How Can Virtual Reality Predict Future Behaviour?

Textual and visual stimuli are cornerstones of many market research techniques, helping brand teams understand how respondents think about, react and adapt to future market scenarios. However, these one-dimensional materials don't free respondents from distractions or give them the opportunity to immerse themselves in a future world.

Virtual Reality (VR) allows us to simulate different environments to provide a realistic context for respondent interactions. Virtual and augmented reality experiences represent a growing market that's set to be worth £44.7Bn by 2024 – it is therefore important to keep our fingers on the pulse of this evolving technology to be at the forefront of developments and the future for market research.

How can we use VR?

VR is an alternative vehicle to get to a higher level of insight. In a VR setting we can transport physicians to an environment where they can have more open, realistic and emotional connections to patients.

At Adelphi we have also introduced an avatar component to provide physicians with the opportunity and flexibility to interact with virtual patients, in a simulated surgery setting. This gives us the opportunity to listen to physician conversations with patients who are sometimes very vulnerable and often hard to reach.

Adelphi's Illuminate Innovation Lab has tested a new VR solution in a pilot study with oncologists and the findings have revealed extensive benefits. During our tests, Sue the patient avatar discussed a real-life concern in her conversation with the physician. She told him about her daughter's upcoming wedding and her desire to be well enough to attend. This was a key driver that made her seek a breast cancer treatment that would extend her life.

Putting VR to work in a real-life project

The experiment continues. Together with Janssen we have also recently conducted VR consultations with haematologists across multiple locations in the UK to provide HCPs with a fully immersive experience. The hypothesis we tested saw the VR setting elicit deeper, less superficial responses, and get underneath what HCPs would really do instead of what they "say" they would do.

The findings demonstrated that, by simulating the consultation in this way, physicians were more open to prescribing newer treatments, despite this requiring more paperwork. They told us that by being immersed in a more in-depth conversation with a virtual patient in this way, they felt closer to the prescribing decisions they make in reality and the additional work of prescribing a new product was worth it as they understood the patients better. We hope to share the results of this project soon at a forthcoming BHBIA conference.

VR consultations not only reflect a believable and real-life setting, but they also provide brand teams with a front row seat to additional insight. Subtle aspects that influence decisions that typically are not found in traditional research come to the forefront with VR. For example, we can also observe how bedside manner, semantics, patient worthiness and objection handling impact final treatment decisions.

What do physicians think about the VR experience in research?

"If we are sitting here without the virtual reality you would have just shown me the profile and asked how I would use Product X. This is more of a natural way. I like the idea of having the patient characteristics included. If you had someone role playing that would be another way of handling this conversation, but the virtual reality was much more exciting and believable. The surroundings are there. You lose yourself in the office environment. I was completely focused on what the patient was saying."

Pilot Oncologist

"The technology is amazing. I got immersed in the scene. It's extremely interactive. You become more in tune with everything as opposed to just reading a profile. Firing on a lot of the senses. The more senses involved; the more things stick with you. It's more of an experience, than a passive situation."

Pilot Oncologist

Future evolution of VR

In conclusion, we believe Virtual Reality can transform the way in which researchers collect information, cemented in an interactive future reality. The method shows its true strength in research where we want to be a "fly-on-the-wall" during a conversation, such as a doctor-patient interaction. This allows us to hear and observe what previously was not possible to observe, for example how concepts are explained to patients with rare diseases, how conversations with 'unreachable' patients unfold, or how emotive discussions are handled.

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