

## **JOHAN STEYN: Symbolism and sensitivity — navigating AI in a culturally diverse world**

In a world driven by technological advancements, artificial intelligence (AI) has become a cornerstone of innovation across an array of human achievements. Yet, as we integrate these sophisticated systems into our daily lives, the challenge of navigating AI within the complexities of a culturally diverse world becomes evident.

The Paris Olympics' opening ceremony, intended as a grand spectacle of cultural celebration, instead became a focal point for global controversy, illustrating how easily symbolic representations can be misinterpreted when viewed through different cultural lenses. This incident serves as a poignant reminder of the sensitivity required when dealing with symbolism in AI.

The ceremony featured a segment where Bacchus, the Greek god of festivity, was portrayed in a manner that some viewers perceived as a disrespectful mimicry of Christian symbols. This interpretation sparked a backlash that overshadowed the event's intentions, highlighting how cultural perceptions deeply influence our interpretation of symbols. Similarly, as AI systems perform tasks involving symbolic or communicative functions, the potential for misinterpretation grows, especially when these systems are deployed across diverse cultural landscapes.

AI, by design, is a mirror that reflects not only our technological aspirations but also our biases and fears. When AI systems like chatbots, virtual assistants, or content recommenders interact with users, they often use symbols or language that carry varying connotations in different cultural contexts. The risk of misunderstanding these symbols can lead to miscommunication or offence. For instance, an AI that uses colloquial language inappropriate in certain cultures can inadvertently alienate or offend users, thereby diminishing the technology's effectiveness and acceptance.

The anthropomorphic qualities often attributed to AI complicate these interactions. As AI systems appear more human-like, users may imbue them with human traits, including self-awareness and intentions they do not possess. Just as some viewers of the Olympic ceremony interpreted the artistic choices as having deeper, possibly offensive implications, users might misread the actions and decisions made by an AI platform, believing these systems have agency or moral dimensions beyond their programming.

To effectively manage the complexities of cultural diversity in AI applications, developers and policymakers must embed sensitivity and inclusivity at the core of AI development. This requires a holistic approach encompassing a wide spectrum of cultural insights and involving cultural experts to ensure AI systems are attuned to the nuances of different people groups. For instance, localisation should extend beyond simple language translation to embrace the integration of local customs, etiquette, and values within the AI's functionality.

Another example is the adaptation of virtual assistants to recognise and respond appropriately to non-verbal cues that vary widely across cultures, such as expressions of politeness or respect, which are not universal but deeply rooted in specific cultural practices.

As we strive to harness the benefits of AI, it is crucial to approach its integration with a keen awareness of cultural diversity and sensitivity. By fostering open dialogues about

the implications of AI in different cultural contexts, we can promote a more inclusive future where technology truly serves the diverse world it exists in.

This will not only improve our relationship with AI but also ensure it acts as a tool for positive transformation, bridging cultural divides rather than deepening them.

Source: Johan Steyn - <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/columnists/2024-08-07-johan-steyn-symbolism-and-sensitivity--navigating-ai-in-a-culturally-diverse-world/>

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