

New Narratives

New Narratives Report

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In collaboration with
M&C SAATCHI | RESEARCH,
WORLD SERVICES | INSIGHT &
EVALUATION

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Introduction

The British Council New Narratives programme is designed to help contribute to changing reciprocal perceptions between Africa and the UK to stimulate new understanding which will unlock new connections and collaborations for mutual benefit. To help realise this vision, the British Council commissioned the Research, Insight and Evaluation (RIE) team at M&C Saatchi World Services to undertake a comprehensive investigation into how young people in the UK and African countries perceive each other and their countries. The investigation had five objectives:

1. To identify the source and nature of **dominant narratives, messages and themes** that frame the UK in Africa and Africa in the UK.
2. To map how young people in the UK and Africa **engage with, share, and resist** the dominant narratives, messages and themes.
3. To establish the extent to which these narratives **contribute to moulding perceptions** that 18 – 35-year-olds across both places have of each other.
4. To understand the ways, if any, that 18-35-year-olds feel these narratives **affect their willingness to network** across both places to social, economic and political ties.
5. To **highlight the less dominant narratives** that 18-35-year-olds across both places, would like the other place to have access to e.g. what would a young African want the UK to know about Africa?

New Narratives research programme deliverables

This summary report provides top-level findings in response to each of these objectives. It forms one of three deliverables provided to the British Council New Narratives teams.

For access to the **full report** or to the **PowerPoint presentation**, please contact Tomas.curran@mcsaatchi.com or ojoma.ochai@ng.britishcouncil.org

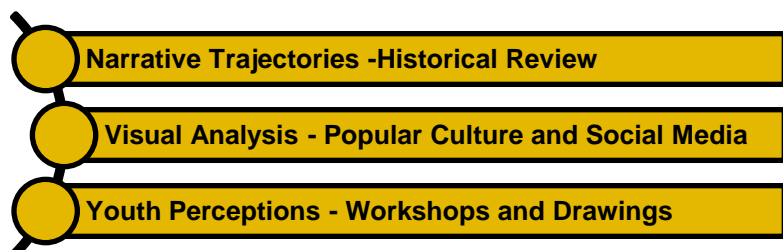
Approach and methodology

"The real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance between people and their environment. People construct a pseudo-environment that is a subjective, biased, and necessarily abridged mental image of the world, and to a degree, everyone's pseudo-environment is a fiction. People "live in the same world, but they think and feel in different ones."¹

Walter Lippmann 1922

Nearly 100 years ago, the US media scholar, Walter Lippmann recognized the significant impact of mediated knowledge and experience on one's view of the world. In order to understand the perceptions that young Africans and young Britons have of each other and each other's countries, it is imperative to analyse the plethora of experiences and influences that have informed that perspective. It is also critical to understand, of the pictures that form inside young people's heads, which of these are widely shared in common, and therefore represent the dominant ways of seeing and talking about other people and other places within a society.

The challenge to capture young Africans' narratives of the UK and young Britons' narratives of Africa warranted a research design that: recognised the long and chequered history between the two regions; acknowledged the significance of popular culture and especially social media in framing one group's view of the other place, and: provided young people the opportunity to communicate the "pictures in their heads" without the requirement to only verbalise how they perceived young people from the other place. The approach adopted is deliberately innovative, boldly experimental and iterative. Three methods were employed: a historical review of the narrative trajectories and cultural and socio-political themes dominating relations between the UK and Africa from 1500 to the present; a semiotic analysis drawing on images in popular culture and gathered by narrative scouts and young people themselves across the two regions; and young people's drawings of young



¹ Lippmann, Walter (1922). Public Opinion. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

people from the other place gathered in the youth workshops. The multiple and varied data streams have afforded a rich tapestry of perspectives and insights on the narrative architecture prevalent in each region about the other place.

Key findings

What are the dominant narratives, messages and themes that frame the UK in Africa and Africa in the UK?

Young people's perspectives of Africa and the UK

From the perspective of young Africans...

The UK embodies a diverse range of **positive values** and characteristics including security, tradition, prosperity, efficiency, justice, equality and freedom.

The UK is widely perceived as a **world leader** academically, economically, and in terms of football. Its status relative to other countries also benefits from positive attitudes towards the quality of British entertainment and creative industries; its historical and contemporary role as a significant military power; and the British Royal Family, which serves as a key differentiator of the UK's global identity.

At the same time, there are widespread concerns about **British racism and elitism**, as well as doubts about how accessible the UK is for all but the most wealthy and privileged young people.

These concerns are rooted in young Africans' knowledge of the UK's colonial past; reinforced by a diverse range of contemporary instances of British prejudice and discrimination; and reflected in a sensitivity to signs of **latent neo-colonialism** in the UK's dealings with African countries.

From the perspective of young Britons...

UK-African relations are most commonly framed through one of two lenses: **exploitation and aid**. The African continent as a whole, meanwhile, is imagined according to two extremes: idealised or demonised.

Decades of images and stories in the news media and by charities highlighting themes including famine, drought, disease, inequality and instability have contributed to a perception of African countries as **impoverished, dangerous, and lagging behind the rest of the world socio-economically and in terms of human rights**. Factors commonly used to explain these issues included endemic local corruption, the historical and contemporary exploitation of Africa by foreign

countries and private interests (including the UK and British companies), and the perceived remoteness and isolation of Africa relative to the rest of the world.

However, romantic idealisations of Africa as a place of **sublime landscapes, beautiful wildlife, ancient peoples and exotic cultures** also mean that, in the minds of young people in the UK, Africa also holds the promise of unique adventures and experiences.

While both extremes demonstrate the persistent ‘othering’ of Africa relative to the UK, there is evidence that young people in the UK are increasingly **conscious and critical of the biases** in the media they consume, as well as cognizant of their own limited knowledge and understanding.

Young people’s perspectives of African and British regions and countries

From the perspective of young Africans...

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are invisible compared to England, which dominates conversations about the UK and Britain as a whole.

London likewise largely dominates conversations about and perceptions of the UK and is regarded both as a go-to tourism destination, and as the centre of economic activity and opportunity in the UK.

Other places in the UK tend to be identifiable due to their association with **high profile universities** (for example, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge) or football teams (for example, Liverpool and Manchester). Beyond these specific associations, however, knowledge of the places and people they represent is scarce.

From the perspective of young Britons...

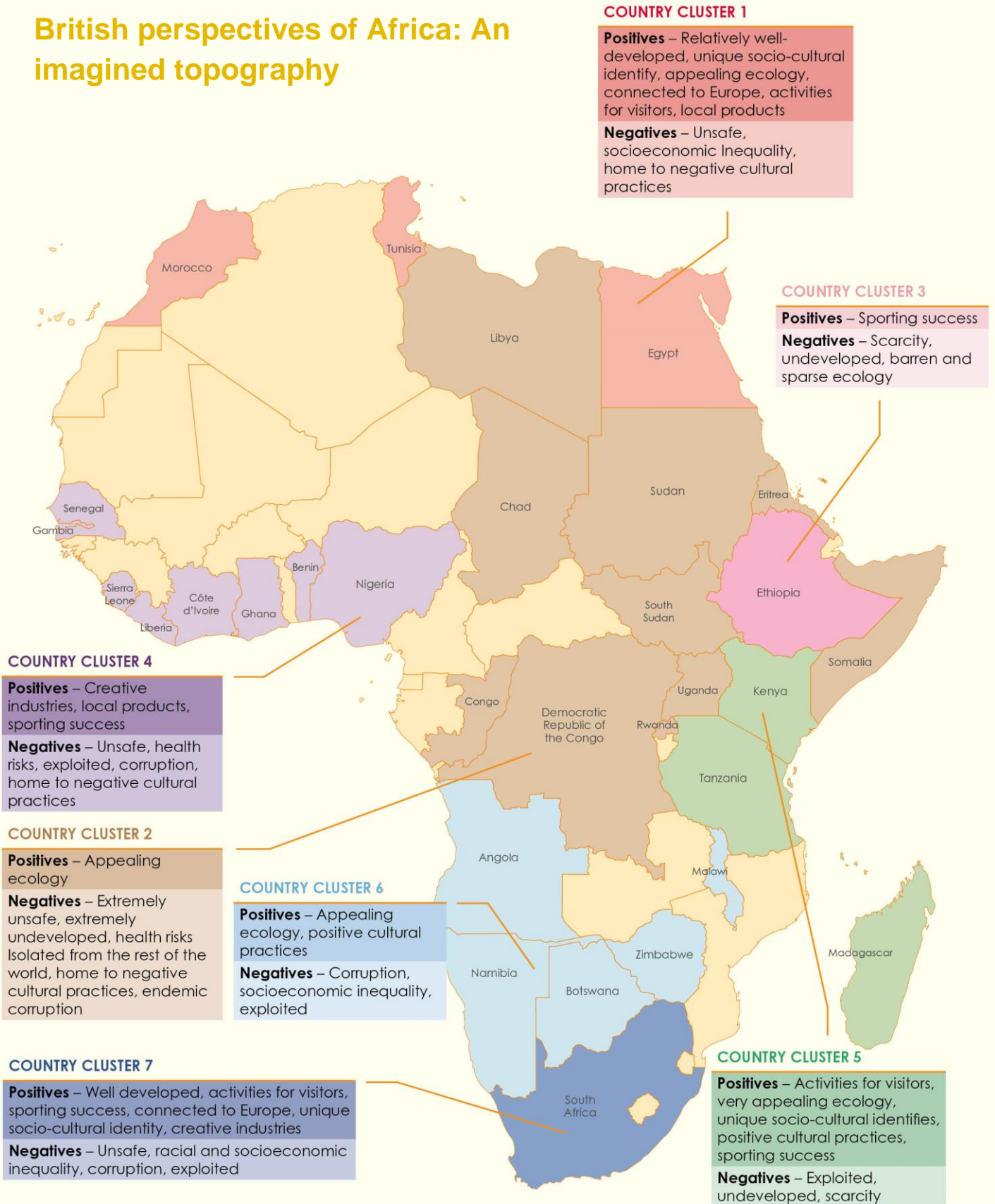
There is some evidence that young people in the UK are moving away from the idea of Africa as a monolithic entity, as they gradually become sensitised to **sub-regional and national differences**. Overall, however, knowledge and understanding of African countries and regions is extremely poor.

At best, efforts to consciously parse the African continent are based on broad and crude distinctions between **South Africa** (perceived as most well-developed country, with strong ties to Europe), **Northern Africa** (somewhat well-developed, with strong Islamic ties as well as ties to the development of European culture and history), and **‘middle Africa’**, or everything in between (extremely undeveloped, dangerous and socio-culturally ‘other’).

The references that young Britons made about individual countries across Africa naturally clustered within geographically proximate parts of the continent. We refer to this phenomenon as the **imagined topography** of Africa. Drawing on these patterns,

Figure 1 below illustrates this imagined topography by highlighting the patterns in references associated with seven different clusters of countries. Only countries named by participants are labelled as part of the topography.

Figure 1: British perspectives of Africa: An imagined topography



Narratives communicated within in popular culture environments

Overall, **Africa is far more salient within the UK** visual communications landscapes and popular culture, than the UK is within the imagination of African countries. This is reflected in the superior richness, variety and pervasiveness of visual representations of African countries, people and themes in the UK, compared to that representing the UK in African countries.

The analysis of British representations of African themes indicates...

A movement away from extremely negative associations such as poverty and disaster, towards **increased focus on African empowerment, creativity, innovation and progress**. Very often, these expressions signal young people, in particular, as the catalysts of these processes.

A dynamic message and messenger landscape defined by **debate, polemic and controversy, alongside a call for deeper listening to how African people want to represent themselves**. These changes are apparent in the availability of counternarratives challenging the assumptions embedded in British discourse of Africa, which are often communicated by hard-hitting voices from within the Black-British population and the African Diaspora in the UK.

The persistence of **representations which idealise, commodify, and fetishize** African countries, cultures, and themes. These expressions are particularly dominant within the luxury travel industry, which routinely represents African countries and cultures as ripe for exploration, discovery, and consumption by Western audiences.

Renewed associations between African countries with ideas of **vulnerability and fragility**. This is most apparent in response to climate change, in relation to which Africa is represented as high-risk and in need of urgent interventions.

The analysis of African representations of British and UK themes indicates...

A heavily institutionalised message and messenger landscape. Assets including **English Premier League**, the **Royal Family**, iconic educational institutions like **Oxford and Cambridge** Universities, and **overseas missions and NGOs** remain the most influential touchpoints for UK narratives in African countries. These narratives convey strong visual associations between the UK and desirable attributes including **order, quality and grandiosity**.

The emergence of changes in the way in which the UK is portrayed in African media following **Brexit**. These changes tend to undermine the UK's connection with stability and order, by conveying images of an unstable and negatively charged UK, introducing **doubts about its future**.

Widespread **anxiety and anger towards British colonialism and racism**. The discourse of 'taking from' and 'using African ideas', for example, is widely debated in online and offline channels, while the idea that UK companies take from the continent is portrayed continuously in the media. Visual expressions of British prejudice and discrimination towards non-white communities, meanwhile, fuel connections between the UK and racism.

How do young people engage with, share and resist these narratives?

Narrative touchpoints

Conversations with young people suggest how common perceptions of the UK and Africa are communicated by a diverse range of sources, under a wide range of conditions. To accommodate this variability, this research employs the term 'narrative touchpoint' to capture the varied sources and conditions under which young people engage with common narratives. Four categories of narrative touchpoint are identified:

Direct touchpoints refer to experiences where young people come in contact with people from the other place. For Africans, this is primarily through friends and family members who have visited or lived in the UK. For Britons, this is largely materialised in education settings, most notably university, where they can meet and form friendships with people from African countries or of African descent.

Bridging touchpoints refer to formats or platforms that involve people from both places. Notable examples include the English Premier League, where the teams are from Britain, but many of the leading players are from African countries. Similarly, contemporary music and musicians originating in one place but heavily consumed in the other place. While somewhat less direct and more mediated, bridging touchpoints afford a greater level of accessibility to the general population.

Mediated touchpoints include the majority of film, TV, advertising and news media that are explicitly produced to represent and communicate information and impressions about the other place.

Iconic touchpoints refer to individuals, places and buildings that are intrinsically identified with either the UK or Africa. Notable examples that emerged in the research included the British royal family, William Shakespeare and Big Ben for the UK; as well as Nelson Mandela, Robert Mugabe, the pyramids of Giza and Kilimanjaro for African countries.

Audience variables affecting how young people engage, share and resist narratives

Conversations with young Britons and Africans indicate that perceptions of the other place may vary depending on a range of demographic and psychographic variables, and on the touchpoints most salient to these groups.

These variables may affect how individuals engage, share and resist certain narratives, by making them more or less receptive to a particular narrative of the other place. By determining media patterns and preferences, they may also shape how groups consume and communicate narratives.

For young Africans, key variables to consider are:

Country: At a broad level, while conversations with young Africans pointed to a set of associations with the UK that cut across countries, they also suggested variations in terms of which associations were more or less dominant in different countries. Conversations with young Kenyans, for example, were characterised by a higher level of consciousness of British racism compared to other groups. Young Nigerians, meanwhile, tended to be the most emphatic in their praise of the UK relative to their view of Nigeria, while conversations with young Ethiopians were marked by a focus on British exploitation of Africa.

Age: In some countries, conversations suggested important differences between how 18-24-year-olds and 25-35-year-olds spoke about and pictured the UK. In Cameroon, for example, older groups expressed strong admiration for the UK based on respect for the British monarchy and history, whereas younger participants were attracted because of the 'cool' status attributed to the idea of Britishness.

Gender: The responses of young women in Ethiopia and Egypt indicated that the UK may hold special appeal for females. This appeal is based on a view of the UK as supportive of female empowerment and gender equality.

Race: Young Africans' discussions of race varied depending on the country and region in question, reflecting variations in racial diversity and sociocultural dynamics across the continent. In South Africa, for example, White participants suggested that their perceptions of the UK were likely to differ from that of their Black compatriots, due to a combination of socioeconomic factors and the country's history of colonialism and race relations.

Values: Young people expressing different values tended to view the UK differently. For example, although not wholly or uniformly accepting of perceived UK values, in general, young Egyptian participants presented themselves as more progressive than Egyptian society as a whole.

SEC: Young Africans belonging to higher socio-economic classifications often had a higher level of education and worked in professions which brought them into closer proximity with the UK, for example through professional accreditation schemes and university. As such, they exhibited a greater range of narrative touchpoints, compared to young Africans belonging to lower SECs.

For young Britons, key variables to consider are:

Race: Black-British participants exhibited greater familiarity with African histories and traditions, and many were active consumers of cultural exports including music by contemporary African artists, and products such as food and fashion. They were also highly conscious of British racism, acknowledging it as both a community-level and institutional problem in the UK which affects them personally, as well as being more sensitive to the historical and contemporary exploitation of African countries.

Education: Going to university was highlighted by a number of young Britons as a pivotal transition in terms of their knowledge and understanding of African countries and identities. Participants who had attended university were more likely to have formed friendships with peers with African heritage, and to have been exposed to a wider range of opportunities for learning about Africa in general, as well as specific African countries, themes and identities, for example through university societies and events.

Age: A number of participants referred to an assumed generational divide in the UK in terms of how Africa is perceived, with older generations' views characterised as more negative. Furthermore, comparisons between the mediated touchpoints referred to by Britons aged 18-24 vs. 25-35 indicates:

For younger audiences, the relatively greater influence of certain mediated touchpoints including YouTube; social media influencers; and popular entertainment formats like Love Island and The Apprentice in shaping their associations with African countries.

For older audiences, the experiences of friends who have travelled to African countries for holiday. These experiences were often communicated in photos and videos published on social media and tended to showcase the tourist attractions of African countries.

Engagement with the charitable giving sector: Young Britons have identified an appetite for a more progressive and future-oriented perspective on Africa that would serve as a counterpoint to the framing of Africa in charity communications.

How do these narratives contribute to young Britons and Africans'...

Perceptions of each other?

Young Britons and young Africans **share common ground** in terms of their values, personal hopes and aspirations, yet are divided by differences in material circumstances and societal challenges.

Young Africans and Britons both believe that the other is committed to strong interpersonal values, such as **family values, honesty and respect**. They also commonly imagine the other as aspiring towards professional and economic success.

From the perspective of young Britons, however, their African peers are limited by issues **including poverty, inequality, access to food and water, and corruption**. Young Africans, by contrast, commonly imagined their peers as facing few personal worries. Where challenges were identified by young Africans, these focussed on **racism and money problems**.

Willingness to network across locations?

From the perspective of young Africans...

Motivations to network are grounded in the perception of the UK as a **gateway to opportunity and personal aspirations**. As a destination, the UK is imagined as both a place where young Africans can achieve a higher standard of living and income, as well as a place where they can acquire skills, credentials and status which would ensure their future success.

The UK also promises **high-quality, unique experiences** to visitors, further compounding the desire to travel, study, work and live there. These experiences include British sightseeing opportunities, the excitement of a Premier League match, a diverse and rich cuisine, and a beautiful countryside.

However, British **racism and elitism, visa worries, and prohibitive costs** all act as demotivators to network with people from the UK.

Several participants expressed concerns about the **safety of the UK** as a destination for them and their family, due to threat of racism. They also wondered whether British people would look down on them and whether they could afford to travel to, work or study in the UK.

While there is no clear understanding of **what Brexit means for African immigration** to the UK, for some participants, the loss of access to freedom of movement within the EU via the UK has degraded its appeal as a place to live, work, and study.

From the perspective of young Britons...

Very few participants expressed any desire to travel to an African country except **as a tourist destination**. Even when explicitly asked, participants struggled to nominate a country they would be happy to travel to for work, study or immigration.

Tourism aspirations were driven primarily by **'once-in-a-lifetime' experiences** such as safari and appreciating natural, cultural and historical wonders such as the Pyramids and the Sahara Desert.

Safety concerns represent the single greatest inhibitor to travel to, study, work or live in an African country. Concerns about safety were expressed for all countries mentioned, although the substance of the concern did vary: from fear of mugging and gang violence in South Africa, to threats of terrorism and kidnapping in Nigeria and Northern African countries, to the risk of political instability and conflict in countries such as the DRC and Somalia.

After safety, the general sense that African countries tend to be **poorly developed** means that they present little appeal as destinations except as tourist destinations.

Volunteering and development work generally, while recognised as a driver for some people to travel to African countries, garnered a mixed reception among participants. While the development aims of projects themselves were regarded as admirable, they were also regarded as platforms for individuals to showcase altruism to peers back home. This suggests a resistance to virtue signalling by young Britons.

What narratives would young people in each place like the other to have access to?

Both young Africans and young Britons complained of a **lack of diversity and nuance** in the ways in which they and their countries are represented internationally.

From the perspective of young Africans...

While being 'African' constitutes a **part of their identity**, it represents just one, sometimes relatively minor, component of how young people from African countries see and understand themselves.

There is a need to move past the catch-all, short-cut label of 'African', which participants felt serves to **falsely homogenize** the national, regional and local diversity of the continent.

To help address their overarching concern with the perceived treatment of **Africa as a monolithic entity**, participants provided an array of examples which could be leveraged to present a more accurate representation of their own countries specifically, as opposed to just 'Africa' as a whole.

Three reference categories emerged for building more reflective and grounded representations of their countries:

Commonly identified: These reference points were identified by participants in all or nearly all (6-8) countries researched. As such, they offer material to develop new narratives that cut across all locations. Widely identified reference points include beautiful natural regions, historically significant sites, local cultures and traditions, tribal and ethnic identities, local cuisine, sports were all widely identified as salient reference points for building a more reflective and grounded representation of their country.

Widely identified: These reference points were identified by participants in between 3-5 countries researched. They include music; features of urban environments such as transport and nightlife; local activists and activism; locally or nationally cherished values; and the arts.

Rarely identified: identified by participants in a maximum of 2 countries. Local brands, modern design and architecture, modern fashion and science and

technology was rarely suggested as distinguishing features of the countries researched.

From the perspective of young Britons...

The norm in how the UK is represented and perceived internationally is to focus on the upper social classes and on England and London, specifically. As such, young Britons were critical of a perceived lack of social class and geographic diversity in portrayals of the UK. Conversations about how young Britons would like to be represented indicated three categories of associations:

Rejected associations: including posh-ness, racism, and binge-drinking.

- Young Britons rejected signs and symbols of British posh-ness, for example old Etonians, Hugh Grant, and Saville Row, arguing that this stereotype of the UK was not representative of them.
- While young Britons acknowledge that racism and other forms of discrimination are serious and live issues in the UK, they themselves opposed such views and felt they represented a minority only.
- Similarly, while young Britons acknowledged that the British have a widely recognised reputation for binge drinking, it was not an association they themselves wanted to promote internationally.

Contested associations: including the Royal Family, patriotism, politics, commercial brands, multiculturalism, and education.

- Young Britons appreciated the Royal Family for its historical significance, its economic value as a tourist draw, and for the respect for tradition it connotes. However, some question its legitimacy and fairness. There was some evidence of preference for specific individuals as opposed to the institution, for example the Queen, Diana, Harry and Meghan.
- While brands including Rimmel London and British Airways were promoted in terms of their strong reputation for quality and excellence, questions were raised over the extent to which such brands can be considered truly 'British' anymore – or whether have instead become globalised and disconnected from their origins.

-
- While patriotism by Welsh and Scottish people is generally seen as acceptable and even celebrated, English and British patriotism tended to be associated with racism and xenophobia.
 - Young Britons question the extent to which the UK is truly ‘multicultural’ – or whether this value is specific to particular groups and locations, for example inhabitants of more cosmopolitan neighbourhoods. Some also expressed concern that the concept conceals latent colonial tendencies, for example in the appropriation of international cuisines and fashions under the mantra of ‘modern Britain’.
 - Freedom of civic and political participation and the right to protest are widely celebrated – but politicians are viewed as inept and embarrassing. Brexit, especially, has led to uncertainty about the quality of British governance and democracy.
 - Young Britons are proud of the UK education system, and of the quality and reputation of institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge. However, they are concerned by inequality and elitism in British education at all levels, and they feel that Oxbridge effectively eclipses equally high-quality institutions elsewhere – for example, Edinburgh University and Queens University Belfast.

Celebrated associations: including British community spirit, ‘equalisers’, diversity, music and sports.

- Young Britons see the UK as defined by its commitment to social bonding and community spirit. These characteristics were felt to be symbolised by ‘British’ modes of socialising, such as tea-drinking and going to the pub, as well as by community responses to terror attacks.
- Young Britons take pride in local and national champions of social unity and equality, such as the rapper Stormzy. They also celebrate practices, customs and preferences which cut across divisions in British society. Again, tea-drinking and going to the pub were seen as symbols of shared national identity. So also were fish and chips and the love of sports.
- Signs of class, regional and national diversity are widely seen as critical for improving how the UK is currently represented internationally.
- Young Britons see the UK as a leading sporting nation, and as a contemporary and historical powerhouse in terms of musical creativity, innovation and excellence, particularly given its relatively small size.

Considerations

Table 1 outlines a set of key considerations for the New Narratives programme moving forward, based on the evidence and insights generated via the formative research.

Table 1: Consideration for next steps

| Consider... | Highlighting British and African diversity by... | Countering dominant negative narratives of the UK and Africa by... | Aligning with trends in popular culture environments by... | Building common ground based on common youth sensibilities by... |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| New Narratives of the UK | <p>Showcasing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland • Cities and regions other than London • Middle- and working-class communities | <p>Communicating how the UK is leveraging strong systems and structures to address social issues like racism and elitism.</p> | <p>Expanding: the range of touchpoints for young Africans to engage with new narratives of the UK, to break out of the current institutionalisation of the landscape.</p> | |
| New Narratives of African countries | <p>Showcasing country-based assets and differentiators, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salient country references identified by young Africans • Emerging country- and regional-differentiators in the imaginations of young Britons | <p>Communicating how the African countries are leveraging strong social values to address systemic issues such as poverty and corruption</p> <p>Building narratives which highlight African countries, organisations and individuals as significant agents on the international stage.</p> | <p>Amplifying:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong and diverse youth identities • Challenges to negative stereotypes • Influential and emerging voice • African innovation, creativity, progress and change <p>Avoiding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latent (neo)colonial tropes, motifs and stereotypes • Exoticisation, idealisation, and associations with vulnerability / fragility | <p>Exploring opportunities for narratives which communicate shared youth values, hopes and aspirations</p> |