ALTERNATIVE FUTURES:

FINAL DOCUMEN-TATION

May 12, 2025

FORE SIGHT ACA DEMY

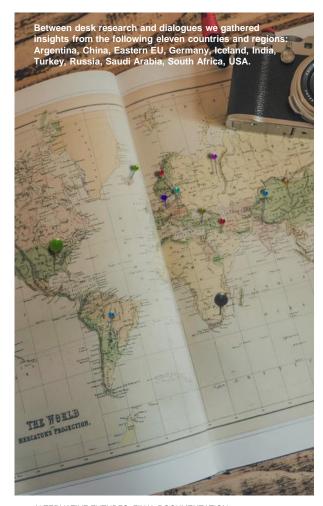# Content

Management Summary

Management Summary

Objectives and scope

- The Foresight Academy's Hot Topic Space "Alternative Futures" explored values and perceptions beyond the traditional democratic-authoritarian framework.

- We investigated how supporters of authoritarian movements, regimes, or political parties relate to key issues such as globalization, climate change, demographic shifts, family and gender roles, human rights, and technological advancements.

- This analysis covered countries classified in the global West as "democratic," "authoritarian," or "mixed," specifically examining the attitudes of authoritarian movement supporters within Western democratic societies.

- Methodology included desk research, dialogues with global thought leaders, imagery analysis, and workshops.

Between desk research and dialogues we gathered insights from the following eleven countries and regions: Argentina, China, Eastern EU, Germany, Iceland, India, Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, USA.

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

Process

Desk Research: Themis Foresight conducted comprehensive desk research on nine countries and regions. Through textual analysis, we examined how governments align with the six identified categories.

Imagery Analysis: Wolfgang Ulrich and Annekathrin Kouhout analyzed political and ideological imagery—including AI-generated visuals, social media content, memes, and visuals linked to authoritarian, accelerationist, and democratic worldviews.

International Dialogues: We organized eight two-hour dialogues with representatives from Argentina, China, Germany, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and the United States to gain diverse perspectives.

Workshops: Two workshops were held to discuss the research findings and explore their potential implications.
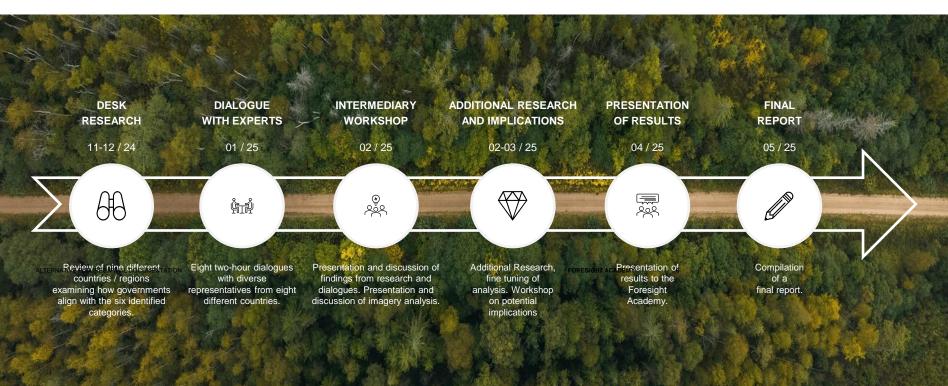
The Project at a Glance

DESK RESEARCH	DIALOGUE WITH EXPERTS	INTERMEDIARY WORKSHOP	ADDITIONAL RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS	PRESENTATION OF RESULTS	FINAL REPORT
11-12 / 24	01 / 25	02 / 25	02-03 / 25	04 / 25	05 / 25
Review of nine different countries / regions examining how governments align with the six identified categories.	Eight two-hour dialogues with diverse representatives from eight different countries.	Presentation and discussion of findings from research and dialogues. Presentation and discussion of imagery analysis.	Additional Research, fine tuning of analysis. Workshop on potential implications	Presentation of results to the Foresight Academy.	Compilation of a final report.

ALTERNATIVE VIEWS RESEARCH DOCUMENTATION

FORESIGHT ACADEMY

Management Summary

Dialogue Partners

Vladimir Kotenev (Russia)

Vladimir Kotenev, former Russian ambassador to Germany (2004 – 2010), began his diplomatic career in Germany in 1979 and later headed the consular service of Russia's Foreign Ministry (2001–2004).

Prof. Chen Weilin (China, name and image changed by the authors of this report)

Prof. Weilin, Dean of a prestigious Chinese school for economics and international relations, researches U.S.– China relations and public sentiment, frequently commenting for international media

Manoj Kuthari (India)

Manoj Kothari is the CEO and Chief Strategist at Turian Labs, a strategic foresight and innovation consulting firm, where he leads interdisciplinary initiatives integrating design thinking and futures strategy.

Layla Al-Fayez (Saudia Arabia, name and image changed by the authors of this report)

Layla Al-Fayez is a design futurist who examines Saudi Arabia's transformation, focusing on globalization, societal shifts, gender roles, climate policies, and the country's global image.

Management Summary

Dialogue Partners

Naleda Kumalo (South Africa, name and image changed by the authors of this report)

Naleda Kumalo is a young South African law student passionate about justice and social equality, aiming to positively impact her community through her future legal career.

Alexander von Bismarck (Germany)

Alexander von Bismarck is an entrepreneur, lord of Döbbelin Castle, and former CDU politician who engages in peace activism on social media.

Tomás Almada (Argentina, name and image changed by the authors of this report)

Tomás Almada is an Argentine chemical engineer working as a project engineer in Southern Europe, developing energy-saving projects for the pharmaceutical industry.

Peter Clarke (U.S.)

Peter Clarke, owner of Washington state's only Black minority owned moving company, is a Jamaican-born community leader serving on Vancouver's Chamber of Commerce board.
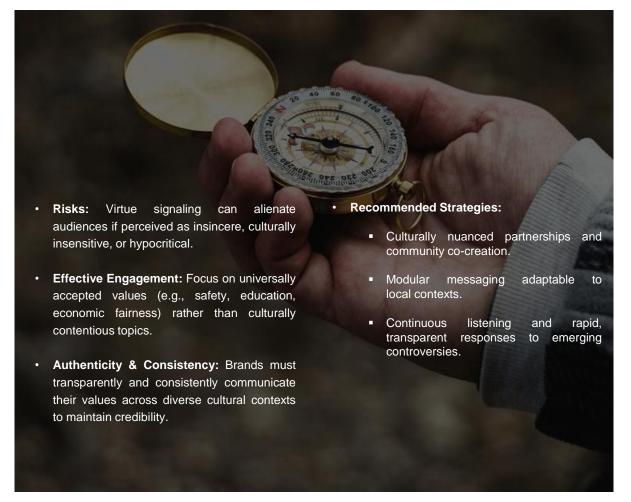
MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

Key Findings

Based on our research and dialogues, we identified the following attitudes among supporters of the studied authoritarian regimes, parties, or movements toward key topics:
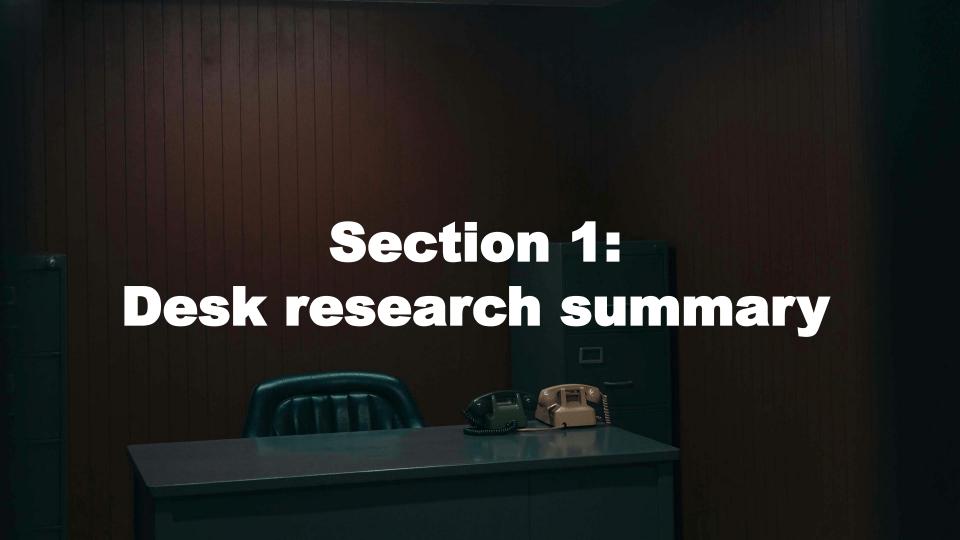
- **Globalization:** China and India see globalization as essential for economic growth; populist movements in Western and African countries highlight its unequal outcomes, while BRICS nations promote a multipolar global order.

- **Climate Change:** Universally recognized yet prioritized differently; developing countries often prioritize economic growth and tangible benefits like clean water over abstract global climate goals, while Western nations are split between skepticism towards regulation and reliance on technological solutions

- **Demographic & Societal Change:** Aging societies in Europe, Russia, and China pose economic and social challenges, while younger populations in India, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia present opportunities for growth alongside employment pressures

- **Family and Gender Roles:** Progress toward gender equality varies significantly, with rapid change in Saudi Arabia, steady advancement in India and South Africa, and conservative resistance in Russia, Germany, and the USA.

- **Technological Optimism:** Most pronounced in China, India, and Saudi Arabia; Western countries express greater caution driven by concerns about privacy and job displacement.

Management Summary

Virtue Signaling and Strategic Implications for Brands

- Simplistic categorizations of countries as either "democracies" or "autocracies" fail to capture complex political realities.

- These rigid classifications obscure deeper cultural, societal, and economic dynamics shaping global change.

- Understanding nuanced governance practices and societal attitudes provides richer, actionable insights for strategic foresight.

- **Risks:** Virtue signaling can alienate audiences if perceived as insincere, culturally insensitive, or hypocritical.

- **Effective Engagement:** Focus on universally accepted values (e.g., safety, education, economic fairness) rather than culturally contentious topics.

- **Authenticity & Consistency:** Brands must transparently and consistently communicate their values across diverse cultural contexts to maintain credibility.

- **Recommended Strategies:**

  - Culturally nuanced partnerships and community co-creation.

  - Modular messaging adaptable to local contexts.

  - Continuous listening and rapid, transparent responses to emerging controversies.

Section 1:
Desk research summary

• **Note:** The selected countries represent important geopolitical dynamics and regional diversity. While additional countries could have provided further insights, the selection aimed primarily to capture a broad range of relevant global perspectives.

Desk research summary

Overview

Nine countries/regions reviewed, chosen for their global importance, representation across continents, and diversity of political systems:

- **Democratic Reference Country:** Iceland (for comparative baseline)

- **Authoritarian Regimes:** China, Saudi Arabia

- **Mixed Governance:** Turkey

- **Democracies with Prominent Authoritarian Trends:** United States, Eastern EU, Argentina, India, South Africa

• **Findings organized around six key themes:** Globalization, climate change, demographic shifts, family and gender roles, human rights, and technological change (including governmental attitudes).

• **Extensive Analysis:** 92 sources and 3 books reviewed, summarized in a detailed 40-page report.

Desk research

Findings

- **Political thought structures** only partly serve as a sufficient indicator for how people relate to the six categories under investigation. Numerous paradoxes and unexpected combinations of perspectives emerge, highlighting the need for nuanced analysis.

  - Attitudes to **family and gender roles** tend to be **more traditional in authoritarian thought structures**.

  - **Human rights** are more easily **disregarded** in authoritarian thought structures.

  - The values regarding **globalization, climate change, demographic change and technological change** varied widely across the full 1–5 scale

- Support to **globalization** scored **medium to high** (3-4) **in democratic and authoritarian regimes**, while **authoritarian tendencies** in democratic countries scored from **low** (1) to **medium** (3).

- **Climate change** was of **high concern** in **democratic** (5) **and authoritarian** (4-5) **regimes**.

- Attitudes to **technological change** were **positive in authoritarian regimes** (5), **medium in democracies and mixed countries** (3), and scored **between 1 and 5 among authoritarian tendencies** in democracies.

Desk research

Findings

- **Biases** in research matrix conceal more than they reveal.

  - **Opposition to globalization** is not necessarily **"nationalist"**. Nationalist rhetoric abounds in China, yet the regime is supportive of globalization. Trump supporters in the U.S. reject globalization – out of fear of job losses in the U.S. While this overlaps with MAGA-nationalism, it is not identical.

  - **Climate change** similarly concealed strong environmental concerns that exist among supporters of authoritarian movements or regimes. U.S. miners may **oppose climate policy while militantly rejecting environmental damage** like mountain top removal by coal companies. In India **more immediate concerns** over clean air or water may find easier articulation than an abstract global phenomenon.

  - While there is a universal U.N. definition of what **human rights** represent, indices measuring human rights vary widely. Thus, while India scores 66/100 in the 2024 Freedom in the World Index compared to Afghanistan's 6/100, the 2023 World Press Freedom Index ranked Afghanistan 9 rungs higher (152nd place) than India (161st place).
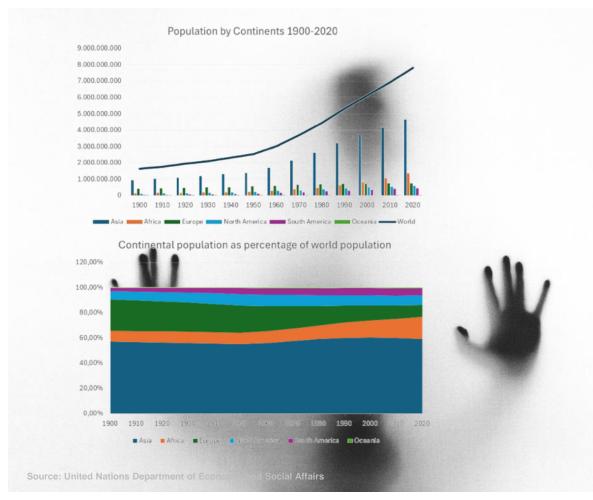
Desk research

Findings

- The categorization between **democratic and authoritarian** regimes or movements is by and large **not helpful to capture underlying cultural, societal, or ideological differences** between countries or people supporting one or the other political belief system.

- Absolute categories such as "democracy" or "autocracy" provide at best a snapshot of the present. They do not take into account move-ment. While e.g. Saudi Arabia is one of the few remaining monarchies, the social and economic reforms of the last eight years are unparalleled in modern history.

- Rather than **simplifying comparisons** solely by **authoritarian vs. democratic**, examining specific practices, rights protections, governance effectiveness, and societal attitudes provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of differing value systems.

- For a full review of the desk research findings, please consult the 12 December 2024 report **"'Alternative Futures' HTS of FSA – Report on Initial Research Findings"** by Jan Berger, James Hoefnagels, Lousia Kastner, Carina Stöttner and Felix Tegeler.

"Battle of Seattle", 1999, leftists, environmentalists and labor unions unite to challenge globalization.

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proteste_gegen_die_Welthandelsorganisation_in_Seattle_1999#/media/Datei:WTO_protests_in_Seattle_November_30_1999.jpg

Population by Continents 1900-2020

Continental population as percentage of world population

Source: United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs
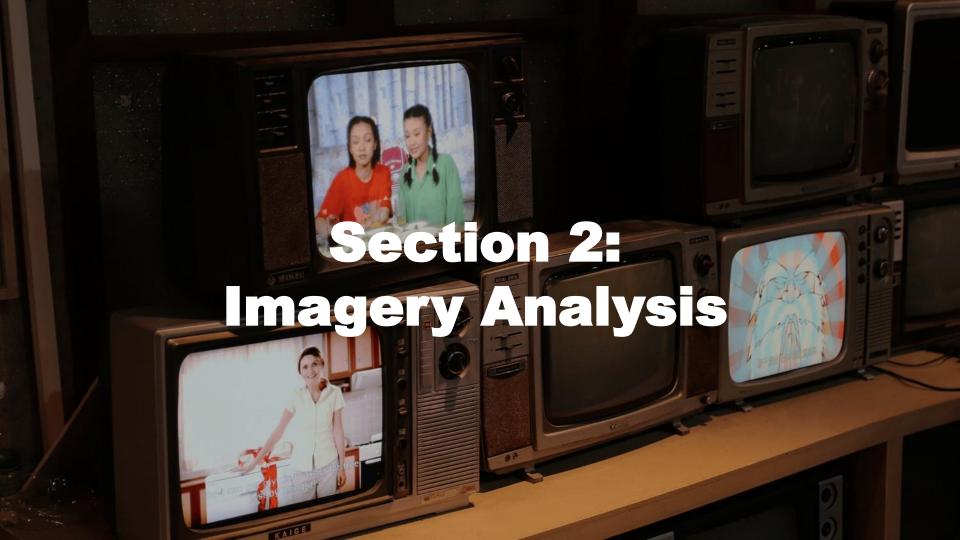
Desk research

Overview

The global balance of power is shifting.

One hundred years ago, Europe alone had a larger population than North America, South America, and Africa combined, and the Global West accounted for 31% of the world's population.

Today, this figure has dropped to 17%. Yet, the West continues to assume significant political and moral leadership — exemplified by groups like the G7.

Increasingly, this leadership and the underlying confidence in Western dominance are being questioned by the rest of the world. While many Western structures and cultural norms from the era of globalization remain influential, they are now being reassessed, relativized, and reinterpreted globally.

Section 2:
Imagery Analysis

February 2025: Scene from the AI-generated "Trump Gaza" video, originally intended as sarcastic criticism of Trump's policy plans, but later reposted by Trump himself on Truth Social, sparking heated debate

https://www.instagram.com/realdonaldtrump/reel/DGhfpgHsOg6/

Imagery Analysis

Findings

Images have become **more influential than texts or arguments** in shaping political discourse and determining political outcomes.

Powerful imagery doesn't need to be real; it should evoke emotions, represent wishes, and symbolically reinforce narratives.

Social media amplifies these images, spreading them quickly regardless of authenticity.

Imagery Analysis

Findings

- **Authoritarian and Right-Wing Imagery Strategies**

  - AI-generated images effectively amplify authoritarian and right-wing narratives by recombining familiar, nostalgic elements.

  - Imagery focuses on power, strength, dominance, and superiority, reinforcing a "survival of the fittest" ethos.

  - These visuals create an idealized past and optimized future, exemplified by movements like MAGA or Effective Accelerationism (e/acc).

https://www.neom.com/de-de/regions/theline

Imagery Analysis

Findings

Contrasts Between Authoritarian and Democratic Imagery

- **Authoritarian Images:**

    - Focus on grand visions, strength, order, and spaces rather than individual people.

    - Use imagery that excludes nuanced human aspects (e.g., diversity, equality, individual stories).

- **Democratic Images:**

    - Emphasize evolutionary change rather than radical disruption or restoration of a perceived lost past.

    - Highlight diversity, plurality, equality, and the individual's role in society rather than grand architectural or territorial expansions.

Imagery Analysis

Findings

- **Democratic Imagery Challenges and Opportunities**

    - Democratic movements often struggle to produce emotionally compelling, visionary imagery compared to authoritarian counterparts.

    - Imagery driven by minorities and marginalized groups presents a dynamic, inclusive vision, showing a peaceful, prosperous, and equal society.

    - Effective democratic imagery could strategically leverage narratives of empowerment, inclusion, and realistic future optimism to compete more effectively.

For the detailed imagery analysis, please consult "Imagery Analysis within the Hot Topic Space 'Alternative Futures in a Fragmented Global Landscape'" by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Ulrich and Prof. Dr. Annekathrin Kohout.

Section 3: Comparative Perspectives

Comparative Perspectives

Changing the narrative

The following pages offer comparative insights into attitudes toward globalization, climate change, demographic shifts, family and gender roles, human rights, and technological change, as expressed during our dialogues.

Although specific positions are associated with particular countries (e.g., Germany), these viewpoints do not represent the overall attitudes of each country's general population.
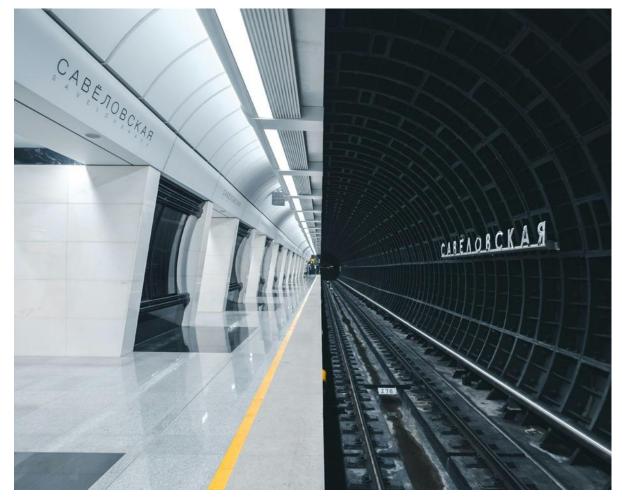
Instead, they reflect the perspectives of dialogue participants who, to varying degrees and for diverse reasons — including active support, one-time voting, protest votes, or acceptance out of necessity — are aligned with regimes, parties, or movements often characterized as "authoritarian" in Western discourse.

For instance, the "German" viewpoint captures perspectives from AfD or BSW supporters, while the "Indian" viewpoint represents opinions of BJP voters.

The Dialogues

What's motivating support for authoritarian regimes & parties?

Germany (AfD, BSW): Driven by concerns about losing national, cultural, and familial identity, particularly intensified by unresolved feelings around German reunification and East German experiences. Strong distrust towards political elites perceived as sacrificing national interests to an unchecked European bureaucracy.

Russia: Motivated by profound disillusionment from the economic collapse and perceived national humiliation of the 1990s, intensified by the loss of global status after the Soviet Union's dissolution. Resentment toward broken Western promises, notably NATO expansion, and the rejection of closer economic integration. Vladimir Putin is credited with restoring national pride, economic stability, and cultural self-confidence in contrast to perceived Western decadence.

The Dialogues

What's motivating support for authoritarian regimes & parties?

India: The BJP is perceived as driving modernization and growth after decades of perceived stagnation and corruption under Congress rule. It serves as a unifying national force, promoting higher standards and addressing historical grievances related to colonial and Muslim rule. Balancing tradition and modernity, especially in family and gender roles, sovereignty and self-sufficiency remain core values.

China: National pride linked to overcoming a "century of humiliation" and achieving significant economic and social progress. Support is based on the government's success in lifting millions out of poverty and securing global leadership status. Citizens broadly accept surveillance and political control as long as prosperity and stability continue, though younger generations show signs of increased individualism.

South Africa: Support emerges from frustration over unfulfilled post-Apartheid promises, ongoing socio-economic inequality, and persistent ethnic divides. Anger is compounded by perceptions of a corrupt elite. Continued demands for wealth redistribution highlight that the project of nation-building remains unfinished.

The Dialogues

What's motivating support for authoritarian regimes & parties?

Saudi Arabia: Support stems from rapid modernization and extensive social reforms introduced by MBS, including enhanced personal freedoms and women's rights, reduced corruption, and effective containment of religious authority. While acknowledging ongoing challenges, there's a strong sentiment against external criticism and moralizing.

MAGA U.S.: Driven by disillusionment with the erosion of the American Dream, economic insecurity, and cultural anxieties surrounding identity, traditional values, religion, and immigration.
Deep skepticism toward perceived corrupt political and technological elites fuels a desire to regain lost strength and respect.

Argentina: Rooted in widespread frustration over persistent economic stagnation and corruption among traditional political elites, particularly affecting the younger generation. Javier Milei symbolizes hope for renewal, promising to address economic insecurity and restore national pride and identity.

Instagram profile of famous American tradwife influencer

https://www.instagram.com/p/DECB-vJOqLS/

The Dialogues

Key Takeaways

- **Globalization shifts** — China, India, and BRICS favor an open but multipolar economy, while Western and African voices express skepticism.

- **Climate action is fragmented —** Developing nations prioritize economic growth, while the West is divided over urgency and policies.

- **Demographics drive future labor markets** — Aging populations require automation and immigration, while youth-heavy countries need job creation.

- **Gender roles evolve unevenly** — Rapid legislative advancements in Saudi Arabia, India, and South Africa contrast with conservative pushback in Russia, Germany, and the U.S.

- **Human rights perspectives diverge** — The West emphasizes political rights, while emerging markets focus on stability and economic well-being.

- **Tech optimism is highest in the Global South** — China, India, and Saudi Arabia embrace AI and digital innovation, while the West wrestles with regulation and ethics.

Globalization:

Divergent Views on Globalization

- Strong support from **China** and **India**, viewing globalization as a driver of economic growth.

- **China**: "Single largest beneficiary" – unwavering commitment to open markets.

- **India**: Advocates an "Indianized" globalization—openness with **strategic self-reliance**.

Western Populist & African Critiques

- **U.S. & Germany**: Concerns over job losses, economic sovereignty.

- **Germany**: Globalization has gone "too far"; support for multipolar trade.

- **South Africa:** Criticism of globalization as benefiting elites, leaving local communities behind.

Russia & Saudi Arabia's Pragmatic Approach

- **Russia**: Distinguishes between "**globalization**" (economic integration) and "**globalism**" (Western dominance).

- **Saudi Arabia**: Benefits from globalization but seeks control to **protect cultural and religious identity**.

Rise of a Multipolar World

- **BRICS** nations advocate for **reduced Western economic dominance**.

- Discussions on a BRICS currency and **alternative global trade corridors**.

- **Anticipation of shifting alliances**, with some expecting Europe to align more with BRICS in the future.

Climate Change:

Widespread Acknowledgment but Differing Priorities

- **All participants recognized climate change as real**, but views on urgency and responsibility varied.

- Developing nations see **climate action as important but secondary** to economic growth and poverty reduction.

China: Climate Leader & Largest Emitter

- "**One of the most significant environmental turnarounds**" – aggressive shift to electric vehicles, solar, and pollution control.

- **Contradiction**: The world's largest carbon emitter, reliant on coal.

- Emphasizes **international cooperation** but warns that geopolitical **tensions could slow progress**.

Developing Nations: Balancing Growth & Sustainability

- **India**: Committed to climate goals (Paris Agreement) but emphasizes the need for economic stability—coal remains dominant (55-60% energy supply).

- **Argentina & South Africa**: Climate change seen as a "**luxury concern**" compared to economic crises, unemployment, and social issues.

- **Saudi Arabia:** Government invests in renewables (Vision 2030) but seeks to **balance oil dependence with economic transformation**.

Western Perspectives: Skepticism & Political Polarization

- **Germany & U.S.**: Climate change is seen as **over-politicized**; skepticism about extreme policies.

- **Germany**: Prefers **technological solutions** (nuclear, fuel efficiency) **over** drastic **regulations**.

- **U.S.**: Some see climate policies as **elitist, economically harmful**, and question whether they disproportionately **impact working-class jobs**.

Demographic Change

**Aging Societies
(Europe, Russia, China)**

- **Germany & Russia**: Low birth rates (~1.4 children per woman) seen as **strategic threats.**

- **China**: Post-one-child policy, still facing **declining birth rates** despite incentives.

- **Concerns**: Economic **burden of aging populations**, shrinking workforce, rising pension costs.

Young & Growing Populations (India, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Argentina)

- **India & South Africa**: Youth bulge presents **opportunities** but also risks of unemployment and **social instability**.

- **Argentina**: Emigration crisis—many young professionals leaving due to economic instability.

- **Saudi Arabia**: Gradual fertility decline but **youth-focused policies** (education, employment).

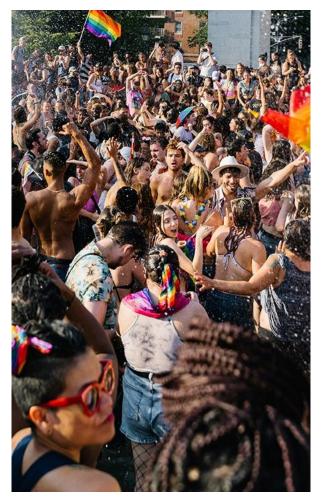# Family & Gender Roles:
Tradition vs. Progress

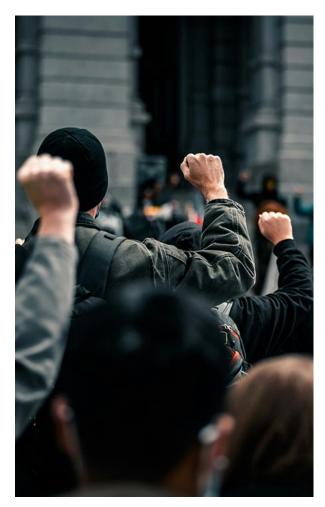## What's motivating support for authoritarian regimes & parties?

**Traditionalist Views
(Russia, Germany, USA)**

- **Russia**: Patriarchal norms persist; women balance careers & household duties.

- **Germany & U.S.**: Concerns over shifting gender roles, gender identity debates, and declining family values.

- **LGBTQ rights**: Strong pushback in Russia; U.S. participant split between personal tolerance and political resistance.

**Shifting Gender Norms
(India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa)**

- **India**: **Gradual** gender equality **progress**, but **traditional roles remain** prevalent in rural areas.

- **Saudi Arabia**: Rapid reforms — women's rights expanding under Vision 2030 (workforce participation, travel autonomy).

- **South Africa**: Strong feminist movement — pushing for economic empowerment & **safety from gender-based violence**.

Human Rights: Conflicting Global Narratives

Western Liberal Approach

- **Germany & U.S.**: **Individual freedoms** (speech, democracy, LGBTQ rights) prioritized.

- Criticism of rising state control, "woke" politics, and erosion of majority rights.

State-Centric Approach (China, Russia, Saudi Arabia)

- **China & Russia**: Human rights = economic stability, collective security over personal freedoms.

- **Saudi Arabia**: Pushback **against Western "moralizing"**—sees its modernization as self-driven.

Post-Colonial Perspective (South Africa, Argentina, India)

- **South Africa & Argentina**: Human rights discussions center on economic justice (poverty, land reform).

- **India**: Balancing Western human rights models with local cultural and social values.

Technology:

Innovation vs. Regulation

Tech Optimism (China, India, Saudi Arabia)

- **China**: AI, big data, and green technology viewed as **strategic assets** for global leadership.

- **India**: Digital transformation booming — tech as a **tool for economic growth**.

- **Saudi Arabia**: Heavy investment in AI, smart cities, and biotech (Vision 2030).

Tech Caution (Germany, USA, Russia, South Africa)

- **Germany & U.S.**: **Concerns** over privacy, AI job displacement, and monopolization by Big Tech.

- **Russia**: Technology seen as a **tool for national power** but less public concern about privacy.

- **South Africa**: Youth embrace digital tools but fear AI worsening unemployment.

Section 4: Driver analysis

National sovereignty resurgence

A growing emphasis on **national sovereignty** is reshaping the attitude towards **globalization**.

- Powers like China, India, Russia, and Saudi Arabia have been and continue to be open to globalization but **advocate "shared prosperity"** on their own terms and criticize Western-dominated value frameworks as overreach.

- **Russia distinguishes between globalization and "globalism,"** seeing the latter as a U.S.-led imposition. **Saudi Arabia** welcomes foreign investment if it **aligns with local religious and cultural norms**.

- Meanwhile, South African voices critique of a system they feel has bypassed Africa altogether.

- **Growing nationalist sentiments** in the **U.S.** and **Germany** is being driven by attributing **job losses** and a **feeling of diminished sovereignty** to excessive globalization.

This divergence — sovereign pride versus liberal cooperation — drives countries toward shifting alliances (e.g., BRICS) and reinforces distinct value regimes.

Balancing climate change with societal needs

Across the board, dialogue partners ack-nowledge **climate change as real**, **yet the urgency assigned to it varies greatly** based on local economic and social contexts.

- **Developing regions** — such as India, South Africa, and Argentina — **prioritize growth and poverty alleviation over emissions reduction**, viewing comprehensive climate action as secondary when faced with im-mediate issues like unemployment and corruption.

- **China balances climate leadership ambitions**, including major investments in green technology, **with its ongoing eco-nomic and societal goals**.

- **Western nations**, particularly Germany, **embed environmental ethics deeply into societal values** yet they experience internal tension between Green-driven urgency and resistance rooted in economic concerns or fear of governmental overreach.

This ongoing dynamic underscores the complex global challenge of aligning climate commitments with pressing societal priorities.

Collective welfare vs. individual liberties

The **tension between collective welfare and individual liberties** is a key driver influencing divergent value systems globally.

- Historically, **the concept of "freedom" has evolved** significantly — from the French National Assembly's original broad definition of "liberty" as encompassing **collective empowerment and equality**, toward today's narrower focus on **individual autonomy**.

- Countries like **China and Russia prioritize collective stability**, economic prosperity, and national sovereignty **over unrestricted individual freedoms**. Similarly, **Saudi Arabia** pursues a **culturally specific, incremental approach to rights**, balancing progress with preservation of traditional values.

- **India and South Africa** highlight the tension differently, **framing human rights discussions around socio-economic equity and community well-being**, which sometimes conflict with international liberal expectations.

- Even **within Western nations**, the definition of "liberal" has narrowed, often reduced to specific social freedoms like free speech and LGBTQ+ rights.

Inequality and populist backlash

Chainsaws have become symbolic props for figures like Javier Milei and Elon Musk, representing their eagerness to cut through established institutions.

Economic inequality and perceived corruption are fueling populist backlash and reshaping societal values, reflected in growing anti-elite sentiment and demands for distributive justice.

- In **South Africa**, **citizens critique globalization for entrenching elite wealth**, leading to grassroots calls for economic justice through redistribution and state intervention.

- In the **U.S. and Germany**, working-class anger at **job losses** and **institutional distrust** has led to populist movements that promote protectionism, national pride, and skepticism toward globalization and government.

- **Argentina's** younger voters, **disillusioned by systemic corruption**, supported radical outsiders promising economic reforms, exemplified by Javier Milei.

- **Russia, China, and India** feel this less acutely but still face similar pressures, where **governments must continually prove economic legitimacy** to keep trust.

Without addressing inequality and perceived corruption, societies risk deepening polarization, with citizens increasingly attracted to strongman leaders or radical solutions to achieve fairness, accountability, and national pride.

Demographic shifts driving societal and political transformation

Demographic shifts are a significant driver shaping values globally, with some countries confronting rapid aging while others still experience youthful expansions.

- Aging societies like **China, Germany, and Russia** view their **declining fertility rates as strategic threats**, prompting policies aimed at boosting childbirth and promoting traditional family values.

- Conversely, **India, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, and South Africa**, with younger populations, face opportunities and challenges tied to their youthful demographics. **India's burgeoning youth population fuels innovation** and social change, while *Argentina* grapples with significant **youth emigration** due to economic instability. The resulting generational divides significantly influence societal values, where **younger societies** are more **open to progress** and embrace issues like **social justice** and **technology**, whereas **aging societies** lean toward **maintaining a status quo**.

- **National identity serves as a narrative to both** progress and maintaining the status quo.

Technological adoption influenced by trust in institutions

The **adoption of technology** is strongly influenced by **institutional trust**, with enthusiastic embrace in countries like **China, India, and Saudi Arabia**, where governments champion digital transformation as vital to national sovereignty and global status.

- China's "Made in China 2025" initiative emphasizes **technological self-sufficiency to avoid Western dependence.**

- **India's government** promotes digital initiatives to drive **inclusive economic development**.

- Conversely, **Western nations** (U.S., Germany) show **considerable uncertainty** due to concerns about **data privacy, surveillance, and monopolistic control** by powerful tech corporations.

- In **South Africa**, **younger people exhibit optimism but also fear job losses** from automation.

The more optimistic a society is, **the more likely it is to embrace emerging technologies**. This should be explored and tested further.
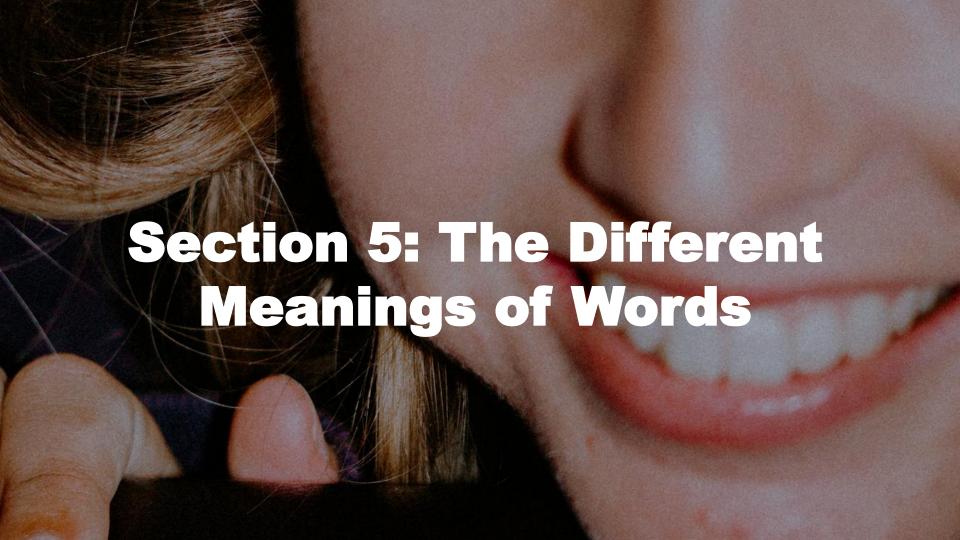
Evolution and resistance in gender roles and family structures

Demographic, political, and cultural dynamics are driving **a complex evolution in gender roles and family structures** globally, resulting in **value clashes** within and across nations.

- **China and Russia** are emphasizing **traditional family norms to combat demographic decline**, framing Western gender discourse **as threats to their cultural integrity**.

- **Saudi Arabia rapidly modernizes family and gender roles** within its Muslim framework.

- **India blends progressive legal changes**, such as LGBTQ+ rights, **with persistent patriarchal attitudes**.

- **Argentina reflects internal tensions**, with progressive gender equality threatened by conservative political shifts.

- **Western democracies** experience polarized debates between urban progressivism and rural traditionalism.

The importance of human dignity in relationships is agreed upon, **definitions of "family values" remain deeply contested**, suggesting that change will be incremental, with progress frequently accompanied by backlash.

Section 5: The Different Meanings of Words

The Different Meanings of Words

Biases in Wording

Words reflect culture and experience

- Terms and concepts carry **different emotional and practical meanings** depending on a person's **cultural background, historical experiences, and social context**. The same word can resonate positively in one community and negatively in another.

"Universal" terms hide nuances

- Words commonly used in international discussions (e.g., globalization, human rights) come with **implicit cultural biases or assumptions**. What seems neutral or positive in one context may be perceived as foreign, threatening, or irrelevant elsewhere. This came across in the dialogues when a question about liberal values was interpreted by the dialogue partner as being about LGBTQ+ rights.

The Different Meanings of Words

Biases in Wording

Potential for misunderstanding and resistance

- Differences in interpretation without explicitly discussing the meaning intended can lead to friction, resistance, or outright rejection — even when underlying goals might align. Without careful attention to these nuances, communication efforts can inadvertently deepen divides rather than bridge them.

Importance of contextual communication

- Effective dialogue requires sensitivity to these varied interpretations, emphasizing locally relevant language and concepts to build common understanding and trust.

The Different Meanings of Words

Example: Climate Change

Climate change as a polarizing term

- In many regions, **climate policies** are viewed **skeptically or negatively**, perceived as **externally imposed** agendas that **ignore local economic realities** or cultural priorities. This **skepticism does not arise from denial** of environmental concerns **but from distrust** toward global or elite-driven policy solutions.

Local environmentalism: Shared concerns, different expressions

- Communities skeptical of broader climate-change narratives **frequently demonstrate a strong commitment to local environmental issues**. Priorities such as clean water, air quality, soil protection, waste management, and preservation of natural landscapes resonate strongly. This was prevalent in the dialogue partners from the **U.S., India, and Argentina**.

Implications for communication and engagement

- **Recognizing the distinction between global discourse and local priorities** is essential. Tailoring environmental messages to reflect local immediate concerns can foster trust, reduce resistance, and build collaborative solutions that resonate across diverse cultures.

The Different Meanings of Words

Example: Globalization

Globalization vs. globalism

- One dialogue partner emphasized a critical distinction: **"Globalization"** is viewed **positively as international economic integration** among sovereign nations, whereas **"Globalism" implies** unwelcome **Western political dominance** and imposition of external values.

Historical baggage vs. future potential

- **Globalization** as a term **carries historical baggage** — perceived as exporting Western ideologies or shifting manufacturing from advanced economies to lower-cost countries. This connotation may shift as global dynamics and economic balances evolve.

Support or opposition doesn't equate to just or unjust motives

- Support or skepticism to globalization glosses over the fairness or legitimacy of its reasons. A nation may have valid motives to balance free trade against national sovereignty.

The Different Meanings of Words

Example: Human Rights

Multiple rights, different priorities

- The term "**human rights" encompasses numerous rights** — political, economic, social, and cultural — that **enjoy different prioritization** depending on a nation's situation. Their relative importance must be explored explicitly through dialogue rather than assumed.

Different nations, different stages

- Countries are at **varying stages** in their interpretation and implementation of human rights. **Expecting universal alignment with contemporary Western norms ignores historical contexts** and development paths. Western societies, too, evolved over time.

Virtue signaling vs. common ground

- If Western companies seek to embrace virtues, they should **emphasize universally recognized rights** rather than **divisive issues**. Aligning communications with widely shared values enhances credibility, avoids polarization, and fosters cross-cultural dialogue.

Prisoners at the "Center for the Confinement of Terrorism" (CECOT) in Tecoluca, El Salvador. (Source: Secretaria de Prensa de la Presidencia)

The Different Meanings of Words

Example: Family and Gender Roles

Layered dimensions

- The term **"family and gender roles" combines multiple sensitive dimensions** — family structures, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights — into a single category.

  This aggregation masks important distinctions and regional priorities, as societies may strongly support women's economic empowerment while simultaneously opposing LGBTQ+ rights. Understanding each component is essential to **accurately interpreting values across cultural contexts**.

Cultural context, demographics, and backlash

- **Views on family and gender roles** are shaped deeply not only by each region's cultural and historical experiences but **also by current demographic pressures**.

  Moreover, perceived impositions from Western liberal elites can provoke backlash, driving some societies to reaffirm traditional norms. Thus, **regional positions reflect both internal societal debates and external geopolitical tensions**, complicating dialogue on these topics.

The Different Meanings of Words

Navigating Complexities of Nationalism

Nationalism is a powerful social force with inherent contradictions. It can unify societies, strengthen cultural identity, and drive collective progress. Yet it also holds potential to fuel division, exclusion, and chauvinism.

Whether nationalism leads to positive or negative outcomes depends largely on its current social context, leadership goals, and institutional strength. Recognizing this dual nature is essential to understanding the role it plays in societies.

Brands must approach nationalism with nuance, acknowledging its potential benefits while remaining alert to its risks.

In practice, **nationalism becomes problematic when** defined narrowly or exclusively, **setting boundaries** that marginalize minorities or dissenting voices.

Conversely, **when nationalism embraces inclusive civic principles** — based on shared values, mutual respect, and common purpose — it **can strengthen societal cohesion and resilience**.

The challenge for businesses lies in identifying when nationalism is being leveraged constructively to foster unity, and when it is exploited to exacerbate tensions or consolidate power.

A protester at the PEGIDA demonstrations in Germany, a right-wing movement prominent in 2015-2016 opposing immigration and "Islamization".

https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/lka-mitarbeiter-bei-pegida-demo-die-polizeibeamten-sind-oft-100.html

The Different Meanings of Words

Evaluating Nations in a State of Nation-Building

Historical context

- Post-colonial societies are **still in the process of nation-building** and prioritize stability, economic development, or internal security over adopting external governance standards.

Diverse definitions of progress

- Different societies emphasize varied aspects of progress, such as economic growth, social harmony, or standardizing law, based on their historical and cultural contexts. Governance models and societal values reflect unique national circumstances rather than universally defined benchmarks.

Challenges of external assessment

- Evaluations based on external liberal-democratic norms overlook local achievements and misinterpret internal dynamics. Sovereignty considerations and historical experiences strongly influence national choices and development pathways.

Section 6: Changing Narratives and Behaviors

How attainable are your dreams?

Powerful narratives like the "American dream" or "progress" can be appropriated by changing political actors:

- In the **U.S.**, Trump's electoral base feels that the American dream has become unattainable to them. **"Identity politics",** while purportedly aimed at inclusion, marginalized the predominantly white working class in rural areas. As one dialogue partner stressed: when embracing **identity**, you start your conversation with what **separates** you, while **MAGA** appeals to what **unites** you.

- In **India**, decades of stalling economic development and corruption shattered the belief that the Congress Party stood for enabling economic advancement. The BJP became an **effective champion of the nation's progress and delivered** on economic growth.

Failure of political parties or regimes to deliver on promises of economic opportunity, fairness, and social mobility leads to discreditation and eventually political or regime change.

Changing consumer pyramid

For the years of **economic upturn**, the consumer pyramid experienced a pronounced divergence: premium (top-end) and discount (low-end) segments expanded significantly, while the standard segment — traditionally defined by affordability, simplicity, and reliable quality — shrank considerably.

Branding of top-end pro-ducts was value-laden. Recently, however, there has been a **notable shift reversing this trend**, with renewed growth and consumer interest emerging in the middle segment. Consumers increasingly seek products and experiences offering **reliable value, dependable quality, and straightforward pricing**.

- **Costco** in the U.S. capitalized on this trend appealing to a broad consumer base through a **focus on affordability, high-quality essentials**, and simplified shopping experience. In 2019, one-quarter of U.S. consumers shopped at Costco. In 2024 it was nearly one-third.

- In **France**, "bouillons" offer traditional French dishes at the price of a McDonald's meal, reviving the **egalitarian appeal** of early 20th century-working class canteens.

- A **consumer strike wave targets Western retailers** like Lidl, DM, Kaufland in **all South-Eastern** and some **Eastern EU countries** since the beginning of 2025.

Section 7: Implications for Brands

The new global reality for brands

Recognizing the value diversity

In markets from Asia to Eastern Europe, there is growing resistance to what is perceived as a Western liberal worldview. Some communities feel that prevailing Western narratives ignore local traditions, while others see them as outright attempts to impose external values. Western values are touted as "right" instead of appreciating that this is not determined by external actors but those living the the specific region.

Multiple worldviews

Values vary enormously from region to region, shaped by histories of the region, ideological conflicts, and economic disparities. For instance, anti-colonial narratives in India and anti-hegemonic sentiments in China feed skepticism toward Western-led globalization, while in places like Saudi Arabia or Turkey, religious and traditional identity can significantly shape public acceptance of progressive ideals.

Relevance for brands

Brands can no longer assume global audiences automatically share Western liberal norms. A one-size-fits-all strategy risks alienating segments that hold contrasting beliefs on family structures, climate priorities, and governance. Addressing these value nuances is critical to building trust, especially where local identities are reasserting themselves against globalized, "Western-centric" narratives.

Why brands must adapt

License to operate

Cultural acceptance is intertwined with market acceptance. Brand messages that engage deeply with local values — rather than glossing over or dismissing them — can help establish a lasting license to operate. Failing to adapt risks reputational damage, local boycotts, and public scrutiny, especially when global debate highlights perceived Western bias.

Risk of backlash

From social media firestorms to consumer boycotts, backlash can arise rapidly if messaging is viewed as disrespectful. This reaction is intensified where communities sense foreign brands "lecturing" them on Western values or appearing to override local norms. Sensitivity to these triggers is essential to prevent swift reputational fallout.

Opportunity spaces

Despite tensions, emerging markets boast expanding middle classes that appreciate high-quality goods, technology, and modern services. Brands seen as respectful and collaborative can stand out among competitors who either ignore local nuances or fail to address them. For Western brands, this presents a chance to secure loyalty by demonstrating sincere cultural engagement and delivering tangible community benefits.

Key principles for Western global brands

Cultural sensitivity

Building meaningful rapport starts with understanding. Conduct regular cultural audits — talk to local stakeholders, review media discourse, and partner with regional experts. This helps ensure campaigns honor local customs and historical identities rather than unintentionally clashing with them. Over time, a nuanced approach fosters goodwill and positions the brand as a thoughtful "insider," rather than an aloof outsider.

Acknowledging hypocrisy

Global Western brands who want to engage in value-based messaging should ensure its consistency, openly acknowledging and addressing issues in their home countries rather than only abroad. This authenticity reduces perceptions of hypocrisy and strengthens moral credibility globally.

Value alignment

Seek shared themes — such as family well-being, social stability, or youth empowerment — that resonate universally across diverse cultures.

By focusing on common ground, brands can avoid overt moralizing while still expressing their core principles. This approach also allows for adaptation that resonates with local customs, reinforcing the brand's commitment to inclusivity.

Practical engagement tactics

Local partnerships

Collaborate with credible figures or organizations that have deep roots in the community — this can include NGOs, academic institutions, cultural influencers, and respected local businesses. Such partnerships signal genuine investment in local welfare and ensure that brand activities address pressing regional concerns, from job creation to environmental stewardship.

Modular messaging

Design campaigns that share a unifying narrative but allow for multiple expressions tailored to each market. For instance, highlight climate co-benefits (e.g., reduced pollution) in regions sensitive to job security, or focus on heritage and modernity in areas proud of their cultural legacy. Modular content helps avoid tone-deaf messaging and underscores the brand's adaptability to local sentiments.

Invest in listening

Before major launches, use consumer focus groups, digital sentiment analysis, and open-ended social media feedback to gauge local reactions. This iterative listening not only refines the brand's message but also cultivates community rapport, as stakeholders see a willingness to learn. Frequent, transparent communication can help nip controversies in the bud and keep brand-community dialogue constructive.

https://esrag.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/solar-light-Rwanda.png

Handling sensitive issues

Human rights & social issues

Addressing these areas openly can be positive, but emphasize universal dignity — like safety, education, worker protection — rather than proclaiming one set of cultural norms to be superior. Show understanding of each society's journey on matters such as women's rights or minority inclusion. Highlight local champions of progress to help audiences feel ownership of the conversation, not imposition by an external voice.

Climate & sustainability

Recast sustainability in practical, locally relevant terms — like improving air quality, safeguarding water supplies, and generating new employment in green industries. In regions where distrust of Western "climate agendas" runs high, pivot from abstract emissions goals to tangible benefits (e.g., energy independence, advanced agricultural methods). Engaging local communities in co-creating green solutions fosters shared ownership and trust.

Respecting boundaries

Even well-intentioned statements about gender or governance can be seen as intrusive if they appear to challenge long-standing beliefs. Map out local red lines — like explicit activism on LGBTQ+ rights in certain conservative markets — and determine how to handle potential pushback. Brands that fail to do so risk being drawn into polarizing debates they may not be equipped to navigate.

Brand governance and policies

Internal cultural fluency

Build truly diverse teams, train staff on cross-cultural communication, and bring onboard local advisors who can spot potential pitfalls. This ensures decisions regarding marketing, product design, and customer service are less prone to uninformed assumptions. A cross-regional perspective helps blend corporate priorities with cultural realities more seamlessly.
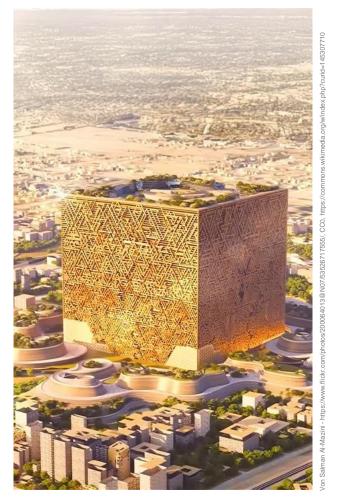
Transparency on corporate values

Clearly articulate which principles are non-negotiable — like ethical labor practices or inclusivity — and how they manifest in each market. Provide real examples of how these values translate into local actions (e.g., sustainable supply chains or fair wage practices).

Consumers become more accepting when they see consistency rather than suspecting brands of selectively applying "global" values for PR.

Monitoring & rapid response

Develop protocols for quickly addressing controversies or misunderstandings, with designated local spokespeople authorized to clarify brand intentions. Swift, empathetic communication — especially in the local language — can defuse tensions before they escalate. Transparent crisis management also reassures potential partners that the brand takes its reputation and consumer sentiment seriously.

Looking ahead

Maintain agility

Cultural norms evolve, especially in rapidly developing regions like the Middle East, South and East Asia. Revisit and refresh market-specific insights yearly. Open dialogue with local communities — both online and offline — can reveal emerging shifts in public opinion. Use foresight methods (trend mapping, scenario building) to anticipate how multiple futures — de-globalization, climate shocks, social realignments — could reshape consumer attitudes. Ensuring brand strategies remain flexible and integrated with these scenarios can help your organization pivot smoothly under shifting political or cultural climates.

Focus on mutual benefit

The most enduring cross-cultural relationships form when brands deliver tangible positives: job creation, skills training, support for local entrepreneurs, or infrastructure investments. This transforms companies into perceived allies in community development rather than transient market players, boosting loyalty and resilience against disruptive cultural or political waves.

Long-term relationship building

True acceptance does not happen overnight. It emerges from consistent, honest engagement and shared interests. Cultivate partnerships with local educators, creators, and civic institutions to co-create programs — ranging from local manufacturing development to cultural sponsorship. Over time, these trusted collaborations become a buffer when broader geopolitical tensions or cultural flashpoints surface.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

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Sources

All images unsplash unless otherwise noted.

Full Desk Research report (including all footnotes and sources) **available on internal Foresight Academy website.**