

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Hello, and welcome to the CARC Podcast. I'm Chris Davis, the Associate Director of the Career and Academic Resource Center, and today I'd like to talk to you about the Harvard i-lab. The i-lab is the central component of the Harvard Innovation Labs, which is a cross-disciplinary ecosystem for the Harvard community to explore innovation and entrepreneurship. It consists of the student i-lab membership for current degree seeking Harvard students, the Life Lab, a wet lab for student and faculty led life science ventures, and Launch Lab XGO for alumni founded ventures in the pre-seed to seed stage.

The student i-lab membership provides advising and subject matter experts to help Harvard degree students move their startup ideas forward. Harvard Extension School admitted degree candidates in ALB and ALM programs and also pre-medical program students can participate in the student i-lab membership community in fall and spring semesters if they're currently registered for courses. More information is in the description of today's episode.

Today I want to share with you two recent conversations I had. The first was with Vivien Kocsis, a current ALM data science student who is a former engagement manager at McKinsey. Vivien's startup, AudienceAI, which we'll learn more about shortly, was a finalist in the recent Shark Tank Harvard Business School Fall 2023 competition and is one of the semi-finalists in this spring's President's Innovation Challenge. Here's our conversation.

So first of all, you are Vivien Kocsis. You are an ALM data science student, and I think you're set to graduate in May 2024.

**VIVIEN KOCSIS:** Next year.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Yes.

**VIVIEN KOCSIS:** Correct. Yes.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** So yeah, tell me a little bit about-- I wanted to learn more about AudienceAI. I had seen the i-lab had sent a note, I think at the beginning of the fall, and it mentioned AudienceAI as one of the ventures that they were talking about. But I want to hear from you about what your experience has been like at the i-lab and talk a little bit about AudienceAI. You gave a fantastic pitch for it, wanting to hear a little bit more about that.

**VIVIEN KOCSIS:** Sure. So AudienceAI is for video creators such as YouTubers and brands creating online content who want to predict basically the actions of their audience. And I do analytics on videos before they are released on major platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, et cetera, and predict views as well as audience retention drops. And this directly affects the revenue potential of these videos, and thus I am doing this kind of analytics. Regarding the Harvard Innovation Labs work in this, this whole project was fully developed at the Harvard Innovation Lab.

So what happened is that last September, I went to a YouTuber conference because I am fascinated by the media and entertainment industry, where I learned that audience retention is a key problem that directly affects the revenue per video. And given that I am a data scientist, I was thinking to myself that maybe this is something that we can solve in a more scientific manner. Simultaneously, I also joined the i-lab because one of my passions is media entertainment, as I mentioned, and the other one is entrepreneurship.

I really wanted to try out whether I can build something on my own. And so the two started to develop at the same time. Harvard Innovation Lab has, I think, a track specifically for people who are interested in entrepreneurship. This is called Explore, to my best knowledge. And I started to join those information sessions as well as scheduled weekly mentoring calls with one of the Harvard Innovation Lab mentors. I started to define the problem. I started to conduct customer interviews as I came up with a technology that may work.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** I'm going to ask a couple of follow up questions. So if I'm understanding correctly, is AudienceAI a service you provide or is it a technological platform, or a little of both? It sounds like it's something that's already functioning. Am I correct?

**VIVIEN KOCSIS:** It is already functioning. So the way it is set up now that a creator sends me their video and the product I send them back is their own video with data below it, and this data includes the facial expression of people, where they are looking on the screen by watching this video, as well as-- and that is, I believe, the key thing-- the predicted audience retention rates with marks that mark a potential audience retention drop.

Major YouTubers pay very close attention to this. They'll go back and re-edit these videos to keep the audience watching for as long as possible. Literally one shot of a boring screen or a boring element can make the audience leave. We have very, very short attention spans, and TikTok's definitely affected that in the past few years because they are very, very short.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Yes. Thank you for elaborating on that. And for those who might not know the world of-- I mean, I think everyone is familiar with YouTube. But as you've talked about your customer base is those higher profile YouTubers who do this professionally, and their viewing metrics are tied to their revenue.

I think folks don't understand that. Sometimes I think they simply look at the subscriber numbers as kind of the top metric for if and when YouTubers are paid, how much they're paid, their financial compensation. But the individual video views are extremely important to them in terms of their revenue, right?

**VIVIEN KOCSIS:** Correct. And the views depend on two metrics. Number one is click through rate. So how many people click on the thumbnail. And number two is how long the people who click on the thumbnail watches that video. And if these two come together, high click through rate, long watch time, so high audience retention, YouTube is going to boost those videos. And so my AudienceAI tries to solve for both.

The key product for now is predicting audience retention drops. But given that we can track where people are looking on the screen, we can also analyze thumbnails and what attracts attention and optimize thumbnails as well. So we are solving for these two to increase the view. We have already experimented on Instagram Reels as well, which are TikTok-like shorter videos, as well as some TikTok videos. Because eventually what grabs people's attention is regardless of platform.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Vivien, I want to hear from you also is this is a great opportunity for current or future students to hear about what is possible or what happens at the i-lab from an insider's perspective. What has the experience been like for you? What have you learned there? What's been the experience like being an extension student in a facility that provides resources to the entire Harvard community? What advice would you give to students? What's your experience been like, candidly?

**VIVIEN KOCSIS:** For me, fantastic. I really, really love the Harvard Innovation Lab. There are many resources. The resources that were the most helpful to me are the following. Number one is mentoring with the Harvard Innovation Lab mentors. There are full time people who work at the i-lab, and you can just go to their calendar and schedule a weekly meeting or however frequent you want with them.

The second thing that I used a lot is the free classes, so to say. So there is like class about validating demand, running an A/B test, legal, how to set up a limited liability company in the United States. I am not from the US, so that was very, very helpful, et cetera, et cetera. And I think there are probably two, three classes per week. Some of them are online and some of them are in person.

But I think even for the in-person ones, they are trying to make them online, which can be helpful for many Harvard Extension School students who are not living in Boston. So that is a second resource that is very helpful. A third one is the space itself. I was lucky enough to spend a couple of months in Boston. Some of my best friends from Harvard, we are having lunch together, we are giving feedback to each other, we are helping each other out. That's also very helpful. And I would add--

**CHRIS DAVIS:** These are students from other schools, right?

**VIVIEN KOCSIS:** Correct. There are college-- from all schools. I can recall friends from the business school, from the College, from the Harvard Extension School, as well as the Education school. All schools. Really, the 13 schools are represented, so that's something that is very great. And then I think a fourth resource that I also leveraged and I thought it was a mind-blowing opportunity is scheduling office hours with external people. So I got the opportunity to talk to a Hollywood producer. And it was just the click of a button and I could set up a call with him where I could ask questions about AudienceAI and how it could be used in Hollywood. So I thought that was fantastic.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** That's amazing. Yes, I've heard about the people that they connect students with. But yeah, that's something important to accentuate. So candidly, I mean, would AudienceAI be in the same place it is today if it hadn't been for your work at the i-lab, do you think?

**VIVIEN KOCSIS:** Oh, no. For sure not. For sure not, because there are many skills that I do not know. I'm a data scientist, but I wouldn't know by myself how to put together a pitch deck, how to put together a website that is engaging and salesy. I wouldn't even know about many of the opportunities. I wouldn't know about the Shark Tank event.

I also made it to another event. It is a TechCrunch event in San Francisco where AudienceAI was selected to be one of the top AI startups, and I got the opportunity to exhibit and pitch in San Francisco. I wouldn't even know about these things. But this is in a weekly newsletter coming from the Harvard Innovation Lab so learn about these, I apply to these, and then I got exposure and fantastic learning opportunities. So no, for sure. AudienceAI wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Harvard Innovation Labs.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Yeah. Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing that. So what comes next for you after graduation?

**VIVIEN KOCSIS:** Depends. Let's see how our AudienceAI goes. I want to see whether I can bring it to a place where it is sustainable. If that is not happening, and startups often fail-- this is just a fact of life-- then I will probably keep on running after an entrepreneurial dream. Let's see how that goes.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Yeah, of course. That's a very realistic and practical approach.

**VIVIEN KOCSIS:** Yeah. Thank you very much for the opportunity, and let's talk in one, one and a half years.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** That's a deal. OK.

Next I spoke with Nikita Roy, a 2023 ALM data science graduate of the Extension School whose venture, the NRI Nation, a media aggregation platform, was twice a semifinalist for the Harvard-wide President's Innovation challenge competition. Since graduating Nikita has started a podcast, which the i-lab has spotlighted, on the current relationship between AI and journalism.

**NIKITA ROY:** My entire experience at Harvard was definitely marked by being a part of the i-lab that completely changed the career trajectory that I was on. I had that entrepreneurial spirit. I always wanted to do something. And I think the i-lab kind of nurtured it, combined with the courses that I was taking, which were so practical that I could instantly go to my classrooms and get all of this knowledge.

Mainly as soon as I had gotten, as you said, I got my master's in the ALM data science program. And one of the main things from that was when I started the program, I found out about the i-lab actually through stocking somebody else's LinkedIn profile who was part of the HES community. And I was looking at their LinkedIn, and I saw this something called Harvard Innovation Labs. And I was like, what's that? And so I googled it, and they were accepting applications at that time.

I had this idea of a media startup for the Indian diaspora that I was working on the side at that time. I'm part of the Indian diaspora. So we are officially called non-resident Indians by the Indian government, and so that's why it's called the NRI Nation. NRI standing for a non-resident Indian. And the i-lab was a place that kind of gave me that platform to then connect, get mentors, connect with absolutely amazing business minds, get funding.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** I want to back up a little bit because there's a couple of things that I wanted to spell out a little bit more for students. So the NRI Nation, that is your project that was developed over the time that you were an Extension School student. Now, correct me if I'm mistaken, but from what I've seen it's a website. As you said, it is something that is targeted to the diaspora of Indian national citizens around the world. Is it fair to call it a media aggregator, or is it stories that are written for your site that are of interest to Indians who living around the world?

**NIKITA ROY:** Yeah, we call ourselves a media outlet. We also produce our own journalism, and we are launching a Canada specific NRI Nation next year as well. And so we produce our own journalism as well as a content that we see relevant to it. So our entire motto is kind of like journalism for the diaspora, by the diaspora.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** And in your last semester for your data science program, you were actually-- I don't want to miss this. I want to mention it and talk about it with you. You were one of the semi-finalists for the President's Innovation Challenge, which is in the spring each year. It is a very competitive competition. There are cash prizes that are available to winners. There are different tracks and there's also an alumni track. One of our alumni actually was the grand prize winner of the alumni track in 2021. But you were a semifinalist, and I want to ask you a little bit what that was like.

**NIKITA ROY:** The President's Innovation Challenge, which was there, I was lucky to be a part of it. Actually, this was our second time around. From the first time we had gotten into the i-lab. Within that first year, we actually got into the President's Innovation Challenge to the semi-finals. And so going into it, it's honestly amazing to be a part of this ecosystem and it's very inspiring and encouraging. And also, we are probably all competing, I would say.

But in a way of, all of us are also-- we're friends, all of us founders, so we give each other tips and who to talk to, go and speak to that expert. But a lot of it is, I would say, really showing there's been a validated demand for your product in any way of terms of funding or member base and revenue. In any of those ways, if you're able to show a demonstrated funding and talk about the need more than just how are you changing the world with your product.

I think that's what the President's Innovation Challenge has a bit more of a social impact theme to it is how is the world going to look different because of your product in the world. And that was one of the main aspects that we were talking about. But I think what the President's Innovation Challenge, especially the first time around, did for me was I had this idea.

We were working on it, but this really helped narrow down specifically what our pitch was, what our value proposition was. And just, again, these experts were there at the i-lab who were able to help you, guide you through that entire process. I think that's where I would say it's like I had a mentor throughout this entire process with me from the moment I've been in the i-lab. Everything that I have done has been because he's been with me throughout.

And you just have this person you can go to, which is really, really-- I would say when you're starting off as a founder, it can be a very lonely journey. It is a very lonely journey. And it's that community that you have in terms of people that you can rely on, experts and advisors, who you know they are just there to give you the best advice possible, and you develop a relationship with them over the years as well.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** The I-lab serves the entire university. As you mentioned earlier, there are other venture leaders who are there in whatever shape or form, whether it's part of the student community or the President's Innovation Challenge competition or other events or things that come up.

The network that you create as being a part of that community involves people around who are students from the various schools around the university that in your Extension School courses you wouldn't necessarily have the opportunity to meet or interact with or share, trade wisdom or experience from. Talk a little bit about who you met there, the network that you built, what it added to your student experience, what it added to your venture experience as well.

**NIKITA ROY:** Yeah, absolutely. I think if you walk into Harvard Innovation Labs, they have that everywhere. 13 schools, one Harvard. And that is really that mission of theirs is really something that you can feel in all of the events, everything. It's that one Harvard spirit. You will meet people from across all different schools. I have met and I know somebody from every single school because of the i-lab. If it wasn't for the i-lab, I don't think I would have known these people, for sure. Because you had people coming from the med school and the School of Public Health.

I was in the data science program and we were not-- I don't think we would have ever had an overlap where I would ever be in those areas or those schools. But they were usually there because they were starting their own health care startup and something. So you would meet people, and I have friends from all of these different schools. It's because, again, the i-lab brought us all together. You don't meet people who you would be sharing classes with or anything regularly.

You're meeting people who are in their business schools, who are doing postdocs, because it's just open to the entire community. And so it's very, very encouraging that way, that diversity that you see as well. And I think the recent stats for the AI lab was also showing that it was, I would say, almost equal between male and female founders as well.

So again, there's a huge gender diversity as well that you see, which is so encouraging when you walk into these places. And as a woman that you see, again, so many other female founders who are having these ambitious dreams and also working on it and doing such amazing jobs.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Thank you so much, Nikita. Yeah. I think it's important to mention that. To close, I just want to ask you what's next for you. What's next for you and the NRI Nation and whatever is next on your path?

**NIKITA ROY:** Yeah. So I mean, I say it's because of the i-lab that I'm at the career path that I was. I started doing my master's in data science and I was going down probably being a data scientist. But now I'm really working on the intersection of AI and journalism and bringing my data science knowledge into the news industry and making sure that we're on top over there.

So I have just been doing a bunch of stuff in terms of generative AI and journalism. Specifically AI literacy for the news industry is one of my key focuses, and continuing to build the NRI Nation, the podcast, and maybe another media brand again soon.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** You have listened to the CARC Podcast. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School, and I hope you will join us again.