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WHITEPAPER

What People Ask AI:

A New Layer of Consumer Insight

Early exploration using prompt data in the alcohol category



A shift hiding in plain sight

For years, the consumer journey followed a relatively predictable path. People searched, browsed, compared, and eventually decided. Entire marketing systems, from SEO strategies to content ecosystems, were built around this behavior.

But something is starting to shift.

Consumers are no longer just searching. They are increasingly asking.

Today, millions of people turn to AI not just for information, but for guidance. They ask what to buy, how to choose, what is better, what is safer, what fits their situation. And in return, they receive something fundamentally different from what search has historically provided. Not a list of links, but a structured answer. A recommendation. A point of view.

This may seem like a subtle change in the interface. In reality, it signals a much deeper shift in behavior.

Because when consumers move from searching to asking, they are no longer navigating information themselves. They are delegating part of the decision-making process to AI. And with that shift comes a new kind of data.

A missing layer in how we understand consumers

Marketers have never had more data at their disposal, yet there is a gap.

Social listening tells us what people talk about, but after the fact, shaped by identity, performance, or cultural expression. Search data tells us what people look for, but strips away context, emotion, and nuance. Surveys provide structure and scale, but capture answers to questions we decided to ask, not necessarily the ones consumers would ask themselves.

Each method captures a fragment of reality. None fully captures the moment when a consumer is actively trying to figure something out. That moment (when someone is uncertain, curious, or deciding) is where the most valuable insights live. And increasingly, that moment is happening inside AI conversations.

This is where prompt data begins to matter.

Because it doesn't just capture what people think, or say, it captures how they formulate a need, how they frame a decision, and how that decision is immediately interpreted and resolved.

In that sense, prompt data does not sit alongside existing datasets. It sits between intention and outcome, offering a view into both at the same time.

Data Type	Position	What it captures	Key Benefit
Survey data	Rational + Structured	Stated attitudes, awareness, consideration	Reliable benchmarking, consistent KPIs over time
Search data	Rational + Unstructured	Real-world needs, questions, demand signals	True intent at scale, what people actually want
Social data	Emotional + Unstructured	Feelings, culture, conversations, brand meaning	Cultural relevance, how your brand lives in the real world
Prompt data	**Mid Rational/Emotional + Semi-structured**	**Reasoning, associations, decision journeys**	**Deep understanding, explains the why behind behavior**

What prompt data actually is *(and what makes it different)*

At first glance, prompt data might appear similar to search queries. But this is a misleading comparison.

A search query is typically short, fragmented, and transactional:

> *"best cocktail recipes easy"*

A prompt, by contrast, is often contextual and situational:

> *"I'm hosting a small dinner with friends this weekend and want to make something simple but impressive. I don't have many ingredients at home, — maybe vodka, lime, and something sweet. What would you recommend?"*

This difference matters. Because prompts do not just signal interest. They reveal:

- constraints
- (planned) intent
- context
- and desired outcomes

> *"I'm going to a BBQ this weekend and usually drink beer, but I want something lighter because it's going to be hot outside and some friends don't really like strong alcohol. What would be easy to bring that feels social and refreshing?"*

This single prompt already reveals multiple layers simultaneously:

- the occasion (BBQ)
- social dynamics (group preferences)
- constraints (weather, alcohol strength)
- intended behavior (bringing/sharing)
- desired outcome (social + refreshing)

More importantly, prompt data does not exist in isolation. It is inherently paired with something new: the AI response. This creates a unique analytical unit.

On one side, we have the prompt: the raw expression of a need or a decision in progress.

On the other, we have the answer: the AI's interpretation of that need, shaped by training data, system design, and safety protocols.

Together, they form a complete loop. A moment of interaction where intent is not only expressed, but structured and acted upon. For the first time, we can observe not just what consumers want, but how that want is translated into guidance.

PROMPT:

> *"I've had a stressful week and want something relaxing to drink tonight, but I don't want anything too heavy or unhealthy. What would you recommend?"*

AI RESPONSE:

> *"If you're looking for something light and relaxing, you could try a spritz, a lower-alcohol cocktail, or even a non-alcoholic option like a botanical mocktail. They feel social and enjoyable without being too heavy, especially if you're just trying to unwind. As with any alcoholic drink, moderation is important, particularly if alcohol is becoming part of a regular stress-relief routine."*

In a single interaction, we can observe:

- the emotional need ("stressful week")
- the desired outcome ("relaxing")
- personal constraints ("not too heavy or unhealthy")
- and the way AI reframes the decision through moderation, balance, and guided recommendations.

Our approach

To explore this emerging signal, we analyzed approximately 35,000 publicly shared prompts and corresponding AI responses within the alcohol category.

The data is directional rather than representative - reflecting visible, shared use cases and often expressive or notable interactions rather than everyday usage. Although this limitation is important, it does not reduce the value of the analysis.

But it does not reduce the value of the analysis. It defines its role. The objective is not to measure behavior at scale, but to identify patterns in how consumers:

- articulate needs
- approach decisions
- and interact with AI systems

Even in this early state, the patterns are revealing.

From information retrieval to decision support

One of the clearest shifts emerging from the data is how AI is being used. Consumers are not primarily using AI to explore categories. They are using it to resolve decisions.

Prompts are overwhelmingly situational:

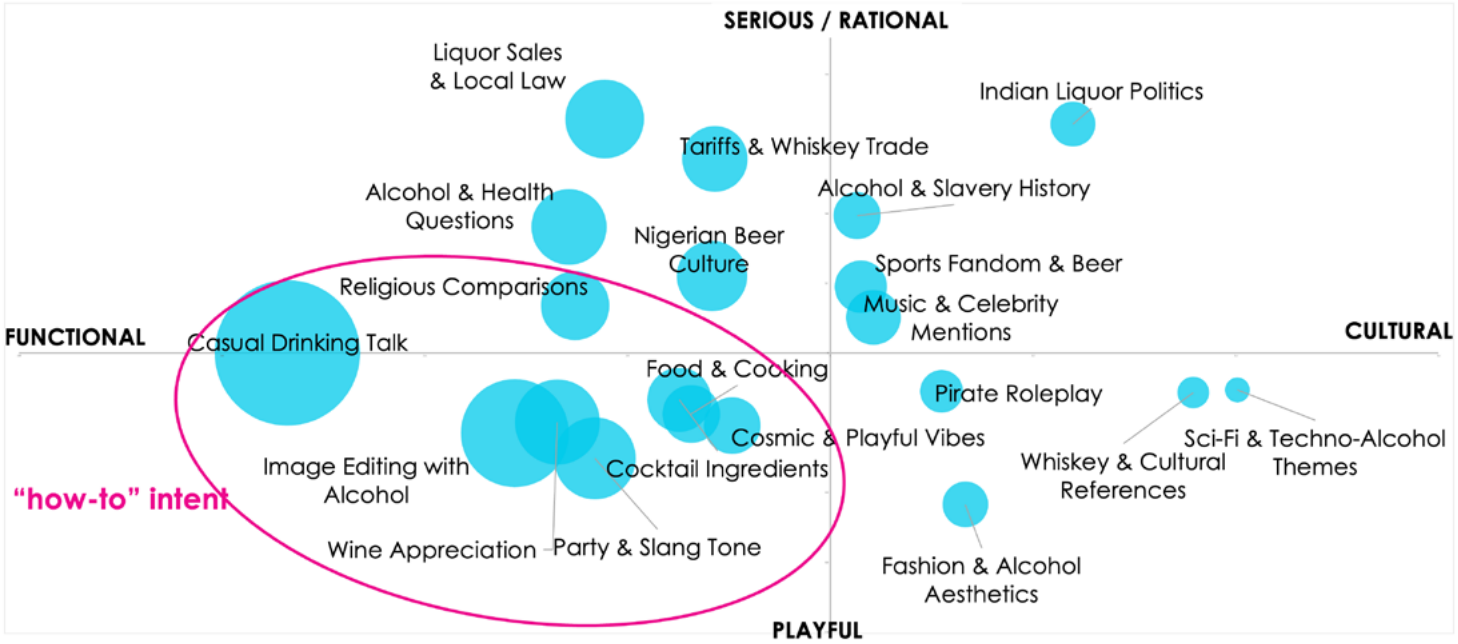
- what to drink at a party
- how to make something with available ingredients
- what fits a specific mood or occasion

These are not abstract or exploratory queries. They are in-the-moment decision problems.

This suggests that AI is not simply another touchpoint in the journey. It is increasingly becoming part of the decision itself.

And this changes the nature of influence. Traditionally, brands competed to be remembered at the right moment. But when that moment is mediated by AI, memory becomes less central. Instead, decisions are shaped by how well options fit the context described in the prompt. In other words, the shift is not from awareness to consideration. It is from mental availability to moment relevance.

Consumer Alcohol prompts



Prompt Topic Modeling Total N = 35268

- How-to" prompts show AI is used in the moment to decide and navigate, helping users turn intent into execution, making it a potential point of influence on real behavior.
- Intent is constraint-driven and practical → prompts focus on ease, speed, and available ingredients, showing AI helps solve real-life limitations
- Influence shifts to utility → brands only appear if they simplify execution, making "how-to" moments a key point to shape actual behavior

What prompts reveal about real consumer intent

Another important distinction is what prompt data captures compared to other sources.

- Surveys capture what people say.
- Social data captures what people express.
- Search captures what people look for.

Prompt data captures something different:

- It captures what people are trying to do.

This is not a small nuance. It fundamentally changes how we interpret intent.

Rather than abstract preferences ("I like premium whiskey"), prompts reflect task-driven needs:

"What's a good drink for a casual dinner with friends?"

What can I make with what I have at home?"

In our data we see that decisions are shaped by:

- context (the occasion)
- constraints (time, ingredients, budget)
- and desired outcomes (easy, impressive, light, social)

Consumers are not thinking in terms of brands or even categories. They are thinking in terms of situations.

Prompt data captures this naturally, without prompting or framing. In many ways, these prompts resemble a new form of live Category Entry Point expression. Rather than researchers inferring buying situations through surveys or segmentation frameworks, consumers articulate needs, occasions, constraints, and desired outcomes directly in natural language. Prompt data therefore offers a uniquely contextual view into how category entry points are formed and expressed in real decision moments.

The hidden influence of AI answers

If prompts reveal how consumers think, AI answers reveal how those thoughts are structured.

And importantly, AI answers are not neutral. Across the dataset, responses consistently:

- simplify choices (add. E.g._
- introduce structure
- add context and explanation
- include guidance or constraints

They often go beyond answering the question to shaping how the topic is understood. For example, answers frequently include moderation cues, health considerations, or alternative suggestions, even when these are not explicitly requested.

This creates a subtle but important shift.

Consumers bring intent into the interaction.

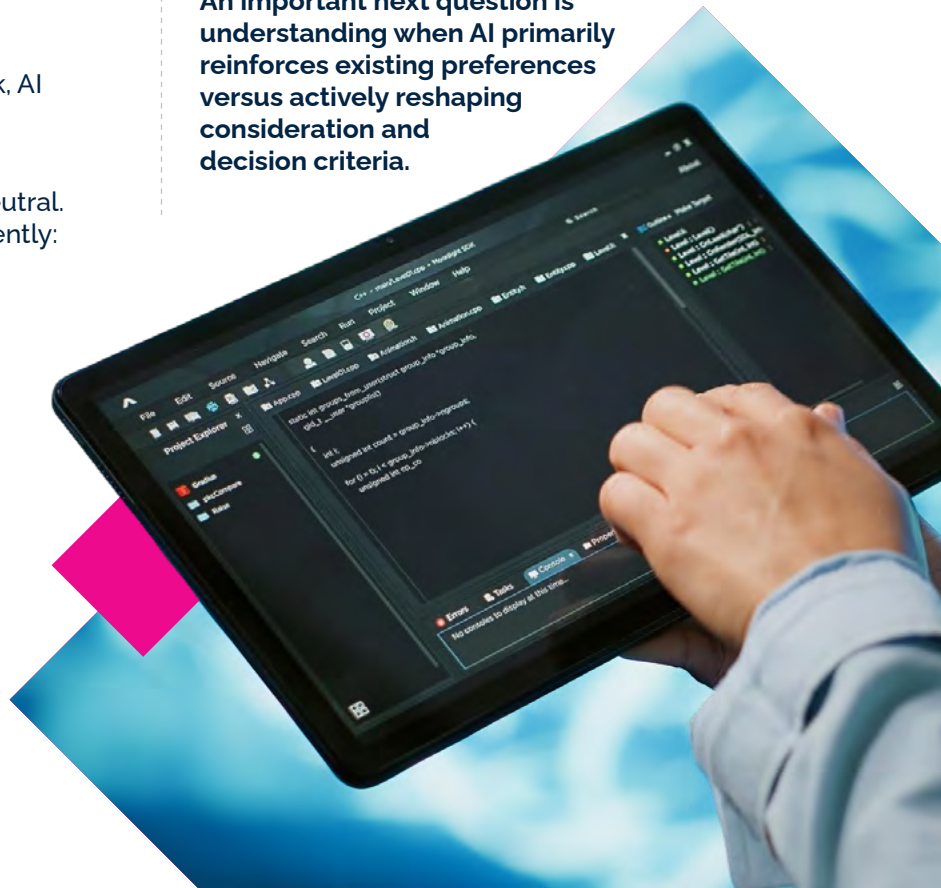
AI brings interpretation.

And in doing so, it influences:

- how options are framed
- which criteria matter
- and what constitutes a "good" decision

This means that AI is no longer just a channel for information. It is an active participant in decision-making. For brands, this introduces a new layer of competition: not just for consumer attention, but for how AI systems structure and present choices.

An important next question is understanding when AI primarily reinforces existing preferences versus actively reshaping consideration and decision criteria.



The changing role of brands

One of the most striking findings in the analysis is how limited the role of brands is at the start of these interactions. Only a small share of prompts explicitly mention brands, and even in AI responses, brand inclusion remains relatively low. Conversations typically begin with needs, not with brand recall.



This suggests that, in AI-mediated environments, brands are not the entry point into decision-making.

Instead, they appear later and only under certain conditions.

When brands do surface, they tend to play one of three roles:

1. as examples to illustrate a recommendation
2. as familiar reference points
3. or as solutions to a clearly defined need

In other words, brands are not pulled into the conversation by default. They are introduced when they help make the answer clearer or more actionable. This points toward a shift in how brand value is realized. Not through presence alone, but through usefulness within a specific context.

Split the G" shows how branded rituals turn products into behaviors, making them more likely to surface in AI conversations.



"Yes, Guinness is typically an alcoholic drink, with Guinness Draught, commonly used in the 'Split the G' challenge, having an ABV of 4.1% to 4.3%. There is a non-alcoholic version, Guinness 0, but the challenge likely involves the alcoholic Draught based on its context and marketing."
(AI RESPONSE)

"Dua Lipa is pulling off the 'Split the G' challenge on her first try! It's a fun Guinness tradition where you drink the pint until the beer level perfectly bisects the 'G' on the glass. Impressive skill (or luck)!"
(AI RESPONSE)

"while 'me in my 30s' focuses on enjoying a perfectly poured Guinness, hoping to 'split the G' (a reference to the beer's distinct head and body)."
(AI RESPONSE)

In AI-driven journeys, brands win when they become part of the behavior, not just the choice.

From products to behaviors

There are, however, cases where brands play a stronger role. These tend to be situations where brands are not just products but are linked to recognizable behaviors or cultural moments.

The "Split the G" Guinness ritual is a clear example. It transforms the act of drinking into a specific behavior, making it more likely to surface in conversation.

This is an important distinction. Brands that remain abstract choices seem to struggle to appear.

Brands that become actions or rituals become easier to reference, recommend, and recall.

In an AI-driven environment, where decisions are framed around doing rather than choosing, this difference becomes critical for brand recognition.

Occasions are the real organizing principle

Across both prompts and AI responses, one organizing logic consistently emerges: occasions.

Consumers do not structure their thinking around categories. They structure it around moments:

- a party
- a casual evening
- a dinner with friends
- a need to relax

AI mirrors this logic. It does not reframe the category; it reinforces how consumers already think about it.

This has important implications. If decisions are occasion-led, then brand relevance is also occasion-led.

Brands that are not clearly linked to a moment are less likely to appear, not because they lack awareness, but because they lack contextual fit.

What this means for marketing

Taken together, these patterns suggest a shift in how brands may need to think about visibility and influence in AI-driven environments.

- First, relevance is defined by use case, not positioning. Brands that clearly map to specific situations or needs are more likely to be surfaced.
- Second, usefulness becomes a driver of visibility. AI systems prioritize clarity and resolution. Brands that help make an answer more actionable are more likely to appear.
- Third, clarity and simplicity matter. AI translates information into structured outputs. Brands that are easy to describe, recommend, and apply have an advantage.
- Finally, expression still plays a role, but differently. While prompts are functional, there are signals that brands can appear in more expressive contexts, particularly when they act as symbols or cultural references.

In this sense, visibility is no longer something brands can assume. It is something they must earn within the logic of the answer.





The limits of prompt data and why they matter

Prompt data is powerful, but it is not without limitations.

It is:

- not fully representative
- influenced by platform dynamics
- shaped by AI system design and safety policies

Additionally, much of today's prompt data is drawn from publicly shared interactions, which may skew toward more performative or polished use cases. These constraints are important to acknowledge.

But they do not diminish the value of prompt data. They clarify its role. Prompt data in its current state is best understood as a directional, exploratory lens one that complements existing methods rather than replaces them.

An early signal of a larger shift

It is worth remembering that we have seen this pattern before. In the early days of search, query data was limited, fragmented, and not easily accessible. Yet it offered something fundamentally new: a direct window into consumer intent.

Over time, it became an important data sources in marketing. Prompt data appears to be at a similar inflection point. Today, it is early. Partial. Not yet scalable.

But even in this state, it reveals patterns that are difficult to observe elsewhere:

- how people articulate needs
- how decisions are framed
- and how those decisions are shaped in real time

Consumers are not just searching anymore. They are asking. And in doing so, they are showing us not just what they want, but how they arrive at decisions. For brands, that shift may prove to be one of the most important changes in how influence is created and understood in the years ahead.



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About Toluna

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www.tolunacorporate.com

About the authors



Jan Jaap de Reus
Associate Director Discovery Observation team

Jan Jaap de Reus leads Toluna's Global Discovery Observation team. He's passionate about creating insights from digital consumer behavior and has helped grow some of the world's most iconic brands. He advocates for using scientific methodology to answer business questions.



Aydan Yusifova
Research Manager Discovery & Observation

Aydan Yusifova is a Researcher in Discovery and Observation at Toluna, turning social media patterns and digital behavior into fresh consumer insights that help teams look beyond the obvious.

Contact one of our experts →