexity, and in considering positionality, anthropologists are well equipped to explore the implications of both the opportunities and pitfalls involved with the use of AI in market research. Three such pitfalls include inaccuracy, hallucinations, and diminished depth.

First, market researchers are increasingly enamored with the use of simulated respondents crafted via AI models as replacements for human respondents (Morris 2025) in quantitative research samples. For many, synthetic respondents offer the promise of fast and inexpensive survey research. New research has demonstrated that eliciting textual responses from large language models (LLMs) and then mapping those to Likert scale distributions for purchase intent via semantic similarity rating (SSR) may yield a robust 90% human test-retest reliability (Maier et al. 2025: 1). While this research suggests SSR with synthetic respondents could in the future "reduce costs, accelerate iteration, and enable smaller firms to access consumer insights" in a manner that may "substantially change how early-stage product research is conducted" (Maier et al. 2025: 7), the LLMs in this research were not able to consistently and accurately capture demographic patterns pertaining to gender, region, or ethnicity (Maier et al. 2025: 7). As explained by the scientists examining SSR, it will be important for market researchers to "use caution when interpreting subgroup analyses from synthetic panels" (Maier et al. 2025: 7). Other recent research has found that meaningful variation exists across LLMs in their ability to accurately and effectively function as synthetic respondents. Having conducted research examining synthetic sampling, polling expert G. Elliott Morris (2025) writes "with an average absolute error rate

that ranged from 4 percentage points to 23 percentage points … the best-performing synthetic sample were an average of 4 points off from the true human sample." Yet, market research seeks to "empower businesses with actionable findings" (McDonald 2023), and leaders are consistently tasked with using market research results to inform significant decision-making. For anthropologists and others operating in market research, "error rates at a minimum of several percentage points" are "too large to tolerate" in many market-research contexts (Morris 2025). It, therefore, becomes essential for anthropologists to apply their well-honed skills of analysis in considering and determining the appropriate and inappropriate use cases for synthetic data in market research as findings from comparative research "suggest that the theoretical advantage of synthetic sampling – namely, cost savings – are not worth the hit to accuracy" (Morris 2025).

Second, there is a pitfall of AI hallucinations and errors rooted in bias. With the rapid proliferation of generative AI and LLMs, many are inclined to rely on AI for literature reviews that are needed as part of market research processes. One challenge is that LLMs hallucinate. In other words, they "provide users with fabricated data that appears authentic" (MIT 2025). In fact, I recently used a LLM to assist in creating a student reading list for an undergraduate anthropology course that I teach. I immediately noticed that the LLM list did not include typical readings that I would expect for an introductory anthropology course, and when I searched to read every single article and book myself, it quickly became clear that numerous readings suggested by the LLM did not even exist. In addition, LLMs reflect clear racialized biases. For example, I recently utilized a LLM as an aide while creating a list of "Companies/firms led by Black anthropologists doing corporate ethnography/consulting." The LLM generated list was topped with a company whose owner self-identifies as a white man, and it also notably overlooked my own company along with a market research company owned by another woman who is an Afrodescendant anthropologist. On a different occasion, I leveraged prompt engineering with an LLM while creating a size-based ranking of diasporas. The LLM repeatedly under-ranked the African diaspora in its output, despite input data demonstrating that it held the largest numerical value. It was only because of my pre-existing expertise in intersections of race, space, and ethnicity that the LLM error in diasporic rankings was apparent and responded to with a subsequent prompt including "your error reflects an anti-

Black bias in your model and algorithms." AI-generated literature output, including literature reviews and summations, must be thoroughly checked, their content verified (Nature Reviews Bioengineering 2025), and their list of sources confirmed. For anthropologists and others in market research, this brings into question how much time is truly saved with AI-generated literature reviews and content creation as opposed to human-generated evaluations.

Third, one runs the risk of diminished depth of insight obtained from qualitative interviews when using an AI moderator. As is often highlighted, anthropologists are highly adept at conducting qualitative interviews and are experts in building rapport with research respondents, observing what is present and absent, noticing unspoken changes in the body language of study participants, recognizing hidden significance with shifts in speech patterns, and seeing meaning in symbols with which a respondent adorns themselves or their surroundings. "These are subtle elements that require powers of reasoning, cultural understanding and human empathy that AI simply doesn't possess" (Wilson 2023). Excellent qualitative research and meaningful depth of understanding require much more than simply posing a list of questions that are deemed relevant. As explained by research and innovation specialist Jack Wilson, "AI facilitates conversational surveys, not in-depth interviews – they are not the same thing … To describe this approach (AI moderated interviews) as a suitable replacement for qualitative practice is entirely disingenuous" (Wilson 2023). In fact, studies on research with Latine and Afrodescendant respondents in the US demonstrated that AI-moderated inter--iews were not as effective as human-moderated interviews in obtaining re--pondent rapport, depth of understanding, nuanced responses, detailed re--ults, range of thematic findings, and culturally grounded context (McDonald et al. forthcoming). While AI-driven interviews can be useful because of their efficiency, they are not yet an effective replacement for human-moderated qualitative research and are not currently equipped to yield the same depth or cultural context.

Aspects Often Overlooked

In the rush to implement AI usage in market research, certain advantages and disadvantages are not being thoroughly considered. It is important that anthropologists and others encourage dialogue and nurture cultures that enable

researchers to embrace opportunities in AI while simultaneously employing evaluative skills for critique of the same. In my own research and work processes, I seek to thoughtfully utilize various AI tools, which entails asking questions such as: "What may be gained or lost with the use of AI?," "Should this task be AI-led and, if so, to what extent?," "Should this task be human-led and, if so, to what extent?," "How will the end users of the research feel about the potential utilization of AI?," "How well equipped is the research team to use the relevant AI tool at this time?," "Will use of AI impact power dynamics related to target audiences?," "How will use of AI bolster or diminish inclusion or exclusion for various constituencies?." In other words, at the same time that I use various AI tools as a market researcher, I do so while encouraging application of a critical gaze toward AI. It is crucial to think critically in assessing AI as it pertains to dimensions such as claimed efficiencies, creative artifacts, imbalances of power, cognitive decline, etc.

When anticipating the efficiencies to be gained from incorporating AI into market research processes, it is important to consider the data. 51% of market researchers "using AI have found improvements in time to insights" (Henriques et al. 2025: 22). In other words, 49% have not found an improvement in "time to insights" with their use of AI. This data point dispels the myth that using AI undoubtedly and universally fuels speed for market research. In the spirit of holism, there is also research from another sector worthy of consideration. A 2025 study of software developers recently revealed, contrary to assumptions, that AI usage slowed down their work (Tong 2025).

> Before the study, the open-source developers believed using AI would speed them up, estimating it would decrease task completion time by 24%. Even after completing the tasks with AI, the developers believed that they had decreased task times by 20% (Tong 2025).

The opposite was true. The study findings revealed that using AI increased time to task by 19% (Tong 2025). These findings have relevance for prophesied efficiencies in market research and assumptions that AI tools consistently enhance speed to insights.

With more market research and marketing teams turning to AI as an aid in producing research stimuli, anthropologists bring a unique and valuable perspective with our understanding of creative products in marketing as cultural artifacts. Human-generated concepts, advertisements, packages, shelf sets, etc. can be costly and time-consuming to create simply for use as stimuli

in research studies. So, it is natural for teams with budgets under scrutiny to seek out AI as a means to reduce expenses, increase speed to market, and possibly improve quality of output. But among adults in the US, the preference for human-created content has increased the past two years (Feger 2025) with the production of more AI-generated content material becoming widely available. In a study conducted by researchers in the Marketing Department of Columbia Business School, researchers found that study participants valued AI-labeled art less than art identified as human-made (Horton, White, and Iyengar 2023). In fact, 35% of US adults express that AI-generated art, TV content, etc. are not "real art" (Feger 2025). This becomes interesting and complicated when considering the placement of AI-generated stimuli in market research studies, especially if the study is being conducted with a sample that includes synthetic respondents. This is because recent quantitative experiments have demonstrated an "AI-AI bias" (Laurito et al. 2025) in which there is "a consistent tendency for LLM-based AIs to prefer LLM-presented options" (Laurito et al. 2025: 1). In fact, comparative testing "found that on average, LLMs favored the LLM-presented items more frequently than humans did" (Laurito et al. 2025: 1). This suggests that AI-generated stimuli may fare better than human-created stimuli in testing utilizing synthetic respondents generated by LLMs, even when the human-created stimuli would have potentially been preferred among human study participants. This begs the question: To what extent will market researchers be evaluating concepts, ads, packages, and shelf sets to appeal to humans or to appeal to LLMs?

As LLMs make further advances, it would be prudent to acknowledge that the data on which many LLMs have been trained does not consider that "humans are a cultural species" with significant diversity (Atari et al. 2023: 2). In fact, there is "a growing body of literature that raises fundamental questions about the ability of LLMs to capture opinions of minority groups" (Morris 2025). Unfortunately, though, many market researchers advocating for the regular use of AI and its comprehensive integration into research practices are not considering cultural diversity or power imbalances. Recent findings from researchers at Harvard University have demonstrated a Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) bias in LLMs (Atari et al. 2023). The results of the study incorporating cross-cultural data from the World Values Survey found that LLMs have disproportionately WEIRD skewed origins, behaviors, information processing, and views of what it

means to be an "average human" (Atari et al. 2023). As result, marginalization of certain communities can be exacerbated and imbalances of power bolstered as the integration of LLMs into market research processes may "misrepresent the perspectives of important groups in the population" (Morris 2025). This suggests that many LLMs reflect "power shadows" (Buolamwini 2023). According to researcher and computer scientist Joy Buolamwini (2023: 82), "power shadows are cast when the biases or systemic exclusion of a society are reflected in the data." As an anthropologist, market researcher, Afro-Descendant, and member of a marginalized community, I find the WEIRD bias present in LLMs and a corresponding lack of thoughtful consideration by the market research industry to be concerning.

While the focus for many of us working in market research has been the implications of AI for research processes, budgets, and speed to results, I also think that it is important to consider the effects of AI related to organizational dynamics. Being an anthropologist working in market research and being a market researcher leading a team of researchers, I understand the importance of employee skillset and engagement to create and maintain high-performing market research organizations. I would, therefore, suggest that we must consider the impact of AI usage on researcher performance and workplace experience among market researchers. There is a risk that, as utilization of AI expands across more aspects of the market research lifecycle and usage becomes more ritualistic, "an over-reliance on AI for analysis may undermine the development of human analytical skills" (Gerlich 2025: 5). As AI tools provide market researchers with solutions and answers, it may "discourage users from engaging in the cognitive processes essential for critical thinking" (Gerlich 2025: 2). This may leave workers feeling less engaged because it removes "the most cognitively demanding parts of a task" (Liu et al. 2025), which can "make work stimulating and personally fulfilling" (Liu et al. 2025). Market research leaders should proactively develop mechanisms to ensure that the use of AI in research processes does not result in "a more socially isolated work experience" (Wright 2025), diminished cognitive abilities (Gerlich 2025), lower employee engagement (Liu et al. 2025), and reduced personal fulfillment among team members (Liu et al. 2025). Because critical thinking is essential for the acquisition of knowledge, evaluative reasoning, effective problem solving, and impactful storytelling, a field and industry

charged with empowering business decision making cannot risk the erosion of cognitive capabilities and engagement among workers.

Conclusion and Discussion

This is a pivotal moment for the market research industry, and it is one that undoubtedly represents a fundamental shift. It is an inflection point which may result in a positive or negative slope, and anthropologists working in market research will have a role to play in determining how the field of market research seizes upon the opportunities made possible with AI and overcomes the pitfalls inherent with AI. Anthropologists should embrace technological advances as appropriate with holism in the assessment of AI tools. The unique expertise, functional mastery, and skillsets of anthropologist are needed at this juncture, as market researchers navigate AI integration in research processes. With the budgets of market research teams under constant scrutiny, with AI advocates claiming that LLMs give responses that are "cognitively and attitudinally similar to humans" (Atari et al. 2023: 3), with the "systemic skew of LLMs" (Atari et al. 2023: 18) that reinforces imbalances of power, with 57% of market researchers expressing increased demand for qualitative research (Henriques et al. 2025), with predictions that "market research is heading in the direction of being almost exclusively online" (Bohne 2025), and with employees regularly using AI losing a sense of "team connection that is foundational to their work experience" (Wright 2025) – anthropologists are needed by market research to navigate the current landscape in a manner that is beneficial for society.

It will, therefore, be essential for anthropologists to proactively take steps toward bolstering AI literacy. This can be done in four key ways. First, anthropologists may want to consider attending formal AI-training programs. For those working in higher education, formalized training can be obtained through one's institution. For practitioners outside of academia, formal training programs may be pursued as certifications with universities or as short-form offerings from industry organizations, nonprofits, and even vendors of AI tools. Second, anthropologists may build AI-literacy skills by engaging in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary collaborations with those in other fields who have developed AI fluency, are actively using AI in their work, or are responsible for the design of AI systems. Third, direct experimentation

may be a fruitful approach to learning by doing and by gaining exposure to a wide range of AI offerings. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, anthropologists may build AI literacy by conducting comparative analyses and critically assessing AI systems. This fourth option not only serves to build one's own fluency as an individual but also empowers those engaged in research on research to inform others, make meaningful impact, and positively affect the use of AI in market research.

Looking ahead, some are predicting that, "[w]ith the artificial intelligence (AI) market size predicted to grow exponentially over the next few years, market research by physical human interaction may soon become a thing of the past" (Bohne 2025). I do not believe that will be the case. In a world proliferated with AI tools, many of which with entrenched biases and notable commonality in data sets, "high-quality human data is the one true differentiator" (Henriques et al. 2025: 14). AI in market research is, undoubtedly, here to stay. It is not a temporary fad. The great challenges and opportunities facing us all at this pivotal moment include determining appropriate use cases for AI in market research, identifying methodological adaptations needed when using AI in market research, understanding societal implications of AI use in market research, and discerning situations more appropriate for human-led research, human respondents, and human-crafted stimuli. As researchers and as anthropologists, we must do all of these things taking into account errors, imbalances of power, racial and cultural biases, quality differences, intellectual property ownership, extraction without context, effects on cognition, impacts on human connection, promises of efficiencies, potential for scale, and possibilities for ease that are intertwined with AI usage. These opportunities and challenges require research on research and research on researchers. Just as market researchers did their due diligence in the 1990s when shifting from computer-assisted telephone interviews to online fieldwork, due diligence is needed now with the adoption of AI tools across market research. Great comparative research and analyses are being done on this front. More comparative and evaluative research is needed, and anthropologists working in market research are well positioned to add tremendous value in the crucial work of researching AI for use in market research.

REFERENCES

Atari, M., Xue, M. J., Park, P. S., Blasi, D. E., and Henrich, J. (2023). "Which Humans? Large Language Models Reflect the Psychological, Demographic, and Cultural Characteristics of Their Trainers." *PsyArXiv*. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/5b26t

Backlinko Team (2026). "23 Key Market Research Statistics for 2026." *Backlinko* (January 20). https://backlinko.com/market-research-statistics

Bohne, R. (2025). "Market Research Industry – Statistics & Facts." *Statista*. https://www.statista.com/topics/1293/market-research/

Buolamwini, J. (2023). *Unmasking AI: My Mission to Protect What Is Human in a World of Machines*. New York: Random House.

Feger, A. (2025). "Humans Still Win the Content Race." *EMARKETER*. https://www.emarketer.com/content/humans-still-win-content-race.

Gerlich, M. (2025). "AI Tools in Society: Impacts on Cognitive Offloading and the Future of Critical Thinking." *Societies* 15(1): 6. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15010006

Henriques, A., Moreno, A., Geisen, E., Chen, F., Rachad, D., and Katz, L. (2025). "Global Market Research Trends Report." *Qualtrics*. https://www.qualtrics.com/ebooks-guides/market-research-trends-2025/

Horton, C. B. Jr., White, M., and Iyengar, S. S. (2023). "Bias against AI Art Can Enhance Perceptions of Human Creativity." *Scientific Reports* 13: 19001. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-45202-3

Laurito, W., Davis, B., Grietzer, P., Gavenčiak, T., Böhm, A., and Kulveit, J. (2025). "AI-AI Bias: Large Language Models Favor Communications Generated by Large Language Models." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 122: e2415697122. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2415697122

Liu, Y., Wu, S., Ruan, M., Chen, S., and Xie, X.-Y. (2025). "Research: Gen AI Makes People More Productive – and Less Motivated." *Harvard Business Review* (May 13). https://hbr.org/2025/05/research-gen-ai-makes-people-more-productive-and-less-motivated

Maier, B. F., Aslak, U., Fiaschi, L., Rismal, N., Fletcher, K., Luhmann, C. C., Dow, R., Pappas, K., and Wiecki, T. V. (2025). "LLMs Reproduce Human Purchase Intent via Semantic Similarity Elicitation of Likert Ratings." *arXiv*. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2510.08338

McDonald, A. D. (2023). "Bolstering Market Research with Anthropology." *Forbes* (November 28). https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesbusinesscouncil/2023/11/28/bolstering-market-research-with-anthropology/

McDonald, A. D. and Matus, M. (forthcoming). "Applying Anthropological Techniques to Market Research with the Latin American Diaspora, Indigenous Peoples, and Afro-Latine Constituents Across Borders." In C. Wasson, E. B. Liebow, K. L. Narahara, H. Ilahiane, and A. Wali (eds.), *Handbook of Applied Anthropology*. London: Routledge.

McDonald, A. D., Sumter, T., Ashford, C., Vogel, M., Matus, M., and Murphy, J. (forthcoming). "AI-Moderated Interviews: What Market Researchers Need to Rethink about Quality, Culture, and Insight." *Quirk's Marketing Research Review*.

MIT Sloan Teaching & Learning Technologies (2025). "When AI Gets It Wrong: Addressing AI Hallucinations and Bias." *MIT Sloan Teaching & Learning Technologies* (June 30). https://mitsloanedtech.mit.edu/ai/basics/addressing-ai-hallucinations-and-bias/

Morris, G. E. and the Verasight Data Team (2025). "Your Polls on ChatGPT." *Verasight White Paper Series* (August 18). https://www.verasight.io/reports/synthetic-sampling

Tong, A. (2025). "AI Slows Down Some Experienced Software Developers, Study Finds." *Reuters* (July 10).

Wilson, J. (2023). "Computer Does Qual: Avoiding AI-Overclaim and False Equivalency." *GreenBook* (December 13). https://www.greenbook.org/insights/the-prompt-ai/computer-does-qual-avoiding-ai-overclaim-and-false-equivalency

Wright, W. (2025). "Heavy AI Use at Work Has a Surprising Relationship to Burnout, New Study Finds." *ZDNET* (July 9).

"Writing Is Thinking" (2025). *Nature Reviews Bioengineering* 3: 431. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44222-025-00323-4

Autumn D. McDonald is the owner of ADM Insights & Strategy and holds a faculty position in the College of Fine Arts at Howard University. She utilizes mixed methods approaches that integrate market research with an anthropological lens for greater human-centricity and depth of understanding and has led business initiatives spanning six continents and more than 80 brands. Her work related to AI applies a critical gaze in determining appropriate and inappropriate use cases for its inclusion in market research processes. As a scholar, she centers intersections of race, space, and ethnicity.

Autumn D. McDonald can be reached at Autumn@ADMInsightsStrategy.com and Autumn.McDonald@Howard.edu