

ASKING THE UK THEIR GENDER:

Inclusive survey design

Executive Summary

As attitudes in society shift, so does the market research landscape and we are increasingly finding that the way we ask participants about sex and gender is evolving. It is often not necessary or appropriate to ask someone's sex, it may be more appropriate to measure gender and, for practical and data protection reasons, it is often not advisable to allow participants to self-describe using open text. It is for these reasons that Ipsos is suggesting an approach which is more inclusive for today's UK society.

To ensure that the research we conduct for our clients is accurate and representative, it is vital that participants can answer questions about themselves in a way that makes them feel engaged and valued for who they are.

Previous research, shown later in this paper, has also shown that moving from a binary question with just male and female response

options, or a question where it is unspecified whether it is measuring sex or gender, to an inclusive gender question does not result in significant changes to trends.

Our new recommended question is also based on extensive cognitive testing and piloting against other inclusive gender questions using both qualitative and quantitative research.

This paper explains our rationale for the change from our previous recommended inclusive gender question and shares some details about the research that informed the development of this new question.

Previous Question	New Question
Which of the following best describes how you think of yourself?	Which of the following best describes your gender?
Male	Man
Female	Woman
In another way	Non-binary
Prefer not to say	My gender is not listed
	Prefer not to say

The Rationale for Change

Societal Context

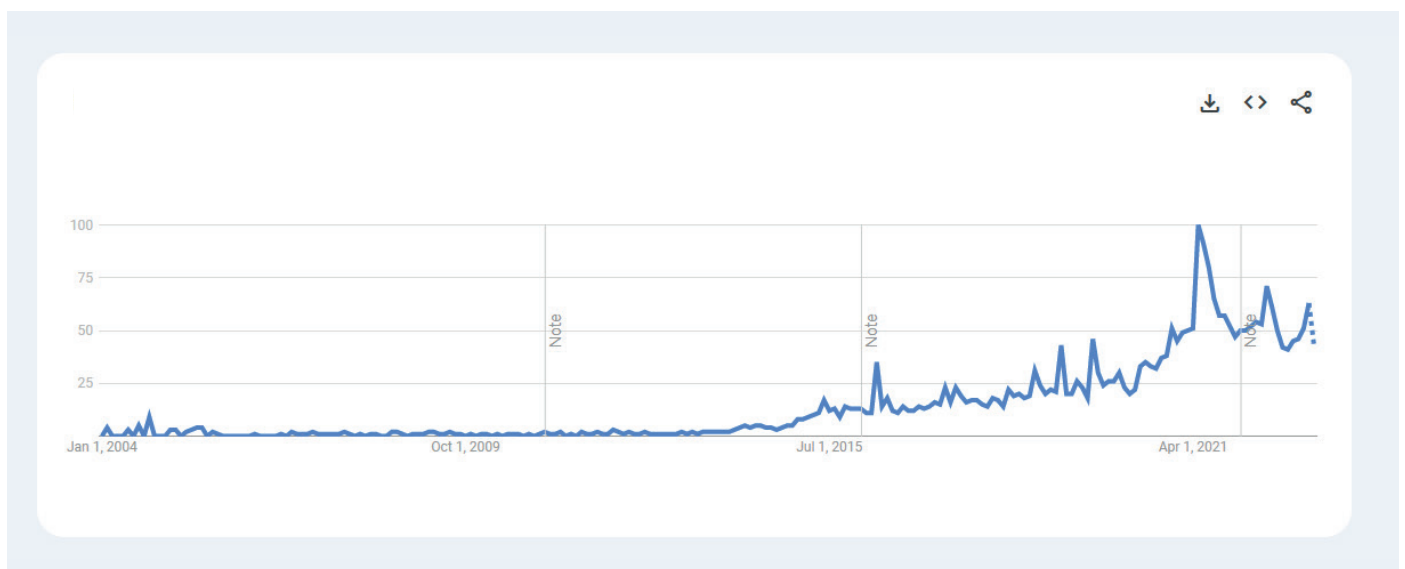
Society is changing and our understanding of gender is changing with it. Within the UK, gender identity is a subject that the general public is increasingly aware of, evidenced by the conversations about the questions asked in the UK 2021 census, the gender recognition act consultation, and some countries

legally recognising non-binary people being widely reported.

We have also seen the increased awareness in different gender identities evidenced by data such as google searches and the volume of searches for the term 'non-binary gender' having increased steadily

over time, peaking in 2021 and coinciding with the debate about the questions to be asked in the UK census. We also see it in the evolution of our language, with terms such as 'non-binary' or 'gender-fluid' becoming more common.

Interest over time



Google trends data April 2023: search term 'Non-binary gender'

Whilst in previous decades many people spoke about gender and sex as though they were the same thing, today it is commonly accepted that sex relates to biological and physiological characteristics of females and males as determined by their anatomy, whereas gender identity is a social construct relating to the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys. People's gender identities exist on a spectrum and may not match the sex they were registered with at birth.

Ipsos data, collected in June 2022 indicated that 98% of adults (16-75) in Great Britain state that their gender identity matches their biological sex (referred to as being cisgender) and 2% would describe themselves as transgender. In this survey we explained to participants that we were using 'transgender' as an umbrella term covering those who are non-binary, gender queer or agender as well as transgender men and women. Among 16-34 year old people this figure rises to 4%. Additionally, more than one in three adults (35%) aged 16-75 have 'met or encountered someone like this' which demonstrates the way in which our society is changing.

Given this context, if we are to fully understand society in the work that we conduct, we need to reflect these changes in the language we use in the questions we ask on our surveys.

An industry responsibility

Since 2016, the UK Market Research Society (MRS) guidelines have stated that all research participants need to feel equally valued and satisfied that their personal preferences are being respected in terms of how they wish to describe and categorise themselves. In accordance with this we developed our previous standard gender question, including a code that allowed people to describe themselves 'in another way' ('male', 'female' and 'prefer not to say' as response options).

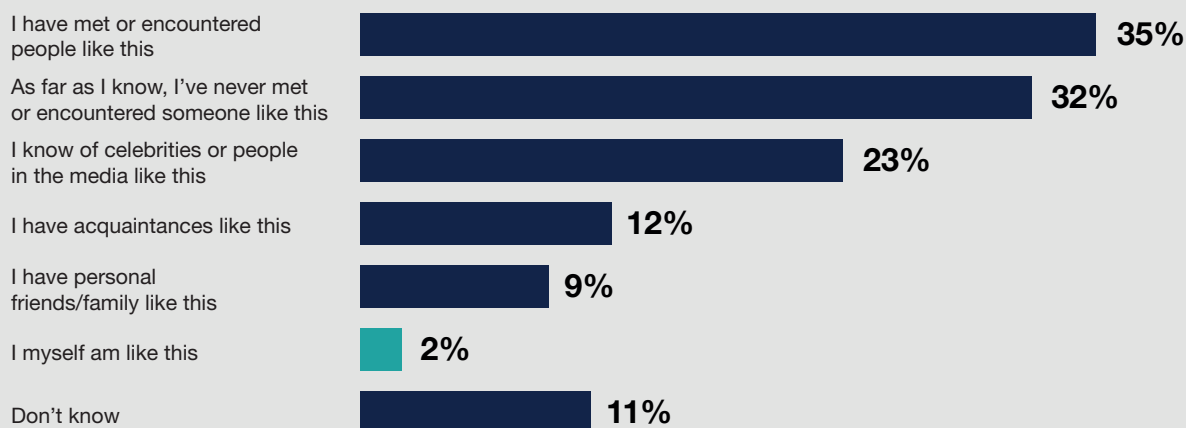
Despite this standard question already being in compliance with the MRS Code of Conduct, Ipsos has decided to change because we believe that this is more inclusive for today's UK society.

We reached this decision based on multiple factors, including:

- Feedback received from participants, clients, and our internal LGBTQ+ employee network that the wording of both the question text and the 'in another way' response option could be considered loaded or dismissive.
- While the wording of our previous question was based on the findings of an extensive study conducted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission¹, this study is now a decade old. In that time use of terminology such as 'non-binary' or 'gender-fluid' has become more common in mainstream society and we believed that it was time to review the wording of the question.
- Changes to the Census have created a divergence in questions relating to gender identity across the four countries within the United Kingdom. The Census in England and Wales now includes an additional voluntary question on gender identity, in Scotland it includes a question on 'trans status', while there has been no change in Northern Ireland.

Where the decision is made not to use the GSS question, Ipsos believes there is a need for a new, well-researched and harmonised gender question that is suitable for inclusion in UK surveys.

Q. Thinking about transgender people, which, if any, of the following apply to you?



© Ipsos - 2,176 Adults aged 16-75 in Great Britain, interviewed online 10th June-13th June 2022 - Sample included 739 adults aged 16-34

When conducting research for the public sector and media currencies, where possible we try and ensure our questions are consistent with the Government Statistical Service's (GSS) harmonised questions. This is to ensure that results are consistent across different surveys and administrative datasets, and this is particularly important for demographic questions to allow for comparability and to apply suitable weighting. However, the harmonised questions currently recommended for sex and gender by the Government Statistical Service are not necessarily appropriate for all research. This is because they ask sex, followed by whether or not the participant's gender is the same as their sex registered at birth, with a free-text box to enter gender. In a lot of market research it may not be necessary or appropriate to ask sex, it may not be practical to measure gender using an open text option, and it may be more important to measure gender first. This quote from a participant in our pilot study who identifies as non-binary demonstrates that, as an industry we are often falling short of MRS guidelines aimed at ensuring all participants feel equally valued.

“I always get a funny feeling when gender questions come up, you never know what they’ll be like.”

People who are transgender or non-binary told us they find poorly worded gender questions exclusionary and difficult to answer from both an emotional and a cognitive point of view. When question terminology conflates biological sex and gender identity it can be confusing as well as offensive, which could lead to non-participation. If we want to ensure our research represents a diverse population, we need to ask people about themselves in ways that are respectful, inclusive and comply with the MRS Code of Conduct

How we developed the new question

We conducted an extensive three phase pilot study combining in-depth qualitative cognitive testing (to optimise the question wording) with a robust quantitative assessment of three possible question wordings.

At the start of this pilot, we established clear criteria for the development of a new standardised gender question. Some of these criteria related to our industry requirements and some to our responsibility to our participants.

Clear criteria for question design:

For our industry

- Simple, closed question for all topics
- Must comply with the MRS Code of Conduct
- Avoid collecting special category data under GDPR
- Data should be consistent with existing trends

For our participants

- More inclusive than our current question
- Use appropriate language
- Easily understood by all
- Easy to answer for all

Ipsos has conducted an extensive self-funded pilot exercise

Three phases of cognitive testing

Phase 1 Qualitative	Phase 2 Qualitative	Phase 3 Quantitative
40 minute individual interviews conducted online	40 minute individual interviews conducted online	Short survey via Ipsos Knowledge Panel
10 participants who identify as trans or non-binary	10 participants who identify as trans or non-binary	12,511 interviews Total UK sample
		Sample split across three new gender question options with each person seeing one option (A, B or C)
10 members of the general public		

From a business perspective, we were seeking to develop a single, simple closed question that could be used for a survey on any general topic, while recognising that there will be situations where a more detailed understanding of both gender identity and biological sex would be required, such as surveys seeking to understand certain healthcare topics.

The question needed to adhere to MRS guidelines, but also GDPR data minimisation guidelines relating to privacy by avoiding collecting personal data related to health (which counts as special category data). If we collect information that might identify someone as having had medical treatment or surgery as part of gender reassignment this would count as special category data, which requires specific consent.

This could apply to some people who would select a closed response of 'transgender' or to those who might prefer to provide an open ended "write in" response. Having to collect specific consent before asking the gender question on all surveys would be burdensome and could impact response rates leading to samples that do not accurately represent UK society and increased costs. If multiple special categories of data are to be collected in the survey, meaning that consent is already required to gather personal information, then a "write in" option could be included, but our aim was to develop a single response closed question.

Data trends were also a key consideration and any new question needed to provide data consistent with previously published population data. It is worth noting, however, that when there are developing trends in society, such as the increase in individuals identifying themselves as non-binary and also a lack of published national data for the UK, matching previous data will become less relevant over time.

Any new question needed to be more inclusive than our previous version, to use appropriate language and to be easily understood and answered by all participants.

Qualitative phases

Phase 1

In the first round of qualitative interviews, we spoke to 10 people who identify as transgender or non-binary. In one-to-one interviews lasting around 45 minutes, we presented them with one of two different versions of a gender question within a wider set of demographic questions to gather their spontaneous reactions. We then probed for detailed reactions to additional wording options for both the phrasing of the question text and the response codes.

The options explored in phase one are shown to the right.

We received more positive reactions to response options that used more specific language (such as 'non-binary') than more general responses (such as 'another gender') which were considered dismissive and offered little improvement on just providing 'other' as an option. There were, however, several participants who pointed out that the term non-binary is not all encompassing and there are many people who may describe their gender identity using alternative language, such as 'agender' or 'queer'.

In terms of question wording, our participants felt that if you are asking for their gender, then this should be clear in the question by ensuring the word 'gender' is included in some way rather than simply relying on the responses as a guide. Participants also expressed the view that for clarity, the language used for the

What we explored in phase 1

COMPLETE QUESTIONS

Are you..?

Select only one

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say

What is your gender?

Select only one

- Female
- Male
- Another gender
- Prefer not to say

QUESTION WORDING

- Which of the following describes how you think of yourself?
- Which of the following best describes your gender?
- Which of the following best describes you?
- What is your gender identity?

RESPONSE WORDING

- Non-binary
- Another gender
- Other
- I identify in another way
- Gender non-conforming or non-binary
- I don't identify as either

response options should reinforce the understanding that the question refers to gender and not biological sex and, therefore, 'man' or 'woman' would be more appropriate and accurate language than 'male' and 'female'.

Opinion about the inclusion of the word identity was mixed, with younger participants considering this to be the most appropriate and natural language. But, participants recognised that the term is polarising and becoming increasingly politicised in the societal debate about transgender rights.

Phase 2

Based on the findings from the first phase of qualitative interviews we developed an evolved question which was presented in an identical way to two different audiences: 10 transgender or non-binary participants and 10 members of the general public of different ages and genders.

The initial question shown to participants referenced gender in the question wording, used a specific term 'non-binary' for the third code, but also included an additional response option to represent participants who are not cisgender, but would not identify using the term non-binary.

Again, alternative questions were probed alongside multiple options for the wording of this additional response code. In addition, we sought reactions to a question that used alternative wording for the binary options: 'man/boy' and 'woman/girl'.

The options tested in phase two are shown to the right.

We received positive reactions from both audiences to the evolved question. Although some participants in the general public sample were not sure why an additional code was required, it did not detract from their ability to answer the question and they recognised that it would be more

inclusive. Among the trans and non-binary sample, the additional code was appreciated and some thought it demonstrated an appreciation that gender identity is a more complex issue that can't be distilled into three simple categories.

For the additional code, there was not a clear consensus with all options being acceptable to at least some of the respondents. The most positive reactions were split between 'My gender is not listed' and 'I identify as another gender', however, on balance, given some negative reactions to the word 'identity' across both rounds of qualitative interviews, we concluded that 'My gender is not listed' would be a preferable wording to minimise adverse reactions.

The language used for the binary gender options remained a challenge. In both samples there was recognition that the terminology for sex and gender should be different, although within the general public sample there were some inconsistencies in language use with some participants stating that 'male' and 'female' are words to describe gender rather than biological sex and vice versa. The question option combining 'man/boy' and 'woman/girl' which was proposed to avoid the need for a wording change when interviewing children did not test well and was jarring to both audiences.

What we explored in phase 2

AN EVOLVED QUESTION

Which of the following best describes your gender?

Select only one

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Another gender
- Prefer not to answer

QUESTION WORDING

- What is your gender?
- What is your gender identity?
- Which of the following best describes you?

RESPONSE WORDING FOR AN ADDITIONAL CODE

- I identify in another way
- I identify as another gender
- My gender is not listed

ALTERNATIVE QUESTION WITH DIFFERENT WORDING FOR BINARY CODES

Which of the following best describes your gender?

Select only one

- Man/boy
- Woman/girl
- Non-binary
- Another gender
- Prefer not to answer

Quantitative Phase

The final phase of our pilot study involved large scale quantitative testing of our preferred question options.

Having received feedback about the language used for the binary options in both rounds of qualitative research, but being mindful of the need to ensure there was no impact on data trends, it was decided to test three options in this final quantitative phase. The only difference between the options was the way in which the binary responses were phrased. In each case the binary codes were presented in alphabetical order.

The options tested in the final phase are shown below.

We recognised that Option C was the only one using precise terminology to describe gender identity, but we were keen to assess how data collected using this version compared to one using the more common 'female' and 'male' response options. Option B was developed as a compromise.

Each participant saw one version of a gender question as part of a 10-minute interview that collected typical demographic information such as age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion. After all demographic questions had been answered, closed and open-ended diagnostic questions were asked to assess their reaction to the wording of the gender question specifically.

In total 12,511 interviews were conducted with residents across the United Kingdom aged 16+. Around 4,000 participants were, therefore, exposed to each version of the question. The study was conducted on the Ipsos KnowledgePanel², a random probability survey panel. Panellists are recruited via a random probability, unclustered, address-based sampling method, meaning every household in the UK has a known chance of being selected to join the panel. Members of the public who are digitally excluded can register to the KnowledgePanel either by post or by telephone and are given a tablet, an email address, and basic internet access to allow them to complete surveys online.

The results of this final phase determined our choice of question going forward.

New Ipsos Gender Question for the UK

Our new recommended gender question for fieldwork conducted in the UK is:

Which of the following best describes your gender?

- Man
- Woman
- Non-binary
- My gender is not listed
- Prefer not to say

What we tested in our final quant phase

Q. Which of the following best describes your gender?

Option A (Female)	Option B (Female/Woman)	Option C (Woman)
Female	Female/Woman	Man
Male	Male/Man	Woman
Non-binary	Non-binary	Non-binary
My gender is not listed	My gender is not listed	My gender is not listed
Prefer not to say	Prefer not to say	Prefer not to say

Why this question?

Question wording

Use of the word gender within the question minimises confusion for participants who are not cisgender, making it clear we are asking them about their gender identity and not their biological sex.

Using the language 'best describes' indicates an appreciation that this is not an exhaustive list of gender identities.

Non-binary response code

Using the specific term 'non-binary' is appreciated and makes the question more inclusive than a generic phrase, such as 'another gender'.

As this participant who identifies as non-binary said:

"My 80yr old mother wouldn't think twice about saying 'I am a woman', but for me having a non-binary option is very important."

Additional 'my gender is not listed' code

From the first round of qualitative interviews it became clear that although providing a more specific response option of 'non-binary' was greatly appreciated by those who identify in that way, it is not an exhaustive term.

Responses that are phrased effectively as 'other' do not feel inclusive and can trigger negative emotions for the participant. 'My gender is not listed' avoids 'othering', but also suggests an understanding that gender is a more complex issue and acknowledges that there are other gender identities.

Changed wording for the binary codes

In the quantitative phase of our pilot we tested three different options for the phrasing of the binary options: 'male' and 'female', 'man' and 'woman', and 'male/man' and 'female/woman'. We strongly believe that it is important to use appropriate language especially in sensitive areas such as inclusivity to avoid any confusion or alienation.

Verbatim comments from participants in our quantitative phase demonstrate that comprehension is impacted by inaccurate language, as is the reputation of the company fielding the study.

"It mixed sex with gender so was very confusing."

"Being FEMALE relates to SEX not GENDER, likewise MALE. Confusing SEX and GENDER is wrong. Sex is biologically defined. Confusing the two is irresponsible. It made me very angry. I would expect Ipsos to understand the important difference between sex and gender."

Our decision was supported by data

To summarise, our objective was to design a simple, closed question suitable for use on a wide variety of surveys that did not involve the collection of special category data under GDPR regulations. Our new question fulfils these criteria.

From a participant perspective, our criteria have been met. Throughout the pilot project we received consistent feedback that the new question used more inclusive language than the previous version and we recorded an increase in the proportion of people choosing the gender diverse responses from 0.3% with the

previous standard version to 0.8% with the new wording, suggesting that more people who are not cisgender were able to find an appropriate response.

It is important that the gender question works for all participants and, therefore, evidence was required to demonstrate that the wording was not jarring to members of the general public who may be less familiar with different gender identity terminology. Our data showed that all three new question options tested (A, B and C) were considered equally easy to understand and to answer, with 98% of UK residents aged 16+ stating that they found it very or quite easy to find an appropriate response, and a similar proportion stating that the questions were very or quite easy to understand.

Clear criteria for question design:

For our industry

- Simple, closed question for all topics
- Must comply with the MRS Code of Conduct
- Avoid collecting special category data under GDPR
- Data should be consistent with existing trends, such as ONS mid-year population estimates for the UK 2021 which state a 51% female and 49% male split on sex

For our participants

- More inclusive than our current question
- Use appropriate language
- Easily understood by all
- Easy to answer for all

Arguably the most critical aspect for our clients is that the change does not impact on data trends. All three versions of the question resulted in very similar profiles. Compared to our current question, the proportion of participants not using the binary responses increased slightly

suggesting that the question is more inclusive as intended. The relationship between the male or man and female or woman responses remains consistent and matches nationally representative published data.

This is also consistent with previous research and findings from [the GP Patient Survey](#). When moving from a question asking “Are you male or female?” to a question asking people to select from a list including non-binary and “Prefer to self-describe” options, the proportion identifying as female and male stayed very similar (maximum 1 percentage point difference). This suggests that this change will not impact trends or the ability to compare to national statistics using alternative questions, while still allowing those participants who identify with other gender identities to select an option that best describes them.

Changing the language of the binary options from ‘male’ and ‘female’ to ‘man’ and ‘woman’ was the biggest potential risk with the new question and has implications for weighting data to be nationally representative. Using the Ipsos KnowledgePanel as our sample source meant that the data from previous responses to our current

gender question, both from signing up to the panel and the subsequent demographic screening surveys were also available for comparison.

Analysis showed that the responses collected from individuals remain highly consistent; 99% of those who answered ‘man’ when answering option C had previously answered ‘male’ to our current question and 98% of those answering ‘woman’ had previously answered ‘female’. When comparing data from the current gender question asked on different occasions to the same participants, the proportion answering ‘male’ or ‘female’ on both occasions was 99% demonstrating that the new language maps very closely to previous data trends and the differences that we see are in line with normal test/re-test variation.

This finding means we can confidently map data collected using ‘man’ and ‘woman’ to that using ‘male’ and ‘female’ for both reporting and weighting purposes.

Interviewing younger participants

The new question requires some adaptation when interviewing younger participants.

We have taken the decision that when our sample definition consists of individuals aged 16 or older we will use the question illustrated above for all participants. The MRS Code of Conduct defines children as those under the age of 16 and while some 16-year-olds may not spontaneously describe themselves as a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’ considering the terms too adult, they will still comprehend the question and be able to answer easily.

For participants below the age of sixteen, the language for the binary options will be adapted to ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ but careful consideration should be given to the wording of the additional response codes depending on the age of the child. For secondary school aged children (11-16) the ‘non-binary’ and ‘my gender is not listed’ codes would be acceptable as understanding of different gender identities is prevalent among this age group. Evidence from our coding team, who review open ended

Current Screener		Option A (Female)		Option B (Female/Woman)		Option C (Woman)	
Female	51.6%	Female	52.9%	Female/Woman	51.5%	Woman	50.0%
Male	47.6%	Male	46.2%	Male/Man	47.6%	Man	48.6%
In another way	0.3%	Non-binary	0.4%	Non-binary	0.6%	Non-binary	0.4%
Prefer not to say	0.4%	My gender is not listed	0.2%	My gender is not listed	0.1%	My gender is not listed	0.4%
		Prefer not to say	0.2%	Prefer not to say	0.2%	Prefer not to say	0.6%

12,511 UK residents aged 16+ interviewed via the Ipsos KnowledgePanel between 24th February – 2nd March 2022.
In total 12,511 interviews were achieved with residents across the United Kingdom aged 16+.

answers to gender questions on large scale surveys of secondary school aged children, shows that 'non-binary' is the most frequently used term for those who do not identify as boy or girl but also other gender identities such as 'agender' or 'gender fluid' are common responses which would support the use of the new gender question among this group.

For children aged 7-10 specific terminology may be too complex for some to understand and, therefore, a more simple 'other' code could be more appropriate. For children younger than seven a simple binary question with the answers 'boy' and 'girl' would be more appropriate although the addition of don't know or prefer not to say should also be considered. This approach would ensure that question wording is appropriate to the age of the child but also that participants are able to provide information in a way that reflects the view they want to express, including an option not to answer.

Our pilot exercise did not include any interviews with children although all participants in the qualitative phases were asked at what age they considered this sort of question wording to be appropriate. The general consensus was that secondary school age (11-16) was an appropriate age to ask about specific gender identities. As a result of reviewing the evidence, we have made the decision to change the question on our Young People's Omnibus, our annual survey of young people aged 11-16 attending secondary schools in England, Wales and Scotland and will share findings on this in due course.

As with all work interviewing children, permission will need to be granted by a parent, guardian or responsible adult in accordance with the MRS Code of Conduct and classification questions that are unnecessarily intrusive or are difficult for the child to answer should be avoided. It may be preferable for

some classification questions to be asked of the parent or responsible adult, rather than the child.

Implications for international research

This document summarises the results of a pilot study that was conducted in the UK only. As an international organisation, consistency is an important consideration, so the decision to change a standard question in the UK only at this point is one that required careful consideration.

Gender identity is continually evolving and non-binary gender terminology in particular is becoming increasingly mainstream although this is not a universal shift. There are still many countries where non-binary gender is not recognised and using a question such as the one described in this document could be confusing and, in some cases, offensive or even illegal. On the other hand, in countries such as the UK where non-binary gender responses have been collected on surveys for several years, there is a need to ensure the wording of those questions is keeping pace with the evolving societal context. As described earlier, we believe a change to the UK wording is required to ensure our surveys are sufficiently inclusive.

For UK only studies we will be recommending the new question with immediate effect. If the UK is included in a multi-country study, we feel confident that the consistency of data from the current to the new question as described above means that use of the new question remains appropriate for the UK sample. The alternative would be to use the more general non-binary gender question that we use in multiple markets today which has the responses male/female/another gender.

For more detail on things to consider when asking about gender in international research please see '[A question of Gender](#)' by Trixie Cartwright.³

Summary

In summary, we are proud that this rigorous cognitive testing pilot has resulted in a new question that is more inclusive and more appropriate for today's UK society. Without our participants, we have no industry, so it is essential that we do the right thing to ensure all our participants are treated with respect and feel that their opinion is valued. We are delighted that during fieldwork for the first live studies using the new question we have received spontaneous positive reactions from people who previously felt marginalised when answering surveys and now feel they have an option that described them.

We will leave the last word to one of our pilot participants.

"Inclusivity is almost something invisible - when people are not affected by it then it doesn't occur to them, but if you are affected it is incredibly important and it is very affirming to have the option that describes you."

Non-binary participant in UK pilot study

References

1. Developing a Gender Identity Question (2011), https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/rr75_final.pdf
2. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/uk-knowledgepanel>
3. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14707853221108663>

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