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When difference doesn't mean different:
Understanding cultural bias in global research studies

Fiona Moss | Bharath Vijayendra

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Global organisations require global market research programmes. The benefits are clear: not only do global programmes return better value for money than a multitude of individual studies, but they also provide a degree of standardisation across markets. The latter allows management teams to see aggregated 'global' results and to identify 'hot spots' or global systemic issues to effectively prioritise improvement opportunities.

Multi-market research programmes are not, however, without their challenges. The research needs to find a delicate balance between consistency across markets and cultural/market-level customisation to ensure accurate and reliable data collection that delivers on the needs of global and local users.

Results interpretation is also a thorny issue. Organisations want to track KPIs globally, but a straightforward comparison of results across markets can be misleading, as scores given by individuals can be influenced by many factors, including cultural response bias. This is true regardless of the sector or company being evaluated. Cultural response bias can significantly undermine the validity of conclusions drawn from global research programmes. Therefore, acknowledging and addressing its impact is essential to global tracking programmes and, importantly, driving action as a result of them.

How cultural response bias influences responses

Cultural response bias is not a new theory. It has been scrutinised within research communities for many years. Consequently, large numbers of studies have confirmed that there are substantial and systematic differences in response styles between countries.[1]

Cultural response bias typically applies to attitudinal questions where response scales (for example, the five-point Likert scale, 10-point end-anchored scales) are used. It manifests itself as a country-specific tendency to consistently use a rating in the scale, or set of ratings, regardless of what is asked.[2]

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[1]Baumgartner, Hans and Steenkamp, Jan-Benedict (2001), *"Response styles in marketing research: A cross-national investigation"*, Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 143-156

[2]For brevity, this paper focuses on variations in ratings over a 10-point scale among the service sectors. Naturally, questions in a different context (e.g. feature evaluation/concept testing) may elicit slightly different variations in the response style patterns than those shown in this paper. However, the fundamental principles of awareness and the need to appropriately handle country-specific response style tendencies remain universal in order to provide robust comparability in global studies.

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Cultural response bias types

Three types of response style are most commonly cited:

1. **Acquiescence response styles (ARS)**

   The tendency to agree, regardless of what is asked – seen frequently in Latin America. Known as dis-acquiescence (DRS), the reverse can also hold true.

2. **Extreme response styles (ERS)**

   The tendency to use the extremes of a rating scale. Again, this is typically seen in Latin America (particularly at the positive end of the scale – a tendency to score at the negative end of the scale is rare). In contrast, Asian markets are least likely to opt for extremes.

3. **Middle response styles (MRS)**

   The tendency to use the mid-responses of a rating scale. Asian markets tend to provide more mid-responses, while Latin America is less inclined to do so.

Countries most and least likely to demonstrate each response style
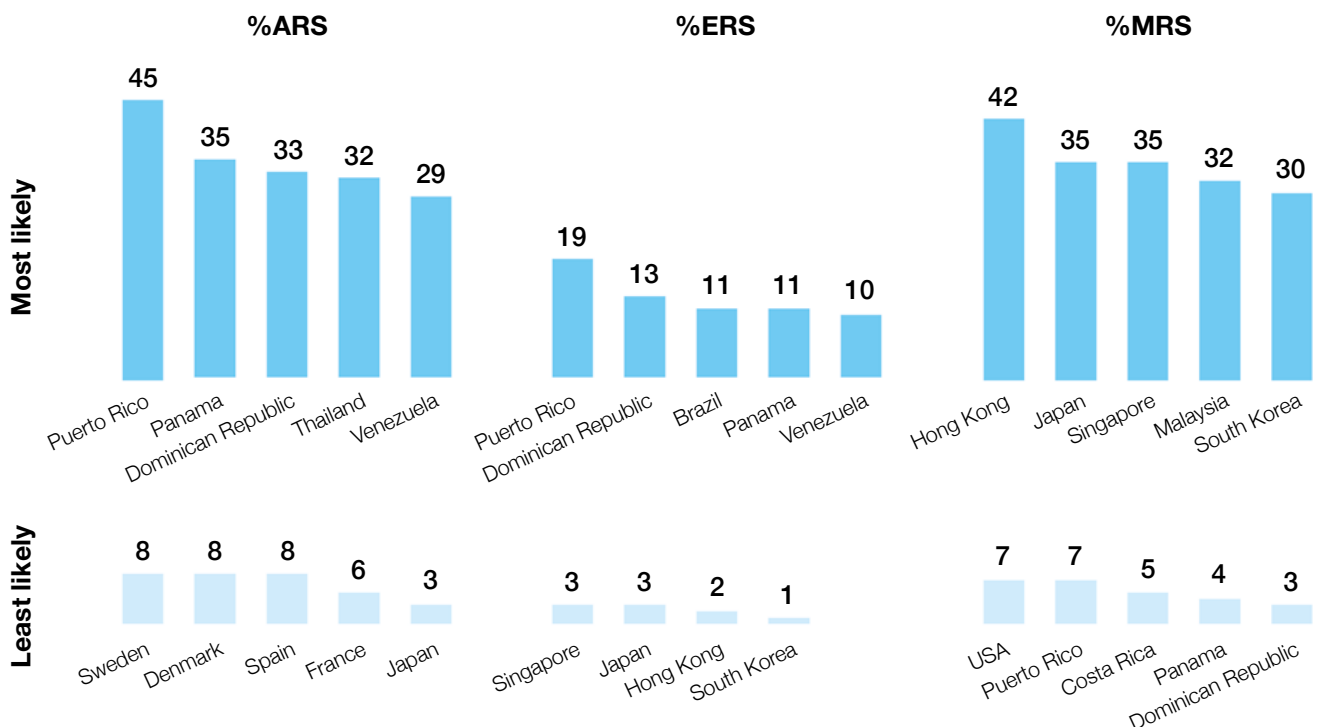
Data source: Ipsos' market-representative global norms data 2016.[3]

Multiple metrics on a 10-point scale relating to retail banking have been used.[4]

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Performance difference? Or cultural response bias?

%Scoring 8, 9 or 10

■ Japan   ■ Puerto Rico

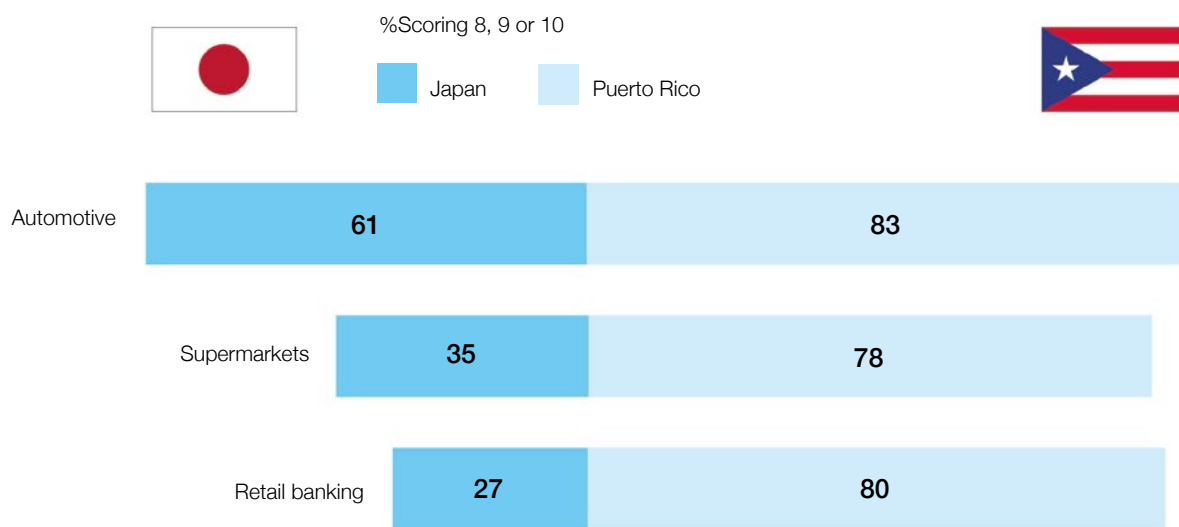|	Japan	Puerto Rico
Automotive	61	83
Supermarkets	35	78
Retail banking	27	80

Figure 1

The impact of cultural response bias when looking at survey findings can be obvious and significant. At its most simple level, it gives the impression of inflated or deflated scores (see *Figure 1*).

Moreover, cultural response bias is not just visible in descriptive results. Inferential statistics can also be distorted. For example, relationships between different attitudinal statements can appear to have inflated or deflated correlation values when the analysis includes data from multiple countries.

However, isolating cultural effects is particularly challenging. This is because product or service expectations may also differ across countries due to a number of factors, including market maturity or competitiveness. The combined influence of expectation and cultural response bias is difficult to pick apart.

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[3]Not all Asian (most significantly India) and African/Middle Eastern markets participated in this research, therefore their response patterns cannot be examined here. As demand for research in these countries grows, there will be a need to understand response styles in these markets, too. Many European markets participated in the research but did not exhibit the response styles as strongly as the markets reported here, and are therefore not shown in the graphs.
[4]Across a range of retail banking metrics on the same 10-point scale: ARS shows the proportion of respondents who scored 8, 9 or 10 at every metric; ERS the proportion who scored 1 or 10 at every metric; MRS the proportion who scored 4, 5, 6 or 7 at every metric. In each case the proportion is based on the number of respondents in each country.

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Cultural response bias in action: its impact on multi-market studies

In a nutshell, cultural response bias makes it very difficult to compare results between countries and reliably gauge whether disparities are the result of true differences in the performance measured or simply in cultural response styles. Direct comparisons between countries using data from Ipsos' market-representative normative studies illustrate this.

Taking the example of automotive manufacturers, for the Net Promoter Score (NPS) we see Asian markets typically give lower scores and Latin America and the US give higher scores (see *Figure 2*).
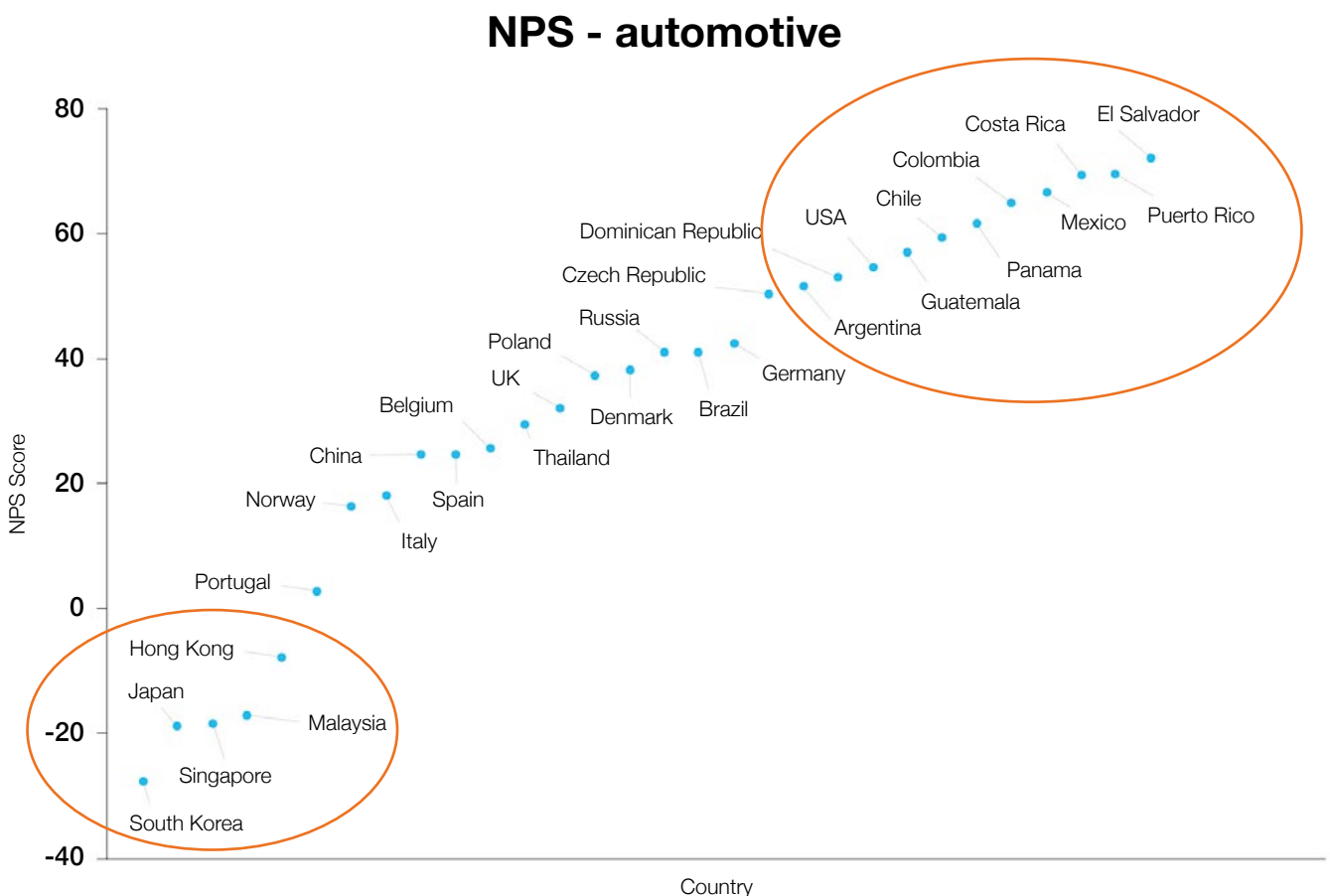
NPS - automotive

Figure 2

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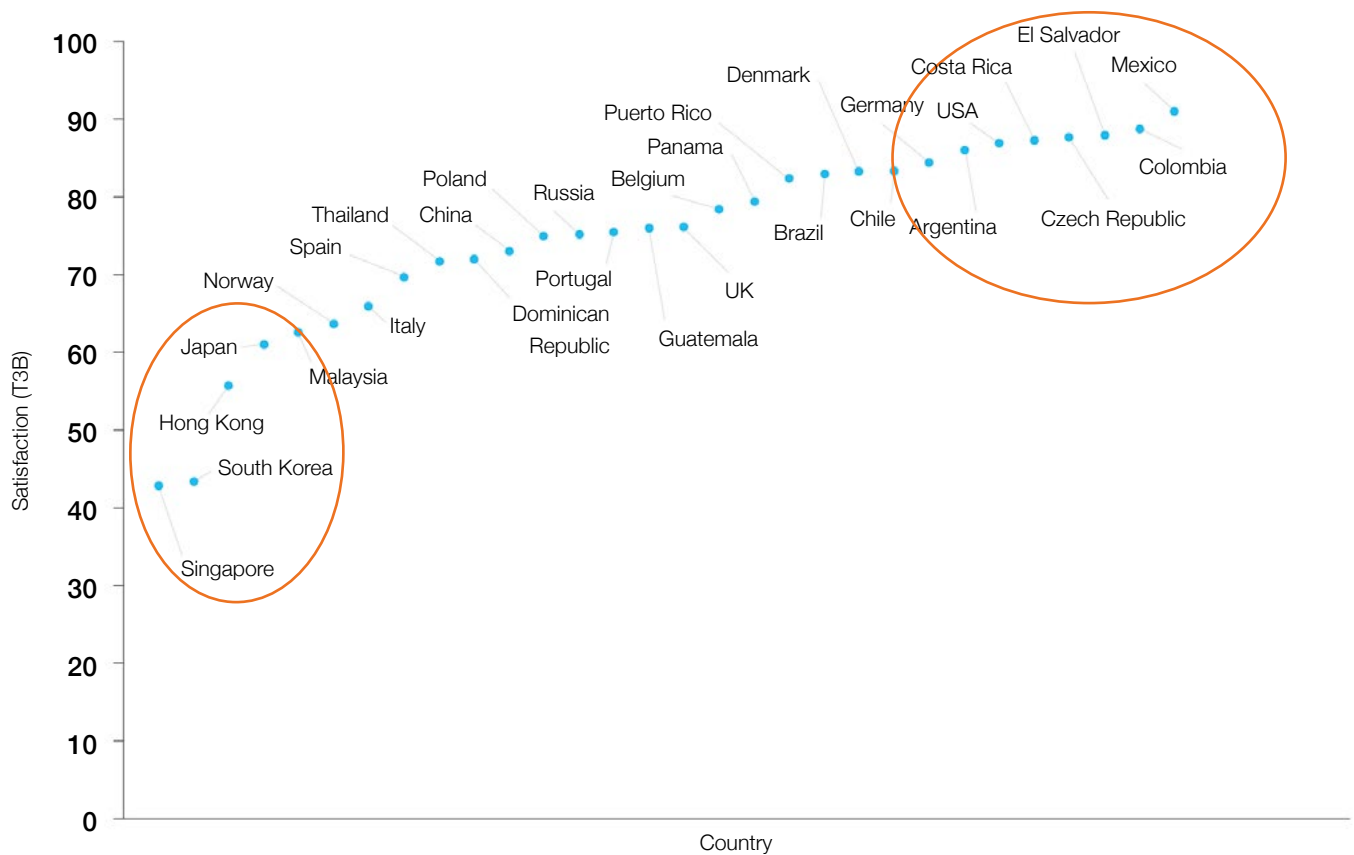## Satisfaction (T3B) – automotive

Figure 3

This pattern repeats itself regardless of KPI or metric. For example, here we see, with some variation of course, very similar high and low-scoring markets for overall satisfaction (top-three-box – i.e. those scoring 8, 9 or 10) in the automotive sector (see *Figure 3*).

Moreover, this pattern is pervasive across many industry sectors (see *Figure 4*). Evaluating overall satisfaction within the retail banking sector, for example, shows a similar pattern where Asian markets tend to score low and Latin America and the US tend to score high. Again, we are looking at top-three-box – i.e. those scoring 8, 9 or 10.

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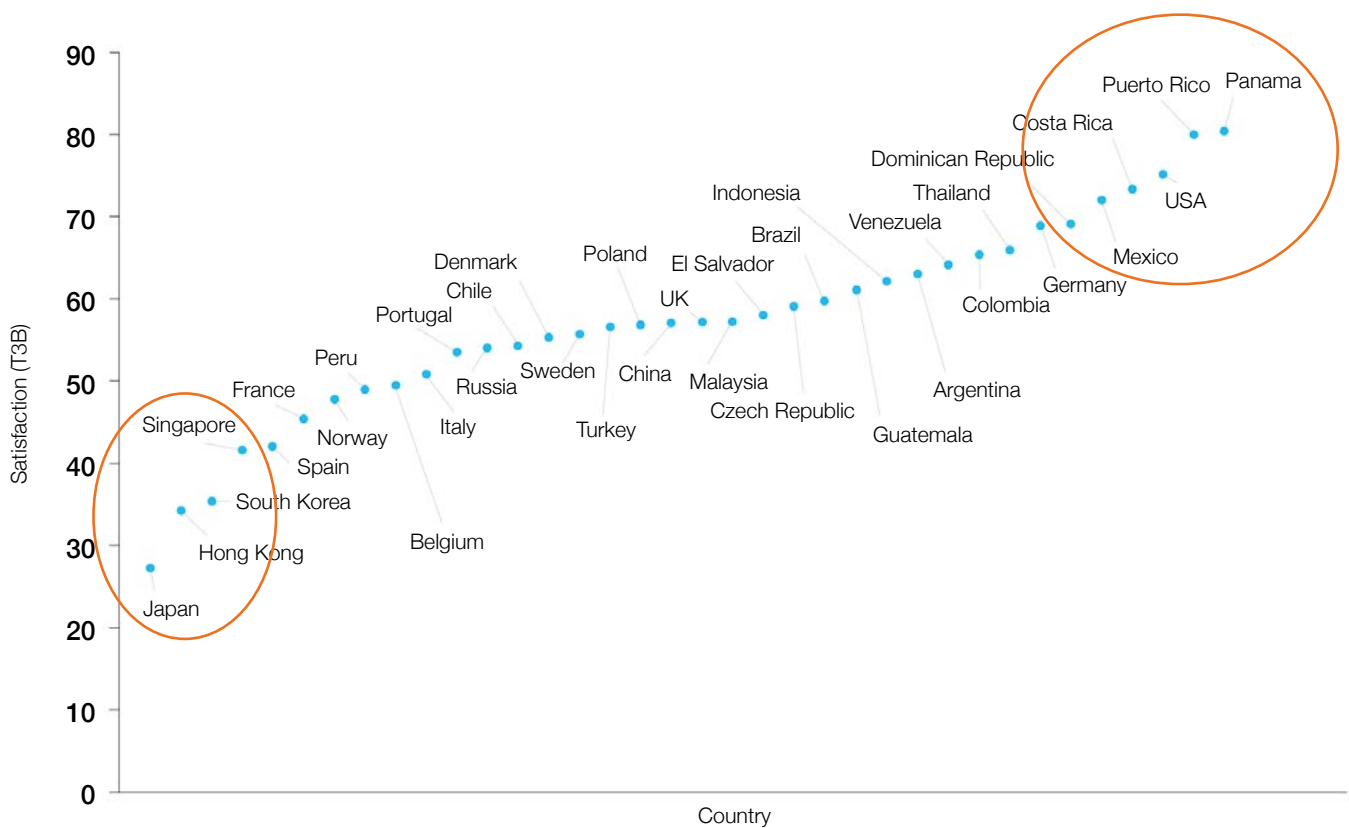
Satisfaction (T3B) – retail banking

Figure 4

But to conclude from this that Asian markets always score low and the US/Latin American markets always score high could be too reductive – meaning real performance issues or highlights are not noted. Conversely, the patterns across markets are repetitive enough for it to be clear 'something cultural' is at play.

This is compounded by the fact that there are of course exceptions to these patterns, both in terms of the countries involved and the sectors.

Plus, these patterns are more visible in certain metric calculations than others. For instance, the influence of cultural response style on the mean calculation is less apparent than on a top 'n' box metric.

Given that a straightforward comparison of scores across countries is not a reliable way to identify strong and weak performers, the question is how best to assess performance across countries.

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Addressing cultural response bias in global studies

As a result of cultural response bias, decision-makers are strongly advised to consider response-style differences and their consequences when evaluating data involving multiple countries.

However, before getting as far as interpreting the results, the first thing to do is to ensure the playing field is as level as possible at data collection. This means, for example, ensuring that the same scales are used; that

'don't know' and 'not applicable' options are available (or not) consistently across countries; and that where several languages are involved, translations are an accurate reflection of one another.

When working with the results, there are a number of options to minimise the impact of cultural response bias and make comparison between countries more feasible. These include:

Technique	How it works	Pros	Cons
Standardisation/ normalisation techniques	• Involves adjustment of means of either individuals, groups or both, using either the mean across variables for each individual or across individuals within a group, or both.	• Allows aggregation of the results across countries and provides a relative assessment of the variable in relation to other variables.	• Can remove 'true' differences between countries. • Requires a large number of attributes to perform the standardisation.
Studying trends over time	• Focuses on results for individual markets over time to identify increases or drops in performance.	• Provides a reliable way of monitoring in-market progress/ trends.	• Countries continue to be considered in isolation. • Comparison between markets remains unreliable.
Calibration based on expectations questions	• Introduces a set of questions that respondents use to rate their product/service experience as better/about/worse than expected. • Uses the scale response distribution relative to the 'expectations' to calibrate the response scale.	• Provides a statistical adjustment to the response scale distribution allowing cross-market comparison of the overall measure.	• Two sets of figures (non-calibrated and calibrated) may be in circulation, potentially causing confusion. • Calculation of statistical adjustment factors is needed. • Assumes that cultural response bias is constant across metrics (i.e. the same recalibration can be applied to several metrics). • Assumes expectation levels are consistent between markets.

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The best way forward

Ipsos believes in two primary approaches to address cultural response bias[5]:

1. **For studies unable to capture competitor information:**

   Include questions about brands with minimal service variation across markets, and use these results to isolate the effect of cultural response bias

2. **For studies that capture competitor information:**

   Compare the KPI ranking of your brand versus other relevant brands in each market to avoid the use of absolute scores

a) Asking about brands with minimal service variation where competitor information is not captured

This solution involves identifying a set of large, well-known global brands that are recognised to have minimal service variation across the markets of interest. A question assessing the performance of these brands is then asked.

During analysis, it is assumed that an individual's scores for these brands are influenced by three factors: the performance of the brand itself, the individual's cultural response bias and the individual's socio-demographic profile.

As the brands' service variation is minimal and the respondent's socio-demographic profile is known, it is then possible to isolate cultural response bias. From this, a calibration factor can be calculated and applied to key measures for the brand of interest.

Components that influence an individual's score
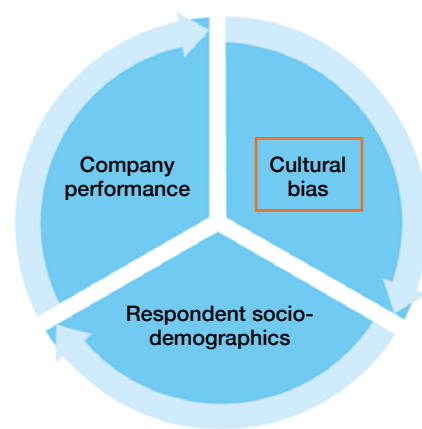
It is true that this approach carries with it the drawbacks of adding questions to questionnaires that are often already full; and of generating two versions of figures on key measures ('original' and recalibrated).

However, it carries with it the major benefit of truly isolating the impact of cultural bias on responses, with limited risk of negating real differences. Moreover, the calibration factors can be applied to any KPI, and need only be recalculated sporadically, minimising any potential impact on questionnaire length and response rates in the long run. Consequently, this can be an efficient and reliable way of generating comparable KPI figures across markets.

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[5]These approaches have been particularly developed for the service sector related to attitudinal rating scale questions. For Consumer Packaged Goods, other normalisation adjustment alternatives are available, and your Ipsos contact will be happy to discuss them.

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*2. Ranking where competitor information is also captured*

This solution does not look at your brand's scores in isolation, but considers how respondents score your brand versus other brands in their market within your sector. This translates into measuring how your brand ranks against its competitors in each market where collecting competitor information is appropriate.

Concretely, this can be achieved in two ways, both based on the principle of ranking:

1. Looking at the percentage of respondents who rate your brand most highly across all the brands they use.

2. Using a ranking-based metric such as Ipsos' Attitudinal Equity[6] that takes account of the position of your brand within the wider competitor set used or considered by the respondent.

These options carry a number of benefits. They bypass much of the effect of cultural bias by setting individual brand KPI scores within a wider market context. Moreover, Ipsos Research and Development has also found Attitudinal Equity to be a better predictor of desirable business outcomes such as reduced churn or increased spend than a KPI score alone.

Attitudinal Equity correlates with market share

Correlations	
	Claimed Behaviour
Purchase Intent	0.30
Satisfaction	0.57
Attitudinal Equity	0.85
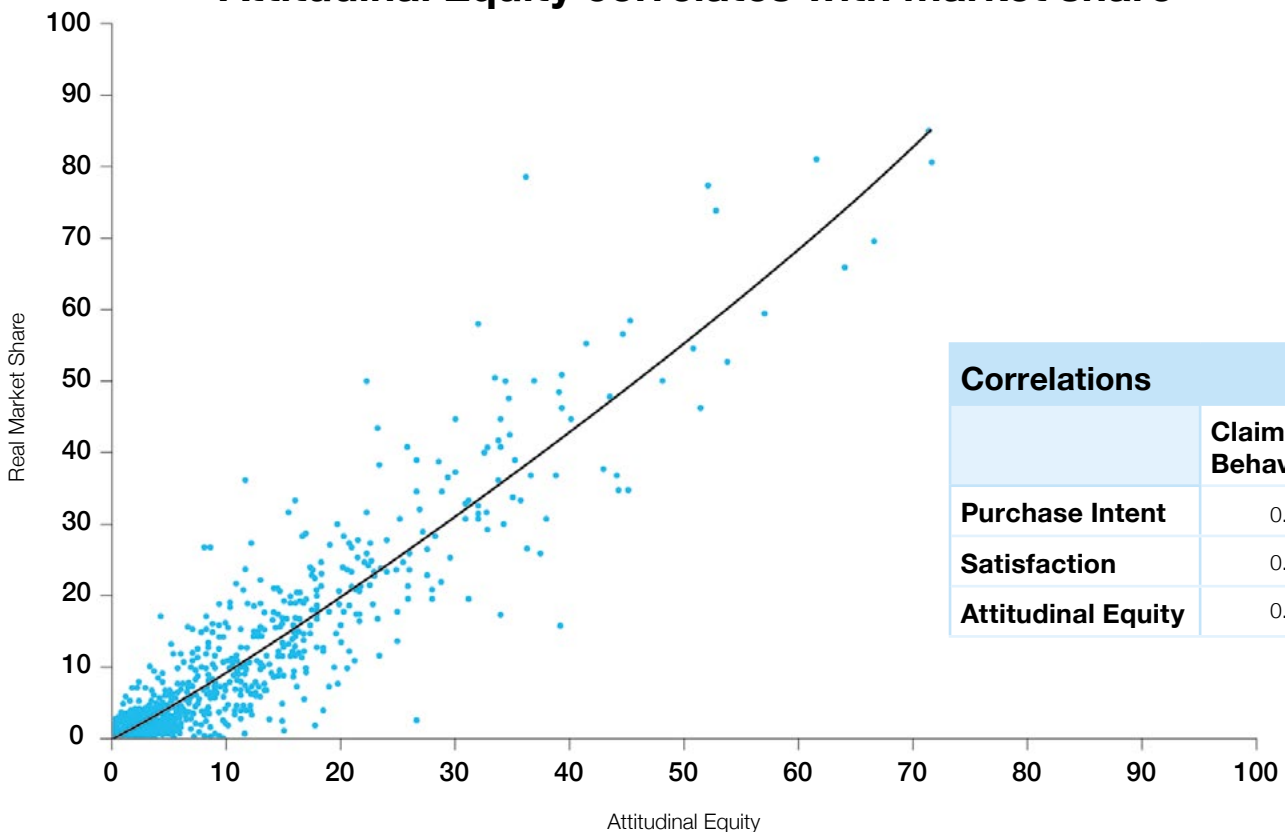
[6]A composite measure that takes account of an individual brand's ranking across two attitudinal statements.

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This is because rank matters: nine out of 10 is only a good score when it is higher than your competitors. If all your competitors are scoring 10 out of 10, then suddenly nine is a much less positive result.

Your Customer	Your Brand	Competitors	
		A	B
Janet, 32, married, 3 children	9 _Equal last_	9	10
John, 45, divorced, no children	9 _Clear first_	7	8

By looking at this rank, the absolute score your brand has received is suddenly irrelevant and we have much better comparability between markets. Thus, the knowledge gained from this approach can far outweigh the potential downside of asking respondents to provide KPI scores for the brands within their usage/ consideration set.

In conclusion

Cultural response bias is an inevitable part of global research programmes. However, it does not necessarily follow that it must undermine the reliability of results comparison between markets.

It is crucial, though, to acknowledge its potential impact at the research design phase. By doing this, the questionnaire can be designed both to minimise the introduction of any further bias (e.g. by inaccurate translation) and to answer the needs of the analysis plan (e.g. by asking a KPI score about competitor brands as well as your own for ranking purposes; or including questions about international brands with minimum service-level variability).

The analysis plan must also be agreed – not all solutions to cultural response bias will be appropriate for every business – and communicated to ensure buy-in and understanding across stakeholder groups from the outset.

By ensuring that cultural response bias is considered carefully at programme set up – or programme review for existing studies – its impact can be controlled. Consequently, global and local users can make the most of the survey results, safe in the knowledge that they are drawing reliable conclusions from what they see.

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Fiona Moss, Global Research Director, Customer Experience, Ipsos
Bharath Vijayendra, Head of Analytics, Customer Experience, Ipsos

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