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Cultural Adaptation Strategies in International Digital Marketing: A Study of Bugis-Makassar MSMEs Going Global

Original Article

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Abstract

Indonesian micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) increasingly use digital platforms to reach foreign buyers, yet culturally rooted products and communication styles do not automatically travel across markets. This conceptual article examines how Bugis-Makassar MSMEs can adapt their international digital marketing without eroding the cultural identity that differentiates them. Using a structured narrative review of literature published mainly between 2021 and 2026, complemented by a few foundational works, the study integrates research on marketing standardization and adaptation, cultural intelligence, SME digital internationalization, and Bugis-Makassar values such as siri' na pacce, lempu', and sipakatau. The synthesis identifies four domains of adaptation: narrative and product, language and visual, platform and channel, and relationship and trust. It proposes a conceptual framework in which a retained cultural core and an adaptable periphery, guided by owner-manager cultural intelligence, shape cultural resonance, cross-border trust, and international marketing performance, with cultural distance, platform power, cultural intermediaries, and digital capability as boundary conditions. Six research propositions are advanced. The article contributes to international marketing theory by situating adaptation within an indigenous Southeast Asian value system, and it offers MSME owners, platform providers, and export-support agencies a structured agenda for practice and for empirical testing, preferably through multiple-case studies.

Keywords: Cultural Adaptation, Digital Marketing, Bugis-Makassar, MSMEs, Internationalization

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have lowered many of the traditional barriers that kept micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) out of foreign markets. Online marketplaces, social media, and messaging applications allow even very small firms to display products, answer questions, and take orders from buyers they have never met. Evidence from the cross-border e-commerce literature suggests that these channels can raise small firms' international competitiveness, partly by improving access to market information (Wen et al., 2023), and research on e-commerce SMEs shows that online marketing capabilities are an important, though not sufficient, resource for international performance (Tolstoy et al., 2022). For Indonesian MSMEs, which are largely oriented toward the domestic market, the digital route abroad is an attractive but demanding option.

Reaching a foreign buyer is not the same as being understood by one. Products, brand stories, and ways of communicating are embedded in the cultural setting where they originate,

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and they are interpreted through the cultural lenses of the audience that receives them. The long-running debate between standardization and adaptation in international marketing addresses precisely this tension. Levitt (1983) argued that globalizing markets reward standardized offerings, whereas later research has shown that the consequences of standardizing or adapting depend on context. A recent systematic review concluded that findings on the performance consequences of marketing standardization and adaptation remain mixed and inconclusive, and it identified research gaps related to emerging markets and digital services (Mandler et al., 2021).

Cultural adaptation is especially consequential for firms whose products and identities are rooted in a distinctive local culture. Sasaki et al. (2021), studying Japanese heritage craft producers, showed that such firms face a tension between the cultural specificity of their products and the cultural embeddedness of their operations, and that they handle it through selective targeting, cultural adaptation, or cultural transposition rather than through a simple choice between standardizing and adapting.

South Sulawesi offers a revealing setting for this question. The Bugis and Makassar peoples are widely associated with maritime trade and the *pinisi* boatbuilding tradition, and their social life is guided by a cluster of values, most prominently *siri' na pacce*, which combines a sense of dignity and honour (*siri'*) with solidarity and empathy for others (*pacce*) (Darmayanti & Syukur, 2025; Reski et al., 2021). These values are linked in the literature to how local entrepreneurs think about honesty, reputation, and obligation (Amir et al., 2020; Salassa et al., 2023). They may therefore act as both a resource and a constraint when Bugis-Makassar MSMEs communicate with consumers who do not share the same moral vocabulary.

Existing studies on Bugis-Makassar economic life have examined the cultural foundations of business ethics, women's entrepreneurship, and, most recently, how MSMEs negotiate AI-based marketing tools through the lens of siri' na pacce (Arif & Windarsari, 2026). To our knowledge, none systematically theorizes how these values interact with the adaptation decisions that international digital marketing demands. Research on Indonesian MSMEs' digital marketing, meanwhile, has largely addressed domestic digital markets (e.g., Srinita & Saputra, 2023), and research on cross-border digital marketing rarely engages with indigenous value systems from Southeast Asia.

This article therefore asks three questions. First, how does recent literature conceptualize cultural adaptation in the international digital marketing of SMEs? Second, how might Bugis-Makassar cultural values enable or constrain such adaptation? Third, what conceptual framework and propositions can guide empirical research on Bugis-Makassar MSMEs going global? The article contributes by integrating four streams, namely adaptation theory, cultural intelligence, SME digital internationalization, and regional cultural values, into a single framework, and by offering testable propositions and a research agenda.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews four bodies of work that together frame the conceptual argument: the standardization–adaptation debate and its glocalization variants; cultural frameworks and cultural intelligence; the digital internationalization of SMEs; and the cultural values of Bugis-Makassar society and their documented links to business practice. A short review of closely related Indonesian studies follows.

2.1. Standardization, Adaptation, and Glocalization

The classic argument for standardization holds that technology and communication homogenize consumer preferences, allowing firms to sell uniform products worldwide at lower cost. Subsequent research has largely moved beyond this binary. Mandler et al. (2021), in a

systematic review organized around theory, context, characteristics, and methodology, found the performance effects of marketing standardization and adaptation to be mixed, and they called for dynamic theoretical perspectives and for studies of emerging markets, digital services, individual marketing-mix elements, and customer-related outcomes. These gaps map closely onto the setting of this article.

Glocalization offers a more useful lens for digital contexts, where content can be modified quickly and cheaply. Noris et al. (2025) examine strategic localization practices and glocalization dynamics in the fashion industry, framing localization as a strategic practice rather than a purely linguistic task. For small firms with culturally specific products, the relevant question is therefore not whether to adapt but what to adapt and what to retain. Sasaki et al. (2021) give the most direct guidance. Their three strategies, selective targeting, cultural adaptation, and cultural transposition, portray adaptation as an ongoing process that unfolds alongside international expansion, in which local distributors and foreign designers act as cultural intermediaries. This process view, rather than a one-time standardization decision, underpins the framework developed below.

2.2. Cultural Frameworks and Cultural Intelligence

Cultural dimension frameworks such as Hofstede's (2001) remain common tools for comparing national markets, and Indonesia is typically characterized as relatively collectivist with high power distance. Such frameworks describe country-level differences well but are less able to capture sub-national ethnic variation, which matters here because Bugis-Makassar values are regionally specific. Child et al. (2022) review the role of context in SME internationalization, and Steinhäuser et al. (2021) map two decades of research in the field; both underline that the setting in which small firms operate shapes how they internationalize.

Cultural intelligence (CQ), defined as the capability to function effectively in culturally diverse situations (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2007), shifts attention from comparing cultures to the competence of the decision maker. Magnusson et al. (2013) examined the role of CQ in marketing adaptation and export performance, and Fakhreldin (2021) identified CQ as a driver of SME internationalization in Egypt's manufacturing sector. Most recently, Mammadov and Wald (2025), using data from 399 owner-managers in Norway and Azerbaijan, found that both CQ and emotional intelligence increase the degree of internationalization of SMEs, with a global mindset partially mediating these effects. Because strategic choices in small firms rest heavily on the owner-manager, a point also emphasized by Munteanu et al. (2023), CQ is a plausible micro-level driver of the quality of adaptation decisions. The relational side of this competence is documented as well: Leonidou et al. (2021) show that emotional intelligence improves international buyer–seller relationship quality and long-term orientation, with foreign culture acting as a moderator.

2.3. Digital Internationalization of MSMEs

Digital technologies change how, and how fast, small firms internationalize. Wen et al. (2023), analyzing Chinese listed SMEs, found that cross-border e-commerce pilot zones significantly increased overseas business income and identified a market information mechanism as one channel. Tolstoy et al. (2022) show that online marketing capabilities are necessary but not sufficient for the international performance of e-commerce SMEs; marketing ambidexterity, combining market-driven and market-driving approaches, helps firms leverage those capabilities. Emerging technologies such as AI-enabled marketing tools are also being adopted by SMEs in emerging economies, with reported performance benefits (Abrokwah-Larbi & Awuku-Larbi, 2024). The implication for culturally embedded MSMEs is

that mastery of platform tools will not by itself produce results; firms must also interpret, and where necessary shape, foreign demand.

2.4. Bugis-Makassar Cultural Values and Business Practice

Bugis-Makassar society is guided by a set of interlocking values. *Siri'* refers to dignity, honour, and shame, the sense that one's name and that of one's family must be protected, while *pacce* denotes empathy and solidarity with others' hardship; together, *siri' na pacce* is widely described as a core of Bugis-Makassar identity (Reski et al., 2021). *Lempu'*, glossed as honesty, truth, sincerity, kindness, and justice, has been linked to the character of Bugis-Makassar traders and to Islamic business ethics (Amir et al., 2020), and Abdullah et al. (2019) discuss siri' na pacce as a local-wisdom basis for business that is integrated with Islamic business ethics. *Sipakatau*, commonly glossed as mutual recognition of one another's humanity, expresses a relational ethic of treating partners with respect.

Recent studies connect these values to economic life. Darmayanti and Syukur (2025) examine women's roles in a creative economy grounded in siri' na pacce values, and Salassa et al. (2023) examine how Bugis culture relates to financial access and training among women entrepreneurs in South Sulawesi. The most relevant study for the present argument is Arif and Windarsari (2026), who interviewed MSME owners and key personnel in Makassar across culinary, artisan craft, ethnic fashion, and digital service sectors. They report that siri' na pacce operates as a filter for evaluating AI marketing tools, that firms adopt algorithmically aligned functions selectively while rejecting culturally incompatible ones, and that platform visibility systems can penalize cultural non-conformity, producing constrained agency. These findings suggest that Bugis-Makassar MSMEs already exercise cultural discernment in their use of digital technology, but within structural limits set by platforms.

2.5. Previous Research on Culturally Grounded MSME Digital Marketing in Indonesia

Indonesian research on MSME digital marketing has focused mainly on adoption, resilience, and domestic performance. Srinita and Saputra (2023), for example, investigate how MSMEs in Aceh use social media to enter digital markets and build resilience. Studies that connect regional culture to marketing exist, but those about Bugis-Makassar settings concentrate on ethics, identity, and technology adoption (Abdullah et al., 2019; Amir et al., 2020; Arif & Windarsari, 2026) rather than on foreign-market adaptation. Three gaps follow. First, the adaptation decisions that culturally anchored MSMEs must make for foreign audiences are not theorized. Second, the link between owner-manager cultural competence and those decisions is untested in the Indonesian regional context. Third, the role of platforms and intermediaries in mediating cultural expression across borders has not been integrated with the study of indigenous values. The next sections address these gaps conceptually.

3. Methods

This study is a conceptual article built on a structured narrative review. It reports no primary data. The aim is theory building: integrating dispersed streams of research into a framework and a set of propositions that can later be tested empirically. A narrative, integrative design was chosen over a formal systematic review or meta-analysis because the relevant literature is heterogeneous in theory, method, and context, and because research on Bugis-Makassar MSMEs in international digital marketing is too sparse to support quantitative aggregation.

3.1. Literature Identification and Selection

Sources were identified through web-based scholarly searches of publisher platforms, open-access indexes (DOAJ and RePEc/IDEAS), and institutional and national repositories. Search terms combined standardization, adaptation, localization, glocalization, cultural intelligence, SME internationalization, cross-border e-commerce, digital marketing, Indonesian MSMEs, Bugis-Makassar, siri' na pacce, lempu', and sipakatau. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers published between 2021 and 2026, in English or Bahasa Indonesia, that addressed at least one of the four themes of this article. Reference lists of key articles were used to trace further sources. A small number of earlier works were retained either as foundational references for core constructs (Hofstede, 2001; Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2007; Magnusson et al., 2013) or because no more recent regional study addressed the construct directly (Abdullah et al., 2019; Amir et al., 2020). Only sources with complete bibliographic information were retained.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

Analysis followed three steps. First, the selected studies were read and coded inductively for how they described adaptation decisions, the cultural or managerial factors shaping those decisions, and the outcomes or boundary conditions reported. Second, the codes were grouped by constant comparison into four adaptation domains and a set of antecedents, outcomes, and moderators. Third, the groupings were mapped onto Bugis-Makassar values to identify where cultural anchors align with, or may conflict with, the demands of foreign-market adaptation, and the resulting relationships were stated as propositions. Because the propositions come from interpretive synthesis rather than statistical testing, they should be read as theoretically grounded conjectures. Two limitations of the method follow: the search was not exhaustive, and the available regional evidence is dominated by qualitative and conceptual studies of modest scale.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Four Domains of Cultural Adaptation

The synthesis suggests that cultural adaptation in the international digital marketing of culturally anchored MSMEs can be organized into four domains: (a) narrative and product adaptation, (b) language and visual localization, (c) platform and channel selection, and (d) relationship and trust-building. Table 1 summarizes each domain, the adaptation practices reported or implied in the literature, the Bugis-Makassar cultural anchor most relevant to it, and the principal tension it raises.

Narrative and product adaptation. Sasaki et al. (2021) show that firms with culturally specific products may target receptive segments, adapt, or transpose cultural meanings, and that the choice evolves as the firm expands. For Bugis-Makassar MSMEs selling culinary products, artisan crafts, or ethnic fashion, the strategic question is which elements of the product story form the cultural core, such as provenance, the craft process, and the honour attached to the maker's name, and which are periphery, such as portion size, colour palette, packaging format, and product naming. Retaining the core while adapting the periphery may protect authenticity without making the product unintelligible to foreign buyers.

Language and visual localization. Noris et al. (2025) frame localization as a strategic practice within glocalization dynamics, which implies that translating text is only one layer of the task. Language choice, visual representation, tone, and local cultural references all affect how a message is read. For owners whose communication is shaped by respect for the interlocutor (*sipakatau*) and sensitivity to honour (*siri'*), the tone that feels appropriate in

domestic business relations may read differently to foreign consumers, and promotional styles that feel assertive may sit uneasily with local norms of dignity. These are plausible tensions that empirical work should examine, not established findings.

Platform and channel selection. Platform choice determines which cultural expressions become visible. Tolstoy et al. (2022) show that online marketing capabilities alone are insufficient, and Wen et al. (2023) show that cross-border e-commerce can improve firms' market information. Arif and Windarsari (2026) report that Makassar MSMEs practise value-based discernment and selective adoption of AI marketing tools, yet face constrained agency because algorithmic visibility systems can penalize cultural non-conformity. The platform domain therefore involves not only choosing among marketplaces, social media, and messaging applications but also negotiating the terms on which cultural difference is rendered visible.

Relationship and trust-building. Remote buyers cannot observe a seller's character directly. Leonidou et al. (2021) show that emotional intelligence supports buyer–seller relationship quality across cultures, and Amir et al. (2020) describe lempu' as honesty, truth, sincerity, kindness, and justice shaping Bugis-Makassar traders' conduct. These values are potential relational resources, but they must be converted into signals that foreign buyers can verify, such as accurate product descriptions, transparent policies, prompt responses, and consistent fulfilment. Intermediaries such as distributors and foreign designers (Sasaki et al., 2021) can help bridge the gap by vouching for the seller in the buyer's own cultural terms.

Table 1. Domains of cultural adaptation in international digital marketing of Bugis-Makassar MSMEs

Domain	Adaptation practices (literature)	Bugis-Makassar cultural anchor	Principal tension
Narrative and product	Selective targeting, cultural adaptation, or cultural transposition of culturally specific products; ongoing adjustment as the firm expands (Sasaki et al., 2021)	Pinisi maritime heritage; honour of the maker's name (siri')	Over-adaptation dilutes authenticity; under-adaptation limits comprehension
Language and visual	Localization as a strategic practice beyond translation, covering text, imagery, and local references (Noris et al., 2025)	Respectful address and tone (sipakatau)	Literal translation; tone and imagery misread by foreign audiences
Platform and channel	Choice of marketplaces, social media, and messaging; building online marketing capability and ambidexterity (Tolstoy et al., 2022; Wen et al., 2023)	Community orientation (pacce); value-based discernment of tools (Arif & Windarsari, 2026)	Platform dependence; visibility penalties for cultural non-conformity
Relationship and trust	Relationship quality supported by emotional intelligence; use of intermediaries (Leonidou et al., 2021; Sasaki et al., 2021)	Honesty and sincerity (lempu'); solidarity (pacce) (Amir et al., 2020)	Values not visible to remote buyers unless converted into verifiable signals

Source: authors' synthesis of the reviewed literature. Cultural anchors are interpretive mappings, not empirical findings.

4.2. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 integrates the argument. On the left, two antecedents drive adaptation decisions: the cultural capital of Bugis-Makassar MSMEs (*siri' na pacce*, *lempu'*, *sipakatau*, and maritime-trading heritage) and the cultural intelligence of the owner-manager. In the centre, the four domains form the adaptation strategy. On the right, adaptation is expected to produce cultural resonance and perceived authenticity, cross-border trust and relationship quality, and ultimately international marketing performance. The lower band lists boundary

conditions drawn from the literature: cultural and psychic distance, which the SME internationalization literature treats as contextual (Child et al., 2022); platform power and algorithms (Arif & Windarsari, 2026); cultural intermediaries (Sasaki et al., 2021); and digital capability and resources (Tolstoy et al., 2022).

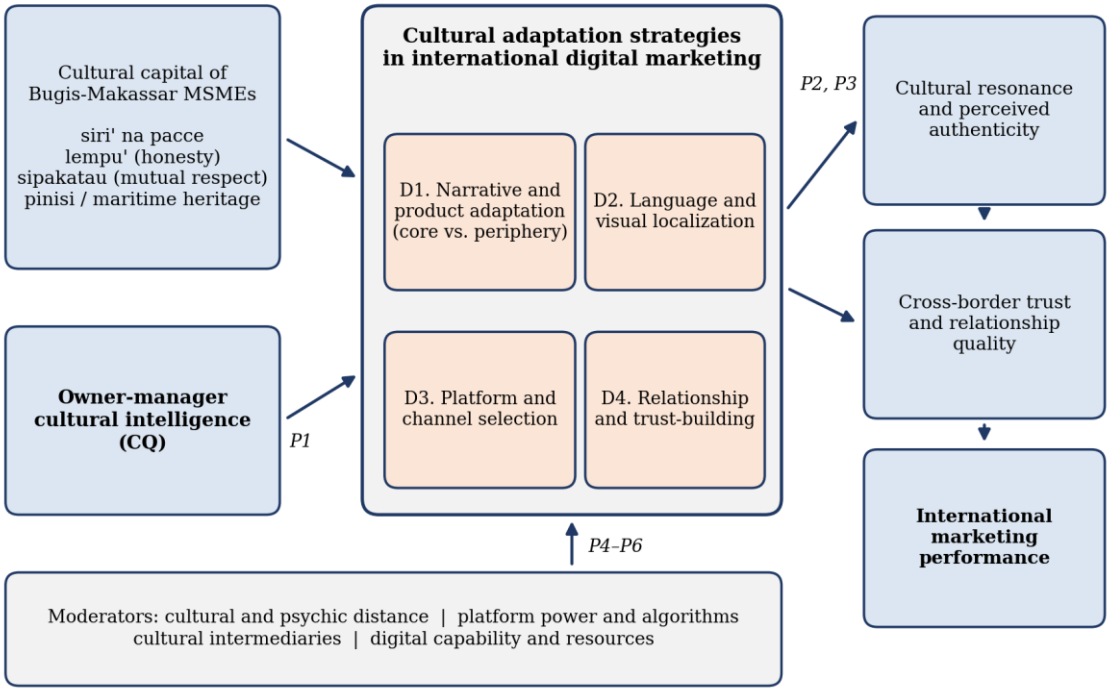


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of cultural adaptation in the international digital marketing of Bugis-Makassar MSMEs (source: authors' synthesis)

4.3. Research Propositions

Six propositions follow from the framework. They are summarized in Table 2 together with the main literature supporting each. They are intended as a starting point for empirical testing, for example through multiple-case studies of exporting MSMEs, supplemented by netnographic analysis of their digital channels and by surveys once constructs have been operationalized.

Table 2. Research propositions

No.	Proposition	Main support
P1	Owner-manager cultural intelligence is positively related to the quality of adaptation decisions across the four domains, notably the separation of cultural core from periphery.	Magnusson et al. (2013); Fakhreldin (2021); Mammadov & Wald (2025)
P2	Retaining a culturally anchored core while adapting peripheral elements (language, visuals, formats) is more strongly related to cultural resonance and perceived authenticity than either full standardization or full adaptation.	Sasaki et al. (2021); Noris et al. (2025); Mandler et al. (2021)
P3	Translating siri' na pacce, lempu', and sipakatau into verifiable trust signals is positively related to cross-border trust and relationship quality.	Amir et al. (2020); Leonidou et al. (2021); Arif & Windarsari (2026)
P4	Digital marketing capability is positively related to international performance only when accompanied by marketing ambidexterity and cultural interpretation of foreign demand.	Tolstoy et al. (2022); Wen et al. (2023)
P5	Cultural intermediaries (distributors, foreign designers, and potentially co-ethnic or diaspora networks) strengthen the relationship between adaptation and both cultural resonance and trust.	Sasaki et al. (2021)

No.	Proposition	Main support
P6	Platform power weakens the translation of cultural identity into cultural resonance: the more visibility depends on conformity to platform norms, the weaker the effect of adaptation.	Arif & Windarsari (2026)

Source: authors' synthesis. P1–P6 correspond to the paths labelled in Figure 1.

Taken together, the propositions state that adaptation quality depends on the owner-manager's cultural competence (P1), that a retained core with an adaptable periphery should outperform both extremes in producing resonance (P2), that cultural values must be translated into verifiable trust signals (P3), and that the effects of all this are conditioned by capability, intermediaries, and platform power (P4–P6). P2 is the central claim. It extends the process view of Sasaki et al. (2021) to the digital setting and responds to the call of Mandler et al. (2021) for context-sensitive, dynamic perspectives on standardization and adaptation.

4.4. Discussion

The framework has three theoretical implications. First, it re-frames the standardization–adaptation question for culturally embedded MSMEs from a choice of degree to a choice of layer: which elements of the offering and its communication are non-negotiable, and which are adjustable. Second, it connects cultural intelligence, usually studied at the level of individual managers, to specific marketing decisions in the digital domain, answering calls to examine owner-manager competencies in SME internationalization (Mammadov & Wald, 2025; Munteanu et al., 2023). Third, it places an indigenous value system at the centre of an international marketing model rather than treating it as background context, and it recognizes, following Arif and Windarsari (2026), that such values both enable agency and are constrained by platform power.

For practice, three groups of actors are relevant. MSME owners can begin by auditing their offerings to separate a cultural core from a periphery, deliberately building CQ through exposure to target-market consumers and partners, and converting values such as lempu' into concrete, verifiable trust practices. Platform providers can support culturally anchored sellers by offering richer language and cultural-context fields and by making visibility criteria more transparent. Export-support agencies and regional governments can design training that goes beyond platform mechanics to cultural interpretation, and can support cooperative arrangements for shared translation, design, and logistics services. Arif and Windarsari (2026) additionally call for participatory co-design of AI tools with local communities and for cooperative digital infrastructure, which would extend the same logic to the technology layer.

5. Conclusion

This article proposed a conceptual framework for understanding how Bugis-Makassar MSMEs can adapt their international digital marketing while preserving the cultural identity that differentiates them. The synthesis points to four domains of adaptation, namely narrative and product, language and visual, platform and channel, and relationship and trust, and to a layered logic in which a culturally anchored core is retained while peripheral elements are adapted. Owner-manager cultural intelligence, intermediaries, digital capability, and platform power condition the outcome. Six propositions translate the framework into testable form.

The study has limitations. It is conceptual and presents no primary data, its literature search was purposive rather than exhaustive, and much of the regional evidence it draws on is qualitative and small in scale. The mapping between Bugis-Makassar values and adaptation domains is interpretive and may differ across sub-groups, sectors, and generations. Future research should test the propositions through multiple-case studies of Bugis-Makassar exporters across sectors, combining interviews with analysis of their digital channels and

foreign buyers' reactions. Comparative designs across Indonesian ethnic regions, and across target markets with different cultural distance, would show how far the framework generalizes. Quantitative scales for cultural core retention and trust-signal translation would allow later survey-based testing.

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