

UNLOCKING THE POWER of Gen Z Through Qualitative Chatbots At Scale

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Born at the start of our democracy, the 27.5 million Gen Z are our largest consumer segment in South Africa. (Lerm, 2022). They are the first generation of pure digital natives, having never known a world without the internet or social media. Their presence is being felt by brands, all fighting to grow relevance with this hard-to-reach cohort.

Understanding how to target Gen Z, and decoding what they demand from a brand proposition, is critical for brand growth. Reaching and engaging them via traditional survey methods, however, is increasingly challenging. Sign up rates are low and dropout rates high. Those who complete a survey become overburdened by the extensive and repetitive nature of the questions, resulting in often hurried or detached responses. We also struggle in conventional approaches to unlock the 'why' underlying their actions and choices.

Compounding these challenges is the Low Attention Economy - always on, South Africans are among the most connected consumers in the world, spending an average of 3.4 hours a day on social media, compared to a global average of 2.2 hours (McInnes, 2024). Often perceived as having a short attention span, Gen Z have little room for lengthy surveys which offer little value in return.

To reach Gen Z, to get to the people behind the numbers and empower our clients with deep human-centric insights to underpin their brand superiority, a more nuanced approach, one that engages honestly with participants as equal partners, is needed. Gen Z want to connect and share feedback but only if they trust you.



When we really want to understand people, we turn to their stories. Stories are engrained in our DNA – they are how we learn, discover and share our world. Whether on YouTube, podcasts, or TikTok, Gen Z are as keen to share their stories as they are captivated by those of others. By engaging with them in this way, we are offered a window into their world.

A qualitative exploratory chatbot – or Q.Bot as we refer to it – offers a way to access Gen Z's stories at scale. Leveraging Conversational AI, Q.Bot offers one-on-one engagements to get to the heart of motivations, needs and frustrations, in a way that brings us closer to their lived experiences. Unlike the bot from a service provider like the bank, aiming to resolve and terminate a query as quickly as possible, Q.Bot adapts and probes intelligently, through an open conversation. Its intuitive probing support authenticity and often surprising honesty, and seem especially suited to connecting with Gen Z. In essence, this offers us qualitative depth at a quantitative scale.

Traditional surveys are filled with pre-defined response sets, to deliver standard and comparable KPIs. They measure what we sometimes already know, but often with little depth. Classic qualitative approaches engage with a targeted profile, for diagnostic insight into very specific areas of interest. Yet these are limited in scale and in breadth of discovery. Search and social approaches give us extraordinary breadth, yet people may not talk about the areas you are interested in, and, if they do, their profile may not be known. This is where Q.Bot comes in, giving us the power to explore the consumer experience, to gain a deeper understanding of their world, at scale, through a fun, familiar experience. This builds trust for greater openness and more actionable insights. In doing so, we help our clients to connect with the people behind the numbers – placing them at the heart of decision making.

Our aim for this project was to unlock the power of Gen Z, to understand how they define themselves, what matters, and especially decode what value means to them. Conversational AI seemed the best route to unpack these complex ideas, engaging with Gen Z on their terms, giving us the depth of a qualitative interview, but with the diverse, nuanced perspectives of a big sample.

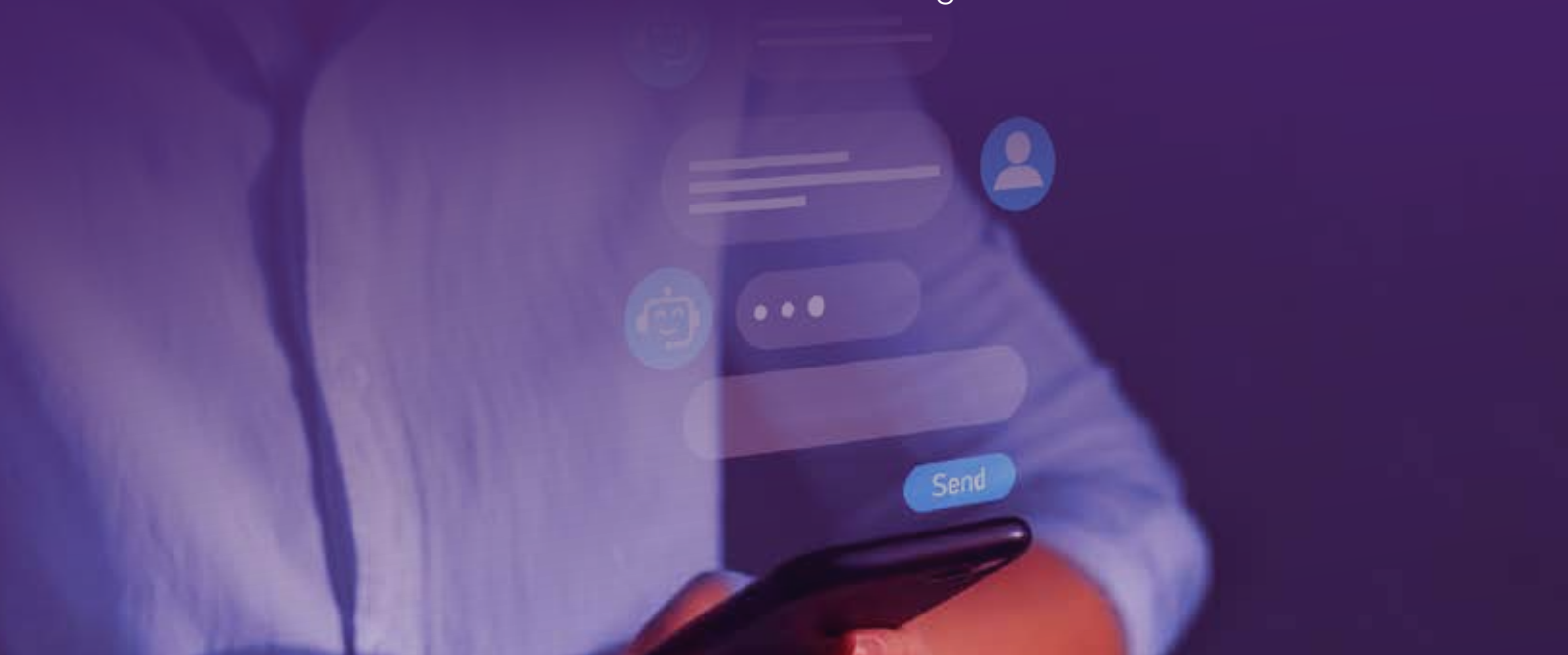


We designed our Q.Bot as a qualitative guide using open, exploratory questions and intelligent probing, with a few attribute association tasks to keep participants engaged. We led with how Gen Z describe their generation, both in a global context and in South Africa. We drilled down to find brands that speak to them, unpacking what a new brand would have to offer to dislodge a trusted one. We explored attitudes to private label and “Dupe” brands before focusing on perceptions of iconic local brands, and any barriers that might stop them from buying local. Finally, we ended the interview with feedback on the experience.

We launched on a Friday night reaching 400 interviews over the weekend, and closed with 860 after 6 days. The bulk of participants were 21–27-year-old men and women in key regions, with a subset of young Millennials to see how their views differed. We found a broad spread of LSM, with 1/3 in the mid LSM space (4-7), allowing us a robust read of differences and also debunking the myth that the middle market can't be reached online.

We aimed at a 20 min conversation, but participants had so much to say that the duration was around 44 min, as they shared their stories with extraordinary richness, and nuance. Compared to about 5 words in a typical quant. open-ender, here we averaged 20–25 words per question. Not surprisingly, participants had most to say about broad topics like “what makes your generation stand out”, and “how do you differ from your parents” – they had a lot to say here! These were at the start of the conversation, when they were most engaged, but even later topics like sustainability averaged 25 words.

Unpacking the richness of 860 in depth interviews, was a huge task. We leveraged AI not only to drive an intelligent and dynamic conversation, but also to help us strategically make sense of a huge dataset. Drawing on AI-powered text analytics, meaningful topics surfaced organically and could be quantified to establish relative importance. Importantly, this approach is not based on keyword matching. Instead, it tries to understand the topics, possible because this AI model has been pre-trained on vast amounts of unstructured data. This also allows themes to surface which a human coder might have overlooked.



As an example, AI-powered text analytics made it possible for us to identify Nike as the brand that connects best with their generation (called out by a whopping 30% of our sample). Nike delivers against the top two choice drivers for Gen Z, being product quality, and offering a quickly evolving fashion and style. Beyond the numbers though, what comes through in the stories is the brand purpose but also its inclusivity.

It makes me feel I belong, with athletes, oversized people, actors and tells me sneakers can be worn for comfort not only sports. It lasts long but it stays in style. The brand created a message that anyone can 'Just do it' and not just those selected few. ; It made me feel I belong on the tennis court when playing, made me feel part of my friends wearing Air Forces to a party, made me feel like Michael Jordan on the basketball court. When I think of Nike I think of many athletes who got to where they are and they 'Just did it' to get there and if they can. I can as well.

It isn't possible to unpack all of the conversations here, but we can share some over-arching themes, along with a snippet of stories that illustrate not only how deeply engaged participants were, but also how insightful their stories are. Describing themselves and how they differ from their parents' generation, our Gen Z spoke about their adaptability, social consciousness and unique communication styles. They see themselves as more skilful in navigating tradition and modernity than other Gen Zs. They respect the importance of their heritage and cultural roots, while also being open to question and challenge these:

We know our history, we're proud of our heritage. We respect our cultures and traditions, and we embrace how diverse we are. In other continents some do not have the freedom to express themselves the way they would want to due to stereotypical rules, toxic masculinity, etc.

Because of their history, they have developed a uniquely South African mindset that speaks to resilience in the face of adversity, and dedication to improving their future, no matter what



Gen Zs in South Africa differ because they've grown up in a country where load-shedding and crime are so prevalent that they've had to adapt to it; I think it has made them a lot more innovative and a lot more resilient to the ups and downs of life.

Drilling down, we learnt a lot about what brands need to do to win the hearts and minds of these important consumers. Our local conversations validated key themes of novelty and nostalgia, identified in the UK, USA and China, as part of our global Gen Z project, and found local examples of product experiences that reflect these themes. At the same time, we identified uniquely South African dimensions that drive brand value for this generation.

Firstly, in line with other markets, we see the importance of Elevated sensory characteristics for Gen Z (e.g. flavour or aroma) that cut through and can minimize migration to competitors

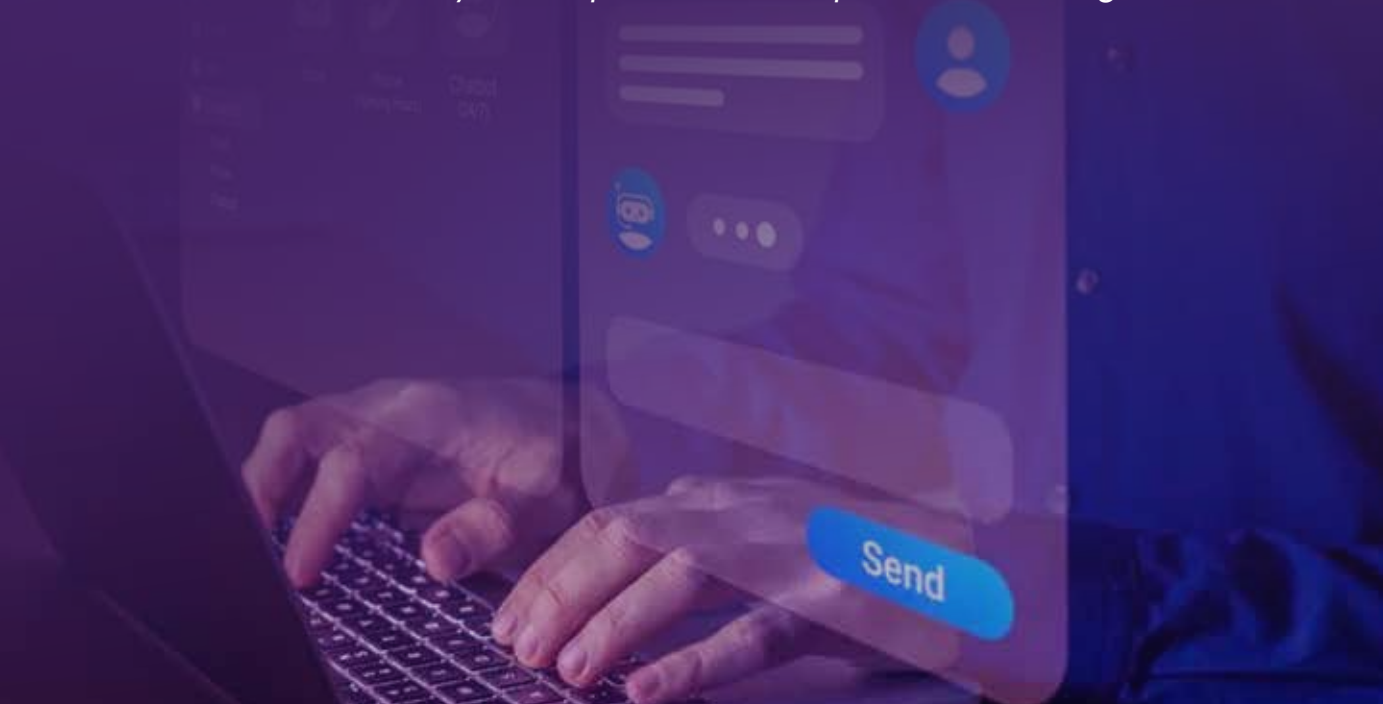
Simba, the taste is amazing nothing compares in the chips market; it cannot be described, its very tasty.

Second, the role of product **Entertainment**, like staged packaging openings, unexpected peak consumption moments, or post consumption content. These help brands pierce the consciousness of a cohort constantly bombarded with stimulation and be remembered.

Kota King – it sells the best kota in the world. It has the best sauces, best bread, perfect size and the flavours just add up to this great experience in my mouth.

While affordability is a core concern, Gen Z in South Africa pay more for brands that offer quality and **Exclusivity**, helping them stand out, to show that they have achieved success.

Maxhosa – It's exclusivity, the craftsmanship of their clothes is authentic and the raw materials are sourced locally. I feel special and unique when wearing them.



To deliver value for South African Gen Z, brands need to be Engaging, offering an authentic experience that connects meaningfully. Here we see strong emphasis on the role of heritage and newstalgia, connecting back with one's cultural roots, but with a new twist, reflecting an interplay between modern and traditional influences.

Koo brings my family together because we all love Koo and when made everyone gathers together; We have a good time laugh and joke and enjoy the meal together as one it's unity

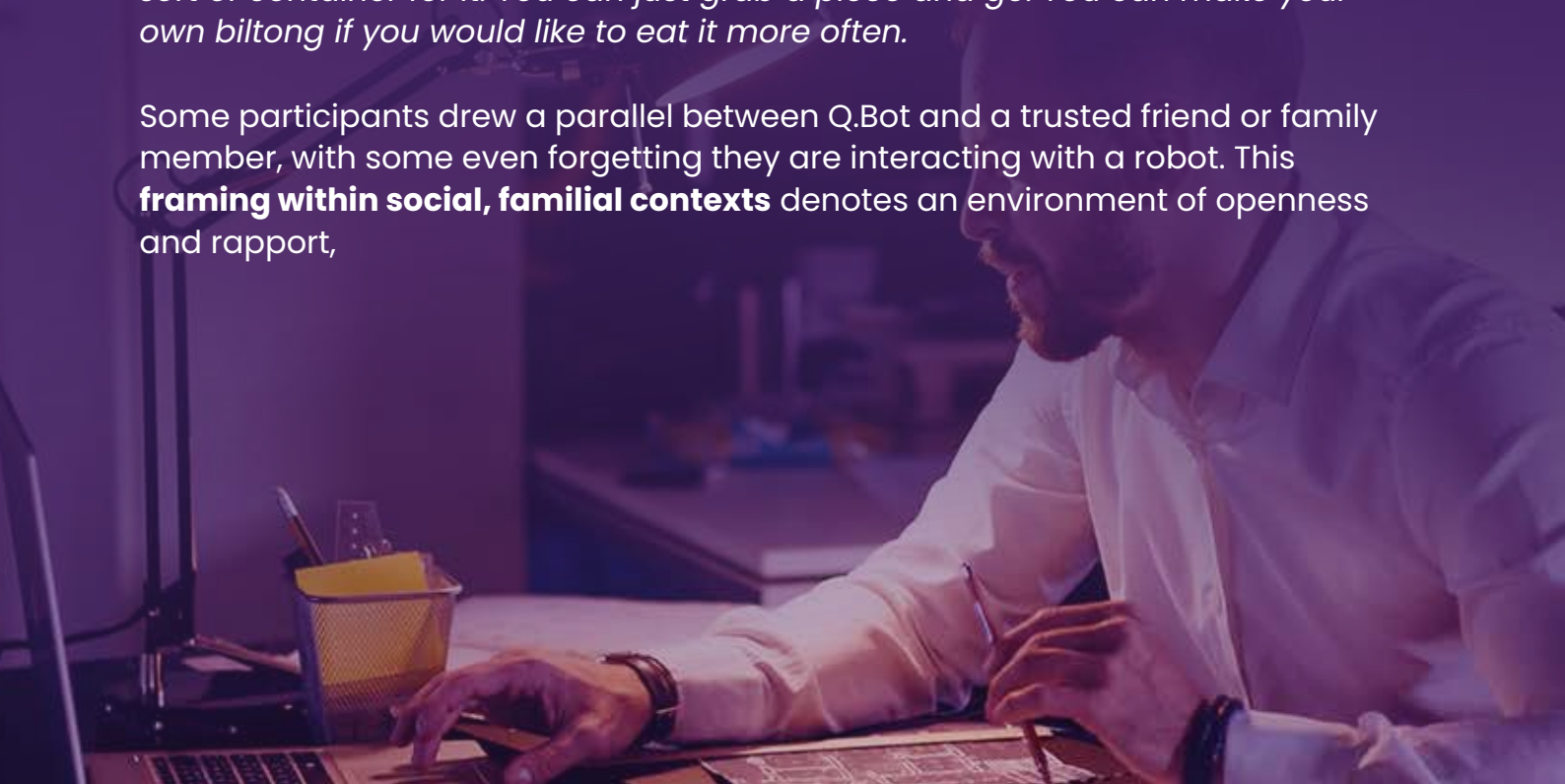
Stepping back from attempts to decode what value means to Gen Z, what have we learnt about how Q.Bot offer an ideal route to connecting with these consumers?. Our survey was well-received, with a feedback rating of 4.5/5 and highly positive feedback sentiment.

A primary driver of its appeal stems from the human-like qualities. These transform Q.Bot into a **platform of engagement** rather than one that passively herds the consumer voice into a list of pre-defined choices. This transformation enhances the overall experience for Gen Z, driving excitement and increased interest in participating.

Just look at these examples of the authentic stories our Gen Z cohort shared about a treasured South African brand. There is something so undeniably South African in the deep sense of pride and rich, diverse culture evident across these stories.

Biltong. The idea of dried meat may not sound particularly attractive, but, as anyone munching on a handful before a braai or during a rugby match will tell you, it's irresistible. Biltong is a great snack and it's actually fairly healthy. It's very easy to take with you on the go as you don't need to wrap it up or have some sort of container for it. You can just grab a piece and go. You can make your own biltong if you would like to eat it more often.

Some participants drew a parallel between Q.Bot and a trusted friend or family member, with some even forgetting they are interacting with a robot. This **framing within social, familial contexts** denotes an environment of openness and rapport,



encouraging Gen Z to express themselves authentically, in turn translating into more meaningful data, as they feel valued and understood. Other sources confirm that the lack of judgement by a Bot gives people license to open up with more honesty than they would if talking to a human, addressing the age-old problem of social desirability bias in research (BBC, 2016; Mrowe, 2021).

You are so understanding, I even forgot I was taking a survey, you made me feel like I'm talking with a family member

Q.Bot's conversational approach is in stark contrast to the one-sided transactional exchanges of traditional surveys. Instead of merely providing data, our participants were prompted with thought-provoking questions to encourage introspection. This shifts the value exchange towards a more interactive dialogue where they have the opportunity to consider, formulate and share views on topics they may not have thought about before, enhancing the quality of responses but also fostering a sense of personal recognition and tailored engagement. By facilitating authentic exploration of individual identity, Q.Bot creates a solution that feels like an authentic encounter, where consumers feel seen and heard, resulting in more insightful and actionable data.

It was so challenging and I love challenges in life, as an upcoming business man the questions you asked me they really give me new ideas of running my company.

In essence, Q.Bot's conversational nature represent a paradigm shift, offering a more engaging, trust-building approach than traditional survey methods. This elevates the experience and enhances the richness of the data.

As we navigate this exciting way of engaging Gen Z, however, we encountered not only opportunities but also challenges that demand creative solutions.

It should come as no surprise then, that a couple of our participants used technology against us, using AI in their responses. For now, it is easy to spot this with word count alone, but as the technology develops, sophisticated methods of detection will be needed here.



When unpacking feedback, a recurring and familiar challenge emerged, that of survey length, a concern for 12% of our sample. We saw a trend of declining response length as the survey progressed, suggesting fatigue. Compounding this, is that fact that as the survey drags on, the level of humanness in our Q.Bot becomes less evident, and at times, the repetitive nature of the probing more pronounced.

The chat was very very long and I feel like you repeated the same questions like three times before moving to the next one.

Addressing this challenge demands a dual perspective — one in which we must immerse ourselves in the perspective of both consumer and Q.Bot. Writing the survey becomes less about standard questions and more about scripting a conversation. Each question should flow, as a human conversation does, with familiar localised phraseology while staying clear of a robotic undertone. As the questionnaire is written, we must continuously ask ourselves not only "would I say it like this?" but "how would I react to this question?".

A further consideration is ensuring clear objectives — is the goal breadth, depth or both? When pursuing a broad and diverse understanding of a topic, fewer probes and more closed questions facilitate comprehensive exploration. Conversely, focusing on a narrowly defined topic should include fewer questions, with targeted probes for data richness.

Ultimately, the success of this approach hinges on maintaining an overtly human element within the digital realm. It's about empowering consumers to feel like active participants in a genuine exchange, rather than being passive data points.

So thinking beyond our study, how do we see the landscape further evolving and what are the implications for our industry overall? New skills are needed and perhaps a shift in identity towards a hybrid qual/quant mindset.

As the technology evolves, consumers will have the power to choose how to share their story, whether by text, voice, or video. This will lead to more multi-modal research, with more multi-dimensional insights, and an ability to facilitate greater closeness between consumers and clients.



There is also potential to leverage this approach for even greater personalisation (e.g. choosing the 'persona' you want to talk to). At the same time, we need to tread carefully to not introduce bias or make it gimmicky so that we always treat consumers with respect.

The ability to use this technology to get in the moment feedback offers further authenticity. We have used Q.Bot to chat to consumers in the duty free at airports (a captive audience with time on their hands, but notoriously hard to get to). We have also used it for innovations at a food festival, to understand sensitive topics like digestive health while standing in the queue at the pharmacy, or to understand motivations for meal replacement as they happen.

What particularly excites us is the ability to add value via custom trained models based on unique expertise in the areas where we most want to use them (already happening in areas like health or therapy.) We are using our chatbot capabilities to embed our product and sensory expertise. In other words, it is IP driven, aiming to use our expertise to elevate the value we deliver to clients rather than just using technology for technology's sake.

In summary then, we hope that we have demonstrated today that Conversational AI acts as a critical partner in reaching Gen Z and unlocking a powerful nuanced conversation with them, one where we treat them as equals in the exchange rather than passive research subjects. This will require a mind shift and a new skill set, requiring investment both in conversational design and analysis expertise. As in all research, anyone can ask a question, but it is knowing how to start with the best question that matters most.

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