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Public relations in Kenya: An exploration of models and cultural influences

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Abstract
This pioneer study explores the public relations models that inform the practice of public relations in Kenya, and the cultural values that influence this practice. Results show the personal influence model as the most used by practitioners in Kenya, while individualism is the most experienced cultural value. The strong correlation between personal influence model and Hofstede's cultural value of femininity points to the practitioners' strong desire for good interpersonal relationships with colleagues, supervisors, clients and key publics.

Keywords: Kenya, Public relations models, Hofstede cultural values, Personal influence model, International public relations, Grunig PR models

1. Introduction

Public relations is becoming global and leading agencies have set up international offices. Kenya is one of the places in Africa where many international public relations firms are expanding. As a relatively politically stable country in a region rocked by intermittent political and economic turmoil, multinational corporations expanding into East and Central Africa first look at Kenya as their entry point into the region. Increased global trade and the accompanying opportunities for the growth of international public relations presents both an opportunity

for research and a need for public relations practitioners and scholars to understand the role of the public relations practice in a global context and specifically in Kenya.

Very little research has been done on public relations in Africa despite the region showing tremendous potential and growth of international public relations. The few African cultures that have been studied in connection with public relations are South Africa (Holtzhausen, Petersen, & Tindall, 2003), Nigeria (Molleda & Alhassan, 2006), and Ghana (Wu & Baah-Boakye, 2009). In spite of the high number of multinational companies operating in Kenya, there has been no study of public relations in Kenya and the impact that the local culture has on the practice. This article presents the results of research which explores the public relations models that inform the practice of public relations in Kenya, the cultural values that influence this practice, and the relationship between the public relations models and cultural values through the following research questions:

RQ1 What models of public relations are practiced in Kenya?

RQ2 What are the Kenyan public relations practitioners' work-related cultural values?

RQ3 What is the relationship between the work-related cultural values and the public relations models?

2. Methodology

Participants were 51 Kenyan public relations practitioners solicited to complete the online survey via a snowball approach by two local research assistants, the Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK), and those known to the principal researcher. To encourage participation, participants were entered into a drawing for one of five Nano iPods. The respondents included both males and females, were 18–55 years old, worked in public relations up to 20 years, ranged from associate degrees to doctorates in education, and worked in diverse public relations fields including agencies, consulting, independent practice, nonprofits, government, and businesses.

The survey included 48 items with a seven point Likert-type scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The first 24 measured six

public relations models practiced in Kenya with four items each. The models included Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models as well as the personal influence model (Sriramesh, 1992) and the cultural interpreter model (Lyra, 1991). The other 24 items measured the practitioners' cultural values drawing on Hofstede's (1980) work and utilizing the instrument from Wu, Taylor, and Chen (2001) which investigated these six models and cultural values in Taiwan. Cronbach's alpha reliability test was run for each model and cultural dimension, and for some, one of the 4 items was dropped to ensure reliability levels of .60 or higher for all scales. The resulting reliabilities were: press agentry model .74, public information .64, two-way asymmetrical .79, two way symmetrical .71, personal influence .69, cultural interpreter .70, power distance .68, uncertainty avoidance .61, femininity .93, masculinity .78, individualism .91, and collectivism .66.

In order to establish the Kenyan public relations practitioner's work-related cultural values and most utilized models of public relations, means were computed for each dimension. To operationalize RQ3, a relationship between the six models of public relations and the dimensions of culture was tested utilizing Pearson product-moment correlations between the six models of public relations and Hofstede's dimensions of culture utilizing the .05 level of significance.

3. Results

RQ 1 results show that personal influence is the most favored model by public relations practitioners in Kenya ($M = 6.43$), while the cultural interpreter emerged as the second most favored ($M = 5.75$). Thus, the two international models appeared to dominate Kenyan public relations followed by two-way symmetrical ($M = 5.41$), press agentry ($M = 5.03$), two-way asymmetrical ($M = 4.90$), and public information ($M = 4.46$).

The results for RQ 2 indicated individualism is the most experienced work-related cultural value among public relations practitioners in Kenya ($M = 6.56$) followed closely by femininity ($M = 6.54$) and masculinity ($M = 6.51$). Collectivism is a moderately experienced work-related cultural value ($M = 6.24$) followed by uncertainty avoidance ($M = 5.75$), and power distance emerged as the least experienced ($M = 4.03$).

RQ 3 examined the relationship between the six public relations models and the six work-related cultural values. The Pearson product-moment correlation analysis yielded just two significant positive correlations: femininity correlated with the personal influence model ($r = .53, p < .01$) and individualism correlated with the personal influence model ($r = .31, p < .05$).

4. Analysis and conclusion

By identifying personal influence model as their most favored model, the Kenyan public relations practitioners are pointing to the great importance they attach to good interpersonal relations and networking in the course of their work. The practitioners play a pivotal role in helping organizations and clients socialize and build good relations with key publics. The choice of the cultural interpreter model as the second most favored model points to the increasing internationalization of Kenyan public relations and the growth of international trade in Kenya.

The results of this quantitative study are similar to the outcome of other studies carried out in Ghana and South Africa. Wu and Baah-Boakye (2009) found the two international models to be the most frequently practiced in Ghana while Holtzhausen (2005) noted that the practice of public relations in South Africa was fast moving toward relationship building and networking, two attributes that define the two international models of public relations. These results are at variance with the results of a similar study done in the United States which showed that American public relations practitioners practice one-way model of communication (Vasquez & Taylor, 1999) although that study did not test whether or not the personal influence and cultural interpreter models were practiced in the United States.

The emergence of the two international models of public relations as the most used in Ghana, South Africa and now Kenya, is indicative of how the practice of public relations is making a transition to the areas of relationship building and networking with key publics. These developments have major implications in the practice of public relations not only internationally but in the United States and Europe, two areas that have previously not paid much attention to the development of public relations outside their borders. Western nations

should pay closer attention to ongoing developments of public relations in less developed countries in this era of globalization. Particularly, practitioners and scholars need to recognize the unique role that culture plays in the practice of public relations.

Cultural values analysis indicated Kenyan public relations practitioners identify with individualism (M = 6.56), the work-related cultural value that emphasizes achievements of an individual as opposed to that of the collective. The second most experienced work related cultural value is femininity (M = 6.54) while the third work related cultural value among Kenyan practitioners is masculinity (M = 6.51). The femininity index emphasizes good working relations with colleagues and collaborative approaches while masculinity places emphasize on one's professional growth and chances for higher pay. As evident with these three work-related cultural values, their average means are close in range which is indicative of the blend of personal objectives, professional goals and close personal relationships with which Kenyan public relations practitioners identify with.

While the study in Kenya showed that public relations practitioners identified with individualism, femininity and masculinity in that order, Wu and Baah-Boakye's (2009) research indicated that practitioners in Ghana identified with uncertainty avoidance, collectivism and power distance. Results of different cultural values among practitioners in Kenya and Ghana point to the fluid nature of culture. Ordinarily, one would have expected Kenyan and Ghanaian public relations practitioners to share cultural values given that the two countries share a common colonial past and similar political and socio-economic development. However, with the outcome showing different results, there is a need to rethink often generalized propositions about the cultural values that are inherent in certain continents or regions of the world. Since culture is a fast changing variable in this era of globalization, there is perhaps a need to reexamine whether there are cultural values that have emerged since Hofstede (1980) conducted his study more than 30 years ago.

The significant correlation between the personal influence model of public relations and the work-related cultural value of femininity points to the practitioners' strong desire for interpersonal relationships with colleagues, supervisors, organizations/ clients and publics indicating that there is a blend of personal goals and close interpersonal relationships among practitioners of public relations in Kenya.

In future studies, efforts should be made to get a larger sample that is also inclusive of practitioners in government offices. Since there were only two correlations that attained the .05 level of significance in this study, a larger sample might reveal more correlations between the public relations models and work-related cultural values. Follow up research focusing on case studies of some of the PR campaigns in Kenya would be valuable.

The limitations notwithstanding, this study adds to our understanding of international public relations and contributes to our understanding of the role of culture on the practice. As multinationals continue to explore business opportunities in places like Kenya and other African countries, research that explores the role of culture in the practice of public relations can help ensure that public relations practitioners are in tune with the local culture and interests of key publics.

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