



next intelligence | inca

in partnership with  NOVA

From Bots to Bonds

Enhancing empathy in consumer research

Kathy Cheng & Tasneem Dalal

Prepared for Quirk's LA, 2025

“Ooh I felt like I was speaking with someone I know.

I felt free to answer all questions... you were so gentle. In fact, I would like to chat with you again.”

21–27 year old male



Decoding Gen Z brand expectations in South Africa

N=858

Over 6 days

45 mins

Actual LOI vs. 20 mins planned

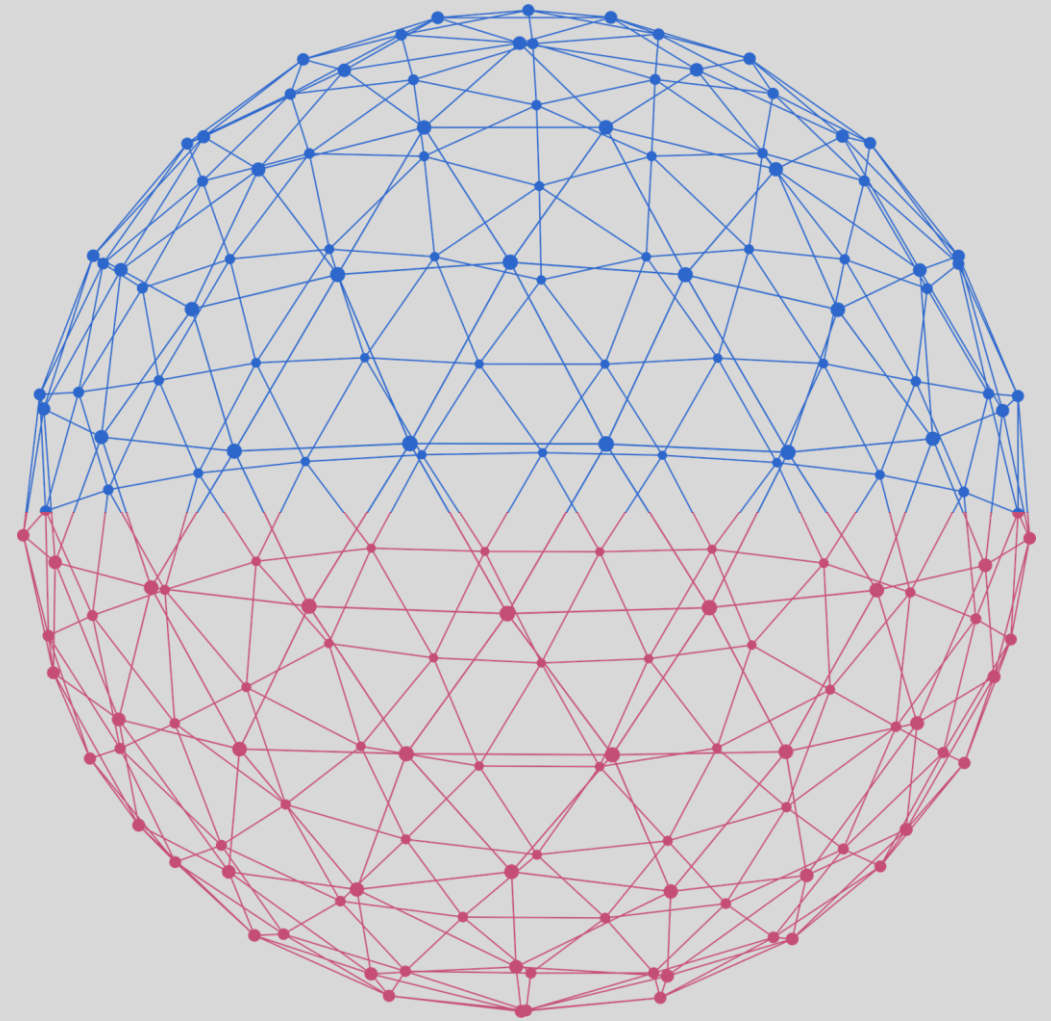
425 words

Per participant, or 365K words in total



4.5 out of 5 engagement score

**A research
relevant AI model
with human-centric
expert design**



There are good
moderators

There are not so
good moderators

There is good
Conversational AI

There is not so good
Conversational AI

There are good
moderators

There are not so
good moderators

We learn from the best human moderators

- Don't ask leading questions
- Don't ask two questions (or more) in one
- Don't probe on answers that are off topic
- Don't probe into answers that are inappropriate
- Probe with empathy

We embed research guidance into an AI model through extensive training



Not out of the box, a domain specific AI model

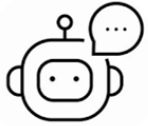


Not static, designed to reason and learn



Not a closed system, open to human expertise

Without training and guidance, Conversational AI doesn't work so well...

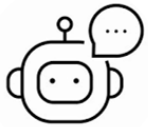


If you had to pick one South African brand that really stands out as one that speaks to you, and delivers the kind of value that matters to you, what would it be?

Does not build on response



What other qualities makes you excited about this brand?



Could you tell me more about the spicy taste and what it is about the quality that represents value to you?

Complicated covering too many areas



It must be Nando's, their flame grilled chicken is the best, and its affordable enough to treat the whole family

A response with very little depth

Hot, spicy, tasty food, good quality

It is starting to feel repetitive!

As I said, the quality is good, always tasty, I can never complain

... but with inca's trained AI, chatbots become agents of empathy unlocking deep insight



If you had to pick one South African brand that really stands out as one that speaks to you, and delivers the kind of value that matters to you, what would it be?

Does build on response



That sounds delicious! What specifically about this chicken makes it the best for you?



That sounds like a lovely memory. You mentioned enjoying it with friends at home, what does that tell you about this brand?

It builds on the person's response, while keeping to the focus of this question

It must be Nando's, their flame grilled chicken is the best, and its affordable enough to treat the whole family

Look at the depth!

It provides amazing familiar flavours and a bold sauce taste like no other. It is hot and spicy, with chillis and herbs, and always reminds me of good times with friends, even at home, using Nando's spices and sauces

Empathy unlocks nuance

It is so authentic, it feels as though Nando's shares values with South Africans and understands our needs, it is proudly local, like us



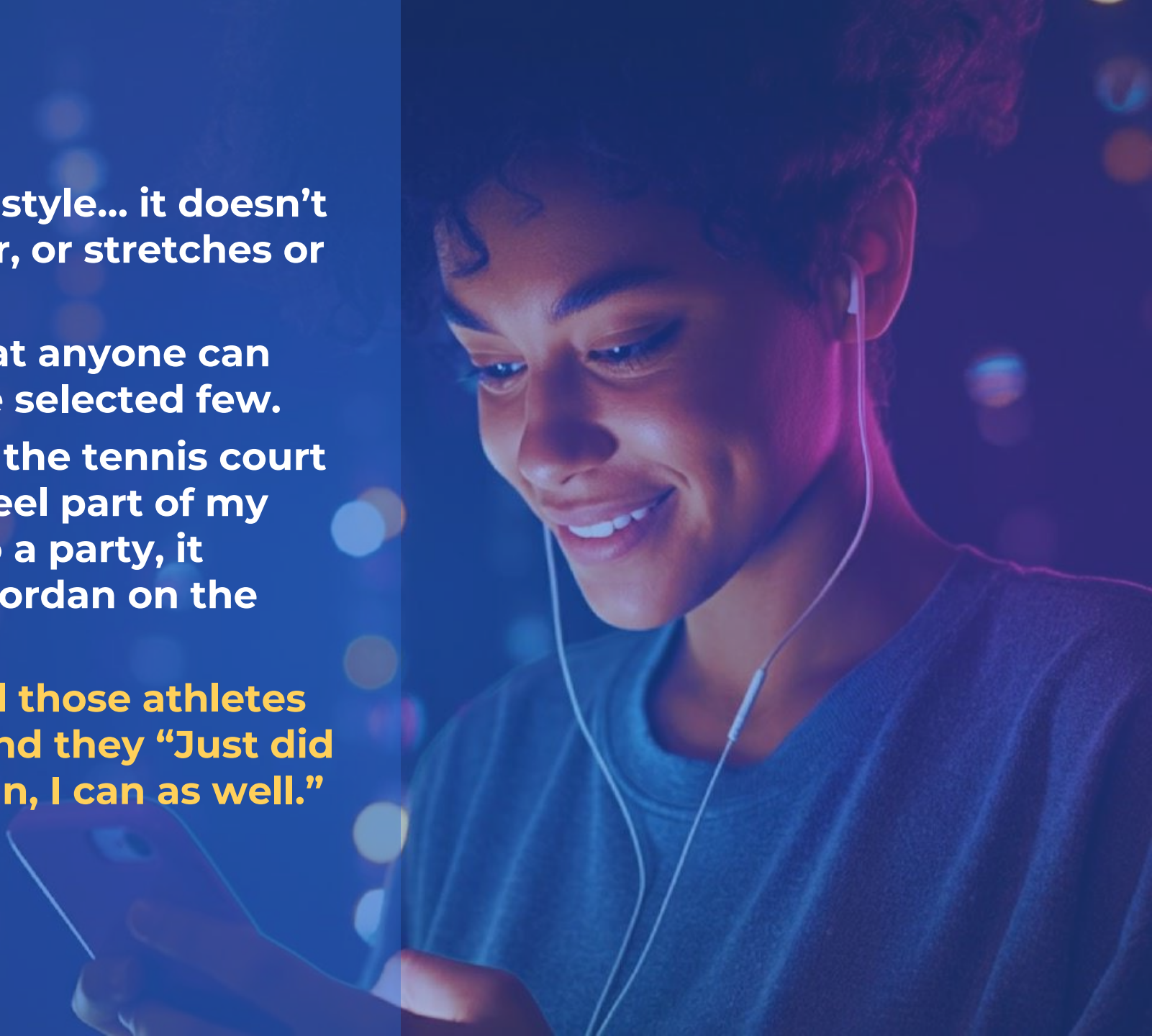
“Nike lasts long, but stays in style... it doesn’t wash out, or tear or discolour, or stretches or shrinks, it is great quality.

It also created a message that anyone can ‘Just do it’ and not just those selected few.

It makes me feel I belong on the tennis court when playing, it makes me feel part of my friends wearing Air Forces to a party, it makes me feel like Michael Jordan on the basketball court.

When I think of Nike, I see all those athletes who got to where they are and they “Just did it” to get there and if they can, I can as well.”

21–27 year old female



The building blocks of emphatic conversations



User-centric
language



User
empowerment



Acknowledge-
ment



Turn-taking



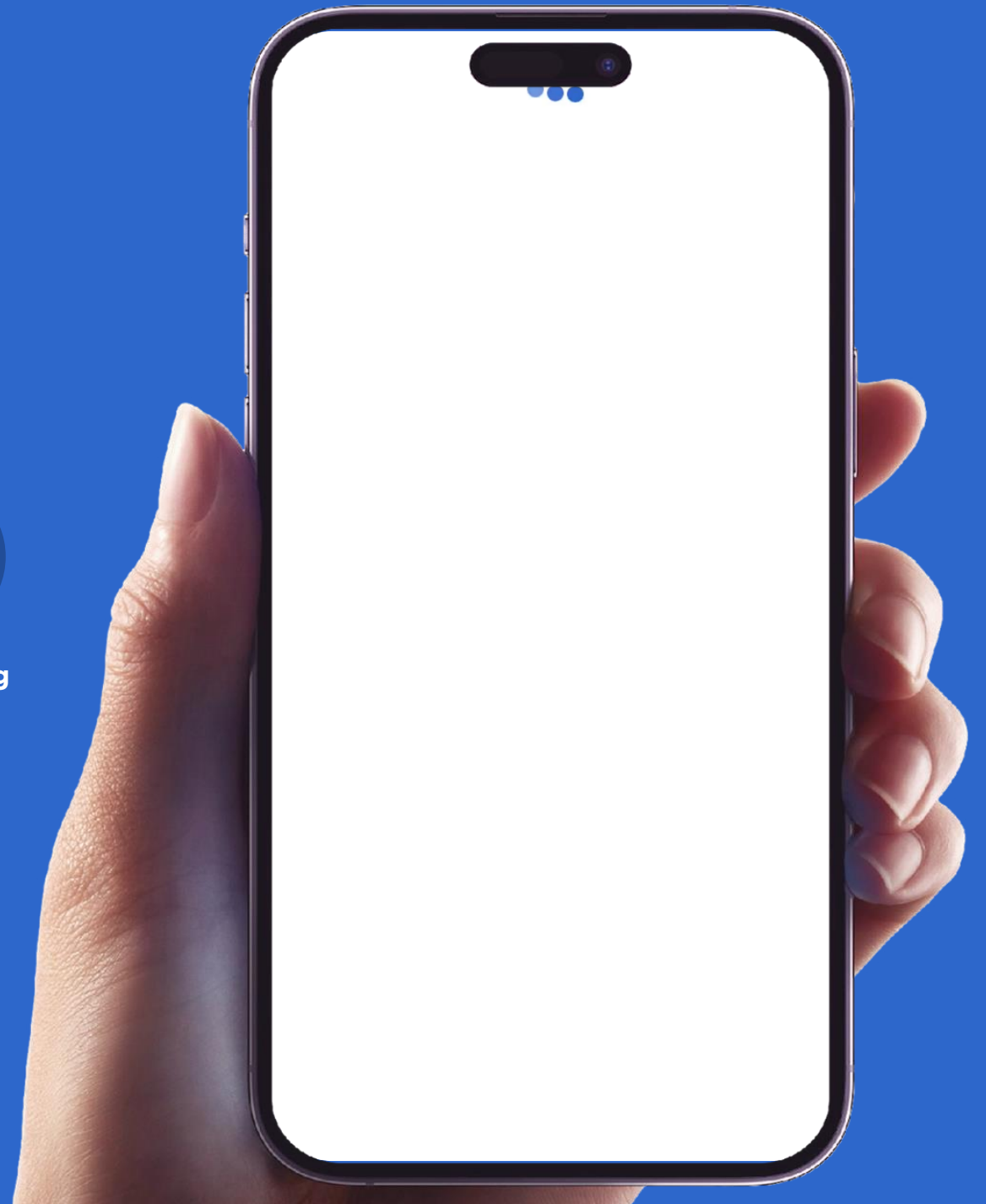
Progressive
disclosure



Small talk



Cooperative
design



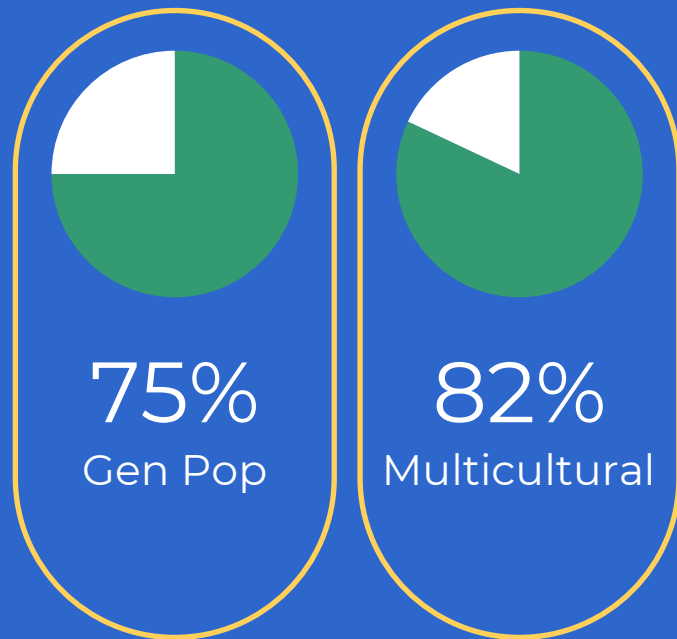
**Transcend the transactional to foster
deep engagement and build empathy**

Knowledge — Challenge — Appreciation

Empathetic Conversational AI works well with diverse audiences across countries

% BETTER/A LOT BETTER RATINGS

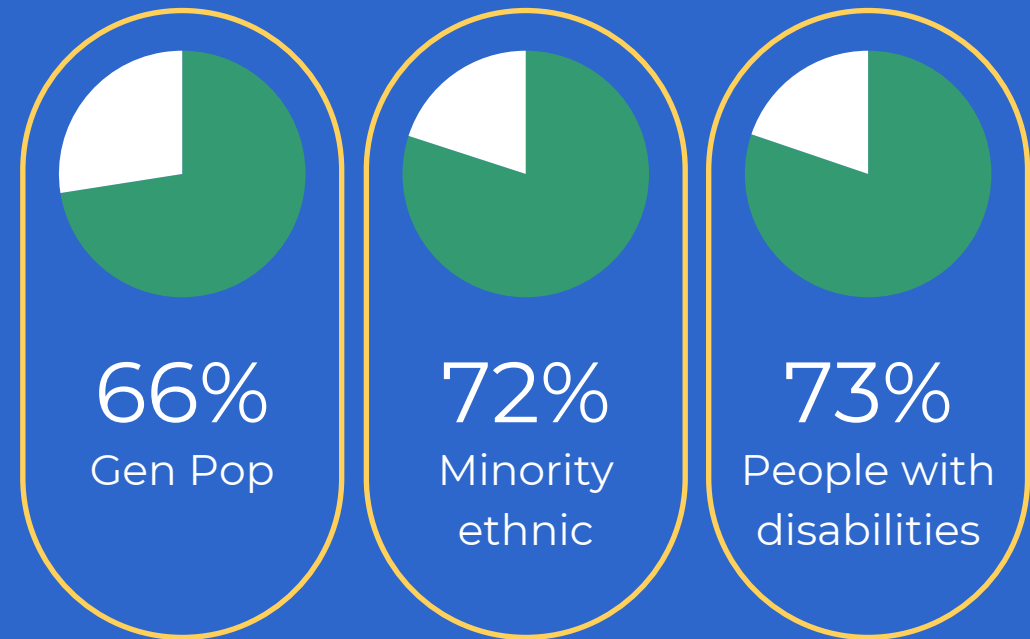
Compared to other surveys you have done, how would you rate this survey experience?*



* Source: Nexxt Intelligence / inca research in Canada

% AGREE COMPLETELY/SOMEWHAT

Agreement with the statement "Allowed me to express myself better than other surveys"***



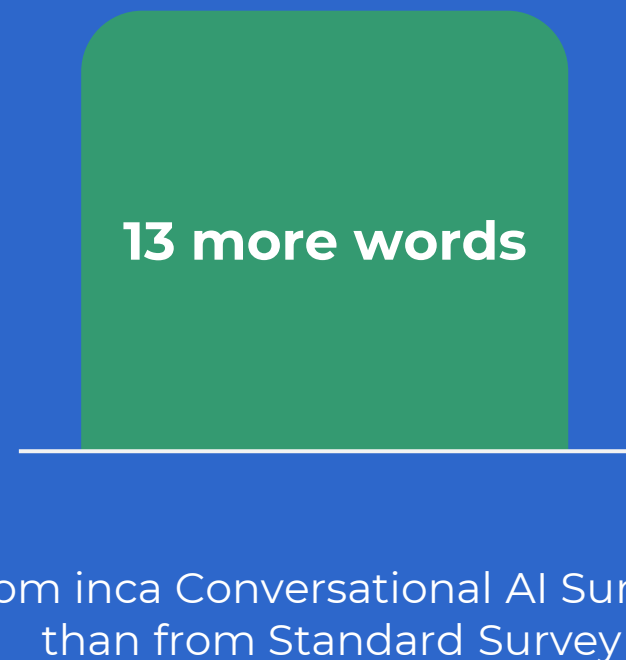
*** Source: Differentology / 7Stars research in UK using inca

Empathetic Conversational AI elicits more response for sensitive topics

Change in word count for HIGH sensitivity vs MEDIUM sensitivity topics*



Total word count for HIGH sensitivity topics*



A STORY HEARD

goes far beyond simply relaying facts and data, it brings color and depth, connection and understanding



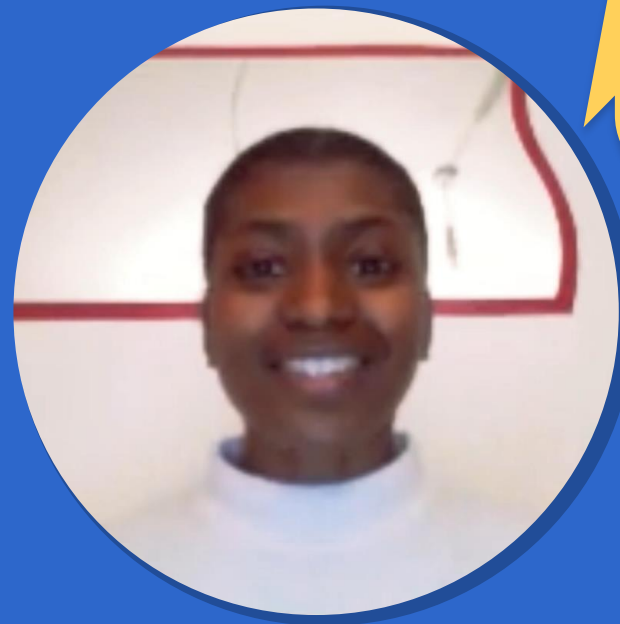
A STORY HEARD

goes far beyond simply relaying facts and data, it brings color and depth, connection and understanding



A STORY SEEN

Video as a more intimate view into the consumer's world, empowering them with the control to share their story, on their terms



If you had to pick one brand that really stands out as one that speaks to you and delivers the kind of value that matters to you, what brand and product type would that be?

A STORY SEEN

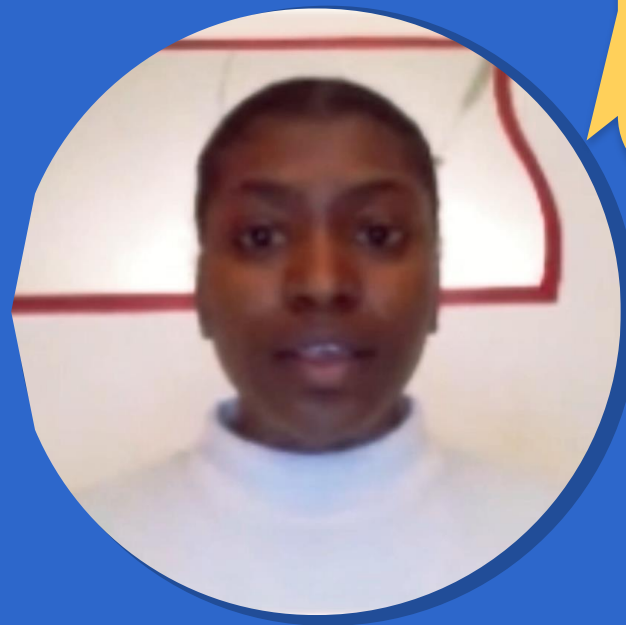
Video as a more intimate view into the consumer's world, empowering them with the control to share their story, on their terms



A radiant smile sounds wonderful! Can you tell me more about how it is good for the planet?

A STORY SEEN

Video as a more intimate view into the consumer's world, empowering them with the control to share their story, on their terms



That's certainly an unprecedented move... what does that tell you about this brand?

IT MATTERS TO CONSUMERS

“You are so understanding, I even forgot I was doing this for research, you made me feel like I’m talking with a family member”

21–27 year old male



IT MATTERS TO CLIENTS

“It has allowed us to become aware of elements that matter to our consumers that we had never even considered to measure in a survey”

Insights Manager, Multi-National
Consumer Healthcare Company

Now it is your turn to activate chatbots in research as agents of empathy



Ask the right questions, using a research relevant AI model, with human controls



In the right way, based on a deep understanding of human conversation and value



To unlock the extraordinary, through business relevant insights that matter, at any scale

inca

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