LISTENING TO THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE

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INTRODUCTION

but my words
like silent raindrops fell
and echoed
in the wells of silence
Simon and Garfunkel, The Sounds of Silence

"My depth interview went really badly! It was full of long silences... my respondent just would not open up!!"
This is a standard cry from young researchers who believe that sessions that are not full of verbal give and take have not "got going".   Many fail to understand that the silence received in response to the advertisement or concept being tested (or any other question asked) may have told the researcher what he or she needed to. If you don't panic, you can probably probe far better, and understand the reason for the silence, and end up with a far stronger set of findings and interpretations.

In qualitative marketing research we tend to place a great deal of importance on analysis of verbally articulated opinions and thoughts. Many researchers are uncomfortable with silences, seeing these as personal failure to build rapport and elicit response.   We try to avoid silences as far as possible, spending much effort on rapport building, and designing questions and techniques aimed at helping our respondents articulate their thoughts as clearly as they can, verbally. The tradition of content and narrative analysis requires written transcripts, rather than audio or video material, and strengthens the need for things to be said – so they can be transcribed, analysed, and quoted.

What makes researchers fear silence in interviews or focus groups? The reason is simple. It is not that we do not acknowledge that silence is part of communication – we simply have no organised way to analyse it and draw reliable inferences. And ambiguity is abhorrent to a researcher!

In the Golden Era of the Sound Byte it appears almost sinful to talk of the importance of silence and indeed this area of communication has been largely overlooked in marketing research. According to Gerald Corey, Professor of Human Services at California State University, silence *"can communicate many and different things. Silence can, so to say, be 'used' in various ways. We can, for example, elect to be silent, but in some situations silence is imposed, as one cannot find words to respond. Irrespective of the reason for the silence, one can emphasize that a non-message is also a message – the silence tells us something."* It forms a significant aspect of language and communication, adding nuances to verbalisations and taking on symbolic meanings in different contexts.

In India, as in many eastern cultures, people are often guarded with their responses (especially if negative) and their use of language is complex and layered. Responses are often withheld, real opinions visible in slack bodies or gentle smiles. Very often real insight comes from an understanding of the silences and subtexts in the discourse rather than through an analysis of articulated responses.

This paper takes the stance that we need to look at ways to understand and analyse silences as they appear in our discourses while we research. Thomas Clifton's opening lines in his essay on the role of silence in music, 'The Poetics of Musical Silence,' are especially evocative in this context: "*To focus on the phenomenon of musical silence is analogous to deliberately studying the spaces between trees in a forest: somewhat perverse at first, until one realizes that these spaces contribute to the perceived character of the forest itself, and enable us to speak coherently of 'dense' growth or 'sparse' vegetation. In other words, silence is not nothing. It is not the null set*".[1] The popular singer and songwriter, Sting, echoes these thoughts when he says that understanding the spaces between notes enhances the understanding of the notes themselves. A study of silence can only enrich our understanding of articulations – understand the character of the forest, not just through a study of the trees but also the spaces between them.

This paper examines the spectrum of silences encountered in qualitative research and ways in which these could be classified and decoded.

"HELLO DARKNESS MY OLD FRIEND" – WHAT IS SILENCE?

Silence is described as absence of sound. It weaves in and out of our normal speech punctuating and adding emphasis to our words, subtly enhancing the communication. These silences are scarcely noticed in regular speech but are processed by the receiver in decoding the content of the discourse. There are pauses, however, that are distinct and noticeable when the silence is either prolonged or out of place which are decoded as 'silences'.

Ulrich Schmitz, in his book "Eloquent Silence", makes a distinction between two broad types of what he terms as "human silence":

- Cultural or institutionally coded silence;
- Personal silence.

Cultural or institutionally coded silence refers to silence that is dictated by the norms and mores of the local culture. Just as in the case of formalised language, cultural coding of silence varies from society to society. *Personal silence* arises out of an individual's personality and immediate thoughts such as boredom, indifference, shock, shyness, ambiguity, etc. would be reflected in their decision to remain silent at that point in time.

A third type of silence can be added: *Transactional silence*. This refers to transactional pauses that may occur in the course of any conversation when the participants are trying to harness their thoughts or assess the ebb and flow of conversations while trying to figure out their own role in the scenario. A conversation between two individuals is fairly simple to handle and the flow of conversation established easily. As more people are added to the conversation participants need to exercise their discretion as to what to say, when to say and how to say what they wish to in order to express themselves without

hampering the easy flow and dynamics of the conversation. Also with multiple participants, there is more information to integrate and process for each individual.

Of these three types of silence, Personal and Transactional silences are independent of the culture and/or geography. Cultural or institutionally coded silence would vary across countries and geographies.

The cultural significance of silence

The way people communicate is deeply linked with the culture, values and norms of a society. It has been noted that there are distinct differences between 'western' and 'eastern' cultures where it comes to the use and comfort levels with silence. The roots of these differences lie in the differences in essential cultures of countries. Geert Hofstede's research provides a comparative analysis of countries on five cultural dimensions:

- *Power Distance Index (PDI)* – the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.
- *Individualism (IDV)* – the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups.
- *Masculinity (MAS)* – assertive, masculine vs. modest, caring, feminine.
- *Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)* – deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity.
- *Long-Term Orientation (LTO)* – thrift and perseverance.
- *Short Term Orientation (STO)* – respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's 'face'.

As per Hofstede's evaluation, Asian societies are socially and externally driven, are highly conscious of evaluation by others, and conditioned to be sensitive to others' emotions. The Hofstede scores on cultural dimensions for Asia and the world show a distinctly lower score for Individualism (IDV) compared to the rest of the world (see figure 1).
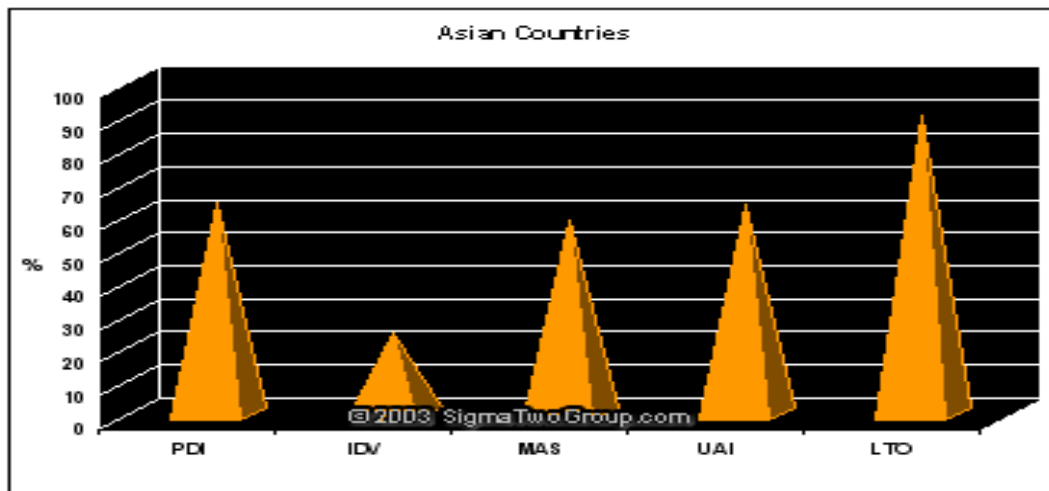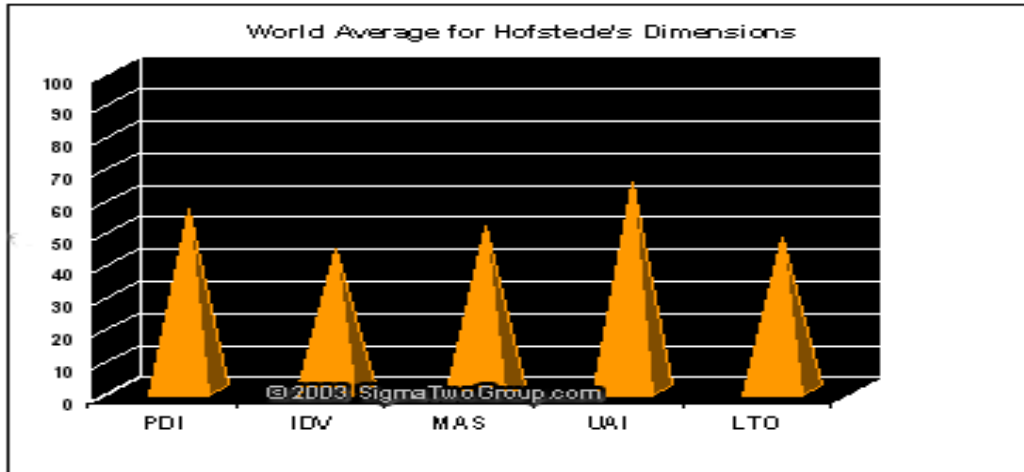
FIGURE 1

FIGURE 1, continued

In Asian countries, which are strongly affiliative, sensitivity to others and the need to keep peace and harmony with others takes precedence over the need to express one's opinions. Eastern cultures stress maintenance of harmony within communities where caution before speech is advocated. In this context, rather than viewing silence as an unwillingness to communicate, a sign of hostility, or a lack of verbal skills, Easterners see silence as evidence of an individual's self-control and desire to maintain relational harmony (Cheng and Tardy).

The Japanese idea of self is in fact divided into two parts: the inner self representing truthfulness, seated in the heart and belly, and the outward self associated with deception, located in the face, mouth and speech. Silence expresses inner truth. The Japanese word *haragei'* means wordless communication or communication from the belly and is seen in a positive light, expressing inner thoughts wordlessly.

Dr. Wong Ngan Ling, Professor of Language and Linguistics at the University of Malaya, conducted a research study across a sample of British and Japanese respondents on the significance of silence in communication. The qualitative component of his study findings show a marked difference in perspective (see table 1).

Table 1 shows the difference in the way the British and the Japanese viewed silence. The Japanese used silence far more expressively and positively than the British in this study.

In contrast, western cultures are seen as being more "verbal" where silence has no real positive value. A China Media Research paper[2] discusses the roots of the western "verbal culture". This paper points out that in ancient Greece and Rome, the cradle of western civilization, rhetoric was given importance "for the discovery and expression of truth". They remark that today, talk in western cultures is seen positively and is rewarded – and there is a high level of discomfort with silence. *"Silence tends to be interpreted variously as lack of interest, an unwillingness to communicate, a sign of hostility, rejection, interpersonal incompatibility, anxiety or shyness, or a lack of verbal skills"* (Giles et al, 1992).[3]

TABLE 1
**RESULTS OF STACK SORTING TASK FOR THE EMOTION AGGRESSION**

	British	*Japanese*
Positive interpretations of silence	1. as a form of respect 2. to avoid confrontation; as a refusal in case of really giving offense; to imply no comment; to show no objection on issue 3. to create concentration and dignity; only as a result of the want of being polite and well-mannered	1. consent/agreement 2. to give someone time to think, to persuade someone to change his or her mind 3. becoming tuned *to* someone else's ideas 4. to show that I want to be asked, or nominated or designated to speak 5. to give a good impression to someone (e.g. seniors)
Negative interpretations of silence	1. to show disapproval or disagreement on an issue, ignorance of an issue or question, if hostility is apparent in the other party, if the other person becomes overwrought, angry, stubborn. 2. indicates a lack of enthusiasm, shyness, grief (bad news), when it is not appropriate to voice feelings of displeasure, giving up, showing disappointment, to avoid getting involved in talking on a sensitive issue/discomfort with the topic under discussion	1. when someone is highly offended, there is no point in saying anything to them 2. to show anger, objection, when someone digressed from the main subject 3. when my point of view is against the general opinion

In his paper "How Americans use Silence and Silences to Communicate", Thomas J. Bruneau (China Media Research, 2008) remarks that Americans tend to view silence negatively: "*The negative zone which is silence in America can become as absolute and real as it is imaginary – a paradoxical bind. One of the reasons why Americans consider deep silence to be negative or undesirable is that such silence is often equated with death and stillness, stopping forever. Silence for many Americans then, is not a vibrant quality of life bursting forth beautifully everywhere and always. On the contrary, many Americans fear deep silences, such as those in the "dead of night" or those silences in being lost and alone in the wilderness.*" He does, however, go on to discuss silence as linked with "contemplation," and with deeply religious places or monuments, where the seriousness of the spot requires a certain level of respect represented by silence.

Silence and Indian culture
India falls midway between Japan and the west in the attitude to silence. Interestingly, the Hofstede analysis of India shows a particularly high PDI (Power Distance Index) indicating a high level of inequality and power, and a hierarchical society. On Individuality, India is only marginally lower than the world index and higher than the average index on this dimension for Asia. (See figure 2.)

PART 3 / INNOVATING RESEARCH

FIGURE 2
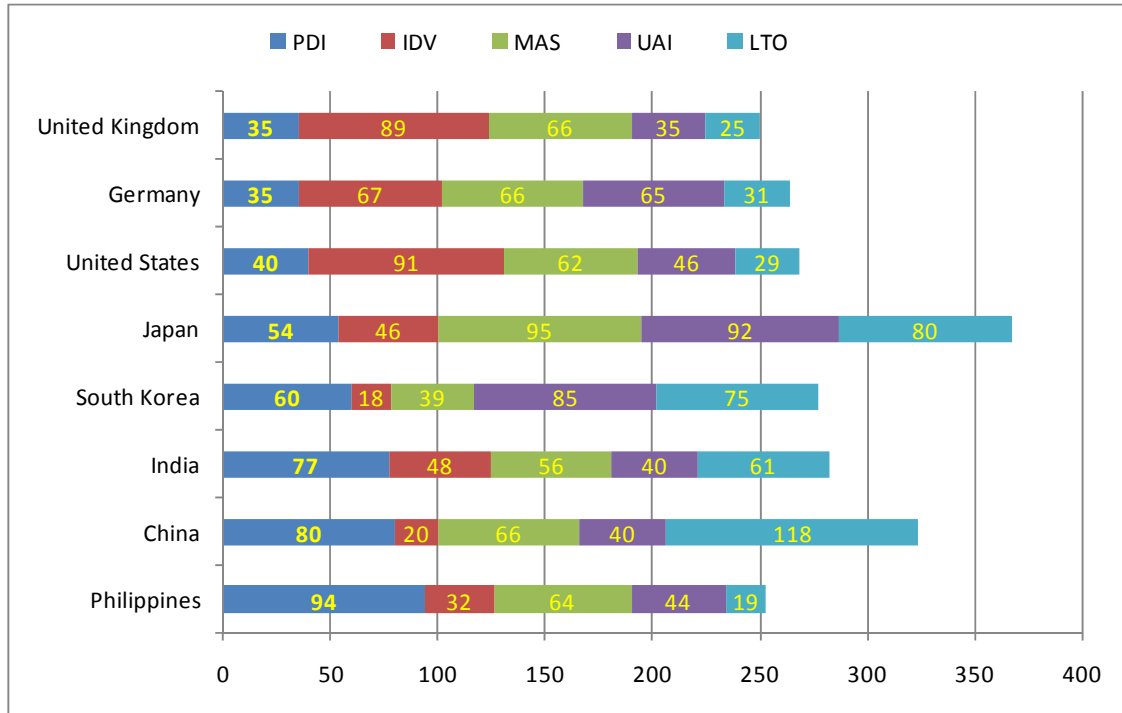
As in the west, silence in social interaction is viewed negatively as unnatural and discomfiting. It is natural for middle class Indians to strike up conversations with total strangers within their own social class, to "open out their hearts" and create deep and lasting friendships from chance encounters. Nobel Laureate, economist and author of The Argumentative Indian, Amartya Sen in an interview to rediff.com says, "By and large, people are keen in chatting and asking questions about each other." He recalls a poem by Raja Rammohan Roy, a religious reformer, about the horror of death: *"Just imagine how dreadful the day of your death will be. Others will go on speaking and you will not be allowed to argue back!"*

In regular conversation one rarely sees silence being used expressively. Being silent in this context would be taken as a signal that the silent party was hurt or offended. In Indian cinema, most leading characters are projected as vivacious and gregarious while the more taciturn characters tend to be tragic figures or the more sinister villains.

However, silence in India has deep social significance. In the hierarchy driven society, silence is used to acknowledge the divisions and power structures in society, and to maintain social structures.

Silence before elders
- Age is shown great respect in Indian culture. Older people are expected to be more knowledgeable and wiser than those younger and are expected to lead and take decisions. Deference to age is not just within the family. It is expected that one should be quieter and in a listening mode before an elder and the elder should not be questioned or contradicted.

- To some extent this structure/ premise is being shaken with the advent of technology which has created a generation of young people who very clearly know more than the older generation.

Genders and silence

- In most parts of the country, particularly in the interior and small towns, there is very little easy interaction between the genders. As a result adult males and females tend to be uncomfortable communicating with each other unless there is clarity on the relationship.

- Male children in India are brought up to be assertive. In contrast women are conditioned from a very early age to be accommodating, self-sacrificing and docile. When she is married she is expected to conform to the norms of the family she marries into. Sita, Rama's wife from the Ramayana, is held as a role model for the Indian woman – unswerving in her loyalty to her husband, and largely accepting the suffering she has been meted out, in silence. Today even in more progressive families, women are expected to be less assertive and, in middle class families, do not take the lead in decision making in critical areas. Women in joint families train themselves to keep their opinions to themselves in front of their in-laws as a way of keeping peace in the family.

- Therefore there tends to be a difference in the way men and women express themselves. Men tend to be more direct and more likely to speak their minds while women – especially housewives – are more guarded about their thoughts and more sensitive to their surroundings in this respect.

  Some of these attitudes are changing with the break up of joint families and the growth of more easy going relationships between parents and children. Women in larger towns or who have received a college education are also more assertive and confident in their relationships with their husbands and in-laws. These silences however persist in interior India, in smaller towns and in the rural areas.

Silence between social classes: money/ power based

- Social distinction is a strong reason for non-communication. There are fairly strong class barriers between richer and poorer classes, between 'white collar' and 'blue collar' professionals, the educated and the less educated. There is a fear of committing social solecisms, or worry about repercussions in the case of power based hierarchies.

- People also have feelings of inadequacy when faced with people of a higher social class.

Silence between social classes, castes

- In interior areas of the country caste barriers are very strong with interaction between higher and lower castes governed by unwritten laws. The issue is more pronounced where it comes to rural areas where whole villages could be inhabited by people of a particular caste. Inter caste interactions, marriages could result in social ostracism.

- In urban areas, people tend to be aware of castes but this does not necessarily come in the way of regular communication between them. People of different castes work together easily though in many cases they may still not mingle at a social level.

Physical block to communication
- There are 22 official languages in the country and one national language – Hindi. Currently, with the economy in a state of flux, there is a great deal of migration taking place between states, and from smaller to larger towns.
- Migrant labourers, lower end technicians, etc. in the bigger cities tend to be at a disadvantage both in terms of ability to communicate in the local language effectively as well as in overall confidence levels.

Uncomfortable topics
- There are a number of topics which are not discussed openly, e.g. sex, menstruation, financial situation, etc.

There is also a deeper spiritual association with silence. The Bhagavad Gita says: *"Contentment of the mind, amiable temperament, silence, religious meditation and good thoughts reflect austerity of the mind."* Silence is a quality bracketed with religious meditation, to achieve a spiritual state of being. The *maun vrath* is a "vow of silence" undertaken for a period of time to achieve spiritual purity. Silence is associated with meditation and deep reflection and is indicative of evolved souls who have managed to transcend emotions.

TYPES OF SILENCE ENCOUNTERED IN QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH IN INDIA
The following is based on the analysis of focus group discussions and in depth interviews conducted over the last three years in different parts of the country across categories of cigarettes, bidis, financial products, hair oil, frozen foods, two wheelers and refrigerators. Over 200 FGDs and 100 DIs have been examined to arrive at the following classification.

Some overall observations
- In general, silence levels at focus group discussions amongst housewives were lower than amongst men.
- Also there were differences across the country in terms of levels of articulation and silence – even given the same objective, stimulus and researcher conducting the session.
- All three forms of silence, i.e. culturally coded or socially induced silence, transactional and personal silence were encountered over the studies.
- Cultural/ social silences emerged more in focus group situations than in one-on-one situations when they needed only to interact with the researcher while personal silences occurred in both group as well as one-on-one situations.

Culturally coded silence

Social structure based silences between castes
These surfaced primarily in rural studies. A study conducted in rural Rajasthan to understand smoking of bidis amongst young men ran into severe issues arising from mingling of castes within the focus group. There were demarcated places where castes were allowed to mingle and communicate – they would talk to each other outdoors but not in inside spaces. Hierarchies are also extremely pronounced in rural India – the order of speech and the decision of whether or not to speak are determined by the hierarchy both in terms

of age as well as social class. It was only when some of the respondents were taken out of the group that others opened up to voice their opinions.

In almost all focus groups amongst women, initial feelings of underconfidence were apparent as some would be more watchful and slow to start. There is a tendency for the respondents to view the researcher as someone who is superior in achievement ("smart"), a 'working woman', and to see her as essentially evaluative of their behaviour and ability. Men are also conscious of class distinctions in focus group situations based on occupation and overt signals of wealth. Even where recruitment has been done carefully keeping in mind socio economic bands to maintain homogeneity, there are subtle inequalities that could reduce the level of sharing in the group.

In interviews and FGDs in smaller towns and rural areas, the researcher himself had to work harder to break the ice with respondents so that they would develop a sense of comfort with him. Again, since he was viewed as coming from a larger town and being better educated and more successful, respondents tended to be reticent and silent in initial stages.

Silence between genders
Depth interviews amongst couples have often had men dominating the discussion while women appeared content to stay quieter – this has been the case particularly amongst smaller town lower income respondents

Language block
This was occasionally encountered where sessions were conducted in Hindi and respondents had differing levels of comfort with the language. In some sessions more educated respondents would express themselves in English, creating a sense of inequality in the group. Those who were less educated would then become quiet unless the researcher directly addressed them and tried to draw them back into the discussion.

Personal / transactional silence
These types of silence were not cultural in nature but were based on immediate reactions to stimuli, thoughts that developed as the session progressed.

Barbara Pirie, in her paper, "Some Speak with Silence: Facilitating Mixed Silent/Verbal Groups" provides some contained personal messages in silence in group sessions:
"No": Silence to avoid offending someone
"Yes": agreement
"Everyone already knows": information is repeated several times to clarify and remind.
*"This is private": not suitable to mention in a public space.*
"I cannot promise": that one never knows what the future may hold and circumstances could occur where you cannot honor a commitment.
"I did it": "I did it, therefore I don't need to say it". In this instance, the person assumes that their actions convey the message and therefore words are not necessary.
"I cannot speak until": Often leaders do not talk during discussions and meetings because whatever they say might be taken as a decision.

Figure 3 illustrates what we found in the Indian context.

FIGURE 3
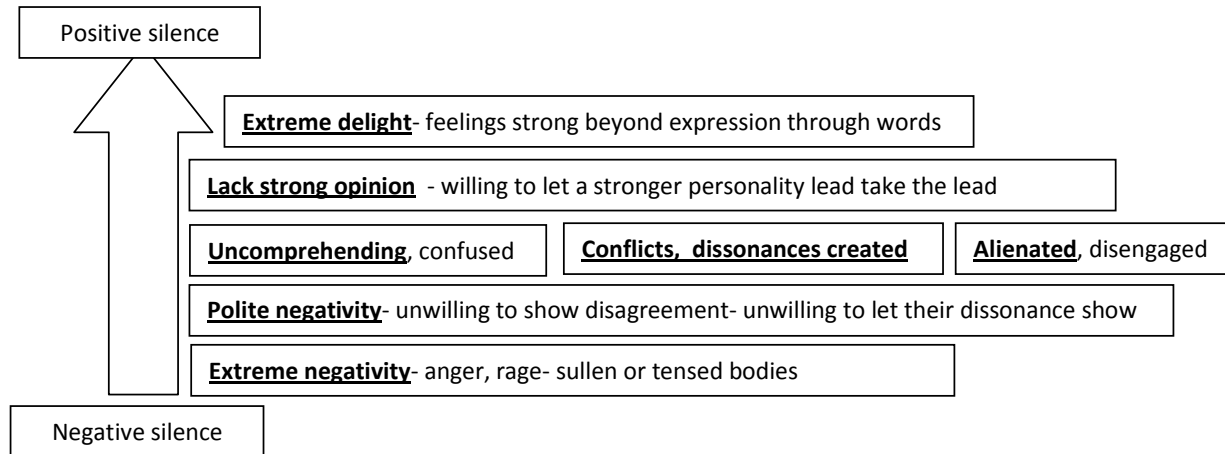
Indians rarely contain strong emotions in silence – they tend to let these feelings out through words. Therefore silence resulting from the two extremes – extreme positive and extreme negative emotion was rare – and if it occurred was short lived.

'Extreme delight' was very rarely silent. There is a strong tendency to verbalise positive feelings as early as possible in voluble terms. There is great joy in expressing positive emotions as this would obviously please the researcher which tends to be a respondent agenda in the group.

Extreme negativity tended to result in a short silence which very often just "broke itself". The body language accompanying strong negative emotions is very obvious – a closed expression, folded arms, rigid body and refusal to make eye contact. In some cases the respondents would whisper amongst themselves. The slightest direct probe is usually adequate to get a verbalisation of these thoughts.

The more common causes for silence amongst both women and men were incomprehension, confusion and feelings of inadequacy, and underconfidence to express them. These reasons generally came to light as the session went on, when, at some point in response to a probe, respondents would admit to have been confused or uncomprehending. In other cases they were simply trying to process the information and formulate their thoughts.

Underconfident respondents also fell into the habit of agreeing with the majority opinion in order not to have to voice their own opinion. Respondents tended to feel slightly anxious at the start of a session, worried that they would not 'perform to expectations'.

Silence also results from fatigue at the end of a long session where respondents have been required to think, process and articulate until they are now unwilling to continue. At this stage respondents tend to 'switch off' and allow their minds to wander to their homes and other commitments.

PART 3 / INNOVATING RESEARCH

Personal silence and inarticulation: "People talking without speaking"

"The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said." Peter F. Drucker

The more subtle form of personal silence is the understatement where for reasons of politeness or fear of hurt feelings, respondents may hold back thoughts. In an article posted on the web, Valeri Victorias, an American and English teacher who has come to live in India, describes her experience of Indians who cannot say 'no': "*For instance, if you ask someone for directions, whether they know the way or not, they do not want to disappoint you, so they go ahead and give you directions anyway. There is nothing in their demeanor or the way they respond to give you a clue that they have no idea where the place is that you want to go. Only as you progress along the way do you realize that they were clueless in how to get you to where you wanted to go. Now, you have the dilemma of asking another person for the same directions. Realizing that "no" is not in their vocabulary, this time you become more selective with whom you ask directions from by considering whether they will be a likely candidate to have the correct answer."*

In a sense this is true of the way Indians deal with outsiders – there is a need to be 'nice' to those who seek help – and definitely to those who are kind and offer hospitality (invitation to a focus group and offering refreshments at the group amounts to hospitality). Unless they feel very strongly negative, Indians face difficulty in expressing negative opinions to stimuli in focus groups. Therefore they tend to say kindly that they would 'definitely try the product at least once' or that the ad exposed was 'good' – all the while their body language would reveal their true interest levels and needs to be read carefully in tandem with the verbalised responses. There is enormous danger in taking these responses literally as there are many contained silences within these.

The best way to tackle this response is to add on projective questions ("how would your neighbour / friend react.") or provide a range of emotions to choose from with added reassurances that there were many people who had opinions across the spectrum. Sometimes it also helps to point out that they seemed to be verbally saying one thing and none verbally another. These probes have helped in helping respondents overcome the barrier of having to say something negative in that situation.

STRATEGIES TO RECOGNISE AND DECODE SILENCE

Recognising silence
It is very important for the researcher to recognise the source of the silence:
- Is the silence resulting from some social issue therefore becoming a block to articulation?
- Is the silence being deliberately used to send a message, i.e. is it signalling confusion, mild disapproval, and mild approval?
- Is the silence simply contemplative – where the respondent is trying to process information and formulate a thought that can be expressed?
- Or is the respondent completely uninterested in the topic and unwilling to participate any further due to fatigue or genuine disinterest in the topic?

Silences that were based on social or cultural issues are *blocks to communication and articulation* and require the researcher to work harder to create a rapport and a feeling of belongingness and safety within the session. These silences did not appear to contain messages that enhanced or added to their verbal communication. The best way to tackle these ideally is through sensitivity in sample and research design.

On the other hand *Personal silences or Transactional silences are productive* – in that if recognised and tackled, can lead to further insight or enhancement of information received.   These silences need to be mined for further insight.

We could divide silence broadly into "active" silence which if tapped could be productive, and "passive" silence – essentially flat empty and drained – and the shades in between. (See figure 4.)

FIGURE 4
ACTIVE AND PASSIVE SILENCE

Passive silence-
empty, drained,
unproductive

Active silence-
pregnant with
emotions, thoughts,
feelings
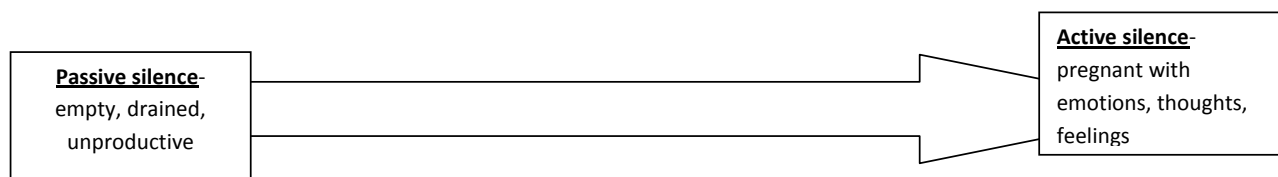
Active silence
This kind of silence holds thoughts that remain unexpressed due to a number of barriers that the respondents impose on themselves. Three types of body language provide clues to this type of silence:

- *Type 1: contemplative:* could be ostensibly disengaged – appearing to be deep in thought, possibly distracted. This type of person may be trying to marshal his thoughts or following a different line of thought altogether. There is of course always the possibility that he has disengaged entirely from the group. In most cases, however, if in a while a direct but gentle question is addressed to this respondent to probe the content of the silence, it could lead to a new line of thought or extra piece of information. Conflicts, confusions also inhabit these silences. The moderator may find it useful sometimes to let the respondent 'simmer' and sort out these conflicts in their minds before the moderator actively addresses the issue.

- *Type 2: striving:* The respondent is visibly engaged, making eye contact with other respondents, and the moderator – positive body language. This person is usually easy to read, and would need some help in articulating his response.

- *Type 3: slow starter*: Less confident, less affiliative individuals – feel a slight sense of alienation at the start; need to be drawn into the discussion.

These forms of silence could occur alone or they could precede or succeed talk. These are fundamentally "silent echoes" of emphasis, words in themselves that need to be treated as primary comments. These would be subject to probe in much the same way as can verbalised statements.

Passive silence

Passive silence is silence that does not contain withheld thoughts. This may arise from a genuine lack of opinion or sometimes from extreme boredom or disinterest. In sessions where there is a disconnect between the moderator and the group this may result from a sense of alienation – where the moderator has not managed to create a sense of comfort or rapport. Sometimes passive silence also comes from respondents who are not accustomed to expressing opinions. Such respondents simply agree or disagree with more articulate respondents who have managed to voice their thoughts. It is more difficult to deal with passive silence as the moderator is not given too many clues through body language as to what may be going on in the respondent's mind.

Decoding silence

There is no credible way in which a silence can be effectively analysed or decoded. However, the researcher would need to follow the following steps:

- *Recognise the silence:* This implies sensitivity of the researcher to the silences that precede/succeed articulations, sensitised to silent respondents and their body language

- *Formulate hypotheses*: Based on the body language and level of non- verbal engagement with the others formulate swift hypotheses on reasons for the silence

- *Strategy:* Based on the hypothesis to arrive at a specific strategy to *mine* the silence

    a. In case of socially induced silences, the objective would be to help the respondent to verbally re-engage with the group/ with the interviewer.
    b. In the case of contained silences/ personal or transactional silences the objective would be to mine the silence and uncover its content.

STRATEGIES FOR MINING AND USING SILENCE

In order to understand how to handle silence and use it better it would be worthwhile to understand how silence is used in counselling. Silence is viewed both negatively and positively depending on the approach that is used. Fundamentally, however, a distinction tends to be made between negative silences that impede progress and positive "working silences" that can foster the therapeutic relationship. The Gestalt approach to counselling tends to use silence more to foster a bond between the counsellor and the client and sees it in a positive light.

Tindall and Robinson (1947) conducted an analysis of pauses and silences in sessions and arrived at seven categories of silence. They were:

- Counsellor initiated: "deliberate" (to force the client to take the onus of the conversation), "organisational" – to collect their thoughts, "normal" – signalling the end of a discussion

- Client initiated: "indecisive" – don't know how to proceed, "organisational" – to collect thoughts, "normal" – end of a discussion, "response seeking" – need approval or response from the counsellor, ratification.

Silence is used by many counsellors to force a conversation. Typically this involves sessions where the counsellor simply waits in silence for the client to take the lead. The client ultimately breaks the silence,

leads the discussion and takes responsibility for the conversation. This helps in his process of finding the space and eventually solving issues with the counsellor's facilitation. It was also found that use of silence (client initiated and therapist terminated silences) actually increased counsellor-patient rapport.

While the counsellor-patient relationship or the purpose of the session is by no means the same as that between the researcher and the respondent, there are some similarities. In both cases, a sense of trust needs to be created so that the respondent feels free to discuss and articulate his deepest thoughts on a topic. Providing the respondent with space and silence when he needs it could be effective not only in strengthening the bonds and trust but also in providing richer insights.

Silence mining

There are the following strategies to manage/ use silence:

1. Allow a silence, when it occurs, to continue for a short while. A simple question such as "what was on your mind?" is adequate to unlock thoughts that inhabited that silence and initiate a fresh line of discussion. During this period it is important for the moderator to maintain positive body language so that the respondents do not start feeling anxious. This can be used even in situations where the moderator senses that the silence is inhabited by negative attitudes.

2. Silences are useful as tools to the researcher for data elicitation on the spot. They would need to be treated at the same level as articulated responses and would be probed based on hypotheses that the researcher generates as reason for the silence, based on a study of body language. The best way to treat silence is to allow for some time for the silence to resolve itself before taking action deemed appropriate to "mine the silence".

3. Rigorous and structured incorporation of pauses and silences into our transcription process. It would be interesting if transcripts could also include notations to indicate pauses. In musical notation, for instance, rests are used to indicate a pause in a piece of music – whole rest, half rest, quarter rest and eighth rest. Similarly, a "General Pause" uses the sign G.P. to indicate pause or silence for all instruments or voices. "Fermata" indicates that a note should be sustained longer than its value.

   In their work on verbal and non verbal communication[4] Stanley E. Jones and Curtis D. LeBaron (2002) have demonstrated the difference made to analysis by using notation to weave in the pauses in transcription. The kinds of notations suggested are the brackets to mark temporal overlap of utterances, timed silences in tenths of a second, micro pauses and hyphens to signify an abrupt halt.

In general there is a strong case for use of video and audio analysis to understand and decode body language and use this analysis in tandem with narrative analysis.

USE OF SILENCE AS AN ELICITATION TECHNIQUE

In order to explore and understand the use of silence as a technique, a small qualitative research study was conducted in Mumbai amongst housewives, men and teenagers in SEC A and B (see table 2).

TABLE 2

	SEC A	SEC B	Total
Housewives (25-35 years)	2	2	4
Men (25-35 years)	1	1	2
Collegians (18-24 years)	1 (M)	1 (F)	2
Total	4	4	8

Hypothesis

- The FGDs involved a standard advertising test where a finished TVC was shown and responses elicited
- Silence as a technique was used in the following ways:

  o The handling of the FGDs was low key, the researcher putting in minimal probes and allowing respondents to take the lead.
  o Allowing silences to draw themselves out longer than normal – as far as possible allowing respondents themselves to break the silence. After the silences were broken, the researcher would 'mine the silence' through the use of gentle probes such as "what was on your mind when you were quiet?" This would help understand the thinking behind the silence.
  o A long drawn out silence used towards the end of the session after respondents had ostensibly finished offering their opinions – this was allowed to continue until the respondents themselves broke it with fresh information.

Observations on silence as a technique

Although the exercise was limited in terms of sample size, it identified some interesting findings:

- Respondents were initially unsure as to whether they were on the "right track" as they did not receive very definite feedback from the researcher.

- They soon picked up confidence and discussed some key issues in great depth.

- As they petered off, they again became unsure and received no strong guidance from the moderator, and then ground to a halt.

- When the silence continued, and it became clear that the researcher would not break it, they became uncomfortable and began to volunteer more information, this time coming through with fresh thoughts and more explanations.

- By the end of the session, respondents were able to share more intimate details of their life having developed a strong rapport with the researcher and other respondents.

- They did not see the researcher as an authority figure but more as a person who needed to be helped and guided and given as much information as possible. In fact some worried that the researcher had lost her bearings in the group and run out of questions – in which case they wanted to help her out.

Learnings from this exercise

Ways in which silence could be used as a tool
Over the course of the FGDs the following types of silence that could be used as elicitation / facilitation tools were identified:

- Discomfiting silence in a focus group situation, using the respondent's need to volunteer information to the satisfaction of the researcher: here the researcher deliberately waits for someone to break the silence with fresh thoughts. Such a silence could be used in situations when respondents have apparently exhausted all that they wish to say at the moment but where the researcher senses that there are still thoughts that respondents are reluctant to share.

- Contemplative silence used in one on one situations – to help develop comfort and rapport, marshal thoughts, talk through personal issues while the researcher accompanies him on a journey of self discovery. These can also be used in focus group situations when dealing with concept reactions, new product reactions where the respondent needs time to process the information and form an opinion. In this the researcher would allow respondents to lapse into silence while the group / individual pondered over the subject. This silence would need to be broken by the respondents rather than the researcher.

- Patient silence – used with respondents who have trouble phrasing their thoughts – allows them time to formulate the right words with which to express themselves

The use of silence in the FGDs was associated with both positives and negatives.

On the positive side:
- The quieter approach where the researcher forced the respondents to take the onus of discussion on themselves created a strong rapport – virtually all respondents felt comfortable about expressing themselves freely although the topic was uncomfortable and they were amongst strangers.

- The most important learning from this limited exercise was the fact that respondents needed time to mull over the topic and to marshal their thoughts – which could only be done in an atmosphere of quiet and a little silence.

- Silence as a technique proved provocative – led to the volunteering of further information, adding to the richness of the data

On the negative side:
- The respondents felt a little rudderless – at the end of the FGD they did not go away with the feeling that they had satisfied what was expected of them.

- There was some loss of energy as the researcher was more passive.

PART 3 / INNOVATING RESEARCH

- When the researcher wanted to get back to guide the group to other topics, she found that some control was lost – the group was now self-willed and would not be readily guided

Therefore from this exercise:
- Silence is effective as a disruptive tool to generate further response based on the respondents' discomfort and urge to break the silence with fresh information. It needs to be used selectively and judiciously in order to be effective but not impair the overall energy and interest levels within the session.

CONCLUSIONS: USING THE "THIRD EAR" – HOLISTIC LISTENING

The understanding developed through this enquiry is that silence is not just a phenomenon that occurs naturally in a discussion or interview, but rather an essential ingredient in the session that allows the respondents time to reflect, draw their thoughts together, develop greater comfort with the researcher and the environment, and take responsibility to provide thought through and richer insight.

Sensitisation to silence implies development of patience and the ability to listen holistically. Our thrust in marketing research has traditionally been on fine tuning modes of questioning and eliciting response. There has been far less emphasis on being able to 'listen' better. With better listening there is sensitivity to the "echoes of silence" in the discourse which are being used at all times to enhance the communication.

There is a need for training of researchers not just on elicitation techniques but also listening techniques incorporating an understanding and use of silence. Silence can also be developed into an effective elicitation technique for obtaining additional information.

Table 3 summarizes the strategies advocated for using silence.

TABLE 3

Type of silence	Nature of silence	Strategy
Socially led/ culturally influenced silence	Obstructive, impedes articulation due to cultural/ normative barriers	Could be prevented through sensitivity during sample design and through careful recruitment As an obstructive form of silence, the researcher should aim to remove the barrier
Personal / transactional silence- contemplative/ active	Constructive- used to draw thoughts together and process	Allow silence to continue, encourage respondents to break it themselves Key questions to mine the silence focusing on content of the silence
Personal / transactional silence - passive	Unproductive- indicates total disengagement, unwilling to re-engage/ tired listless/ bored	Could consider ways to re-engage the respondent
Purposive silence / silence as a tool for elicitation	Provocative silence deliberately employed by the researcher to get respondents to break in with new information	Used by the researcher as a disruptive technique to provoke further discussion and more thoughts/ information when respondents seem reluctant to volunteer more information

FOOTNOTES

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