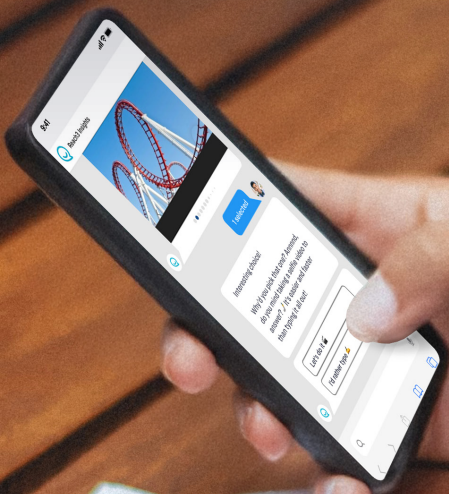


# The Research on Conversational Research

Why Traditional Surveys are Failing—and  
What 2,006 People Say Works Instead





## FOREWORD

I've spent my entire career in research, and if there's one thing I've learned, it's this: how we ask questions matters just as much as what we ask. For decades, we've relied on long, rigid online surveys that often feel more like homework than a conversation. And now we're paying the price: people are tuning out.

Response rates are plummeting, data quality is under pressure, and in some cases, bots are the ones "participating" in our studies. As an industry, we need to be honest with ourselves: traditional surveys aren't cutting it anymore. They don't reflect how people communicate in real life, and they don't inspire real answers.

Seven years ago, we set out on a different path when we introduced a conversational approach to research that felt more natural, more human, and ultimately more effective. Since then, we've seen firsthand how this method has helped our clients connect more deeply with their audiences and uncover richer insights.

Over time, we've refined our techniques, scaled what works, and most recently, expanded our capabilities with the help of AI. This moment felt like the right time to revisit our original hypothesis, not because we were unsure, but because we believed the results could be even more compelling.

This new research-on-research study is our latest step in that journey. We wanted to validate how far conversational methods have come, and what that evolution means for researchers today. Inside this paper, you'll find practical insights and best practices that anyone can use to improve how they engage with participants and elevate the quality of the insights they gather.



**JENNIFER REID**  
Co-CEO and Chief  
Methodologist, *Rival Group*

## INTRO

# Let's face it: traditional online surveys feel like taking a middle school test.

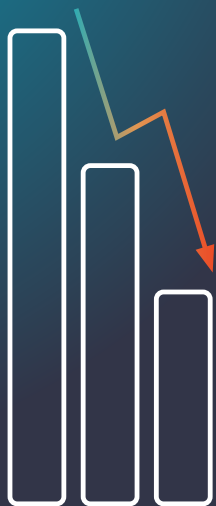
They're rigid and outdated, misaligned with how people communicate and behave today. At a time when attention is fractured, screens are crowded, and people are constantly bombarded by content, we need to rethink how we engage respondents before they stop responding altogether.

It's not just low response rates that are hurting data quality. More bots are taking surveys, gaming incentives and skewing results. Meanwhile, real people are harder to reach than ever, and harder to keep engaged once they do opt in.

This is where conversational research makes a difference. Instead of forcing people through rigid, impersonal forms, it meets them where they already are: on their phones, messaging.

# 5%

average survey response rate today—a major drop from 40% in 1997



## SURVEY RESPONSE RATES IN FREEFALL

According to Pew Research Center, survey response rates **dropped from just under 40% in 1997 to under 5% today**. In the U.K., the Office for National Statistics saw rates **fall from 40% to 13%**, at times getting only

five responses to key labor market questions. In the U.S., the Current Population Survey **dropped from 50% to just 12.7%**. Among younger and hard-to-reach populations, these response rates tend to be even lower.

## CONVERSATIONAL RESEARCH IS DEFINED BY THESE THREE KEY INGREDIENTS

- 1 The Channel**  
Distributed via mobile-first channels like SMS
- 2 The Tone**  
A more human, friendlier approach
- 3 The Interface**  
A familiar, intuitive experience that mimics natural back-and-forth conversation

These elements make the process feel easy, engaging, and even enjoyable — three qualities that matter deeply to participants and to the quality of the data they provide. And the impact goes beyond a single session. Our findings show that participants who take a conversational survey are significantly more likely to say they'd take one again in the future. When you improve the experience, you improve the relationship.

## Here's what you'll find in this paper:

- How conversational surveys unlock richer, more thoughtful responses
- Why the experience matters—and how it shapes future participation
- How the data holds up in quantitative and qualitative measures
- The design principles that make conversational research ideal for mobile
- What better input means for AI-powered outputs

If we want better answers, we need to ask better questions—and do it in a way that makes people want to respond.



## METHODOLOGY

How was the research conducted? We know researchers love a good methodology section, so let's get right to it.

This research-on-research study was designed by **Reach3 Insights** to answer a key question: does a conversational approach actually deliver a better research experience and stronger insights?

**To find out, we ran a parallel design with the same topic and questions, but two very different methods:**

### GROUP 1:

One group received a traditional email-based online survey

### GROUP 2:

The other completed a chat-like, mobile-first experience using Rival's conversational platform

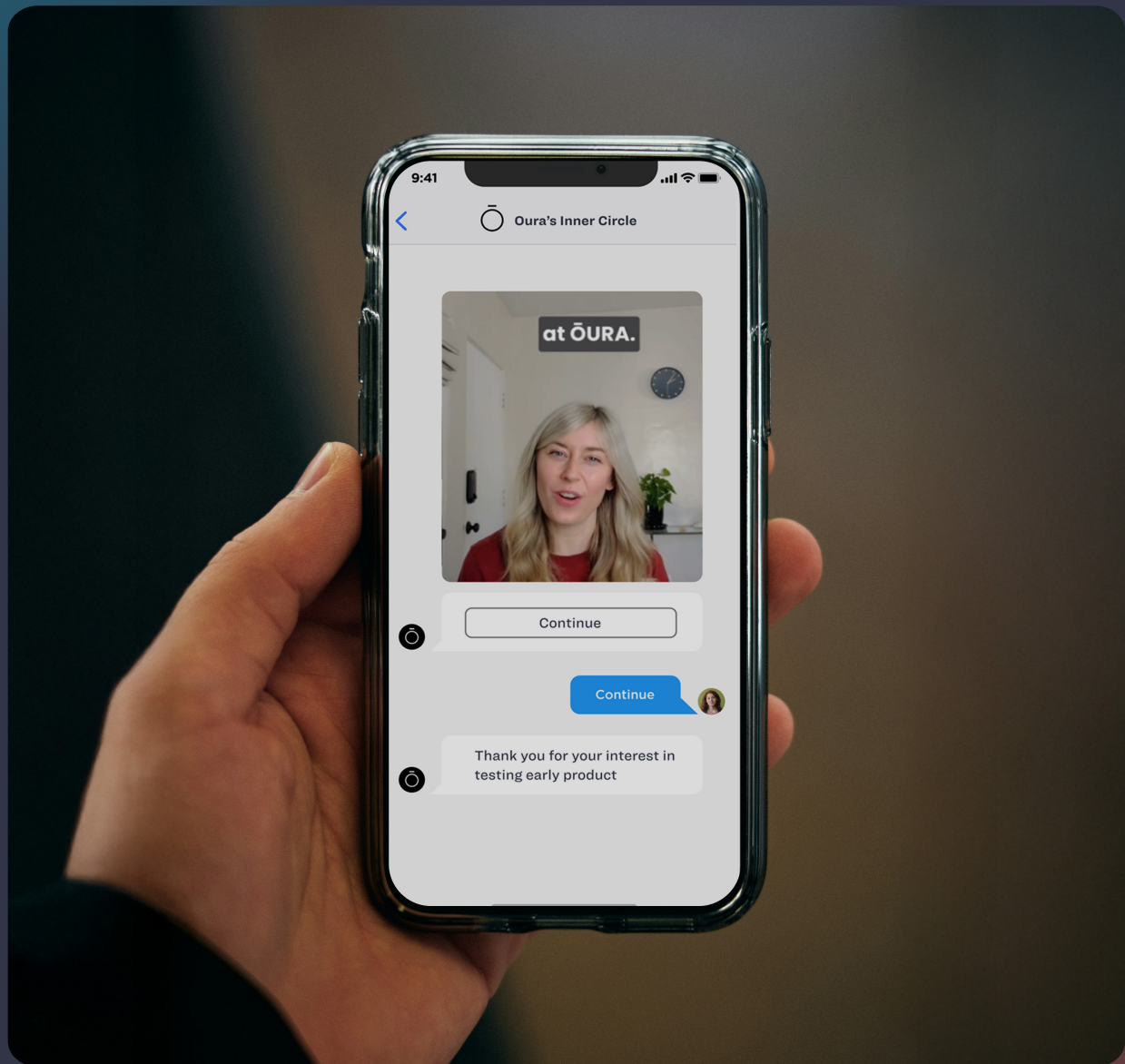
### Here's who took part:

- 2,006 total respondents
- 1,001 took the traditional online survey
- 1,005 took the mobile-first conversational version
- Adults aged 18+ in the U.S. and Canada
- All participants engage in online communities at least a few times a month

Both groups were asked about their participation in online communities like Reddit, Discord, and others. But just to be clear: this report isn't about how people use those platforms. Instead, we'll focus on what really matters to researchers: the participant experience, the depth and quality of open-ended responses, and the overall data integrity.

Fieldwork ran from April 16 to May 5, 2025. All statistical testing was done with a 95% confidence interval.

# Richer, deeper responses that drive better insights



Ask a good question in the right way, and people will tell you more than you expect. That's the power of conversational research. When questions feel like a natural back-and-forth instead of a formal exam, people lean in.



In our parallel study, the same questions were asked to two separate groups—one using a standard online survey, and the other through a chat-like, mobile-first experience.

**The difference was striking: conversational surveys generated dramatically more robust open-ended responses.**

- **2.5x longer** responses using a chat-like conversational survey
- **5x longer** with Smart AI Probe, a tool that generates contextual follow-up questions that deepen qualitative responses
- **Nearly 8x** longer when participants responded by video

## Thoughtful Wins

**It's not just about length, although volume does provide more detail and context — giving you a peek below the surface.** Primarily, though, it's about quality. To measure this, we used our proprietary **Thoughtfulness Score**, a metric that evaluates the depth, relevance, clarity, emotional tone, and overall value of each response. This score also helps determine when an AI-generated follow-up is needed using Smart AI Probe, enabling more dynamic and respectful interactions.

These results highlight the power of video feedback captured via mobile. When people talk instead of type, they share more. Speaking reduces cognitive load and feels more natural than writing, especially on mobile devices. One study found that writing requires more planning and mental effort, which can limit depth, while speaking tends to be more emotionally expressive. We saw that dynamic play out in our research: video open-ends earned the highest thoughtfulness scores, capturing real emotion, clarity, and context that text alone often misses.

Better responses lead to stronger analysis and more confident decision-making. In an AI-driven research landscape, thoughtful inputs are the new baseline.

### THOUGHTFULNESS SCORES (OUT OF 10):



Traditional open ends



Rival open-ends



Rival text open-ends with AI probing



Rival video responses

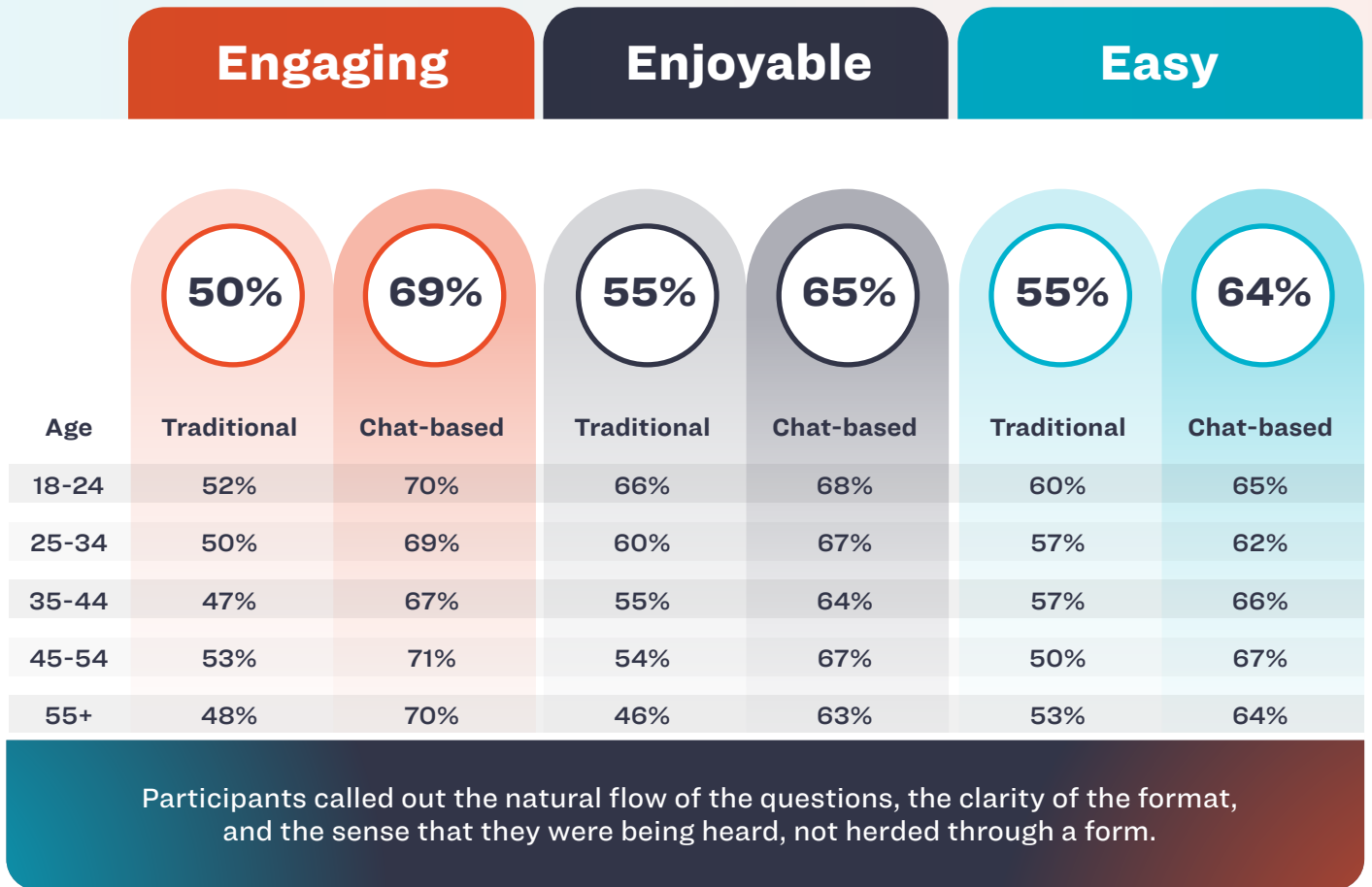
# A better experience for every respondent



When people have a better experience, they give better data. It's that simple. One of the strongest findings from this study was just how much participants preferred the conversational approach.



## WHEN COMPARED TO A TRADITIONAL SURVEY, CHAT-LIKE APPROACHES CLEARLY WON OUT AMONG ALL AGE GROUPS:



These three factors are essential to driving better participation and richer feedback, especially on mobile. When we looked a bit closer at the data by age, we found that these numbers rang true across all demographics and were not simply limited to Gen Z. For example, **70% of the youngest individuals (18-24)** in our study found conversational research more engaging (**vs. 52% for traditional approaches**). Very similar numbers were reported by the oldest groups in our study aged 55 and greater: **70% vs. 48%**.

Importantly, this conversational experience had an impact beyond just one interaction. Participants who took the chat-based version were more likely to say they'd take a similar survey in the future, a signal that better design leads to lasting engagement, not just higher completion rates.

## Experience isn't just a nice-to-have, it's a critical part of data quality

When the format is more human, the responses are too. And because surveys are often one of the first direct interactions someone has with a brand, the research experience itself becomes a brand touchpoint, one that can either strengthen trust or erode it. Making that moment feel personalized, intuitive, and engaging helps turn a one-off study into a brand-building opportunity.

“This survey felt more like a conversation. The format was consistent and easy to follow, which let me focus more on what I wanted to say.”

—Research participant



# Reliable quant with richer qual



There's a common assumption that if something feels easier or more engaging, it must be less rigorous. Our data proves otherwise.

## TRADITIONAL SURVEY VS. CHAT-BASED CONVERSATIONAL

Single- and multi-select questions were remarkably consistent across both methods: For example, as our research covered participation in communities (the topic of the surveys the participants completed for this study), here were some of the data points that reinforce this concept:

### Shared-interest connections

**56%** vs. **58%**  
(Traditional) (Chat-based)

### Supportive relationships or mentors

**27%** vs. **22%**  
(Traditional) (Chat-based)

### Entertainment as a reason to engage

**50%** vs. **51%**  
(Traditional) (Chat-based)

These small, statistically insignificant differences show that a **conversational format does not distort core measures**. It preserves data integrity while providing a better respondent experience (and richer outputs).

At the same time, qualitative depth dramatically improves. Open-ended responses were not only longer (e.g. up to 8x longer with video responses) but also rated higher across dimensions like emotional engagement, specificity, and clarity.

## In short:

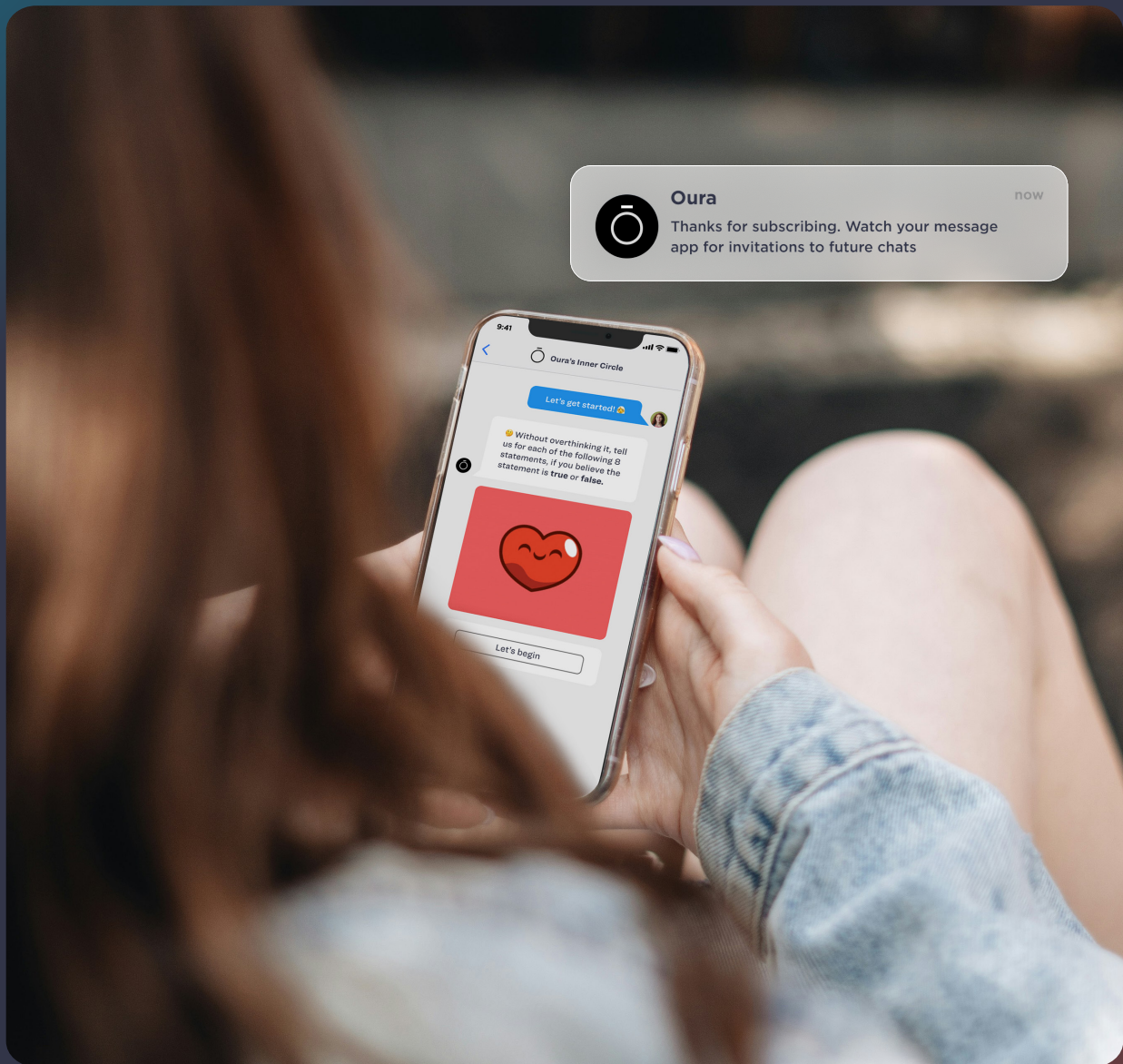
- Quant reliability is intact
- Qual insights are deeper
- The experience is better throughout

Conversational design is a true upgrade. You get the same confidence in your numbers, with the added benefit of richer context and more meaningful stories.



## CHAPTER 4

# Designed for today's mobile-first world



If your research isn't built for mobile, it's already behind. People aren't logging onto desktops to take surveys. They're on their phones, texting, scrolling, and multitasking.

At Reach3 and Rival, recontact rates typically exceed 65%, unlocking major opportunities for clients to get deeper, iterative insights over time.

Even though the chat-based survey in our study took longer to complete (10.9 minutes vs. 7.3 minutes), participants didn't seem to notice. Many described the experience as smoother, more intuitive, and even easier than the traditional version.

This approach doesn't just improve participation. It makes the feedback more genuine, more thoughtful, and more representative of how people think and communicate in their everyday lives.

## Forms to Conversations

To stay relevant, your research needs to match the behaviors of your customers today. Conversational surveys do exactly that. They feel like the texting experience people use every day, which lowers the barrier to entry and makes participation more natural. The format aligns with how people already communicate: short bursts, in the moment.

Mobile-friendly design is now table stakes in the research sector. **What sets conversational research apart is how it uses that mobile environment to build a stronger connection.**

Instead of forcing people through rigid forms, it creates a familiar, responsive exchange that encourages real reflection.

This approach also makes it easier to continue the conversation. Because it happens in a chat-based, mobile setting, follow-up questions feel natural and participants are far more likely to reengage.

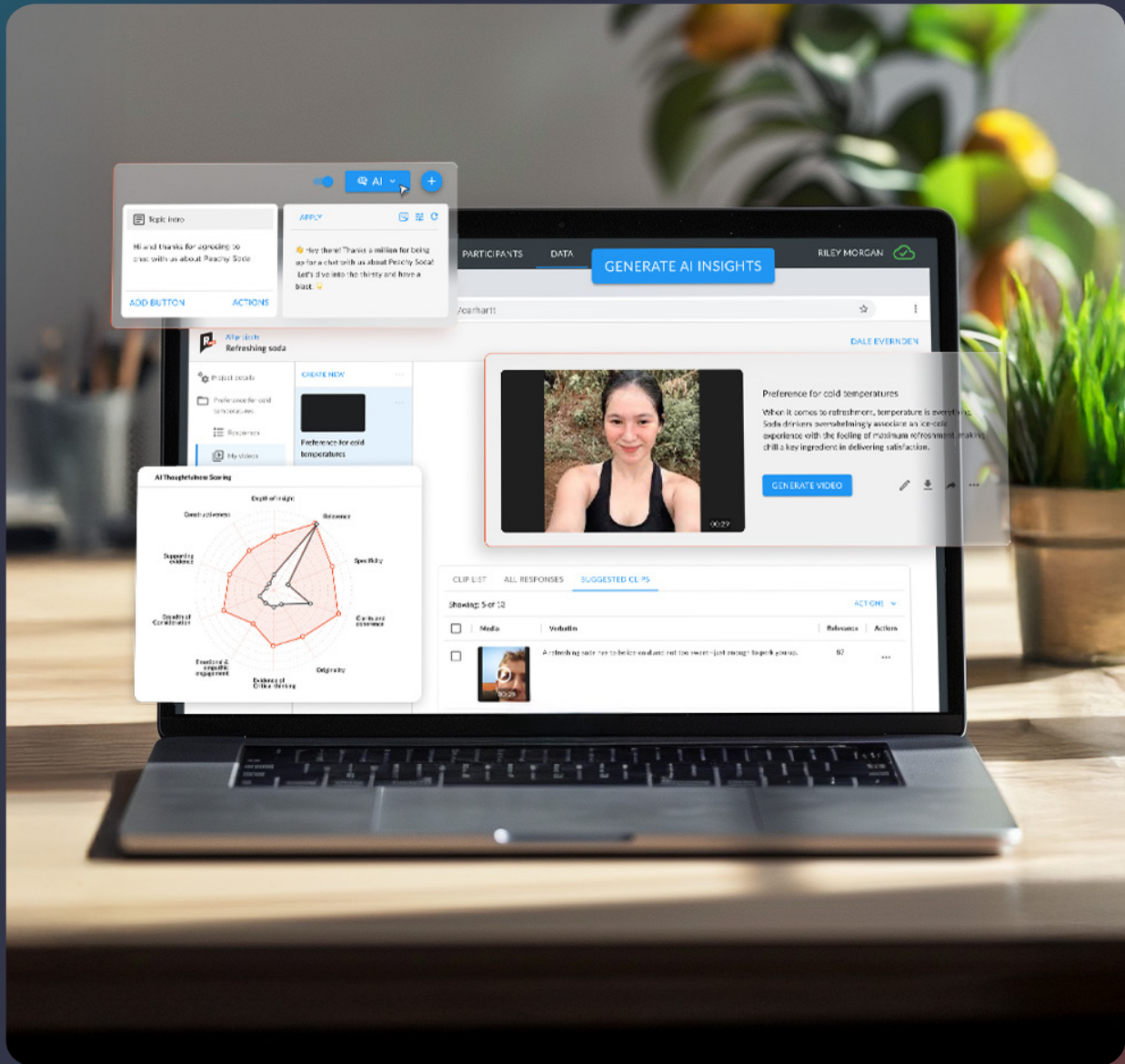
### A RECENT STUDY FOUND THAT...

**People around the world send 23 billion texts per day.** Research that mimics natural mobile behavior stands a far better chance of being seen, started, and completed.



## CHAPTER 5

# Built for AI-powered research



AI is changing how insights teams work. From auto-summarization to theme detection and sentiment analysis, today's tools can process unstructured data faster than ever. But the output is only as good as the input.

# Richer responses fuel stronger AI

Conversational research delivers a critical advantage, because it encourages richer, more thoughtful responses, especially in open-ended and video formats, it gives AI more to work with. The structure, tone, and flow of chat-based surveys prompt people to share real stories, real feelings, and real context. That means stronger signals, fewer gaps, and better data for AI model training and analysis.

## CHAT DELIVERS CLARITY

**Conversational design also improves the AI summaries themselves.**

In a side-by-side test, themes pulled from chat-based surveys were rated higher on actionability, clarity, and insightfulness.

**IN OUR STUDY, WE USED OUR AI SUMMARIZER TO EVALUATE RESPONSE QUALITY ACROSS FORMATS.**

**THE RESULTS WERE CLEAR:**

Thoughtfulness scores were highest in conversational video responses (6.7 out of 10), followed by AI-probed text (6.2).

These responses consistently outperformed traditional open-ends on **depth, clarity, and emotional insight.**

Even vague or poorly written responses were successfully probed by AI to extract meaningful themes.

This isn't just about better outputs; it's about future-proofing your data. As more teams adopt AI tools, many will still rely on thin or generic survey inputs. But conversational methods provide richer training data that improve model performance, increase the relevance of synthetic data sets, and ultimately raise the quality of AI-powered insights.

Better inputs lead to smarter automation and faster decisions. As AI becomes a bigger part of the research workflow, conversational methods ensure your data is ready for it.

## WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY FOR RESEARCHERS?

Based on our research study, here are five ways to future-proof your research.

### Design for mobile first

If it doesn't feel natural on a phone, it won't get completed. Use chat-style interfaces that mirror how people actually communicate.

### Make it feel human

A conversational tone drives higher engagement and more thoughtful responses across age groups. Ditch the formal survey-speak.

### Lean into open ends—and video

Responses were up to 8x longer in video. These richer inputs unlock better insights and feed smarter AI models.

### Use AI to go deeper and faster

Smart AI probes improved response quality without sacrificing the participant experience. Let AI enhance depth, not just efficiency.

### Prioritize experience like it's data quality (because it is)

Participants who had a better time were more likely to come back. A smooth, intuitive experience doesn't just feel good—it builds long-term trust and brand equity.

## CONCLUSION

**The evidence is clear:** when research is designed to be more human, more mobile, and more conversational, everyone wins. Participants feel heard. Data gets deeper. Insights get sharper.

And AI becomes more powerful. Not because of flashier algorithms, but because the inputs are finally good enough to match the ambition. This isn't just a methodological upgrade, it's a mindset shift.

For marketing and insights leaders, the takeaway is simple: better research isn't a nice-to-have, it's a business advantage. And the future of better starts with how we ask.



# Conversational Research Trailblazers

Deeper, Authentic Connections.  
Real-Time Insights. Transformative Results.



Mobile-First  
and Chat-Based



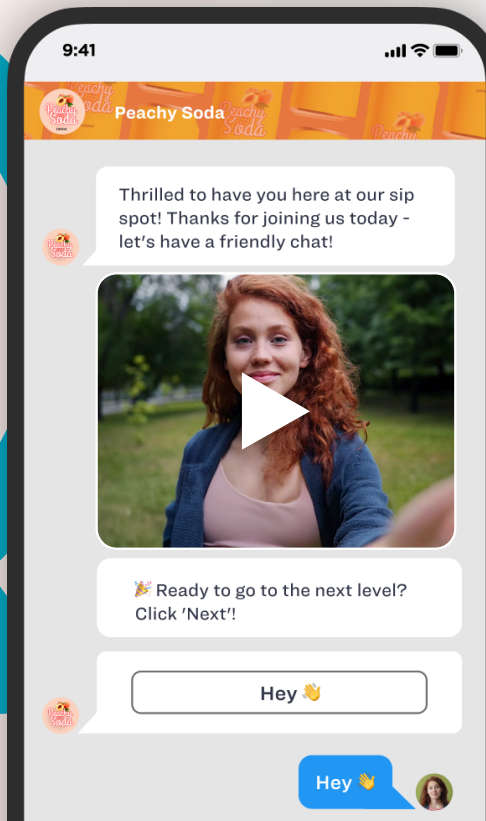
Quant, Qual, and  
Unlimited Videos



AI-Enhanced  
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