

## Case Studies in Cross-Cultural Communication in Global Public Relations

Bridget C. Onochie<sup>1</sup> and Achilleus-Chud Uchegbu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1, 2</sup> Institute of Strategic and Development Communication (ISDEVCOM), Nasarawa State University Keffi.

---

### Abstract

This case study examines the role of cross-cultural communication in shaping effective global public relations strategies, focusing on the interplay of cultural sensitivity, local context, and adaptive messaging. As organisations expand their global reach, navigating diverse cultural landscapes becomes critical to building trust, fostering engagement, and maintaining brand credibility. Through an in-depth analysis of a multinational corporation's public relations campaign across multiple regions, this study explores how cultural nuances influence communication outcomes. Key findings highlight that culturally sensitive approaches, rooted in understanding local values, norms, and socio-economic contexts, significantly enhance audience resonance and trust. Conversely, failure to adapt messaging to local realities risks alienating stakeholders and undermining campaign effectiveness. Public relations practitioners must navigate cultural differences to effectively build relationships, maintain organisational reputations, and communicate messages that resonate with diverse audiences. Effective cross-cultural communication has become a critical component of successful global public relations. The study underscores the necessity of dynamic adaptation in global public relations, offering insights into best practices for crafting inclusive, contextually relevant strategies that bridge cultural divides while achieving organisational objectives. By integrating theoretical frameworks with practical implications, this study contributes to the evolving discourse on cross-cultural competence in global public relations.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural communication, global public relations, cultural intelligence, cultural nuances, international communication.

---

### Introduction

The importance of cross-cultural communication in the practice of public relations cannot be overstated. This is because miscommunication or cultural insensitivity can lead to misunderstandings, reputational damage, and even organisational crises (Wakefield, 2008). For this reason, there has been emphasis on improving, or, adhering to developing strategies that are culturally sensitive and also respect local contexts such that they align with global objectives (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011).

This need becomes necessary given the growing globalisation of the world which brings cultures closer together making them interact in various forms. This interaction of cultures infuses itself into the communication mix to become a vital tool for the development of an effective global public relations practice. With globalisation, products and services become

globalized and brought across cultural boundaries. The marketing of these products and services also transcends borders. It becomes imperative that the ability to navigate cultural differences and foster meaningful connections with diverse audiences becomes a critical tool towards building trust, managing reputation, and achieving strategic communication goals (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009).

Therefore, cross-cultural communication in global public relations involves understanding and addressing the nuances of language, values, norms, and communication styles that vary across cultures (Freitag & Stokes, 2009). This complexity is further amplified by the rapid evolution of digital media, which has transformed how messages are disseminated and received on a global scale (Zaharna, 2013).

It is imperative also to understand the role that globalization has played in transforming public relations into a field that demands cultural adaptability. Organisations operate across borders, engaging stakeholders from diverse cultural backgrounds. This necessitates an understanding of cultural nuances to prevent miscommunication and foster trust. Cross-cultural communication, defined as the process of exchanging, negotiating, and mediating cultural differences, is essential in global public relations (Hall, 1989) as it relates to cultural awareness and the understanding of one's own cultural biases and being aware of cultural differences with others as well as recognizing that language is not just a means of communication but also a reflection of culture. This further affects nonverbal communication and being aware of nonverbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions, which can vary across cultures, and also the contextualization of communication.

This paper therefore explores the challenges and opportunities of cross-cultural communication in global PR, examining theoretical frameworks, practical approaches, and case studies that highlight best practices for fostering effective communication across cultural boundaries. By integrating insights from intercultural communication theory and PR scholarship, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how organisations can navigate cultural diversity to achieve their communication objectives in a globalized world.

### **Background to the Study**

The issue of cross-cultural communication arose out of the practice of public relations. According to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), Public relations, popular as PR, is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their public (2012). It involves managing communication between an organisation and its stakeholders to maintain a positive reputation, build goodwill, and influence public perception. Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006) defined PR as “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the public on whom its success or failure depends.” The definitions above point clearly to the fact that public relations, is communication-driven towards perception and reputation management. To make success of public relations as a tool to effectively communicate perception, manage reputation and build goodwill, the

public relations process would involve engagement with journalists and media outlets to secure positive coverage to manage crises and an organisation's response to crises in order to protect its reputation.

Public relations also involves corporate Communication which relates to communicating internally and externally to maintain brand identity as well as community relations which entails building relationships with local communities and stakeholders; reputation management which is monitoring and shaping public perception through strategic communication and social media management which arose out of the penetrating influence of the social media in reputation and brand communication and as such involves utilizing digital platforms to engage audiences and manage brand image.

Public relations indicate communicating with diverse audiences and across cultures. This has led to the development of cross-cultural communication in global brand and reputation management and communications. The globalisation of the world has collapsed a lot of barriers and brought to word closer though cultural diversities expressed through language, symbols and signs remain. These cultural diversities impact the practice of public relations globally necessitating the need for a study to find ways of breaking through the cultural barriers to develop homogenous messages for the public. This is so because a message developed for one culture may not be suitable for another culture given that words, symbols and gestures mean different things to different cultures.

Cross-cultural communication is therefore the process of exchanging messages between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds. It involves understanding and managing cultural differences to achieve effective communication. Gudykunst (2005) defines cross-cultural communication as an interdisciplinary field that examines how people from diverse cultures communicate and how these interactions can be improved.

Cross-cultural communication involves the exchange of information between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This is however impacted by the differences in language, norms, and values. The differences in language and dialects can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and even offence. Samovar, (2017) argues that even in the same language groups, idioms, slang, and jargon, used differently and under different contexts, may create confusion. For instance, The English word "gift" means a present, but in German, "Gift" means poison, leading to potential misinterpretations.

This is the same with non-verbal cues like body language, gestures, eye contact, and personal space which mean differently across cultures. Hall, (1976) states that a thumbs-up sign is positive in Western cultures but offensive in some Middle Eastern and Asian cultures. Hall also states that high-context cultures for instance, Nigeria and Japan rely on implicit communication, while low-context cultures, for instance, Germany and the United States of America, prefer direct communication. According to him, saying "no" directly is considered rude in some cultures, while in others, honesty is valued more than politeness.

There are also issues with stereotypes and prejudices wherein preconceived notions about other cultures can lead to biases and misjudgments. This is evident in interaction across cultures. In *Beyond Cultures*, Hall (1976) states that “stereotypes create barriers to open-minded communication and may result in discrimination” while what is considered ethical, polite, or respectful in one culture may be offensive in another. For instance, in some Asian cultures, bowing shows respect, while in Western cultures, a firm handshake is expected, Hofstede, (2001). Navigating these potential landmines in effective public relations and strategic communications requires open-minded training in cultural sensitivity and appreciation.

### **Aim of Study**

The objective of this study is to understand how cultural differences affect communication strategies and public relations practices across the different cultures of the world and through it develop effective ways to engage diverse audiences. This would be achieved through understanding cultural norms, values, and communication styles of different cultures so as to avoid misunderstandings and foster positive relationships. Understanding the impact of culture in public relations will also help to adapt communication messages to resonate with different cultural audiences, avoid stereotypes and misrepresentations by recognizing biases and misconceptions while maintaining brand consistency and developing culturally sensitive communication that fosters credibility and trust among global stakeholders and ensure respectful communication that is culturally sensitive and enhances brand reputation among the different cultures. Leveraging cultural insights in creating effective public relations campaigns enhances global business communication success by supporting business expansion strategies.

### **Theoretical Framework of Study**

The study of cross-cultural communication in global public relations is underpinned by several theoretical frameworks that help explain how cultural differences influence effective communication across borders. However, for the purpose of this case study, two theoretical frameworks will suffice. They are the Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and Edward Hall's High-Context and Low-Context Cultures.

Developed by Geert Hofstede, this framework identifies dimensions of culture, such as individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint, that shape how people from different societies communicate and perceive relationships. This theory is used in global public relation practice to tailor messaging and strategies to align with cultural values and expectations.

Edward T. Hall's theory distinguishes between high-context cultures – where communication relies heavily on nonverbal cues, relationships, and implicit meanings, e.g., Japan or Arab countries- and low-context cultures -where communication is direct and explicit, e.g., the U.S. or Germany. This framework helps public relations practitioners to adapt campaigns to suit the communication styles of target audiences.

### **Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory**

Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory for understanding cultural differences in communication, management, and public relations was based on research Hofstede conducted while working at IBM in the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, he analyzed how cultural values affect workplace behaviour across different countries. Through the work, he identified six key dimensions that distinguish cultures. He listed the six dimensions as: Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV), Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS), Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation (LTO), and Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR).

According to Hofstede, the Power Distance Index (PDI) measures how societies handle inequalities in power and hierarchy. He created a distinction between High Power Distance Cultures, which according to him accept a hierarchical structure where authority and status differences are emphasized and employees tend to follow strict rules and defer to senior management like in Mexico, Russia, and China against Low Power Distance Cultures, which he said prefer egalitarian structures where authority is more decentralized, and employees expect to participate in decision-making. Examples of this are Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

The Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV) examines whether a culture values individual achievements or prioritises group harmony. Hofstede also created two dimensions of this to include individualistic cultures which emphasize personal independence, self-reliance, and individual rights, where people are encouraged to express their opinions openly like in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom; against the collectivist cultures which value group loyalty, social harmony, and the collective good over personal achievements like in China, Japan, and India.

His third category is the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) which assesses how comfortable a society is with ambiguity and risk. According to Hofstede the UAI has two components –the High Uncertainty Avoidance Cultures which prefer clear rules, structure, and stability but less open to risk and innovation, like Greece, Japan, and Portugal; and, Low Uncertainty Avoidance Cultures which accept ambiguity and are more open to innovation, risk-taking, and change.

The fourth category, Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS), looks at whether a society prioritises traditionally masculine traits or feminine traits. While masculine cultures look strongly at the value of assertiveness, competition, and material success, feminine cultures value relationships, quality of life, and social well-being with huge encouragement for cooperation and modesty.

The last two dimensions are Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation (LTO) and Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR). Whereas Hofstede argues that LTO assesses how societies prioritise tradition against future planning, with perseverance, adaptation, and future rewards as values; STOs focus on immediate results, traditions, and maintaining social norms; while also, the Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR) would focus on how societies balance enjoyment and self-discipline through indulgent cultures that encourage free expression, pleasure, and personal

enjoyment against restrained cultures that emphasize self-control, discipline, and social norms.

Each of these cultural dimensions has its implications for public relations. They could make public relations campaigns, in long-term-oriented cultures to focus on sustainability and long-term benefits, while in short-term-oriented cultures; they should focus on immediate rewards and quick results. Also, messages in high power distance cultures may need to emphasize respect for authority, while in low power distance cultures, they should encourage open dialogue and participation, individualistic cultures should highlight personal success stories, while those in collectivist cultures should focus on group values, community benefits, and long-term relationships.

The implications of high uncertainty avoidance cultures, according to Hofstede is that public relations messages should provide clear, structured information and minimize uncertainty while in low uncertainty avoidance cultures, creativity and flexibility in messaging are more acceptable. On the other hand, public relations campaigns in masculine cultures may emphasize success, strength, and achievement, while in feminine cultures; they should focus on empathy, inclusivity, and quality of life. In LTO and STO cultures, the implications are that PR and marketing campaigns in long-term-oriented cultures should emphasize sustainability and long-term benefits, while in short-term-oriented cultures, they should focus on immediate rewards and quick results while in indulgent cultures, campaigns can use humour, entertainment, and emotional appeal, while in restrained cultures, messages should focus on responsibility, tradition, and moral values.

Hofstede model is a widely recognised framework for understanding cultural differences. It outlines dimensions such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and uncertainty avoidance Hofstede, (1980). For example, public relations campaigns in collectivist societies, like Japan, may emphasize group harmony and consensus, whereas campaigns in individualistic cultures, like the United States, might prioritise personal achievements and self-expression.

Hofstede therefore recommends that in applying his theory to public relations and, or, advertising, global brands should adapt their advertising strategies based on individualist dimensions to emphasise personal happiness and choice, or, to collectivist cultures to focus on larger communities, friendship, and group bonding. In crisis communication, he urges that since different cultures react differently to corporate crises, high uncertainty avoidance cultures would expect clear, structured crisis responses while low uncertainty avoidance cultures may tolerate ambiguity and a more flexible crisis response.

He also urged that brands operating in multiple cultures must adjust their leadership and internal communication styles to suit high power distance cultures with top-down leadership and corporate communication leads, while in low power distance cultures adopt participatory decision-making.

**Critique of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory**

However, despite the wide adoption of Hofstede's theory in public relations, crisis communication and perception management, the model suffers the bad fate of generalisation because it ignores the development of subcultures and individual variations while making assumptions that national culture is homogeneous.

Secondly, Hofstede's research was conducted in the 1960s and 1970s. This suggests that it may have become outdated as cultural values may have changed over time. It is also limited in scope as its focus was closed to workplace behaviour without further input from outside his workplace. Finally, the theory is Western based and did not make any reference to cultures outside Hofstede's immediate environment. Therefore, though the study is still relevant to understanding the cultural dimension of public relations, it is not universally representative as his Western-based view cannot rightly be extrapolated to explain cultural dimensions in other cultures outside the West.

**Edward Hall's High and Low Context Cultures**

Edward T. Hall (1976) developed the High- and Low-Context Culture Theory to explain how different cultures communicate based on context, nonverbal cues, and explicitness of messages. His theory is highly relevant in public relations (PR), where understanding cultural communication styles is crucial for crafting effective messages and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders across different cultural backgrounds. For instance, he identified and created the distinction between high and low-context cultures. According to him, communication cues depend on how much meaning is derived from context rather than explicit words.

**High and Low Context Cultures**

According to Hall, high-context cultures rely on implicit communication, nonverbal cues, and shared cultural understanding. He argues that the meaning of a message is often embedded in the context rather than being explicitly stated, while low-context cultures rely on explicit, direct, and precise communication. Hall further posits that in low-context cultures, the message itself contains most of the information, and there is less reliance on shared cultural background or nonverbal cues.

Hall listed characteristics of high-context cultures to include indirect and nuanced communication which relies on nonverbal cues like body language, and tone of voice; messages are implied rather than directly stated; relationships and trust are crucial before business or communication occurs; the audience relies on background knowledge to interpret messages, and that conflict is often avoided or resolved subtly to maintain group harmony.

In his work, Hall argued that the implications for public relations high-context cultures are that campaigns must focus on building relationships and trust rather than just providing information; that nonverbal elements like colours, images, and tone are as important as words in messaging; and that crisis communication should be subtle and discreet to avoid

public embarrassment while messages should align with cultural values and social hierarchy.

In Hall's list of high-context cultures, he gave examples of Japan, China, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Mexico, Brazil, Italy, and Spain. His thoughts did not get to Africa. On Low-Context Cultures, Hall explains that they rely on explicit, direct, and precise communication. According to Hall, the message itself contains most of the information, and there is less reliance on shared cultural background or nonverbal cues. Hall listed characteristics of low-context cultures to include that communication is clear, direct, and unambiguous; messages are explicitly stated rather than implied; contracts, rules, and formal agreements are highly valued; facts and logic are prioritised over emotions or relationships and conflict is addressed openly and directly. These are exemplified in such countries as the United States, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.

Hall also identified the implications of this context for public relations to include that messages should be clear, direct, and fact-based; that transparency is highly valued, so public apologies and direct responses to crises are necessary; that data and logical reasoning should be included in public relations messaging, and lastly, that social media campaigns and press releases should be concise and to the point.

### **Application of Hall's Theory in Global Public Relations**

In applying Hall's high and low context theory to advertising and branding, it is recommended that in High-context markets the messaging should be subtle, culturally embedded storytelling while in low-context markets it should be straightforward sloganeering with clear product benefits. It is further recommended that adopting the theory of crisis communication in high- context cultures would require that companies privately address stakeholders before making public statements to maintain harmony, while in low-context cultures, companies should make immediate, public, and transparent statements.

Adapting the theory to media relations in high-context cultures would require public relations professionals to focus on relationship-building with journalists and government officials, while in low-context cultures, they provide direct press releases and factual reports, and lastly, for social media and digital public relations, the theory would prefer indirect engagement, storytelling, and influencer marketing for high-context cultures, while being fast and direct customer responses and factual updates in low-context cultures.

### **Criticisms of Hall's Theory**

Despite the nuanced advantages of Hall High and Low Context cultures, the theory suffers from the problem of oversimplification as it generalizes national cultures, ignoring individual differences and subcultures. It also fails the test of time as changes in cultures develop over time especially with globalization and digital communication, which has forced a hybrid structure over some cultures thus bringing together elements of high-context and low-context cultures. There is also growing identification of low-context theories by certain industries even in high- context environments due to professional and ethical requirements.



### **Specific Case Studies**

There have been instances where the effort to communicate brands to new markets failed due to the misinterpretation of the message as it relates to the cultures of the new markets. Some of such instances include:

#### **Case1: Jumia**

Jumia is seen as being to Nigeria what Amazon is to the United States of America. It is a Nigeria-based e-commerce platform with a strong presence across the continent. In 2022, Jumia partnered a U.S.-based tech company to launch a new affordable smartphone targeting Nigeria's growing middle class and youth demographic. The public relations campaign was designed in the USA and it emphasized a sleek design and cutting-edge technology, with "Upgrade Your Life" as slogan. The slogan was translated directly into local languages to reach a wider audience. However, the campaign failed to resonate with Nigerian consumers because the messaging was rooted in individualistic values and clashed with Nigeria's collectivist culture, where community and family priorities often outweigh individual gain. Additionally, the direct translation of slogans into Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo ignored linguistic nuances. For instance, "Upgrade Your Life" in Hausa was interpreted as implying one's current life was inadequate. It thus was considered offensive to customers. The campaign also overlooked the importance of local influencers and traditional media, relying heavily on social media platforms like Twitter, which skewed toward urban elites rather than the broader population.

#### **Case 2: Shell**

In 2011, Shell faced a major oil spill in the Niger Delta, a region already tensed due to decades of environmental degradation and community unrest. Its global PR team, headquartered in the Netherlands, issued a standardized crisis response emphasizing technical clean-up efforts and legal compliance, distributed worldwide via press releases and English-language media. The response ignored the high-context communication style of Niger Delta communities, where trust is built through face-to-face engagement, local leaders, and storytelling rather than formal statements. The use of English and technical jargon alienated locals, who predominantly speak pidgin and indigenous languages like Ijaw. Moreover, the public relation effort also failed to address cultural sensitivities around land and livelihoods and focused instead on corporate accountability, which was detached from community priorities. Local perceptions of Shell as a foreign exploiter worsened as the campaign did not involve community elders or acknowledge historical grievances. Rather than abate the crisis, protests escalated, and Shell faced boycotts and legal battles, with Nigerian activists amplifying the narrative globally via social media. The public relations misstep prolonged the crisis, costing Shell millions and tarnishing its reputation further in Nigeria.

#### **Case 3: Guinness**

Nigerian Breweries launched a global campaign, in 2019, to promote Guinness stout as a premium export to West African diaspora communities in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The public relations team, based in Lagos, collaborated with international agencies to craft a culturally resonant narrative. The campaign leveraged Nigeria's cultural richness, using the slogan "Made of More" to tie Guinness to resilience and communal

celebration. It featured images that resonated with Nigerians living in the UK and the USA. The campaign boosted Guinness sales in diaspora markets and reinforced brand loyalty in Nigeria. It won a public relations award for its seamless integration of cross-cultural elements, with social media amplifying its reach through user-generated content from s living abroad. The success showed that successful global public relations hinges on blending cultural insights with universal appeals.

**Case 4: Pepsi**

In 2017, Pepsi released a brand communication material featuring Kendall Jenner joining a protest and handing a Pepsi can to a police officer. The communication looked like it was fine as it meant to show that the Policeman would not interrupt the protest because of a can of Pepsi. However, the communication failed after it was roundly criticized for trivializing serious social justice movements, particularly Black Lives Matter. The cultural context of the communication was a Black Lives Matter protest and Pepsi was seen as trivializing a racially sensitive issue. The lesson from the failed communication is that public relations communication strategists must bring their brands engage with social issues authentically and understand the cultural and political weight of their messages.

**Case 5: Dove**

A 2017 Dove brand communication material showed a black woman turning into a white woman after using the body lotion. It failed because consumers interpreted it as suggesting that lighter skin is preferable. Thus, the brand was rejected as reinforcing racial stereotypes. The lesson from the failed communication was that visual messaging should be carefully reviewed to avoid unintended racial or cultural insensitivity.

**Case 6: HSBC**

In 2009, the bank, HSBC launched a global campaign with the slogan "Assume Nothing," but in many countries, this phrase was translated incorrectly as "Do Nothing." The tagline failed to communicate the bank's intentions because the mistranslation confused international customers. This made HSBC to spend \$10 million on a rebranding effort. Lessons from this failure showed that language localization is crucial in global branding to avoid misinterpretation.

**Case 7: Parker**

Parker Pen, was, at a point, the market leader in the pen world. When it wanted to market its pens in Mexico, it went in with the slogan "It won't leak in your pocket and embarrass you." However, its translation in the local language was "It won't leak in your pocket and make you pregnant." This translation was embarrassing to the market and led to a failed communication campaign because the word "embarazar" meaning "to impregnate" in Spanish, was wrongly used. The lesson from this indicates that professional translation and cultural checks are essential for international marketing.

**Case 8: McDonalds**

In 2019, McDonald's released a public relations communication material in China showing a man proposing with a burger instead of a ring. This failed the Chinese audience because they saw it as insensitive to traditional marriage values and disrespectful toward proposals. This suggests that understanding local customs and traditions is key when crafting culturally relevant campaigns.

**Case 9: Dolce and Gabbana**

In 2018, Dolce & Gabbana entered the Chinese market with a public relations communication material which featured a Chinese woman struggling to eat pizza with chopsticks. The communication goal failed because the Chinese saw it as mocking their culture. This led to a backlash and boycott of the brand in China. This teaches that brands must be aware of cultural stereotypes and avoid content that could be perceived as offensive.

**Case 10: Bobba**

In 2024, founders of the Canadian ready-to-drink boba tea company, Bobba, appeared on the show "Dragon's Den" seeking investment. They described traditional boba tea as a "trendy, sugary drink" and claimed to have "innovated" it with healthier, alcohol-infused versions. The claims were perceived as disrespectful to Bobba's Taiwanese origins, leading to accusations of cultural appropriation. They regretted the claim as it destroyed their product. It is important to respect and acknowledge the cultural heritage of products, especially when introducing modifications or innovations.

**Case 11: H&M**

In 2018, H&M featured a black child wearing a hoodie with the slogan "Coolest monkey in the jungle." The feature was deemed racially insensitive, leading to widespread criticism and prompting collaborations to be cancelled. Lesson learned from this episode include being aware of the cultural and historical contexts of marketing materials to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

**Case 12: Nivea**

In 2017, Nivea aired an advertisement in Ghana featuring a black woman using a product that "visibly lightens" the skin. The interpretation that followed the advertisement was that lighter skin is preferable. The advertisement was labeled as "racist" and denigrating the black colour. This led to a public outcry that caused market rejection. The episode showed that brands must be sensitive to issues of colour and race and avoid promoting products in a way that suggests one skin tone is superior to another.

**Discussion**

Cultural Sensitivity has therefore become a norm to help public relations practitioners navigate the cultural landmine in designing messages for public consumption. Sensitivity to cultural interaction in public relations communication suggests respect for the culture of other people. It thus means that the public relations practitioner and strategic communicator ought to deeply research the culture they operate in, taking into cognizance the nuances of the new culture in the areas of symbols, signs, dress style and language. This

indicates a proper understanding of verbal and non-verbal cues of different cultures relevant to particular markets. Understanding this would lead to the designing and use of materials that accurately represent diverse cultures.

Thoroughly researching this further suggests engaging with cultural communities to gain insights and feedback before launching campaigns. This can be done through engagement with community or opinion leaders, town hall meetings, focus group discussions and field research. Learning the cultural landmines to avoid can help brands to better navigate the complexities of global markets and foster positive relationships with diverse audiences. Brands that respect cultural differences do well to avoid reinforcing stereotypes and are better insulated from crisis management.

Generally, markets globally tend to favour brands that respect their cultural nuances. While market penetration and dominance tend to be the goals of new brands, communicating them indicates that the public relations expert has enough research to understand the cultural context of the new markets. For instance, while a fist bump may be accepted in one culture as a form of salutation, it may not be acceptable in another culture as a form of salutation too. An MTN public relations communication material in Nigeria once played up the cultural issues between having a male child and a girl child. The “Mama Na Boy” advertisement was not very welcome in Nigeria because of the cultural attachment to the boy child. The advertisement tended to discriminate against the girl child leading to public outcry and eventual withdrawal.

According to Hall’s theory, Nigeria falls within the category of high-context culture, in this regard; Nigeria relies on implicit communication, shared experiences, and deep cultural understanding. In Nigeria, proverbs, metaphors, and non-verbal cues are freely employed to convey meaning. There is also a strong emphasis on relationships and professional interactions which are built on trust, long-term relationships, and communal values rather than just contracts or written agreements. Further, Nigerians have a very strong sense of collectivism, where family, ethnic groups and social networks play a crucial role in decision-making and interactions while non-verbal cues like body and hand gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions, and silence often carry significant meanings in public and private communication. Therefore, considering these would build the capacity of the public relations professional to communicate with a diverse audience of over 250 ethnic groups and multiple languages.

Therefore, for global public relations to be effective, certain assumptions must be internalised. These key assumptions are:

- (i) Cultural sensitivity enhances effectiveness by fostering trust, respect and understanding among diverse audience. It ensures that messaging resonates authentically, avoid missteps or offense, and build stronger connections leading to more effective communication and brand reputation.
- (ii) Local context drives trust by tailoring messages to align with regional values, norms, and priorities. This demonstrates respect for local audiences, fosters authenticity,

and builds credibility, making communication more relatable and trustworthy across diverse markets.

- (iii) Global reach requires adaptation in public relations to account for diverse cultural, social and economic contexts. Tailoring messages ensures relevance, avoids misunderstandings and resonates with local audiences, enhancing engagement and effectiveness across different regions.

### **Key Findings**

Cultural influences shape public relations effectiveness because the success of global public relations campaigns heavily depends on aligning strategies with cultural values, norms, and expectations of target audiences. This is because cultures with high collectivism like Nigeria, China, respond better to messaging emphasizing community benefits, while individualistic cultures like U.S. and UK, favour personal gain or innovation. Therefore, campaigns that ignore these dimensions, such as those promoting individualism in a collectivist society, often fail to engage audiences or provoke a backlash. For Instance, a campaign promoting a luxury product might succeed in low power-distance cultures like Sweden, with egalitarian messaging but fail in high power-distance cultures like India, without appealing to status and hierarchy.

High-Context vs. Low-Context communication impacts message design because effective global public relation requires tailoring communication styles to high-context or low-context cultural preferences. High-context cultures like Japan or Saudi Arabia demand indirect messaging, trust-building through relationships, and nonverbal cues, while low-context cultures like Germany and Canada prioritise clarity and factual appeals. Misalignments, such as overly technical messaging in a high-context market, would lead to misinterpretation or distrust. For Instance, a crisis response in the Niger Delta might fail if it relies solely on press releases rather than face-to-face stakeholder engagement.

Local adaptation outperforms standardized global campaigns because adapting global strategies to local cultural contexts, which outperforms one-size-fits-all approaches in building credibility and resonance, yields better results. While global branding aims for consistency, research would likely show that audiences reject generic campaigns lacking cultural relevance. Therefore, successful public relations integrate universal brand values with local idioms, symbols, and media channels, balancing global identity with regional authenticity.

Intercultural competence is a critical skill for public relations practitioners. This is because public relations practitioners with high intercultural communication competence like awareness, empathy, and adaptability, achieve better outcomes in cross-cultural settings. Practitioners who understand cultural nuances, manage biases, and adjust strategies dynamically are more effective in navigating diverse markets. Therefore, training in cultural sensitivity reduces errors and fosters trust.

Media environments reflect cultural priorities as the choice of communication channels in global public relations must reflect culturally specific media consumption habits and trust

levels. It is imperative to note that cultural attitudes toward media, like reliance on oral traditions in parts of Africa versus digital platforms in Europe, could dictate campaign reach and impact. Censorship and media ownership also complicate channel selection. For instance, leveraging radio and community leaders might outstrip social media in rural areas of Nigeria, while urban youth respond to social media.

Miscommunication risks escalate in crisis situations in that cross-cultural misunderstandings amplify the stakes of crisis communication, often exacerbating reputational damage. Crises demand rapid, culturally attuned responses and failure to address local values, for instance, apologies in Japan vs. legal defenses in the United States can worsen perceptions.

Cultural values influence audience reception of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that are not culturally sensitive. CSR is a public relations tool but it must align with culturally specific definitions of social good to gain traction. CSR initiatives tied to universal values succeed only when framed through local priorities like education in Africa or family welfare in Latin America. For instance, A multinational's tree-planting initiative might resonate in Southern Nigeria if linked to indigenous land rights but may fail in Sambisa forests without economic development tie-ins.

Digital globalization amplifies cross-cultural challenges through social media. The rise of social media and digital platforms intensifies the need for cross-cultural public relations quickness, as messages spread instantly across diverse audiences. This indicated that digital campaigns require real-time monitoring and adaptation to avoid cultural fault lines, as global audiences interpret content through their own lenses. For example, a hashtag campaign gone viral might offend unintended audiences, necessitating rapid, culturally informed responses.

Globally, public relations practitioners and communicators face the challenge of managing communication in cultural contexts that are different from theirs. This creates the problem of misrepresentations and misunderstanding which deeply erode the messaging and distract from the object of the communication.

Cross-cultural communication in global public relations is therefore essential as it involves engaging with diverse audiences across different cultures, languages, and social norms. Understanding these differences is crucial for crafting messages that resonate and avoid misunderstandings. This is so because cultural nuances can significantly impact how messages are interpreted. Miscommunication of messages due to wrong understanding or appreciation of cultural nuances can lead to negative publicity, damage to reputation, or even crises.

In planning successful global public relations campaigns, it is imperative to build trust and maintain relationships. To achieve this, understanding cultural values and practices would help create better connections with stakeholders, media, and the public as well as enable the public relations practitioner to create communication materials like jingles, television

promos, press statements, handbills and posters, billboards and tag lines that are strategically tailored to appeal to specific audiences in their cultural contexts. This is so because different cultures have varying expectations of communication styles, media usage, and engagement strategies. A lack of the understanding of this has tended to create problems for the public relations practitioners and communicators leading to the non-acceptance of messaging or brand failure. Knowledge of these differences allows public relations professionals to tailor their approaches for maximum effectiveness.

This understanding also is vital in crisis management where the cultural context plays a huge role in understanding signs and symbols that communicate positive and negative values to the audience. This is a vital tool for effective communication as different cultures have distinct responses to crises. In an age of globalization, businesses push beyond particular borders and grow globally. Therefore, the increasing penetration of businesses and products across the world dictates the need for effective cross-cultural communication where the understanding of the cultural contexts is strategic to conducting successful campaigns that can operate in multiple cultures.

The public relations practitioner must work to navigate ethical dilemmas created by cultural differences. This would help to ensure that practices align with local values and ethics as well as enhance teamwork and foster a more inclusive environment for collaborative work. Every culture of the world has its values. These values shape the way people live and perceive or appreciate trends. Ignoring these values in developing non-culturally sensitive messaging materials and public relations or strategic communication materials is an invitation to message rejection and brand isolation. Cultural values shape public sentiment and opinion. Understanding the cultural context allows a deeper insight into public attitudes and behaviours, enabling more effective engagement strategies. This is achievable through exposure to different cultural contexts and having a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances of the different people. Exposure to different cultural perspectives can inspire innovative public relations strategies and creative solutions, ultimately leading to more effective campaigns.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations arise from this study. They are made with focus on building the capacity of the public relations practitioner to develop messaging that resonate with specific audience taking into consideration the specific cultural environment and nuances. These will enhance public relations effectiveness in cross-cultural contexts:

**Invest in Cultural Competence Training:** Equip public relations teams with training on cultural frameworks to enable them understand diverse values, norms, and communication styles. This will empower them to develop more empathetic and effective campaign designs.

**Conduct Local Market Research:** Before launching public relations campaigns, there is the need to perform in-depth research on local socio-economic, political, and historical contexts to ensure messaging aligns with audience expectations and avoids cultural missteps.

**Engage Local Expertise:** Effective global public relation campaigners collaborate with local public relations professionals, cultural consultants, or community leaders to co-create campaigns that resonate authentically and reflect regional priorities.

**Adapt Messaging Strategically:** Tailor public relations content including language, visuals, and tone, to reflect local idioms, symbols, and values while maintaining brand consistency, ensuring relevance without diluting global identity.

**Prioritise Two-Way Communication:** the public relations practitioner should foster dialogue with local audiences through social media, focus groups, or public forums to build trust, gather feedback, and demonstrate respect for their cultural and local perspectives.

**Monitor Cultural Sensitivities:** the public relations practitioner should establish processes and procedures to check and avoid stereotypes, cultural appropriation, or offensive imagery, and regularly audit campaigns to ensure alignment with ethical standards. This will include having adequate knowledge of imageries and offensive nuances.

**Measure Cross-Cultural Impact:** The public relations practitioner should also evaluate campaign success using culturally relevant metrics, such as community engagement or trust indices, alongside key traditional yardstick like reach or media coverage.

**Build Long-Term Relationships:** There is also the need to invest in sustained community engagement and partnerships in each market so as to foster goodwill, and ensure that public relations efforts are seen as genuine contributions rather than opportunistic outreach.

## References

- Ang, S., & Van Dyne, L. (2008). *Handbook of cultural intelligence: Theory, measurement, and applications*. M.E. Sharpe.
- Bardhan, N., & C. Kay Weaver, C. K. (2011), *Public relations in global cultural contexts*. Routledge.
- Cameron, G. T., Cropp, F., & Reber, B. H. (2001). *Public relations and contingency theory: A meta-theoretical approach*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Cutlip, S. M., Center, A. H., & Broom, G. M. (2006). *Effective public relations* (9th ed.). Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Freitag, A. R., & Stokes, A. Q. (2009). *Global public relations: spanning borders, spanning cultures*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203890189>
- Graham, J. (2005). *International marketing*. McGraw-Hill.
- Grunig, J. E., et al. (2002). *Excellent public relations and effective organisations: A study of communication management in three countries*. Routledge.
- Gudykunst, W. B. (2005). *Theorizing about intercultural communication*. Sage.



- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Books.
- Hall, E. T. (1989). *The dance of life: The other dimension of time*. Anchor Books.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Sage.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organisations across nations*. Sage.
- Kotabe, M., & Helsen, K., (2014). *Global marketing management*.
- Neuliep, J. W. (2020). *Intercultural communication: a contextual approach*. Sage Publications.
- Neuliep, J. W. (2020). *Intercultural communication: A contextual approach*. Sage Publications.
- Penaloza, L., Toulouse, N., & Visconti, L., (2012). *Marketing management: A cultural perspective*. Routledge.
- Ricks, D. A. (1999). *Blunders in international business*. Blackwell Publishing Cateora.
- Samovar, L. A., et al. (2017). *Communication between cultures* (9<sup>th</sup> ed.) Cengage Learning.
- Sriramesh, Krishnamurthy & Verčič, Dejan. (2009). *The global public relations handbook: Theory, research, and practice*. Routledge.10.4324/9781315173290.
- Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures*. Guilford Press.
- Wakefield, R. I. (2007). Theory of international public relations, the internet, and activism: A personal reflection. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 20(1), 138–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10627260701727069>
- Wang, S. (2018). The Dolce & Gabbana controversy: Lessons in cultural sensitivity. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Wiley, K., W. J., & Green, M. C., (2015). *Global marketing*. Pearson.
- Zaharna, R. S. (2013). *The cultural awakening in public diplomacy*. Figueroa Press.