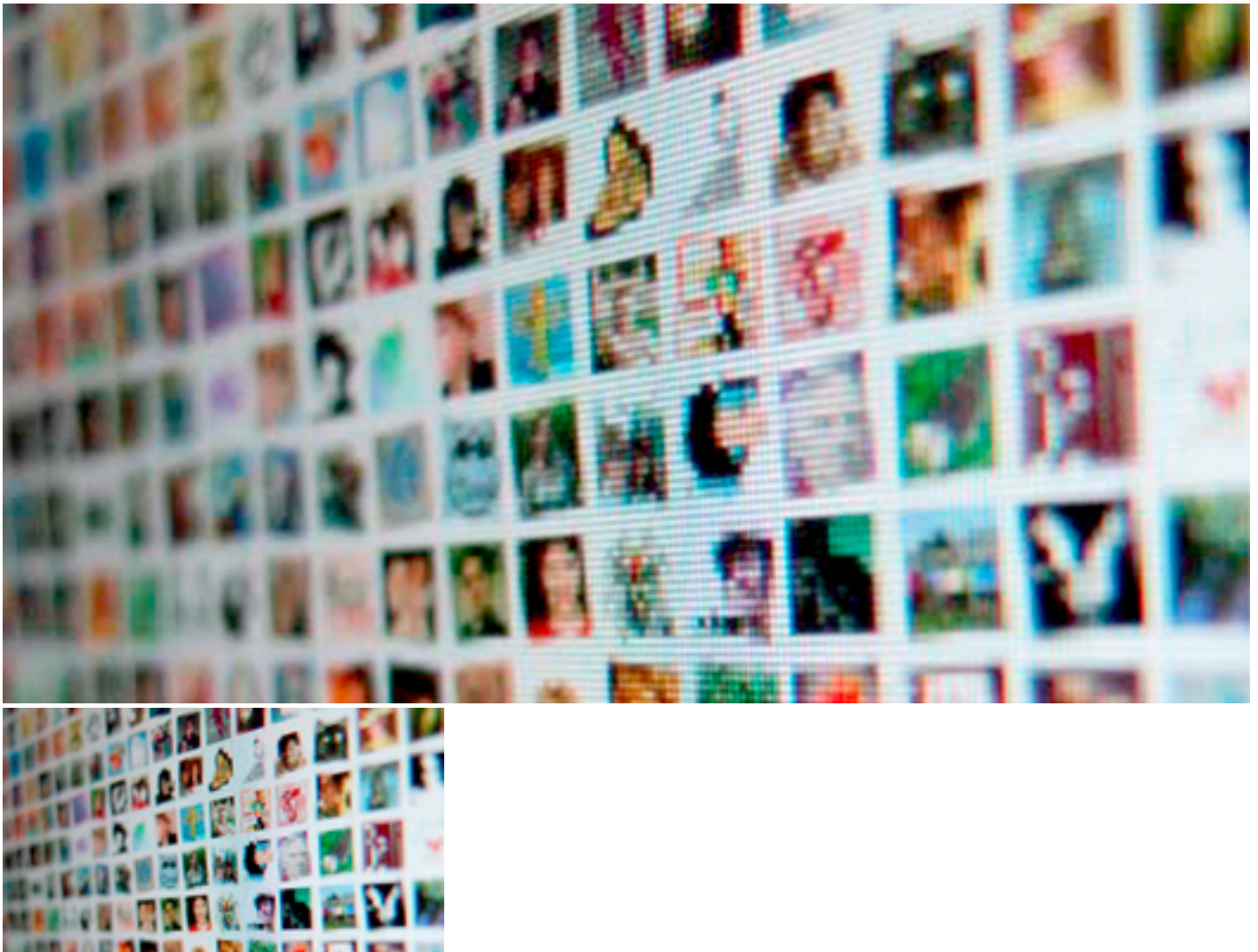


The Evolution of Research: Blurring lines between Quant and Qual

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Are the terms Qualitative and Quantitative obsolete or going through an evolutionary transformation. I would argue the latter. Let's look at the two different angles to the discussion.

Qualitatively Interpreted Quantitative Methods: Quali-Quant

I am referring to a survey question that if posed to a large sample, generates quantitative data. Rating your satisfaction to a service, providing your likelihood to purchase product or your attitudes towards a social policy. Our industry standards have always dictated that we generally do not report on data for samples of less than 30. The margin of error is so large ($\pm 18\%$) that it makes the interpretation of the data directional at best. Most data tables will either omit the information for base sizes less than 30 or at the very least mark with an asterisk and warning to the reader. In qualitative research, directional information is exactly what researchers are looking for. Qualitative research looks for trends or patterns (either strong, weak or inconclusive). That is why qualitative uses most, some, many, few. Qualitative research omits percentages and numbers. So when quantitative questions are posed to a small group of respondents ($n=10$) whether via an online survey or a traditional focus group, the same should hold true. Online data collection has made it easier to process the data; no paper copies from focus groups, it is directly input into a database. However, we should not report percentages just because we can. Therein lies the need for judgment, interpretation and drawing the right insights.

Quantitatively Interpreted Qualitative Methods: Quanti-Qual

Interestingly, this might be a one-way street. If you have a qualitative technique that technology makes possible to pose to a large group of respondents, does that make it quantitative? I would argue not, at least on the whole. Some exceptions are bound to occur. If you think of classic qualitative techniques, they require a lot of probing and interpretation. The response to a

qualitative exercise itself is not the finding. It is the underlying reasons for the choices and responses that contain the real value. Case in point. A researcher sends a study to 1,000 customers with a variety of closed and open-ended questions. One of these questions asks, "If Store X was an animal, what kind of animal would it be?" We all know that the findings lie not in the fact that 20% picked a cat and 40% picked a dog. The insights lie in the fact that different people attribute different qualities to a dog: scary, loyal, friendly, stupid, yappy, energetic. The dog is just a subconscious conduit to the attributes. Ditto for images chosen in a collage or a story telling exercise. Most qualitative techniques are designed to get at issues through subconscious methods; to circumvent the rational surface to get at the underlying emotional. This requires more than response categories or coding.

The benefits of qual-quant or quanti-qual include a better respondent experience and greater engagement in the process. These can be fun exercises and a nice change from your classic closed ended questions in most quantitative survey. And better engagement will always result in better data.