

WESTERNISED DEFAULT SETTING IN TECHNOLOGY

Exploring the Impact of Western-Centric
Design on Diverse Cultures

LET'S START WITH “UNIVERSAL DESIGN”

Universal Design, also known as “Inclusive Design”, emphasises creating design to meet the needs regardless of their gender, age, disability and race (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2024). Many tech companies promise to be inclusive and diverse in opening access for global communities.

However, if we review the details, we see that many designs are shaped by Western ideals, including linear progress, Western-format information, and a standardised English-based interface (Peng, 2023). Design Justice Principles 10 talked about adapting the design from the local cultures to provide a sustainable and empowering diverse communities (Design Justice Network, 2018).

Are we truly building diversity through technology, or are we unintentionally erasing differences under the ideology of universality?

Whose Default?

MANY SO-CALLED "DEFAULT" SETTINGS IN TODAY'S TECHNOLOGIES REFLECT A NARROW CULTURAL VIEWPOINT, OFTEN SHAPED BY WESTERN NORMS. THESE DEFAULTS AREN'T NEUTRAL — THEY PROVIDE A WORLDVIEW THAT MAY NOT REFLECT HOW MANY PEOPLE LIVE, THINK, OR COMMUNICATE.



(Image source: ChatGPT)

Languages



English is the first default language on most of global platforms and devices, even though only about 25% of native speakers (Katya Sheviakova, 2024) of the world populations. This language dominated the privileged of western cultures while marginalising the other cultures.

Calendar and Time



Most calendars use the civil (solar) calendar by default, ignoring the diversity of different cultural understanding about time (e.g lunar calendar, or Indigenous seasonal calendar).

Usability



Design often focuses on task-oriented, minimalist user journeys, prioritizing efficiency with less information (Alexander et al., 2021). In contrast, many Chinese websites are designed as information-rich layouts that are seen as "too busy" by Western standards but highly valued by local users (Liu, 2021).

Visuals



Minimalist and simplified color palettes are often treated as the design "norm." However, colorful, detailed, and symbolic visual metaphors resonate more strongly with many global communities, who may find minimalist designs cold or lacking in meaning.

Tracing the Roots of “Universal” Technology

The dominance of Western cultures is not built within one day. It was built on existing biases and superiority in the current technology.

Lead User Myth

A lot of design, engineering, and decision-making in firms is led by people from the dominant social groups. Too often, the design team only adds diverse users to inform the ideation or even worse, the persona was built based on design teams’ assumptions and stereotypes without validating user needs (Costanza-Chock, 2020, pp.77–98).

Tech Globalism

Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and many other global technology companies are formatted identity embedded by majorly dominated Western cultures which reinforce existing racial and culture hierarchy, even when it’s presented as “objective” and “neutral” (Benjamin, 2019, pp.83–84)

ARE WE FEEDING BIASES?

Today, new technologies like Artificial Intelligence promise to change everything. However, they are still built based on the foundation shaped by historical biases, which are the same biases that have influenced the interaction of technology.

The dominant players in the AI model space are mostly based in Western countries, making English the dominant language to answer the questions and understand the dataset.

The result? Biases, stereotypes of cultures and misinterpretation. If we don't question whose knowledge shapes these systems, we risk perpetuating cultural inequality deeper into the technologies we call "universal."



Whose intelligence is artificial
intelligence?

Location ≠ Justice



(Image Source: Canva)

MANY TECH COMPANIES LOCALISE THEIR APPS BY
TRANSLATING MENUS AND LABELS, BUT TRANSLATION
ALONE DOESN'T SOLVE DESIGN INJUSTICE.

Translation without Understanding

Changing the language doesn't change the system. Formats, flows, and assumptions remain Western. This is confusing, especially when the usability and user experience don't match with the local norms.

Surface-Level "International Versions"

Users often receive copy-pasted Western apps with minor language tweaks, not real redesigns for local needs like alternative calendars, specific name formats and existing bias generation.

One-Way Cultural Export

Western tech dominates globally, but rarely imports non-Western knowledge or design practices back into its core.



The "universal design" flow still moves in one direction — from the West to everyone else (Costanza-Chock, 2020).

REF LEC TION

In the current law enforcement, both the Equality Act and the European Accessibility Act have clear regulations about removing biases. However, these regulations did not address the deeper problem about...



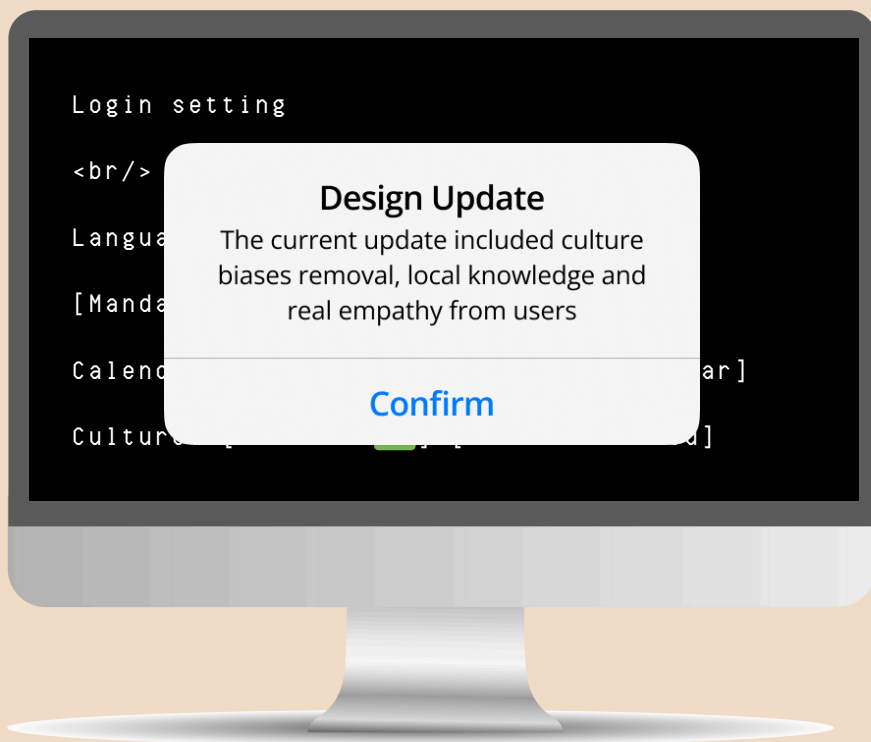
**... WHOSE
STANDARDS
SHAPE THE
WORLD ?**

(image source: Unsplash)

Technology can be truly universal when it doesn't recognize a single voice as standard. True design justice starts when we stop forcing one worldview on everyone, and start designing for many ways of living, speaking, moving, and being.

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