

THE CHEMISTRY OF BETTER DECISIONS

Navigating Positive Friction,
Calibrated Trust, and the Realities of
Synthetic Data in the Agentic Era

August 2026



IPSOS WEBINAR

HI + AI:

The Chemistry of Better Decisions

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This point of view draws on insights from Ipsos' recent APAC webinar, HI + AI: The Chemistry of Better Decisions, which brings together perspectives from Ipsos global experts on behavioural science, Artificial Intelligence, and synthetic data. It also features a client case study from Vandana Pai, Head of Insights & Analytics, India at Kenvue, illustrating how AI can augment human expertise to accelerate and strengthen decision-making.

The APAC AI Landscape: Moving from 'If' to 'How'

Across the Asia-Pacific region, the AI conversation has fundamentally shifted from a speculative "if" to an active, pragmatic "how."

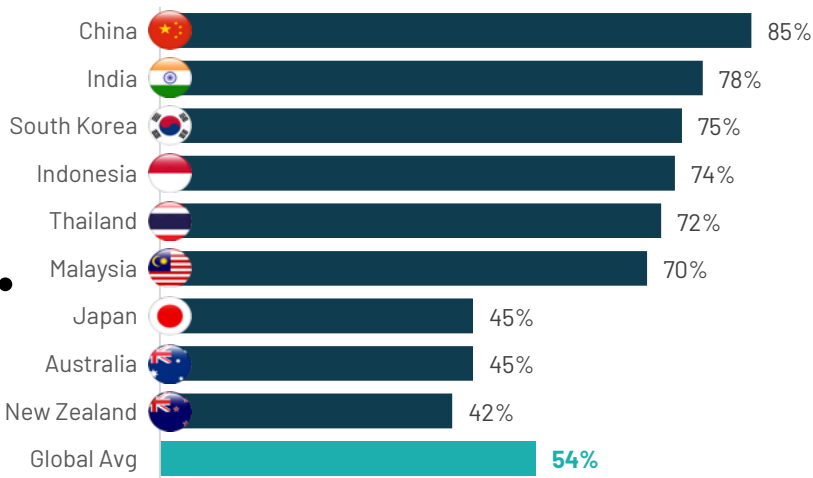
Consumers in China, India, and South Korea are experiencing AI-powered services at a velocity that far outpaces the 54% global average, displaying a higher level of optimism and excitement compared to Western markets. However, this enthusiasm is balanced by a parallel thread of nervousness, particularly in South Korea, India, and Japan, where concerns over job security, workforce disruption, and societal impacts create a complex emotional landscape.

APAC is at the forefront of the global AI shift

Consumers are already experiencing AI faster and more deeply than the global average.

% Agreeing that 'Products and services using artificial intelligence have profoundly changed my daily life in the **past 3-5 years**'.

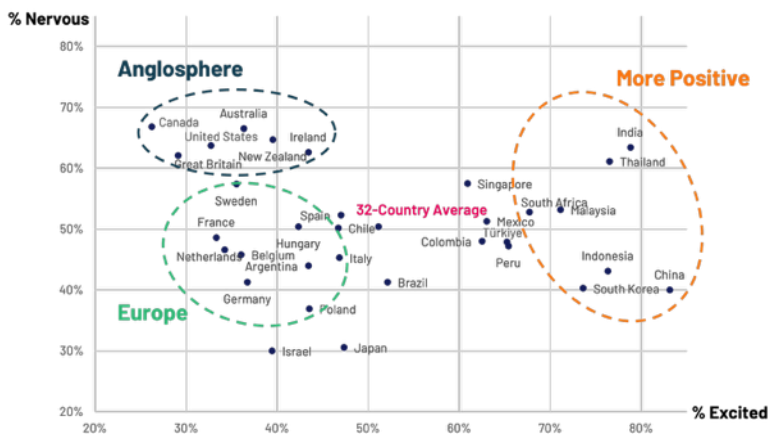
Base: 23,532 adults across 32 countries, Ipsos AI Monitor 2026



AI Is Inspiring Both Excitement and Anxiety

% Agree: Products and services using artificial intelligence make me nervous/excited

Base: 23,532 adults under the age of 75 across 32 countries between March 20, 2026 and April 3, 2026.



Despite these anxieties, APAC comfort levels with AI-assisted tasks are remarkably high: a clear majority express ease in relying on AI for symptom-based health diagnoses or complex financial advice—areas traditionally reserved for human experts. For organizations operating here, the competitive edge no longer lies in raw access to technology, but in the deliberate chemistry of combining Artificial Intelligence with Human Intelligence (HI) to drive smarter business decisions.



The Neuroscience of Choice: Smarter Together through Positive Friction

To successfully deploy AI, organizations must ground their systems in human psychology. As detailed by cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Manuel Garcia Garcia in his book *Smarter Together: How We Think, Feel, and Decide with AI* (Cambridge University Press, June 2026), the human brain naturally conserves energy by shifting decision-making from deliberate thought to automatic habits. AI offers an unprecedented opportunity to outsource this cognitive load. While low-stakes choices—like navigating a route—can be safely automated, high-stakes business and personal decisions require conscious human oversight to prevent critical, unchecked errors.

To counter mindless automation, Manuel Garcia-Garcia introduces the concept of **positive friction**. By intentionally designing cognitive checkpoints within AI workflows, developers can pull the human back into active processing. This builds **calibrated**

trust. Because humans treat fluent, human-like AI as social actors, we trust them too quickly, leading to severe "algorithm aversion" when they inevitably fail. Positive friction calibrates this relationship.

During the session's Q&A, Manuel clarified that while embedding emotional intelligence in AI (such as qualitative moderator bots) yields richer insights and deeper engagement, it is not universally appropriate. In high-stakes medical diagnostic tools, empathy should be bypassed in favour of raw transparency, such as displaying explicit confidence levels so physicians can apply expert judgment. Looking ahead to the next two years, as we move into the agentic AI era, in which autonomous digital agents make decisions on our behalf, modelling human psychology and emotion will be critical to overcoming adoption bottlenecks.

Synthetic Data: Three Home Truths and Validation Frameworks

Synthetic data—artificially generated data that mimics the patterns of real observations without corresponding to any single observed event—is already transforming brand tracking and concept testing. However, David Priestley, Ipsos Global Head of Product for Synthetic Data, warns that organizations must confront three scientific "home truths" to use this capability safely:

1

Synthetic data is not real data:

It improves precision through mathematical optimization, not independent observation. Utilizing synthetic data in traditional statistical tests without modifying methodologies makes organizations up to 13 times more likely to make an erroneous decision.

2

It is not independent information:

It is a mathematical projection of existing, historical datasets and cannot act as a magical expander of sample sizes.

3

Exact copies are useless:

A synthetic dataset that perfectly replicates existing marginals and cross-tabs adds zero analytical value—it is the equivalent of copy-pasting rows in a spreadsheet.





Ipsos' S.U.R.E. Validation Framework for Synthetic Data Quality Assurance



Statistical Similarity



Utility & Fairness



Rarity & Novelty



Expert Validation

It needs to look right, behave right,
add value and make sense

In the Q&A, David emphasized that synthetic data behaves like a weather forecast—it uses historical patterns to model future states but cannot mathematically fabricate human feelings. The consumer's voice remains the irreplaceable baseline of truth; synthetic data is an advanced modelling technique to make that voice go further, not replace it. Addressing the integration of external macroeconomic variables, David introduced Ipsos' proprietary S.U.R.E. validation framework. While synthetic systems can ingest macroeconomic factors from the internet, doing so requires extreme caution to avoid injecting outdated, contradictory, or culturally mismatched variables.

DEEP DIVE: THE S.U.R.E. VALIDATION FRAMEWORK

S - Statistical Similarity: Matches the statistical properties of the original dataset. Validated via distribution matching (values falling in equivalent ranges), correlation preservation, and distance tests such as Wasserstein distance, Jensen-Shannon divergence, and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

U - Utility & Fairness: Ensures synthetic data adds genuine analytical value without inflating false positives or overstating precision. Validated via Train-Synthetic-Test-Real (TSTR) accuracy checks and Effective Sample Size (ESS) bounds.

R - Rarity & Novelty: Represents different, diverse, yet plausible patterns rather than simply replicating or copy-pasting existing historical rows. Validated by measuring distance to nearest real-world samples to verify true generalization.

E - Expert Validation: Applies essential human expert judgment. Algorithms cannot catch logical nonsense or domain errors (such as predicting a bottle size that does not physically exist). No synthetic data ships without domain-expert sign-off.



Bridging Science and Action: The Stayfree India Case Study

The practical application of these dual paradigms—psychological alignment and rigorous synthetic data validation—is demonstrated in the Stayfree team’s deployment of Ipsos Persona Bots. This collaborative effort shows how advanced AI can democratize insights and accelerate innovation pipelines while keeping the consumer’s authentic voice at the absolute centre of brand strategy.

Case Study Inset: Stayfree

Translating Structured CEP Data into a Conversational Sounding Board



The Challenge:

Vandana Pai, Head of Insights & Analytics, wanted to keep complex Category Entry Points (CEPs) for their sanitary products portfolio active and integrated into the daily innovation pipelines of marketing and product teams.



The Solution:

Stayfree deployed eight custom Ipsos Persona Bots. These intuitive conversational agents brought key consumer segments to life, allowing team members to pitch and iterate ideas, claims, and packaging concepts directly with the virtual personas.



The Impact:

The bots acted as an agile sounding board. While not a replacement for formal validation, they significantly reduced the time needed to sharpen ideas. Crucially, they kept the nuanced consumer language and CEP study vocabulary alive across the organization, rapidly onboarding new team members



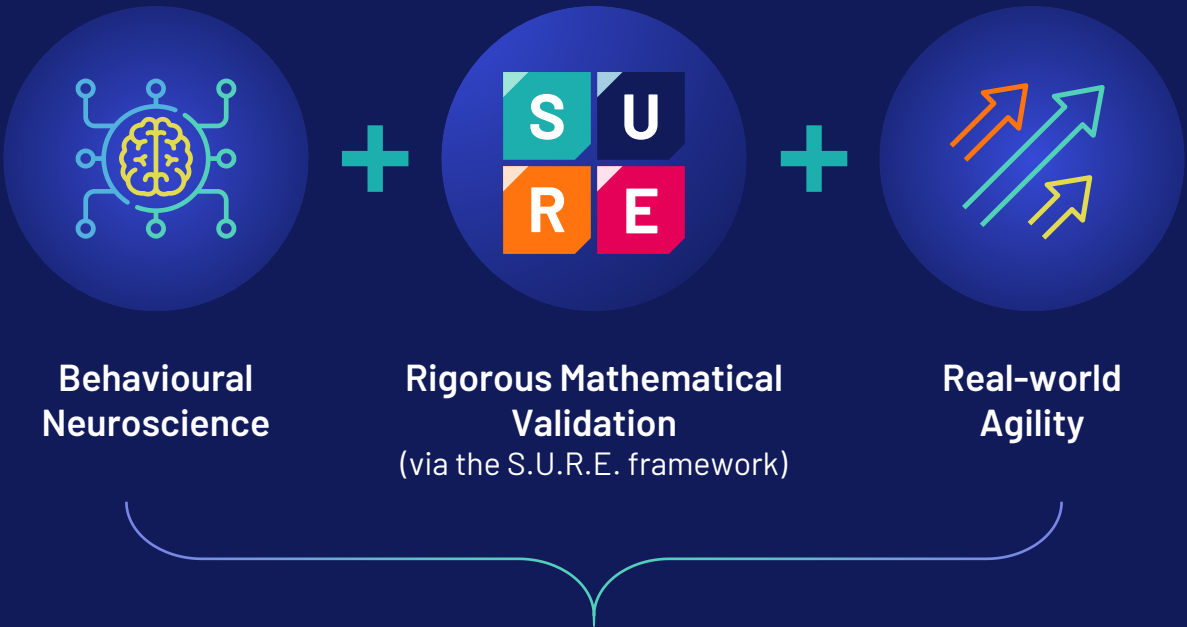
Strategic Implications: Navigating the Agentic Future with Calibrated Chemistry

The integration of Human Intelligence and Artificial Intelligence is not a technology race; it is a scientific discipline. For brands navigating the complex, fast-moving APAC landscape, the path forward requires more than just acquiring AI tools—it demands a partner who can calibrate trust, validate synthetic models with mathematical precision, and keep the authentic human consumer at the centre of strategy.

How can YOU benefit?

As demonstrated by the APAC overview, cognitive neuroscience, synthetic data "home truths," and the Stayfree India case study, business value emerges when AI is built around human psychology and validated with mathematical rigour.

This is where Ipsos' unique commitment to the "chemistry of better decisions"—the deliberate fusion of:



Imprints itself as the essential strategic partner for your organization.

By working with a partner who builds "positive friction" into AI workflows and enforces strict scientific gates on synthetic data, you ensure that your strategic decisions are not just faster, but fundamentally **SMARTER, SAFER**, and deeply grounded in **HUMAN TRUTH**.

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**Contact your Ipsos account
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