

## Globalized: The Imperativeness of Intercultural Competence for International Public Relations Practices

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### Abstract

Globalisation aided by the new communication technologies makes the world virtually smaller and brings different people and cultures closer together. Thus, it makes communication and interactions much faster and easier though at first value. The main function of International Public Relations, IPR is to build, sustain and improve organization's reputation by fostering mutual understanding and relationship between an organization and its publics across national boundaries. More so, most have diverse cultural institutions and inclinations, for maximum benefit. Central to public relations is communication, which is, in many ways, being influenced by culture. This paper aims at closing the literature gap on centrality of local culture in international public relations practice across the globalised world. The paper reviews and discusses the role of culture in the success or failure of International (intercultural) Public Relations practice. It highlights how multinationals, perhaps lured by the notion of globalised or global culture, adopt centralized approach to international public relations practice. It posits that several International public relations campaign fail due to disregard to the culture of the local countries of operation. It argues that though an IPR practitioner may not know everything about various culture of the local countries, he/she must be conversant with cultural practices and institutions that affect their business practice which in turn must be aligned with PR practice to record success.

**Keywords:** Globalization, Global culture, International Public Relations, Culture influence

### Introduction

Globalization with its inherent advancement in information and communication technologies, is believed to have collapsed geographical boundaries between nations, transcended trade barriers, increased interactions among peoples and cultures as well as eased so many activities more than ever before in the history of human existence. This assumption might have informed why some communication experts and scholars overblew the concept of globalized culture to mean local cultures melting down to form a uniform culture among the globalized communities. Perhaps this position has influenced the decision of some multinational organisations to adopt a centralized approach to international public relations campaigns. This according to Szondi (2009 p.126) is a PR approach where a company headquarter pushes the way of thinking of, and conducting PR of the host country on global offices located in other countries, by designing, planning, and implementing all aspects of PR campaign with

little or no inputs from the local countries. This approach is premised on the assumption that people across the world now have a shared culture of consumption and attitude toward the physical environment.

However, in the real sense, globalization has made International Public Relations practice more complex and more demanding than ever before. Globalisation has turned many organizations intercultural or international with divergent publics of different cultural backgrounds, which is key towards how people perceive and react to any form of communication. Consequently, it is pertinent that for any intercultural and international Public relations campaign to be successful there is need for meticulous and detailed study of all cultural components of the target communities. Thus, it entails a greater need for the PR practitioners to help their organisations navigate cultural terrains (Kent & Taylor, 2010, p49). The paper is therefore aimed at analyzing to what extent multicultural competence makes

or mars successful practice of intercultural and International Public Relations in today's globalized world. It also analyses varied cultural settings across different regions that influences how organisations and PR practitioners must approach PR campaigns to win the mutual understanding and benefit in the communities.

### **Culture**

Curtin and Gaither (2007) posit that culture forms the basis of our life and determine the way we make and share meaning. Adler and Doktor (1986) describes culture by some three major characteristics- it is shared by members of some social group, older members pass it down to younger generation; and it embraces the mores, laws and customs that shapes the groups behavior and perception. In this respect Wakefield (2010) argues that it could be said that culture is embedded in all aspects of public relations including the public relations firm, the client organizations, the stakeholders, special interest groups, existing communities, and virtually all societies or organizations that exist within the whole system. Culture therefore is a combination of various components- environment, social and economic status, religion, custom, language, exposure and even access to technology- that shape the way an individual or people can interpret a communication (verbal, non-verbal) aspects as either appropriate or inappropriate, good or bad, acceptable or not. So this paper adopted Wakefield (2010)'s definition viewing culture as 'anything' that shape the worldview of an individual or a people, influence their attitude and affect the way they act or react to their outer world.

### **International public relations**

International public relations is the planned communication activities of a multinational organisation, international institutions or governments to create a favourable and amenable atmosphere through interactions in the target country in order to facilitate the organisation (or government) to achieve its policy or business objectives without harming the interests of the host publics (Szondi, 2009, p. 113). However, government public relation is not the focus of this paper. From aforesaid

definition it can be discerned that this level of public relations involves publics of diverse culture. Hence the need for intercultural competence. And central to intercultural competence according to Kent and Taylor (2009) is understanding that, like interpersonal relationships with our friends and family, effective intercultural communication is based on shared patterns of experience and interaction as well as a general and a specific understanding of individual cultures (p. 51).

### **Multicultural Competence and Intercultural / International Public Relations Practice**

Today the scholarly notion of single culture rooted within nations is subject to widespread challenge- perhaps because the concept is incorrect from the outset. In the first place most nations have long contained numerous cultures, served by their own languages, social and political leaning, and long –standing hostilities toward surrounding cultures. The African continent alone comprises more than 50 nations and more than 1000 languages-each of which is generally rooted within a certain culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). Nigeria alone houses more than 250 tribes and cultures. Even the US, seen for decades as a "melting pot" of cultures, is now experiencing strong cultural variation and increasing call not for *e pluribus Unum*, (*US slogan in Latin, meaning One from Many*) but for greater recognition and accommodation of diversity (Wakefield, 2010).

Inglehart and Baker (2000) in Wakefield (2010) highlight two schools of thought about the relevance of culture in today's public relations. One school emphasizes the convergence of values as a result of "modernization"- the overwhelming economic and political forces that drive cultural change. This school predicts the decline of traditional values and their replacement with modern values. The other school of thought emphasizes the persistence of traditional values despite economic and political change. The school posits that values are relatively independent of economic condition. It predicts that convergence around some set of "modern" values is unlikely and that traditional values will continue to exert an independent influence on the cultural changes caused by economic development.

Scholars see changes of modernization as overestimated. In other words, too much credence was given to the impact of modernization on making the world a melted culture. For instance, sometimes when people migrated, they migrated in a reasonable number and settle in a new environment. Thus, it takes so many generations before they can become totally assimilated to the host culture (Wakefield, 2010).

Also arguing in the same vein, Banks (2000) says young people's taste in music, clothing and food are fast becoming universal; the globalized consumer products' availability and use of leisure time; and conformity in life style aspiration contribute to uniformity of cultural identity. He however adds that these elements of the cultural melt are based on secondary considerations but posed challenges to primary dimension of identity. Victor (1998) in Banks (2000) theorizes that cultural retrenchment – the insistence on cultural differentiation – is defensive against being absorbed into a global consumer identity. In effect, people worldwide are growing more similar as consumers while struggling to retain their core cultural distinctiveness. Cultural diversity, Victor agrees reflects communication preferences, while cultural uniformity reflects consumer preferences. Thus as the world becomes more globalized in one sense, the people become more parochial in ways likely to affect marketing and business communication among boarders.

These contrasting trends have complex consequences. For multicultural and international public relations, one implication is the likelihood that further economic and commercial ties among nations will not necessarily lead to a greater convergence of primary dimension of culture. The need for effective inter-cultural communication even under the global/local principle therefore, will continue to be strong. In addition, economic globalization does not mean that the world is becoming one market with standardized product and communication. While product and leisure activity trends are spreading worldwide, many intercultural marketed products are customized according to a particular cultural setting (Banks, 2000).

Kent and Taylor (2010, p. 55) observes that

in the past some public relations scholars Grunig (1992), Vercic and Grunig (1996), and Grunig (1996) were of the view “that certain single theory such as the excellence theory can account for the understanding of international practice of public relations”. He, however, argues that “given the complexity of making meaning and relationship the one-theory-fit-all approach to intercultural communication is impossible in global context” (p. 52). Consequently, some cultures need some specific model for the Public Relations practitioner to succeed in the PR campaign.

In countries such as South Korea, however, personal influence is crucial and members of in-groups and those with connection are often more successful at achieving organisational and personal goals. This include for example, party members in communist or socialist states, members of in-groups, royalty, individuals with higher status, people from higher castes, business people and individuals with more resources (Taylor & Kent, 1999).

Therefore, public relations practitioners need to consider that culture influences how an organization enacts relationship with domestic and international publics. Central to intercultural competence understands that intercultural communication is pivoted on shared pattern of experience and interaction as well as general and specific understanding of individual cultures. Just as our relationship with friends, family and colleagues differ, culture is also different.

In trying to emphasize the influence of culture on public relations practice Gupta and Bartlett (2007) argue that it is not just enough discussing only cultural differences as a major factor for distinctive public relations practices or simply highlighting the current practices of given societies. It is imperative to focus on more direct influence in to the global public relations profession. They further stated that: “by delving deeper and understanding the rich culture surrounding of a region, the culture that influences human behavior, corporate governance and business practice could help identify the reasons behind the unique public relations practice within each particular region” (p. 64).

In their paper, *Practicing Public Relations in the Global Community of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century- A*

*Comparative of Business Practices in Three World Regions*, Gupta and Bartlett (2007) argued that public relations being an organizational function cannot be isolated from the business modus operandi, the corporate structure and the culture of the publics with whom they relate.

They comparatively analyzed five variables in the business practice of three regions, namely European, Western and Asian regions, in order to appreciate the relationship between business practice and public relations. The variables are information flow and release, shareholder influence, workplace environment; personal influence and spiritual influence in Business.

#### ***Information Flow and Release***

The study established that in Asia and Europe the information flow is a top-down approach, while in the West information moves upwards and downwards. In Europe corporate governance is influenced by the company's interest. Directors' priority is promotion of the company and that is why Press Agency model, along with Personal Influence model is so significantly used there.

#### ***Stakeholder Influence***

In the Asian region, company's family members are a top priority at the expense of minor investors. In Europe, company's interest comes first while in the West, equal opportunity is given to all stakeholders. The Asian business culture adds even further complexities for public relations practitioners to implement the two-way communication models.

#### ***Workplace Environment***

In Western region, independent trade unions and associations often represent employees. However, in many Asian countries, employees are closely related to the caste community or the business owner and are not encouraged to voice their right but sacrificed all to the company's good. In Europe the union level varies significantly from the countries with vibrant union involvement such as Denmark, to countries with weak union involvement such as Portugal (Schnabel & Wagner, 2007). While Western region maintain a level business ground, Asian corporate structures are often all pyramid. These differences portray the viable

basis for Asian public relations practitioners to avoid two-way communication model and turn to the personal influence model.

#### ***Personal Influence in Business***

Personal influence in business plays a key role in the Asian region. In the Western region there is a clear distinction between personal and business relationships, but in most of the Asian countries there was no demarcation. While in Western regions, family relations are often hidden during business negotiations to avoid conflict of interests, in Asian region, any perceivable relationship with the other party is identified and emphasized (Reynolds & Valentine, 2004).

In China for example, the personal influence model takes on a completely new level. The terms *guanxi* and *mianzi* illustrate a strategic and deliberate technique of personal influence. *Guanxi* purely translated means personal tie. So and Walker (2005) defines it as a method of economic organization without resorting to law and formal rules. And *mianzi* on the other hand means recognition by others of an individual's social standing and position. They suggest that maintaining contacts is on a matter of general interest in the West but in China it is a deliberate and formalized ritual. Although *guanxi* is an ancient practice, it has been facilitated and expanded by the new technology. Chinese, especially youths, are building social networks through internet sites such as QQ, which are far more advanced and sophisticated than popular American networking services (Ebenkamp, 2006). Such a deep, ritualized business activity cannot be ignored when developing public relations strategy.

#### ***Spiritual Influence in Business***

In countries of Asian region such as India, the majority Hindus consult astrological sciences like Vedic discussed in the frame of corporate culture. Tsuroka (1993) stated that many Asian stockbrokers resort to palmistry and personal astrology for advice on purchasing or selling of particular shares. In situations such as these a local public relations strategy works best rather than implementing foreign ideals, which have been created by a region so unlike the given region.

So Gupta and Bartlett (2007) conclude that

business practices have a very close relationship with the practice of public relations - which has very much direct influence on the how an organisation is perceived. However, these business practices would have had to emerge from other influences such as culture which in turn influences the practice of public relations. In a nutshell cultural practices directly or indirectly influence the way public relations is practiced.

### **Culture Disregard and the Failure of Intercultural/ International PR Campaigns**

This section analyses different case studies in which PR, advertising and integrated marketing campaigns across diverse cultures failed as a result of poor handling of cultural issues. To begin with an instance which is not far-fetched, in 2001, a Nigerian, Agbani Darego became the first black African to win the Miss World Beauty Pageant. The event organizers as part of their Public relations activities deemed it a favour- to honor Nigeria by holding the next pageant in Abuja, Nigeria's capital. This move, instead of been appreciated, was responded to with intense protests staged by some Muslim population (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, n.d).

The Muslims considered the event as share obscenity and sacrilegious especially for the scheduled period coinciding with Ramadan, a Lunar month believed by the Muslims to be the holy month. The issue was still aggravated by an article written by a Britain born and bred Nigerian, Isioma Daniel to promote the pageant which was also considered blasphemous by the Muslim communities. It led to clashes between Muslim and Christian communities leaving more than 100 killed and property worth millions of dollar destroyed (BBC, 2002). This is how an international Public relations campaign turned fatal denting the image of Miss World Pageant in Nigeria instead of building reputation because of culture disregard. The moment you mention Miss World in Nigeria what may instantaneously come to the minds of many people is the loved ones they lost to the riot.

It should be noted that some cultures are very sensitive when it comes to religious beliefs. Years back a soft drink, carrying a symbol of six pointed star, was introduced in the Arab nations. It was vehemently rejected as the people

perceived the trademark as promoting Zionism (Payne, n.d). The perception of same symbol also raised conflict in Nigeria when in 2014, the country's central bank issued a new 100 naira note to mark Nigeria's centenary celebration. The Muslim communities accused the Christian president of trying to sell the country to the Jews (Nigerian Tribune, 2014, para. 1).

The need for understanding diversity does not limit to only international public relation practitioners, but also practitioners working in a domestic organization with diverse publics brought about by globalization. Tindal (2012) observes that the changing demographics of communities like the United States demonstrates the quest for public relations to become a diverse profession that understands and practices multicultural communication and provides equal opportunities for minorities and women. Therefore, in an organizational context, diversity in public relations is essential if the organization functions in a multicultural environment. Sharing his experience, an African student in a Europe nation Abdou Ousmane argued that his university has put in place so many facilities to give its publics even the minority a sense of belonging. For example, he continues, structures are built to cater for the smokers and the non-smoking students, instructions given priorities to the disabled are pasted on the lifts, the visually impaired library section and gymnasium among other things have been provided (Ousmane,2020).

However, he adds:

*When it was time I asked of a prayer room, to my surprise there was none in the university premises. For an average Muslim that prays five times a day, he needs a prayer room more than some of the things provided. When I confronted a staff at the international student office she said no one had earlier brought to their knowledge or forwarded a request for such a special need, promising to take my demand to the relevant university authorities (Ousmane, 2020, p.3)*

Ousmane observed that the demographics of the university is changing with more enrollment of candidates from the Arab and African countries

raising the number of Muslim students in the university and there is need to respond to their unique cultural identity. Tepeh (2015, p5) states that, 40% of international admissions in University of Nicosia comes from Nigeria which represents the largest African population. She adds that it may interest you to know that the highest numbers of Nigerians in Cyprus are in the Eastern Mediterranean University, and most of them Muslims.

Tindall (2012) argues that a diverse organization can benefit from the multiplicity of experiences, attitudes and backgrounds of its different publics. She suggested that practitioners should “advocate for diversity of all types in the Public relations function and in the organization”. Sharing same belief with Tindall (2012), Ousmane (2020, p4) states that taking into account the needs of diverse cultures including minorities' need may attract more candidates from especially the over one hundred million populated Muslim dominant Northern region of Nigeria (NBS, 2016), and in turn more revenue to the university.

Other cases of neglect of culture of target public in PR campaign can be found in a toothpaste *Pepsodent's* campaign in Southeast Asia emphasizing that the paste 'whitens your teeth'. It was found that the local natives chew betel nut to blacken their teeth because they found it attractive. So imagine them buying Pepsodent to cleanse what they dedicated resources to get! An eyeglass producer in Thailand also made a campaign featuring cute animals wearing the glasses. It later found out that the campaign failed because for the Thais it is demeaning to associate human being with animals so no one was willing to wear glasses worn by animals (Payne, n.d).

In intercultural Public relations, differences among languages and even within a language need to be appreciated while choosing phrases for a given campaign. For instance, when the car manufacturer- Ford launched Pinto brand in Brazil, the brand experienced poor patronage. This was because 'Pinto' in Brazilian slang means a tiny male genital so it sounds unpleasant for many to ride in. Coors' slogan “turn it loose” which may have been gladly welcomed in America, became a laughing stock in Spanish country as it means “*Get loose bowels*” (Sunshine, 2012, para. 3). In another

campaign, Pepsi's “*Come alive with Pepsi*” did not quite work in China, when some took it to mean Pepsi will “bring your ancestors back from the grave”. Still on intra language differences, the airline UAL headlined a PR article about Australian actor and comedian, Paul Hogan, reading “*Paul Hogan Camps It Up*”. It was a goof for UAL because the phrase meant entirely different from the intended message. It was unfortunate that '*camp it up*' in the United Kingdom and Australia is a slang meaning flaunting homosexuality (Payne, n.d).

These instances of linguistics catastrophes and hundreds of others in the literature suffice to say that globalization has made the practice of public relations more challenging and demanding in term of multicultural competence. Because of the influence of culture on the peoples' worldview of taste, even the marketing function- production- in the so called globalized consumable products which people may think is uniform everywhere in the world is tempered with to suit the need of different cultures. In one of its posts one of the multinational food vendors, McDonald appreciated that its more customized packages made it what it is now in the world. It understood that tastes vary around the world, “that is why in many markets; we supplement our iconic menu items with distinctive offerings that embrace local taste. But instead of simply duplicating local favorites, we take what is familiar and put a McDonald's twist on it”. We have an instant, in India where McDonald substituted entire beef in one of its dishes with potato-patting *McAloo Tikki burger and Chicken Maharaja* because of the Hindus entirely different sentiment about cows which could be related in form of worship (aboutmcdonalds.com).

Even the most popular globalized soft drink, Coca Cola was not spared by the cultural influence. The company's headquarters in the United States claimed that it tastes all its soft drink in all bottling companies across the globe to ensure safety and formula standard are maintained but recognizes small differences in taste when it is bottled outside the State (Wise GEEK). For instance, the bottling company in Mexico used cane sugar instead of corn syrup. This may not be unconnected with the peoples' different worldview of what taste is pleasant.

### Getting on Top

As multiculturalism poses a daunting challenge to the success of public relations practice, especially international or intercultural, an organization should pay special attention while planning any international public relation activity to actualize best practices. It should also strategize public relations activities to accommodate domestic and global interest. In essence the public relations team should consist professionals with different cultural competence, having central guidance with relative autonomy to work in such a way to meet the demand of locales within which the branches operate (Wakefield, 2010). For a local organization with multicultural publics, the PR unit should also have a representativeness of the different cultures for maximum output.

It is highly relevant to note that the advancement in globalization which promotes trade and cultural exchanges across boundaries has rather made it more necessary, than ever before, for public relations practitioners to have multi-cultural competences. In other words, the Public relations practitioners in their effort to foster interest, trust and belief in product service or their organization through advertising; media relations; brand management; crisis management and so on, should implement cross cultural analysis so as to ensure the campaign is capable of targeting the audience as best as possible by appealing to their worldview while avoiding offences. This is because culture can make or mar the public relations campaign (Payne, n.d). This applies to both online and offline public relations practice as one of the micro environment that shape your audience worldviews and factors affecting online communication strategy is culture (Breckenridge & DeLoughry, 2003).

When designing any PR campaign our focus should be finding out which specific norms and values will guide our publics' interpretation of our message. Does our message make sense within the targeted culture? The message must be rid of ethnocentrism. And it is necessary to find out where the interest of the organization and public intersects (Kent & Taylor, 2012). We can achieve all these by conducting a survey to pre-test peoples' perception about particular action, words and phrases, symbol and so on before we associate them with our message.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper states that multicultural competence is indispensable for a successful Public relations campaign as far as communication in diversity is concerned. It is therefore pertinent for organizations to give more priority attention to multicultural competence in intercultural / international public relations due to the higher risk as well as opportunities involved so long as the world continues to be globalized with more and more quest for interaction within and among cultures. Cross cultural studies should be encouraged among the practitioners as well as by organizations. This is because some cultures in varied regions of the world have influenced organizations' practice to an extent that the general public relations theories are not easily viable.

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