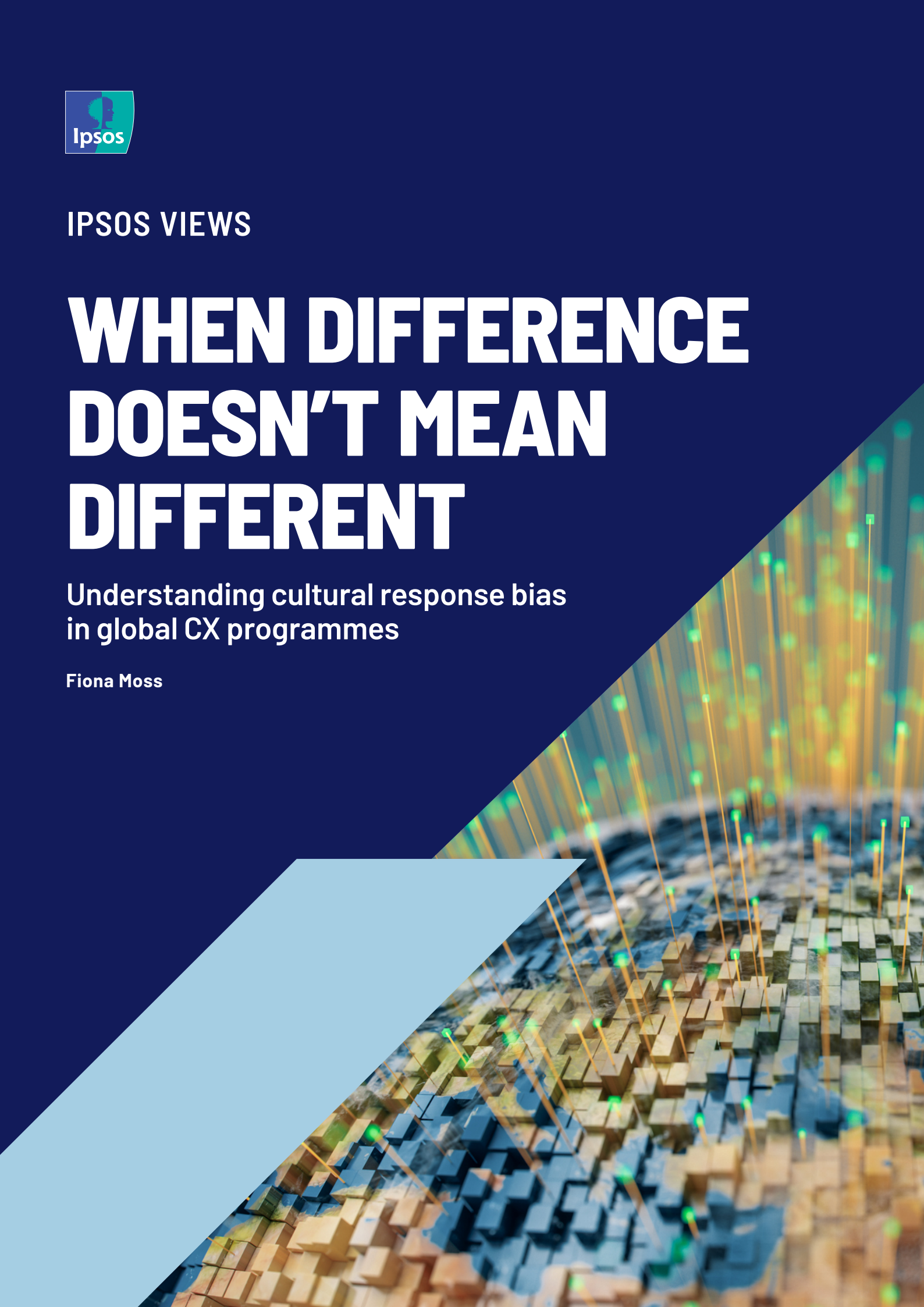
IPSOS VIEWS

WHEN DIFFERENCE DOESN'T MEAN DIFFERENT

Understanding cultural response bias in global CX programmes

Fiona Moss





Cultural response bias can substantially undermine the validity of conclusions drawn from global research programmes.

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 substantially undermine the validity of conclusions drawn from global research programmes. This paper initially sets out to detail the impact of cultural response bias on Customer Experience (CX) survey results, among other sources, before going on to outline a number of steps to mitigate that impact, drive action and ultimately improve an organisation's Return on Customer Experience Investment (ROCXI).

This paper was first published in 2018 and focused on the findings of a dedicated R&D study. In this third edition, we include CX KPI data – customers rating their experience of brands – in aggregate form from Ipsos projects around the world from 2020 to 2025. This allows us to validate whether the response patterns identified in 2018 still hold, as well as encompassing a wider range of markets. This year we also include Brand Health, Employee and Societal metrics to explore how pervasive cultural response bias may be.

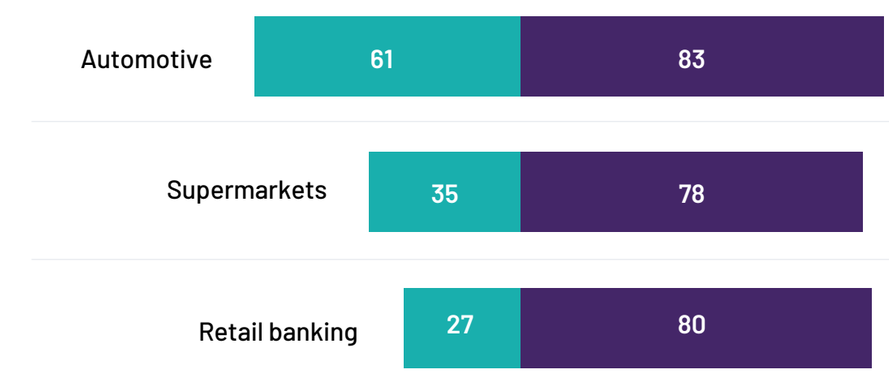
How cultural response bias influences responses

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.

The impact of cultural response bias when looking at survey findings can be obvious and significant. In 2018, when this paper first appeared, we collected normative data specifically with the purpose of exploring cultural response bias. The data clearly illustrates cultural response bias, giving the impression of inflated or deflated scores (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Performance difference? Or cultural response bias? (% scoring 8, 9 or 10)



Source: Ipsos' Normative Study 2016

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.



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, the Middle East and some markets in Africa and Asia. Known as disacquiescence (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).

3. Middle Response Styles (MRS)
The tendency to use the mid-responses of a rating scale. European and some Asian markets tend to provide more mid-responses, while Latin America is less inclined to do so.

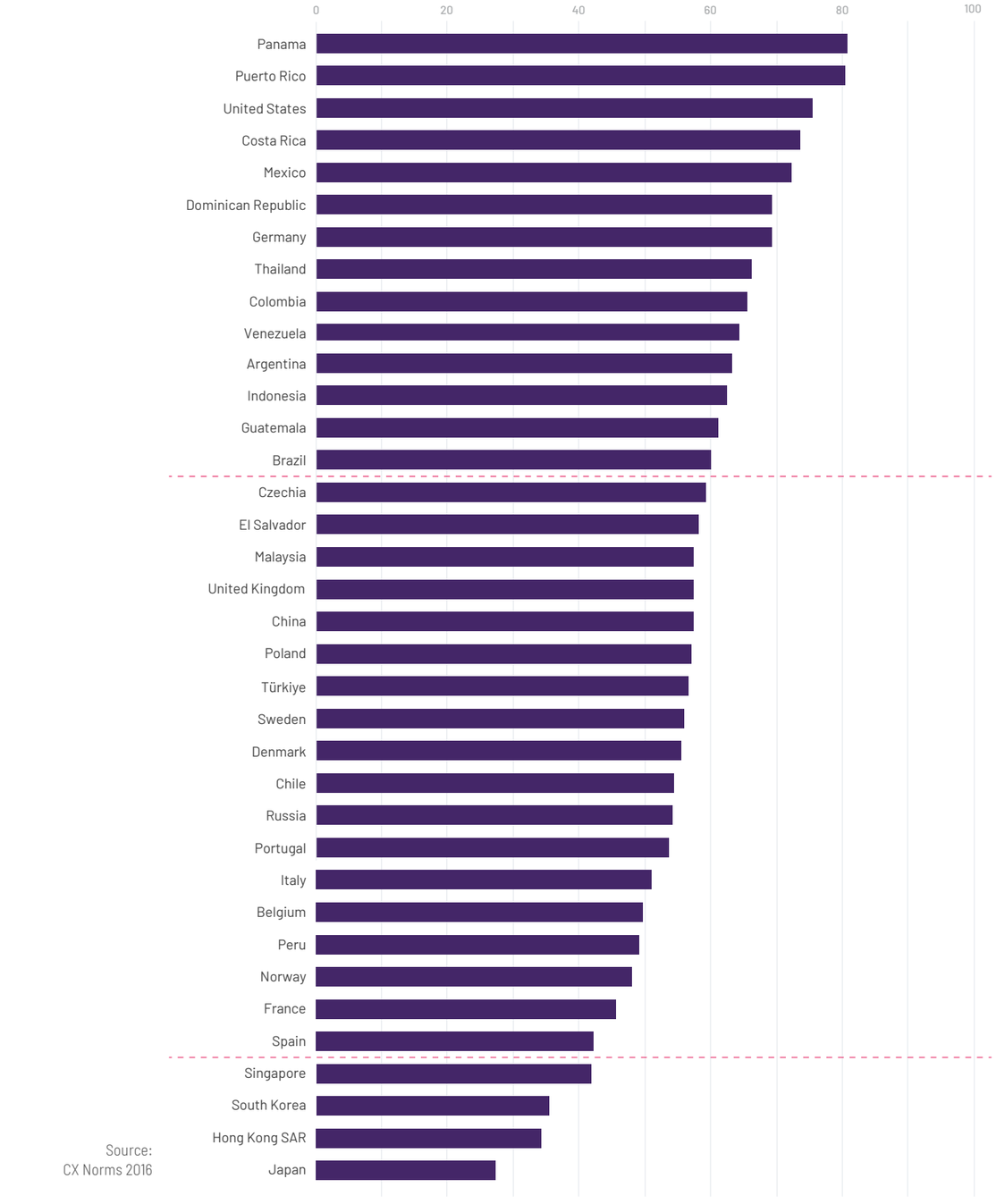
Cultural response bias in action: its impact on multi-market studies

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.

Again, the normative data available for our 2018 paper illustrated this. For example, in Figure 2, considering satisfaction with the banking sector, Asian markets typically give lower scores while Latin America and the US give higher scores, and Europe scores in the middle.

In a nutshell, cultural response bias makes it very difficult to gauge whether disparities are the result of true differences in the performance measured or simply in cultural response styles.

Figure 2: CX normative data – satisfaction with retail banking (% scoring 9 or 10 out of 10)



Source:
CX Norms 2016



Cultural response bias is still entrenched in the way different markets respond to scale questions.

However, now, in 2026, we want to explore two things:

01 **Do these patterns still play out in real-world CX metrics?** To do this we studied data from Ipsos CX studies from H2 2020 to H1 2025 from around the world using our CX Benchmark Database[2].

02 **What does cultural response bias look like outside of CX?** To explore this, we looked at similarly aggregated results for Brand Health (using Ipsos' BVC Database[3]) and Employee metrics (using Ipsos Karian and Box's Employee Experience Database[4]), in addition to societal findings from Ipsos Global Trends 2024[5].

Starting with the CX KPI data (see Figure 3), we found that cultural response bias is still entrenched in the way different markets respond to scale questions. The results are generally aligned with the 2018 paper[6].

Moreover, by including more countries we are also able to tease out more nuance. For example, while many Asian markets give lower scores, some appear among the high scorers; and Latin American markets are not universally high scorers.

The pattern of high and low scoring markets remains the same across a variety of sectors and metrics, as illustrated in Figure 4 looking at the percentage of customers scoring 9 or 10 out of 10 at overall satisfaction. Additionally, we start to see that markets in the Middle East tend to give higher scores, while in Africa anglophone markets tend to give higher scores than francophone markets.

Figure 3: CX Benchmark – cross-sector recommendation (mean score)

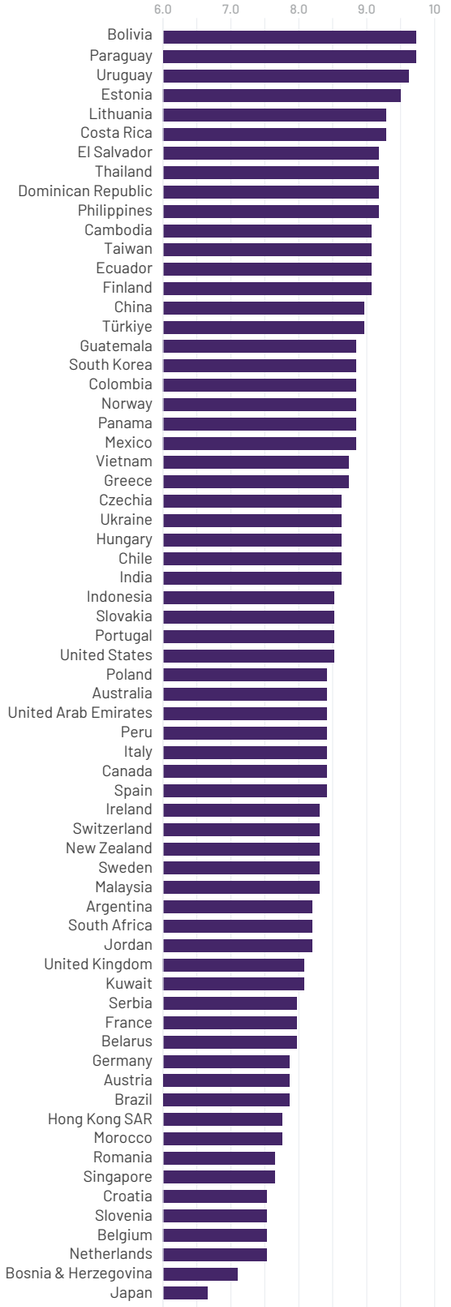
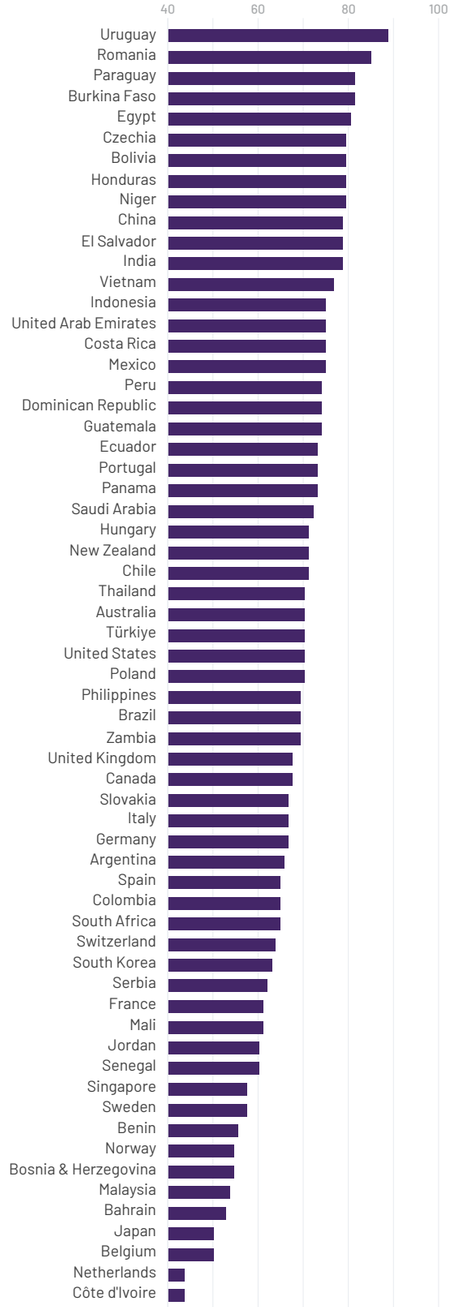


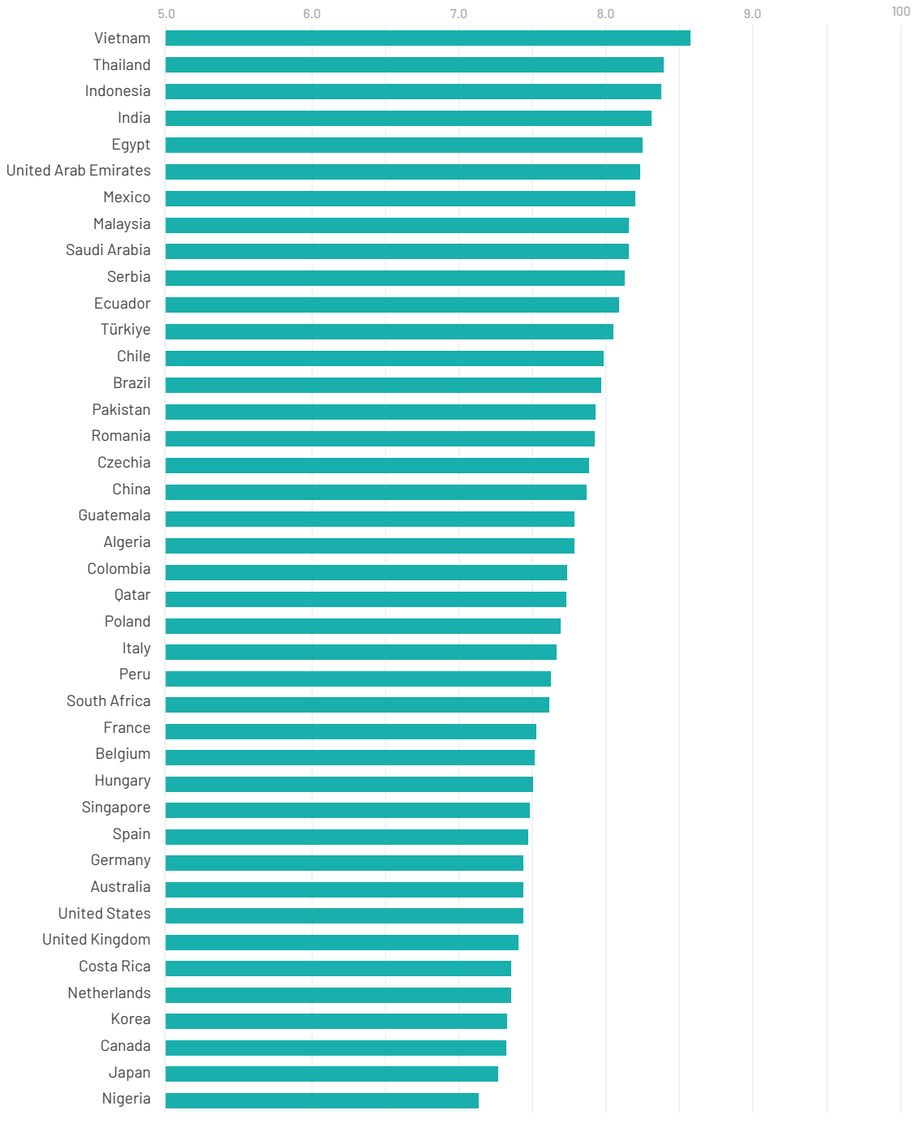
Figure 4: CX Benchmark – cross-sector satisfaction (% scoring 9 or 10 out of 10)



Source (Fig.3/4): CX Benchmark H2 2020 to H1 2025

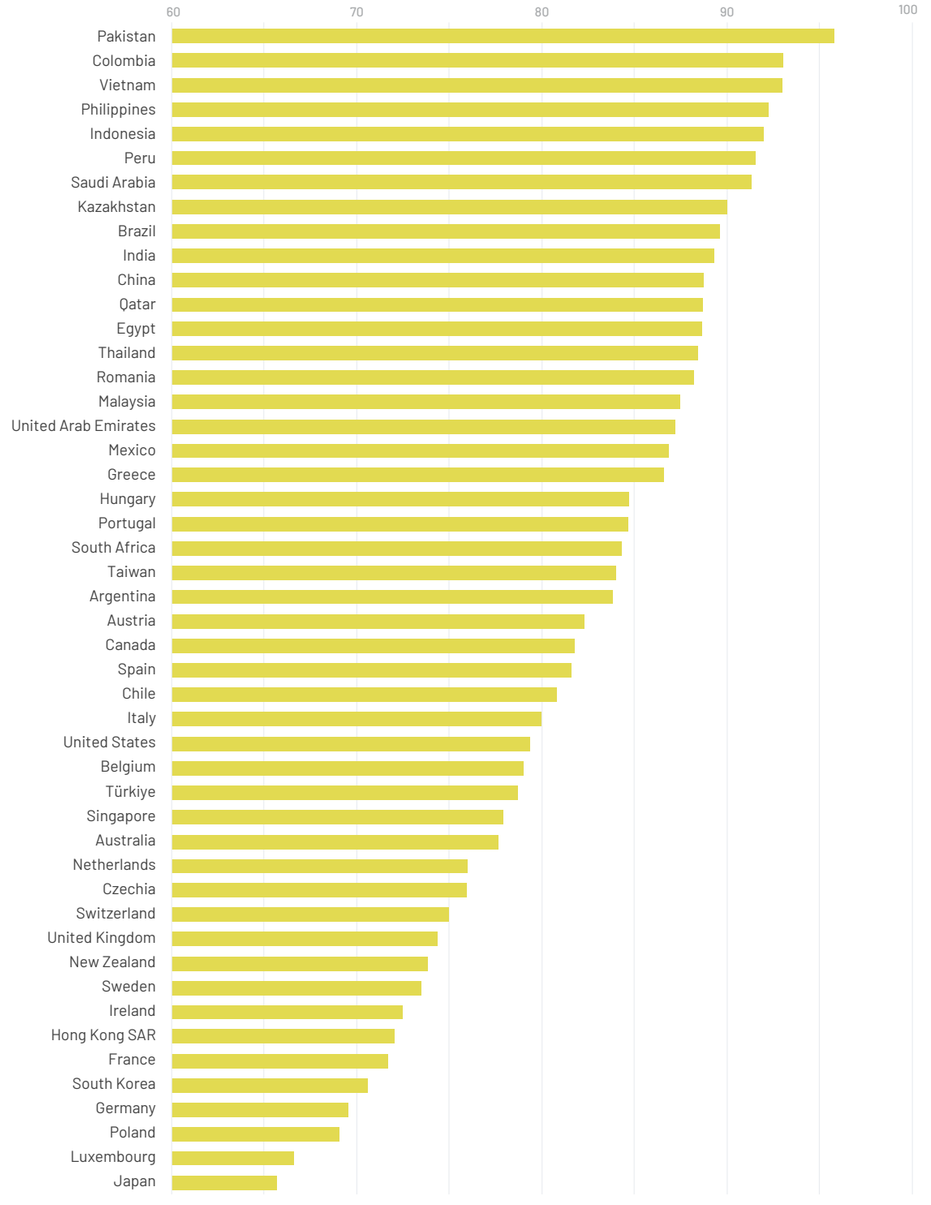
When we expand our scope to consider metrics outside of the world of CX, we find that cultural response bias still manifests itself in a consistent way. For example, we see the emergence of familiar patterns in market scores in Brand Health benchmarks, illustrated here by the key metric of Brand Closeness (Figure 5); and also in Employee benchmarks (Figure 6), here evaluating whether employees are proud to work for their company.

Figure 5: Brand Health - Brand Closeness (mean score): "How close do you feel to each brand?"



Source:
Ipsos BVC Database
H2 2024 to H1 2025

Figure 6: IK&B Employee Experience – I feel proud to work for... (% scoring 4 or 5 out of 5)



Source:
IK&B Employee
Experience Database
H1 2023 to H2 2024

However, when we turn to societal data from Ipsos Global Trends, we start to see that cultural response bias can be disrupted by a reflection of societal norms or the political/socio-economic status of the market in question (see Figures 7 and 8 over page).

Figure 7: Ipsos Global Trends – the main role of women in society is to be good mothers and wives (% agree)

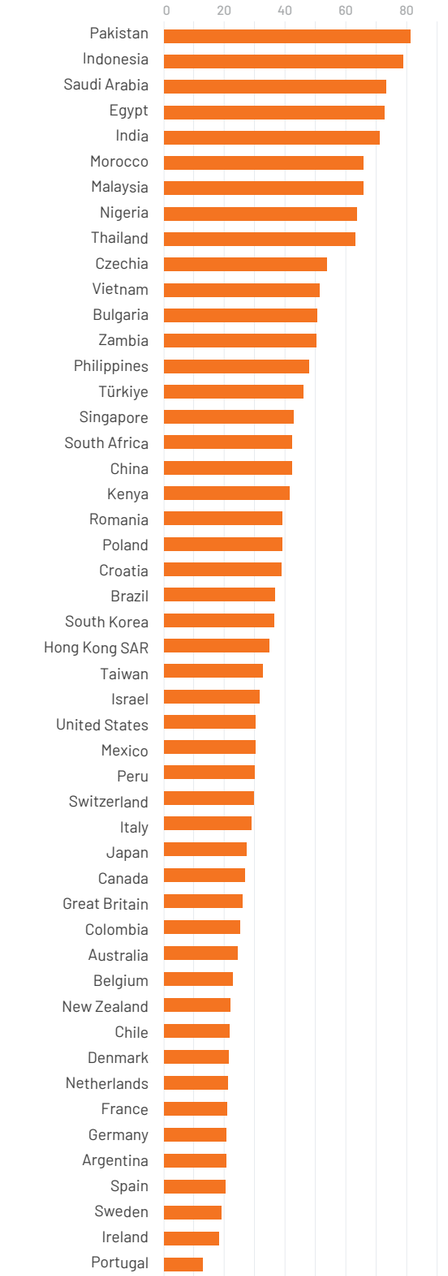
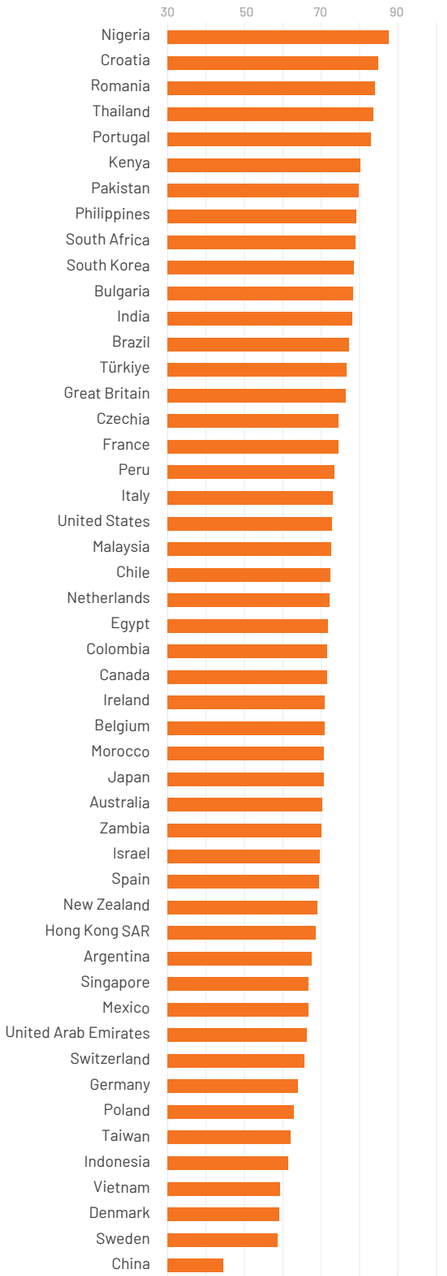


Figure 8: Ipsos Global Trends – the economy of my country is rigged to advantage the rich and powerful (% agree)

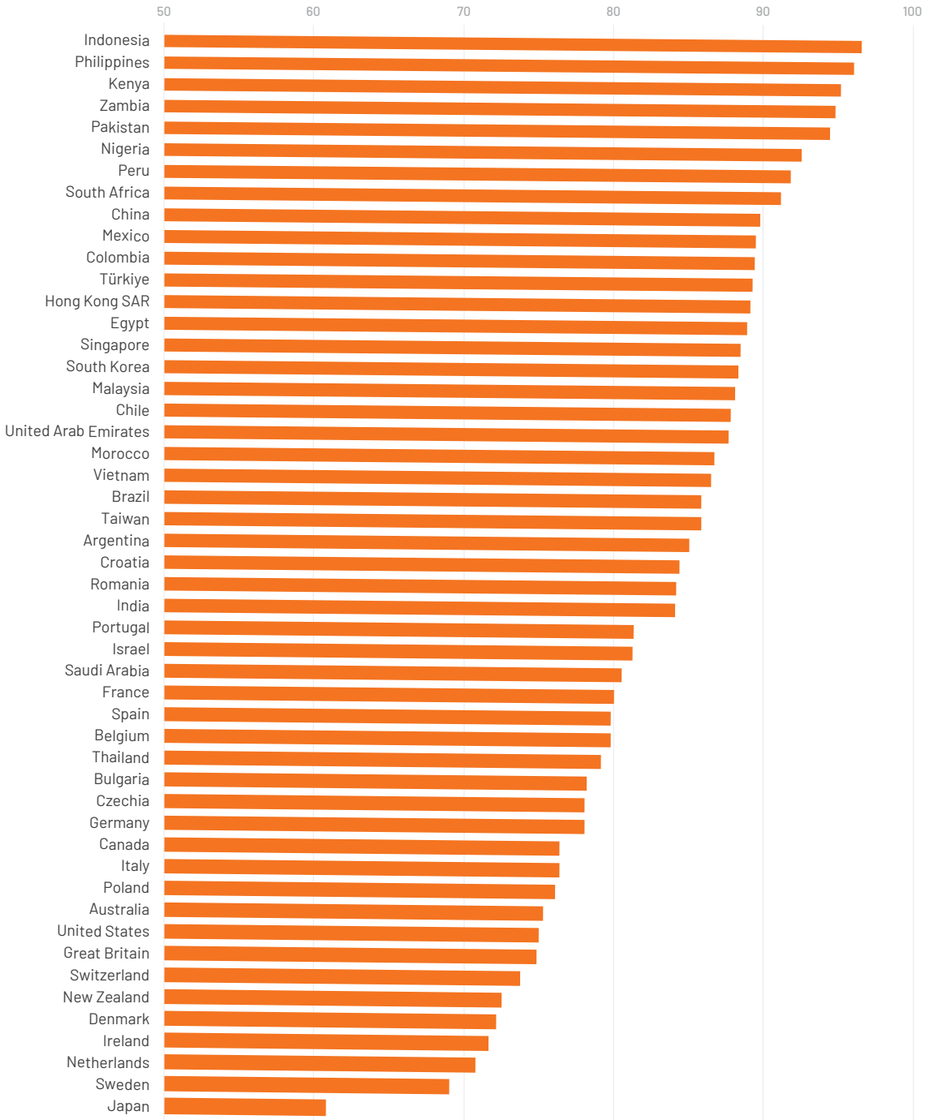


Source (Fig.7/8): Ipsos Global Trends 2024

Cultural response bias can be disrupted by a reflection of societal norms or the political/ socio-economic status of the market in question.

Although, when questions are turned back to the respondents' own experiences rather than their perceptions of society or reflection of its conventions, cultural response bias immediately reasserts itself (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Ipsos Global Trends – the world today is changing too fast (% agree)



Source:
Ipsos Global Trends 2024

This new data, while fundamentally validating the 2018 findings, also provides us with new understanding of the need for specificity and context.

Specificity, because we now know that regional generalisations about cultural response bias patterns are too reductive. We cannot say, for example, that Asian markets always give low scores and that Latin American markets always give high scores. This does not reflect the rich diversity of the markets across each region. However, 'something cultural' is at play because the same markets consistently score in a similar way. We therefore need to step beyond thinking about regional response patterns to market-level specificity when working on global research programmes.

Context because the societal findings show that political or social views disrupt cultural response bias. Keeping *what* is being asked in our minds as well as where is therefore also important.

Returning now to the world of CX, 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.

We therefore need to step beyond thinking about regional response patterns to market-level specificity when working on global research programmes.



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.

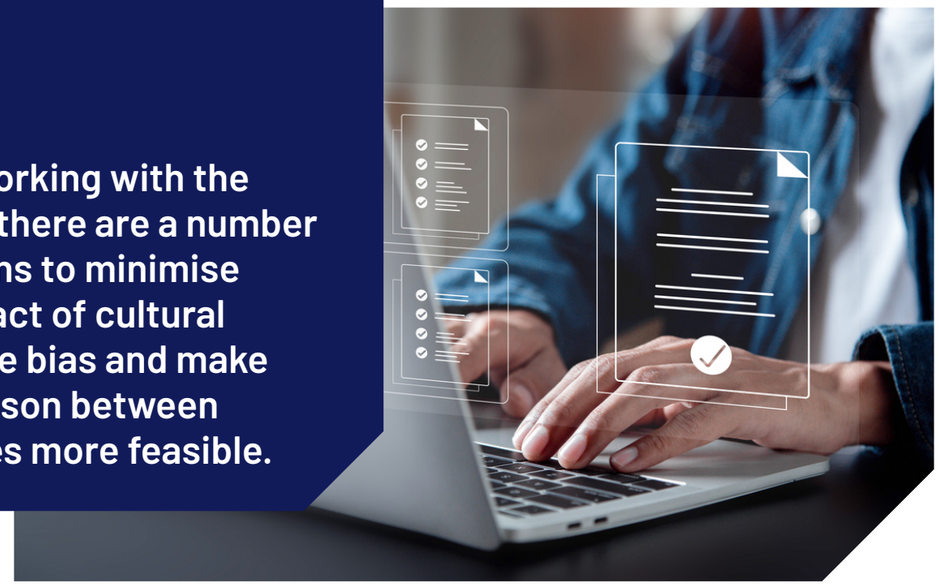
However, before getting as far as interpreting the results, the first thing to do is to ensure the playing field is as level as possible at data collection. This means, for example, ensuring that the same scales are used; that 'don't know' and 'not applicable' options are available (or not) consistently 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:

Techniques	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. • Identifies improving markets and declining markets.	• Countries continue to be considered in isolation. • Comparison between markets remains unreliable.

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.



The best way forward

Ipsos believes in two primary approaches to address cultural response bias[7]:

01 For single brand studies unable to capture competitor information:

Include a question that rates the customer product/service experience as better, in line with, or worse than expected, and use this to recalibrate the scale responses.

02 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.

1. Asking about expectations where competitor information is not captured

This solution involves adding a simple question to questionnaires asking customers to state whether their experience was below, in line with or above their expectations. No other questionnaire changes are needed.

During analysis, the scale response distribution relative to the 'expectations' is used to calculate a calibration factor that can be applied to key measures for the brand of interest. These adjusted or recalibrated key measures can be used in cross-market comparison.

It is true that this approach carries with it the drawback of generating two versions of figures on key measures ('original' and recalibrated), and it is grounded in the assumption that expectation levels are consistent across markets. However, it carries with it the major benefit of more comparable cross-market results, 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 pragmatic way of managing cultural response bias.

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:

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

02 **Using a ranking-based metric that takes account of the position of your brand within the wider competitor set used or considered by the respondent.**

These options carry the key benefit of bypassing much of the effect of cultural bias by setting individual brand KPI scores within a wider market context. This is because rank reflects the fact that 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 (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Rank matters.
Nine is a very different result when compared with your competitors

Average performance	Your brand	Competitor A	Competitor B
Market 1	9 *Joint last*	9	10
Market 2	9 *Clear first*	7	8
Market 3	9 *Mid-pack*	8	10

By ensuring that cultural response bias is considered carefully at programme set up its impact can be controlled.



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, its impact on the reliability of results comparison between markets can be mitigated.

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 a question about expectations).

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.

Endnotes

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 Ipsos' CX KPI Global Benchmark Database, 'CX Benchmark', includes data from over 100 countries and more than 30 sectors. Both B2C and B2B experiences are covered, across a range of channels and touchpoints. Both CX relationship and transactional programme data are included, gathered via various methodologies. Satisfaction, recommendation and the Forces of CX are included in the database. Data is collected on an ongoing basis, and is available to all Ipsos teams for use – please get in touch with your local Ipsos CX contact if you have benchmarking requirements. The data presented here was collected from July 2020 to June 2025. All data used is in line with the terms and conditions agreed between Ipsos and its clients, and all figures are aggregated (i.e. no individual client data is accessible without being aggregated with other scores and no data is identifiable).

3 Ipsos' BVC Database is a dynamic resource offering valuable insights and benchmarks for thought leadership and brand health analysis. Spanning over 46,000 runs and encompassing data from 143 countries and 38.6 million interviews, it covers more than 140,000 brands across 175 categories. This extensive repository provides pivotal benchmarks that allow for robust comparisons of brand performance against category expectations on metrics including Brand Desire, Salience, Brand Performance.

4 Ipsos Karian and Box's Employee Experience Database, Jan 2023 to July 2024. The data presented in this report represents responses to the question "I feel proud to work for [company]. This database represents the views of 2.8 million employees over 100 employers across 118 countries and is updated on an ongoing basis. This database contains expansive employee experience data on a range of topics including Engagement, speak up, psychological safety, and internal communications best practice to allow for robust benchmark comparisons in employee experience.

5 For more information please see https://www.ipsos.com/en/global-trends-2024

6 Please note that as CX Benchmark has grown organically out of the available studies across Ipsos, not all markets are consistently present across every metric or sector.

7 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.

Further Reading

1 The Employee Customer Ripple Effect | Ipsos

2 The Advocacy Ripple Effect | Ipsos

3 AI and the Future of CX | Ipsos

4 CX Global Insights 2025: Unlocking the Future of Customer Experience | Ipsos

5 Empowering People Teams; Navigating 2025 and beyond | Ipsos

Further Watching

1 Global Voices of Experience 2023 [Webinar recording] *- 2026 Recording Coming Soon!*

Further Listening

1 The Experience Perspective | Ipsos

FEBRUARY 2026

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