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Asian multiculturalism in communication: Impact of culture in the practice of public relations in Singapore



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the role of cultural values in influencing public relations practice in Singapore. Given that Singapore exhibits a hybrid of cultures, it purposes to comprehend how multiculturalism is operationalized and to uncover if the values that have a greater influence on organizational communication resemble those in individualistic or collectivistic societies. Using Gudykunst's (1998) seven dimensions that influence individualism–collectivism on communication as a guide, this study interviewed 20 public relations practitioners in Singapore. Our findings showed that although the patterns expressed is slightly more consistent with those found in collectivistic cultures, it does not resemble collectivism in entirety. Multiculturalism in Singapore displays a blend of certain cultural hybridity, which is aligned with it being a multicultural cosmopolitan city that embodies Western modernity while retaining its Asian values. Our findings further reinforced the idea that public relations professionals need to be multicultural themselves to effectively communicate with culturally diverse stakeholders in today's globalizing era of multiculturalism.

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1. Introduction

In the last few decades, scholars in global public relations (PR) have called for more research and education in multicultural communication (Macnamara, 2004; Sriramesh, 2003). This charge has become more urgent today given the increasing number of multinational organizations operating in an ever internationalizing economy that are endlessly “globalizing”, “glocalizing” or “grobalization” (Chaney & Martin, 2014, p. 3) to remain competitive. The need to understand multiculturalism in our field is further accentuated by large scale human migrations across the globe that has resulted in multicultural communities even within many previously ethnically homogenous countries (Koenig, 2015). Essentially, being culturally competent to communicate effectively with culturally diverse publics both intra- and inter-countries has never been more critical.

According to Vercic, Grunig and Grunig (1996), culture is one of the five environmental factors that impact the formation of PR planning in a country. Sriramesh (2003) extended the observation by arguing the need for the American education system to deliver multicultural PR education with an emphasis on multiculturalism if it hopes to adequately equip and train aspiring PR professionals in today's globalized business environments. Macnamara (2004) supported that observation

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and argued that “nowhere is research more important than in multicultural and cross-cultural communication” (p. 1). While honoring the vital works that have been done to highlight the importance of multiculturalism, one also needs to question the operationalization of this cultural construct. This is because while many scholars, particularly in the field of social psychology, have demonstrated and provided empirical evidence to support the operationalization of two other cultural constructs, i.e., individualism and collectivism (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 2007), few have attempted to do the same for multiculturalism. As such, unless researchers understand how multiculturalism is applied in PR practice, multiculturalism will remain an academic construct.

Lamenting the limitations of multiculturalism research in Western-centric cultures, Shome (2012) argued that Anglo-American engagements with multiculturalism tended to be “nation-bound” (p. 144) in the sense that the comprehension of multiculturalism is focused on getting marginalized or immigrant groups of different ethnicity to be acculturated to Western culture. The practice of multiculturalism is often informed by reasoning and logic embedded in Western liberal definitions of what constitute freedom, rights and democracy. Hence, for as long as multiculturalism is studied through these lenses, it cannot adequately understand multiculturalism which requires the ability to “address relations of cultural otherness that are produced by the complexities of transnationalism” (p. 144).

This is unlike colonial and postcolonial countries in Asia such as India and Singapore where different ethnic groups along with their diverse daily activities, religious practices and spoken languages, are accommodated, institutionalized and intricately woven into the social fabric of the societies (Shome, 2012). Asian multiculturalism in these former British colonies tend to exhibit the notion of neighborliness by embracing tolerance, understanding and a presence of “otherness” (Bhabha & Comaroff, 2002, p. 23). Multiculturalism in multi-ethnic Singapore, for example, was made an official policy after the country gained independence from the British. Essentially, officializing multiculturalism in Singapore means no cultural group is a majority or a minority (Huat, 2009). Given the diverse experiences societies have, several questions remain: How is multiculturalism operationalized and applied in the field of PR? What role does culture play in the communication efforts of practitioners?

This study, which is situated in Singapore, aims to understand the role of cultural values in influencing PR practice. Given that Singapore exhibits a hybrid of cultures, this study purposes to understand how multiculturalism is operationalized and to uncover if the cultural values that have a greater influence on organizational communication resemble those in individualistic or collectivistic societies. This study examines multiculturalism through these two dominant cultural lenses because the construct of multiculturalism remains vague. It is perceived more as an ideology to describe a societal phenomenon as factors associated with multiculturalism have not been empirically founded (Schalk-Soekar & Van de Vijver, 2008). In contrast, literature on individualism and collectivism has identified cultural variables that are empirically and conceptually linked to these two constructs. They have further been operationally demonstrated within societies (Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

Twenty PR professionals from various industries in Singapore were interviewed in this study. Gundykunst's (1998) seven communication dimensions framework, which differentiated practices commonly found in individualistic and collectivistic cultures was used as a guide. Face-to-face interviews were first conducted, and after views on each of the seven communication dimensions have been expressed, a simple rating exercise (“score card”) requiring the practitioners to quantify their observations was carried out to provide measurable analyses to better inform the study.

This research is significant on several fronts. First, it answers the call for more research on multicultural communication that is much needed in today's globalized business environments. Second, empirical evidence from this study provides insights on how Asian multiculturalism is applied in practice, which can be integrated into the designing of curriculum to better prepare graduates for a multicultural workplace. Third, the findings aid the comprehension of communication values adopted across diverse cultures as well as their influences, which are key to achieving business goals and cultivating good international relations especially among communities with multicultural minds. Finally, given scant research on multicultural communication, this study contributes to existing literature on culture and public relations.

2. Background: why Singapore

Singapore provides an intriguing context to examine the impact of multiculturalism on PR practice. Multiculturalism in Singapore is state-sanctioned to preserve harmony among the Chinese (74.3%), Malays (13.3%), and Indians (9.1%) (Ortiga, 2014; Department of Statistics Singapore, 2015a). Even though the Chinese forms the majority, Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew established a multicultural national identity amalgamated from the Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO) cultures (Chua, 2003; Lai, 1995) instead of construing an underlying Singaporean identity (Ortiga, 2014). Although the CMIO has been criticized as compelling Singaporeans to fit idealized characterization of their respective ethnicities, critics conceded that it was an essential element to unite a young and diverse society (Lai, 1995).

Faced with globalization and capitalism, the focus shifted towards creating a hybrid ethnic-centric Singaporean identity that preserved traditional cultures, and united Singaporeans in a network of shared culture so that they were “better equipped to appreciate, understand, and adopt other cultures” without being conflicted (Goh, 2010). Multiculturalism thus functioned as codes for intercultural interaction established in a social setting (Goh, 2010).

Consistently, the dominant national narrative propounded by leaders was that multiculturalism was not a social phenomenon endured by the ethnic majority but was politically essential (Keong, 2013) in sustaining Singapore's sovereignty (Ortiga, 2014). In other words, racial harmony was synonymous with and required for national survival. Chua (2003), for example, argued that the government's restrictive approach in a democracy, coupled with practical circumstantial deci-

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