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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.

Keywords

Multiculturalism, Cultural values, Communication, Public relations, Singapore

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 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 and 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 decisions, resulted in “multiculturalism in practice” (p. 74) that allowed it to evade social unrest while enjoying strong economic growth (Goh, 2008). When English became the official language and mother tongues (Chinese, Malay and Tamil) were made second languages, it unified everyone as Singaporeans by allowing for the comprehension of and appreciation for other cultures (Keong, 2013) because it was a neutral language spoken and written universally. It played a strong primary role in integrating Singaporeans under the banner of multiculturalism and a secondary function in influencing its economic quality of life.

3. Cultural-Communication framework

3.1. Cultural constructs of individualism and collectivism

A major dimension used by many scholars to examine and compare similarities and differences across cultures and behaviors within societies is the concepts of individualism and collectivism (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001). Individualism refers to an individual’s emphasis on independence, self-reliance and promotion of the self, and the concept is often found in Western societies like those in the United States or the United Kingdom (UK). Collectivism underscores the importance of interdependence, in-group

solidarity, loyalty and promotion of the group and is frequently emphasized in Asian societies such as China and Japan (Eshun and Gurung, 2009; Oyserman and Lee, 2008).

As the sharing of cultural codes has a direct influence on the way group members communicate among themselves and with others outside their groups, Hall (1976) explained that the style of communication in low-context cultures (individualistic societies) are characterized by logic, facts, and directness. Communicators in low-context cultures are expected to be straightforward, concise, and efficient in telling what actions are expected. Precise words are used and taken literally. This form of communication is, however, different from communicators in high-context cultures (collectivistic societies) who depend less on language precision. Members of this cultural group give priority to group harmony and consensus over individual accomplishments. Further, they are less governed by reason or words, preferring to go by intuition or feelings. As such, high-context communication practiced in collectivistic societies tend to be more indirect and more formal (Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

3.2. Framework

According to Gudykunst's (1998) individualistic and collectivistic perspectives on communication, culture has a direct influence on communication. Individualism and collectivism are manifested in unique ways and to understand communication in any culture, it is essential to discern the patterns associated with both sets of cultural values. Gudykunst's (1998) framework identified seven communication dimensions that differentiated the practices commonly found in both cultures.

The *first* is self-disclosure, which involves individuals telling others information about themselves and engaging in greater transparency to better interact socially and cultivate more intimate relationships (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey & Chua, 1988). Self-disclosure is associated with direct communication styles that characterize individualistic cultures more so than collectivistic cultures. Hence greater self-disclosure aligns more with individualists than collectivists.

The *second* is uncertainty, which determines the manner that individuals go about reducing nervousness for fear of potential negative outcomes when communicating with out-groups or strangers. The way it impacts communication is such that individualists seek out person-based information, i.e. personal similarities to reduce that anxiety (Kashima, Siegel, Tanaka, & Kashima, 1992). In contrast, members of collectivistic cultures source out group-based information, i.e. group similarities to lessen the fear (Gudykunst and Nishida, 1986).

The *third* concerns rules for communication between in-groups and out-groups (Argyle, Henderson, Bond, Iizuka, & Contarelo, 1986). In collectivistic cultures, members of in-groups are required to adapt and also present a united front, while in individualistic cultures, members in these groups are expected to act as individuals even if it means going against members of in-groups.

The *fourth* pertains to face-negotiation, which relates to self-presentation and the degree to which an individual commands a sense of self-respect from others (Gudykunst, 1998). Members of collectivistic cultures emphasize the need to uphold mutual- and other- face, while maintaining self-face is more important to members of individualistic cultures.

The *fifth* is the way individualists and collectivists manage and take turns to speak over conversations in a group setting (Hayashi, 1990; Yamada, 1990). Collectivists arrange discussion topics interdependently and take short turns to ensure uniform distribution in the group. In contrast, individualists organize topics independently and make solo prolonged dramatic speeches.

The *sixth* is the use of appeals when persuading others (Han & Shavitt, 1994). In talking to subordinates or in soliciting suggestions, managers from collectivistic cultures prefer altruistic strategies such as appealing to "duty", i.e. "you should be honored to be working in this company where we are all obligated to give our best". In contrast, individualistic managers prefer the use of "threaten" appeal, i.e. "you will be fired and don't ever think you can walk back into this office again".

The *seventh* is the manner in which different group members manage conflicts (Ting-Toomey, 1988). In dealing with conflicts, members in collectivistic cultures perceive it from an interdependent self-construal as opposed to members in individualistic cultures who based it on an independent self-construal. Essentially, the former thinks about the group's behavior, and preference is for conformity as they do not see themselves separate from the group. On the other hand, individualists think of themselves as independents and do not shy away from confronting the other person with whom they are in conflict with (Ting-Toomey, 1994).

Using these seven communication dimensions as a guide, this study aims to uncover and understand the extent to which each of the cultural values influence communication professionals and their practice in their respective organizations in Singapore. The research thus seeks to examine the following questions:

RQ1: What role does culture play in the communication efforts of PR practitioners?

RQ2: Which set of cultural communication dimensions has a greater influence in the way communication is practiced in Singapore organizations?

4. Method

In PR research, qualitative tools are effective in obtaining information about perceptions, views and attitudes of the target group. These research tools have the potential to achieve increasing awareness of the collaborative dialogue, in addition to collecting data that are capable of providing insights from the perspective of the participants (Weerakkody, 2009). It further allows the understanding of the construct under examination, i.e. multiculturalism, which interviewees use as basis for their views and thereafter for researchers to interpret the evidence – a “stock of explanation” – to answer the research questions (Anderson, 1987, p. 330). It is therefore useful to adopt qualitative research methods for this study to explore the cultural and societal contexts within which the practitioners operate.

4.1. Principal primary method: In-Depth interviews

This study employed in-depth interviews as the principal method for answers to the research questions. Face-to-face interviews with 20 communication practitioners were conducted to better understand the influence and impact of multicultural values on practice. Two sets of questions were prepared – the first pertained to general questions relating to the importance of cultural values when communicating with multicultural stakeholders; and the second, descriptions of how cultural values are operationalized according to Gundykunst's (1998) seven communication dimensions.

The practitioners, who worked in various organizations in Singapore, held positions ranging from executives to managerial levels. To ensure representations from different business sectors, six were from government agencies, four from public-funded institutions, six who worked for multinational companies (MNCs), two from public-listed companies, and another two who practiced communication in private/non-profit organizations (see Table 1).

Table 1. Breakdown in organizational types in sample group.

Types of organizations	Government Agencies	Public-Funded Institutions	Multi-National Companies	Public-Listed Companies	Private Organizations
Number of representations (20)	6	4	6	2	2

4.2. Accompanying primary method: rating exercise

In addition to the in-depth interviews, a simple rating exercise similar to a “score card” was used to accompany the participants’ responses given during the interviews. This scoring exercise applies only to Gudykunst’s (1998) framework of the seven communication dimensions that differentiated the practices commonly found in both collectivistic and individualistic cultures. After providing descriptions on how each of the seven cultural dimensions influence communication in their organization, on a scale of 1 to 10, participants were asked to “quantify” their views and to rate their responses, i.e. the extent to which they think the cultural values that influence their practices resemble those in collectivistic cultures. Participants were asked to only give a score on collectivism. For example, after providing a description, participants were asked “How would you rate the extent it resonated with collectivistic cultures. On a scale of 1 to 10, is it more or less collectivist?” instead of “How would you rate the extent it resonated with collectivistic or individualistic cultures. On a scale of 1 to 10, is it more collectivistic or more individualistic?” This is because both constructs of collectivism and individualism are not bipolar and hence, a unipolar scale will generate more accurate answers (Pelham & Blanton, 2012).

This additional tool helps to better inform the information collected from in-depth interviews. Although responses from in-depth interviews are useful when it comes to understanding the perspectives of the participants, being able to quantify their answers enables the study to provide further measurable analyses. This is needed to capture the degree to which the cultural values are more or less aligned with those in collectivistic cultures. This is essential also because multiracial Singapore exhibits a combination of cultural values and operationalizing the construct cannot be based solely on either one or the other culture.

Views expressed may not be entirely aligned with collectivism or individualism but the degree to which it resembles one or the other. Computing the scores, which ranged from not collectivistic at all (1) to very collectivistic (10) aids in determining if the influencing cultural values are more or less consistent with Asian cultures, which further allows for a clearer understanding.

4.3. Data collection & analyses

To obtain in-depth information from participants, data for this study was collected through face-to-face interviews over a month from 21 March to 15 April 2016. Each interview lasted between one and a half and two hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Semi-structured interviews were adopted as they provided for some degree of flexibility to delve further into the participants’ responses (Singleton, Straits & Straits, 1993). Interview questions were divided into two categories. The first set of questions posed related to the importance of culture when it came to crafting messages and designing communication collateral directed at audiences who differed in race, religion and language. Questions included “Can you describe how culturally diverse are your stakeholder groups?”; “Is it difficult or easy to manage communication with a group that is so multicultural?” and “Are cultural

values important to your work and to what extent do you integrate culture into the designing of communication collateral?”

The second set of questions was guided by Gundykunst’s (1998) theoretical framework. As there are seven cultural dimensions, every participant was asked to describe each of the seven cultural dimensions that “operate” in their organization and highly influence their practice; and thereafter to give a score ranging from one to 10 as to whether it is more or less consistent with collectivistic cultures. Both the fluidity of information sharing during the interviews as well as having to rate and commit quantitatively to what were described thereafter were needed to ensure that the data is plausible and consistent. As numbers would be used to represent personal reflections, participants paid greater attention when answering questions, and care was exercised to provide greater precision and accuracy of experiences in the workplace. Numbers further facilitated pattern recognition when extracting meaning from qualitative data, hence complementing the process orientation adopted in this research (Maxwell, 2010). Such systematic analysis of data helps to safeguard the credibility that is critical in the quality of qualitative data (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007).

Both sets of questions highly informed and provided valuable insights into the cultural contexts that were instrumental in directing the communication practice in Singapore. Analyses of data were carried out after the interviews were transcribed. Patterns and themes relating to all interview questions linked to our two overarching research questions were carefully interpreted and analyzed from the responses before they were identified, categorized, and documented according to “who in which organization said what and why”. The process offered knowledge about how events unfolded and occurrence of organizational phenomena from the participants’ perspectives, in particular, what those phenomena mean in the context of culture, multiculturalism and PR practice.

As for the rating exercise involving participants giving a score to each of the communication dimension, the average rating of each dimension was first computed over 20 to determine the extent to which each dimension resonated with collectivistic practices. Thereafter, the seven averages were further computed over seven to get the final sum average. While the interviews offered in-depth explanation that facilitated interpretation and understanding of the evidence collected, the numerical scores gave precision when examining the operationalization and application of Asian multiculturalism in communication in Singapore.

5. Findings and discussion

The first research question examines the role culture plays in the communication efforts of PR practitioners.

5.1. Impact of cultural values in public relations practice

All 20 practitioners interviewed reported that they managed multicultural stakeholders in their role as communication professionals. Whether their audiences they communicated with were in Singapore or Asia-Pacific, the stakeholder groups were extremely varied and very diverse. For those whose roles focused only on Singapore, they comprised the major ethnic groups – Chinese, Malays and Indians as well as many different expatriate communities who resided in the city-state. For others who managed Asia-Pacific communication, the stakeholders would further include the Thais, Japanese, Koreans, Indians and Australians, etc.

As to whether it was difficult to manage communication with their multicultural stakeholders and if culture was a prominent factor in the design of their communication messages and collateral, most practitioners expressed much difficulty. An interviewee from a government agency reported:

“Every day, I think of how I should write my communication pieces in such a way that it is not culturally offensive! When working on collaterals, I need to make sure that my messages don’t

hurt them or cause any conflict. Especially when using graphics. I need to ensure my pictures don't put down any Malays or Indians or elderly people. Because people will pick on it and say 'don't tell me only the Malays will do such things and the Chinese won't'... as a communication practitioner, race influences my work the most because Singapore is a multicultural country”.

Another interviewee, also from the government sector, shared:

“We do have a lot of constraints especially in our publicity collaterals. For example, if you want to have a face, you must have four different ethnic faces on it. Neither can you only have one language. You need to have all collaterals translated into four languages. In addition, we must take note of gender, must avoid stereotypes. It can't just be a female Chinese, a Malay male, an Indian man that kind of thing. You must try and get a diverse group... recently we produced a video and our communication was meant to target the Chinese. When we were about to start production, our chief asked where are the Malay and Indian representatives in the video. We have to be politically correct. The video ended up having Chinese dialogue, Malay and Indian as well. It was a very messy video but that sets the tone for the rest of the promo videos for the organization”.

A practitioner from an American MNC shared her difficulty:

“Culture is very important in the way we manage communication in my organization. As we manage Asia-Pacific communication, everyone interprets information differently depending on where they reside. We tried to advise our American President regarding email communication, for example. They are often too long. We don't want to read it. And he uses words that nobody understands. He loves the word 'perpetually'. So he will say things like 'perpetually accelerate' or 'perpetual vulnerability'. Maybe for a very cerebral person, you are a Westerner and you know what you're saying. But imagine the plant worker in Thailand who is going to read the same email. The whole part about translating it to local culture means I would bring it down to the lowest common denominator, and it must be at a level where everybody understands what you're trying to say”.

Yet another from a Japanese MNC commented on why culture plays such a major role in his communication practice:

“To the locally employed workers, and even for some of the China staff who are surprisingly able to speak good English, there is not much problem because English is the basic language. The tough part comes for the Japanese. Take my Japanese bosses, for example. There are times that he phrases things differently and we don't get it and we need him to repeat himself a few times before we get it. For others, their command of English is really, really bad! When I presented the branding strategy, CSR direction, memos, and proposals for the corporate gifts, my bosses look like they understood what I was saying as they kept nodding their heads. But I found out later that they absorbed only 30% of my presentation messages. That is one major difficulty I have working as a communication practitioner here. Also, when they come to me and give me instructions, I struggle to understand their accent, language, and meanings”.

Other interviewees appeared to have an easier time with incorporating culture in their communication efforts – through the use of English. One interviewee from a private organization reported:

“It is primarily not difficult. We are not government and we don't do announcements in four different languages. We only use English and we steer clear from having to cater to different cultural groups because the primary business language in Singapore is English”

Another from a public-funded institution shared:

“Basically, everybody understands English. So we use English to all of our stakeholders. We have tried using other languages in our communications efforts but we ended up receiving

criticisms asking why we are favoring one race over another. As such, we now use English. Next, we think of the platform of how we get our messages out, be it social media, an exclusive to friendly media partners, or a blast to all the news desks and editors. And we assume English works for everybody, regardless of background”.

In summary, our findings show that in managing the diversity of stakeholders in Singapore, all the government and most of the public-funded institutions and half of the practitioners from the MNCs found it difficult to work with diverse stakeholders. Cultural values are also found to highly influence and impact practice. Practitioners working in the government and public-funded institutions expressed the importance of making sure that cultural values are sensitively expressed and integrated in all the communication collateral because multiculturalism is an official policy for which all civil servants are expected to carry out. If not abided, the backlash would be people’s unhappiness that certain races or ethnic groups are not treated fairly or equally. This is regardless of whether the groups form the ethnic majority or minority in Singapore. Hence, all racial representations that included translation of languages took precedence even over the success and effectiveness of the intended message to persuade. For those who worked for the MNCs, the reasons for cultural values playing an important role were different, as it had more to do with day-to-day communication in carrying out tasks effectively. For this group, differences in cultural values disrupted and hampered their communication works, which led to misinterpretation and misunderstanding among different ethnic groups trying to work with one another.

Professionals who worked for public-funded institutions where culture was not a major consideration, reported that English was preferred and used for all forms of communication. Although the multiculturalism policy would have meant that these institutions should follow the same practices as other similar institutions, the fact that English is an official business language in Singapore “nullified” and “protected” them from all possible sensitivities and backlash that they might otherwise receive if they were to stand with the multiculturalism policy. As for practitioners working for private, public-listed companies and MNCs, either because they did not belong to the government and therefore did not see the need to apply the multiculturalism policy or that their target audiences were just too diverse (the whole of Asia and expatriate communities from the West), using English is the most convenient as it is the international language of business (Alsagoff, McKay, Hu, & Renandya, 2012).

The second research question examines the set of cultural communication dimensions, which has a greater influence in the way communication is practiced in Singapore organizations.

5.2. Influence of cultural dimensions on communication in organizations

The qualitative findings and its accompanying numerical score offer insights into the seven cultural communication dimensions that influence patterns associated with individualism and collectivism. The numerical scoring is based on a simple unipolar scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being “not collectivistic” and 10 being “very collectivistic”. The mid-point is 5.5. To reiterate, the purpose of using this simple quantifying method is because Singapore’s multicultural environment exhibits a hybrid of cultures. Its policy to ensure that multiculturalism is practiced in every aspect of life may mean that the society’s culture may not necessarily resemble completely that of collectivistic societies such as China or Japan or those of individualistic societies like UK or Australia but “a bit of everything”.

As such, to capture a better sensing of the operationalization of multiculturalism, a quantifying method to further support the interview accounts is useful to provide a complementary understanding of the extent to which Singapore’s culture is more or less consistent with the dominant cultures and hence, its influence on the practice of communication in Singapore.

5.2.1. Self-disclosure

The overall average score for self-disclosure as reported by all 20 practitioners was 4.9. Essentially, self-disclosure which is associated with individuals engaging in greater transparency and direct

communication styles among the Singapore companies are not consistent with collectivistic cultures. One interviewee from an MNC who rated self-disclosure very low on the collectivist scale commented:

“My CEO dictates the company’s culture. He likes all of us to be open and share our concerns with one another. I’m saying this because I’ve worked with multiple organizations, and something as simple as performance, where you stand in terms of your performance. We, as an organization, are more willing to share these types of information with one another and also how the company is performing as compared to our competitors. Other organizations in our business would not engage in such transparency in a way that only certain groups of people can see numbers, and others won’t”.

Another practitioner from a private company further commented:

“We encourage everyone related to the company to give feedback – our donors, our volunteers and all. On a personal level, we also try to engage with them, ask them how they’re feeling, ask them if they have any feedback, to share any concerns and so on and so forth. It’s a very open-door culture. So we can always go up to the CEO and share our concerns if we want to. So that means we can bypass our direct managers and supervisors”.

Communication in government agencies also practice fairly direct communication styles as shared by one interviewee:

“It is very transparent and people are willing to share their knowledge with each other. We are quite willing to spare advice and tips and many of us do that on our own initiatives”.

5.2.2. Uncertainty

The average score for this dimension was 6.7. Referring to the communication manner in which individuals sought information to reduce uncertainty, i.e. person-based or group based, this dimension gravitated towards a more collectivistic one. An interviewee from an MNC reported:

“In times of uncertainty, there’s a lot of grapevine talk. Even if you make official channels available to employees, and push out leaders to the market for them to answer questions, everyone still prefers to remain anonymous. I don’t understand. They’d rather just talk among themselves as groups and we have to constantly make sure we keep our ears on the ground and to try to find out what employees are talking about because they won’t approach you individually”.

Another practitioner, also from an MNC, commented:

“In uncertain times, my management is very clear that they will not communicate. I feel that they don’t really like functioning under that uncertainty and they feel that it is better to be on that side of caution. Hence, people seek information from group members to reduce uncertainty because in such times, no one would approach, say the CEO individually to get more information.”

5.2.3. Communication rules

The dimension leaned even more towards the collectivistic. On average, interviewees gave it 7.3. Concerning communication between in-groups and out-groups with members of in-groups in collectivistic cultures expected to adapt and present a united front, one of the interviewees from a public-listed company shared:

“A little bit more of the sheep mentality. Especially if we have a strong GM involved. If there’s someone leading the discussions, then we’ll just follow through. Group think is strong and conformity and harmony is very important.”

Another practitioner from a government agency commented:

“The in-groups and out-groups exist and they are very defined. When members belong to an in-group, most try not to speak up. Even if they are aware of a flaw in the way things are heading, they would rather not oppose a decision and will let the mistakes slide”.

5.2.4. Face-negotiation

This dimension was equally high with an average score of 7.4. Similar to the previous cultural dimension, face-negotiation in Singapore organizations tended to be more collectivistic. One interviewee from a public-listed organization reported:

“No one dares to go against our chairman. Although he is a very simple guy, many people around him give him a lot of face. My company is also very hierarchical in a way that whatever he says gets carried out. As a result, I don’t think he knows a lot of what is happening on the ground. He is blocked off from the information that is travelling up to him by his subordinates below him. He doesn’t know because he is like in an ivory tower, and everyone around him wants to make sure this happens”.

An interviewee from a public-funded institution added:

“According face to other people is very important. Talking about face, because we work with countries outside of Singapore and across Asia, it’s more about making sure that we accord our Asian partners the respect or the level of face that they require. Not so much about us projecting our own face. We always don’t come across as taking the upper hand. We never want to do that. We always come from a very humble place, almost featuring secondary to them. That’s my version of face in terms of working with people across different Asian countries. So for example, it can be as simple as setting up a first meeting, who you send to the meeting makes a difference. Whether a director goes or a CEO goes for the meeting makes a difference because you are according the other Asian counterpart with the respect by sending someone a little bit more senior. It’s not so much about us but feeding into what they perceive to be offering, according them the respect and making the adjustments on our side as much as possible”.

5.2.5. Turn-taking in conversations

In this area that pertained to group members taking turns to speak in a group setting and arranging topics independently or interdependently, the level of collectivism was scaled down to a 6.5. This is because of mixed views and observations shared among the interviewees. One who felt that group discussion in his MNC organization resembled the mono-logic characteristic found in individualistic cultures, shared:

“It’s actually freedom to say what you want to say. That’s tampered with what you need to say as a consequence. You can say whatever you want to say but you can’t expect everyone to agree with you and we know that. If I were to say something quite controversial or elicit a response, I’ll have to accept that it will elicit a response. That pretty much happens. Accept the consequence, debate it if necessary”.

There were also others, like another MNC interviewee, who responded as follows:

“I will say we’re a 5.5, middle ground. Because of the intervention tool we have. It is to try and moderate and give everyone a chance to speak. The quieter ones who don’t speak, we encourage them to. And those who are overly outspoken, they’re encouraged to give people a chance to speak”.

On the other extreme is one interviewee from a government agency who shared the following:

“If you gather everybody in a conversation, then things will be top-down. In almost any environment or social setting, where you gather people of different ranks, usually the one with the seniority will be speaking the most, the rest will remain quiet”.

5.2.6. Persuasive strategies

This dimension, which concerned the use of appeal to persuade to solicit suggestions posted an average score of 4.7, is the least consistent with collectivism. Many do not use the altruistic appeal of “duty” but reason, which resembled more with “threaten” strategy associated with individualism. One interviewee from a government agency expressed:

“We use reason to appeal. We tend to reason it out because we have to be realistic and sometimes firm too. Although we do not exactly threaten or wheedle them with duty, we are polite with words and we say like, ‘don’t you think?’ or ‘would it be better to use this approach?’

Another interviewee from a government agency commented further:

‘We use a lot of dialogue to address key concerns. I wouldn’t say we appeal for them to do certain things or to behave a certain way, but we get them to understand the situation and to agree’.

5.2.7. Conflict management

When managing conflicts, the average score given by the interviewees climbed to 7.1 to be more consistent with collectivism. Collectivists perceive conflicts from an interdependent self-construal and would think about the group’s behavior, often opting to conform for the sake of maintaining group harmony instead of confronting the person and coming to a compromise. One interviewee from a private organization commented:

“When there are conflicts, it will be very politely debated. Harmony is still the most important. Very conservative. No heated argument. And if there is any potential conflict, it would have been settled before the meeting”.

Another interviewee from a public-listed company added:

“When there are conflicts, we sweep it under the carpet. We will trash out some things but the approach is one that we agree to disagree on certain things and just go. A lot of the things we just forget about and sweep it under the carpet and move on. Group think is strong and harmony is key.”

In sum, to answer RQ2, our findings show the extent to which each cultural dimension influence communication in organizations. Two dimensions – self-disclosure and use of appeals – were deemed to be more consistent with individualism whereas the remaining five resonated more with collectivism. When the seven averages was calculated, the final score was 6.4, which essentially meant that although the patterns expressed in multicultural Singapore was slightly more consistent with those found in collectivistic cultures, it did not resemble collectivism in entirety.

5.3. Pragmatism in cultural impacts on practice

In a multicultural setting like Singapore, it is obvious culture highly impacts practice. Even in organizations that reported less cultural influence, English remains the default cultural tool to ameliorate creases in communication. This could be attributed to the overarching operating culture present in Singapore that pervades all strata and fabric of life – including businesses. Singapore’s leaders have consistently cultivated a “survivalist sense of nationhood” (Ortiga, 2014, p. 950) and focused on the necessity for the races to unite for their nation’s future (Goh, 2008). Pragmatism of the government then rubs off on its citizens and organizations, and this has seeped into – consciously or subconsciously – most corporate practices. English is the cultural lingua franca, reaching out and uniting all ethnic groups. By making the English-language education accessible to all via the national education system, the government could substantiate its emphasis that Singapore is meritocratic and class-neutral (Chua, 2003). For instance, economic pragmatism underpins the government’s intervention in the Islamic educational

institutions' curriculum, which the government feared would produce individuals who lacked essential basic knowledge and skills in the modern knowledge-based economy (Chua, 2003). Although the Malay community was dissatisfied, they had to adjust and incorporate the state's educational curriculum and partake in Singapore's economic success (Chua, 2003). This demonstrates that multiculturalism is a tool strategically wielded by the government to socialize citizens for social cohesion and prepare them to be functional members that contribute to Singapore's economic growth and national progress.

5.4. Hybrid culture in global city

It appears that multiculturalism in Singapore exhibits a blend of certain cultural hybridity that is aligned with Singapore being described as a multicultural cosmopolitan city that embodies Western modernity while retaining its Asian values. According to International Enterprise Singapore (n.d.), Singapore is the fourth largest global financial center with more than 500 financial institutions that offers comparably reasonable interest rates (Monetary Authority of Singapore, n.d.), advanced and complex risk management services, links to top firms, and supplies between 25% and 35% of Asian commodity financing. Singapore not only maintains its close connections to Asian growth markets, but continuously seek to take advantage of budding trade and investment intentions of other regions, as well as strategically establish Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with huge foreign economies for advantageous access to their markets (Monetary Authority of Singapore, n.d.). The comprehensive FTAs and Double Taxation Agreements (DTAs) with numerous nations provided organizations the financial impetus to headquarter themselves in Singapore (Monetary Authority of Singapore, n.d.).

Singapore places top in the World Economic Forum's Enabling Trade Index (International Enterprise Singapore (n.d.)), which establishes her as an important trading center (Monetary Authority of Singapore, n.d.), "nerve center", and a strategic connection and crucial entrance for investors and businesses into Asia (Trade & Industry Association Singapore, n.d.). It is also ranked as the world's easiest place to do business (International Enterprise Singapore (n.d.)) for eight straight years (World Bank Group, 2016) and this is by virtue of its top-tiered and conducive business climate (Monetary Authority of Singapore, n.d.).

This is exemplified by the World Bank's description of entrepreneurship in Singapore: "It takes an entrepreneur just over six working days to get a new business going in Singapore, with low start-up costs. Overall, taking into account other factors, including business licensing, taxes, credit legal rights and investor protection, Singapore has about the most business-friendly regulation in the world" (Monetary Authority of Singapore, n.d.).

Besides providing the necessary socio-politico-economic conditions and infrastructures for stability and convenience to attract investors, Singapore's geographically strategic location in the South-east Asian region is another reason that makes Singapore a global marketplace. Advantageously situated at the intersection of the East-West trade channels, Singapore provides entry to booming and expanding Chinese and Indian markets while serving as an important headquarter for globalizing Asian organizations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.) as well as providing a crucial entrance to several fast-expanding and huge economies and commodities market (International Enterprise Singapore (n.d.)).

Given the emphasis of multiculturalism and its status as a global marketplace, hybridity in cultural practice is to be expected. Interestingly, of the seven dimensions examined, the two that reflected more individualistic scores – self-disclosure and persuasive strategies – operate on a more "personal" sphere whereas the other five dimensions operate on a more "communal" setting. What this means is that in corporate settings, practitioners and organizations are cognizant in acting appropriately in communal settings, reducing uncertainty, abiding by cultural communication rules, maintaining the face of the other, observing turn-taking and reducing conflicts. Amidst these, they are confident in pushing their own individual agendas and marketing themselves to surge ahead. It is no wonder that Singapore has been described as a multicultural cosmopolitan state that embodies Western modernity while staying rooted in its Asian values (Ang & Stratton, 1995).

5.5. Need to understand local social meanings

Our findings reinforce the idea that for PR professionals to practice effectively in multicultural environments, they need to be multicultural themselves to be able to successfully communicate with stakeholders with multicultural minds like those in Singapore and increasingly in many parts of the world. Essentially, it means that pieces of cultural knowledge need to be “implicit” in dealing with multicultural individuals so that these cultural dynamics become operative instinctively (Hong, Morries, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Among the critical roles is the ability to interpret complex knowledge, anticipate cross-cultural conflicts, and diffuse potential misunderstandings when working on communication collateral and conveying messages between the organization and its key stakeholders (Doz, 2013).

So what do all these mean for the practitioner? Low, Varughese, and Pang (2011) argued that for any practitioner operating in a multicultural environment, in addition to determining effective modes of communication, one would also need to study cultural elements and symbols to avoid making blunders. In the circuit of culture model, one would be better placed to understand practice if one understood how social meanings are produced and reproduced (Gaither & Curtin, 2008). Second, research into the role of culture in the practice of public relations reveals a great amount of ethnocentrism, perceiving one culture to be superior to another culture (Vasquez & Taylor, 1999). One practical way of immersing in another culture is to manage ethnocentrism. The human tendency is to sub-consciously regard one culture more superior than another. “Efforts have to be made to minimize that, especially when one is on short-term assignments in another culture where time is not on one’s side to fully understand the culture” (Low et al., 2011, p. 235).

6. Conclusion

This study examines how multiculturalism is operationalized in a multicultural city in Asia, i.e. Singapore, and to uncover how cultural values are reflected in communication practice. It is critical for PR practitioners operating in today’s multicultural environments to understand how organizations should manage diversity with internal and external stakeholders. This is because the issues facing multicultural publics can have an impact on an organization’s business and its reputation. If practitioners are not cultural competent, their solutions to communicate problems will not be creative or effective. When managing stakeholders, the ability to recognize and be acquainted with audiences with multicultural minds or who belong to multicultural groups, i.e. race, ethnicity, religion all at the same time, will equip practitioners to better identify other dimensions of diversity, which has become a very significant part of PR practice if organizations hope to succeed in the globalizing era of multiculturalism.

One limitation of the study is that our findings are based solely on interviews with practitioners and we were not able to corroborate some of their claims. This being a qualitative study situated in one country, this study is also not generalizable. However, as an exploratory study, it has addressed a gap in the literature. It is hoped that this will trigger research in how multiculturalism works in other global cities.

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