

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MULTICULTURAL CULTURE IN THE CODE OF ETHICS AND GLOBAL UNILEVER ANNUAL REPORT 2024



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Abstract

Global business expansion puts corporate companies in a challenging position in aligning organizational policies with different backgrounds in operational areas. This study analyzes the existence of a multicultural cultural integration strategy through secondary data from the Code of Business Principles document and the Annual Report and Accounts for 2024. Using descriptive qualitative analysis methods, and triangulation of data and sources, three main findings were obtained: (1) Gender representation as much as 44% of global legitimacy inclusivity; (2) Adaptation of global and local cultural dimensions through respect for customary rights and lands; and (3) The implementation of the Speak Up system and reporting to mitigate ethical risks and also Power Distance. This research confirms that global ethical standardization and governance transparency not only improve the psychological safety of employees, but strengthen investor trust and improve the company's image in a sustainable manner.

Keywords: Multicultural Culture, Unilever Global, Diversity Management, Speak Up, Corporate Accountability.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of increasingly complex globalization, multinational corporations (MNCs) face significant challenges in aligning global business activities with the cultural diversity of their various operating regions. As multinational entities spanning diverse ethnic backgrounds, religions, and contrasting social norms, diversity and inclusion management are crucial to organizational sustainability. Furthermore, diversity and inclusion have distinct capabilities and capacities, enabling individuals and groups to generate new ideas from their work and contributions (Fajar, 2024). Unilever is one of the largest global business entities, bringing together employees and consumers from many countries with diverse cultural backgrounds. Unilever represents an organization that strives to unite global vision with local ones across different cultural boundaries. Successful multiculturalism can be achieved through navigating a diverse ecosystem through an integrative strategy that synchronizes formal policies and corporate communication practices (Ketemaw et al., 2024). In the Environmental, Sustainability, and Government (ESG) research, it was found that ESG and sustainability reports can be divided into four parts, which include social responsibility, awards, equity costs, and CSR governance in the company (Bosi et al., 2022). On the other hand, it is also necessary to discuss culture to deepen understanding of transparent corporate governance (Alfaro & Sánchez, 2023).

However, behind this success lies the problem of how to formally articulate multicultural values. There remains a gap between the rhetoric of inclusiveness at the top management level and the strategic documentation in the behavioral guidelines of company elements. The Code of Business Principles and Annual Reports are documents often used as references or simply to fulfill administrative obligations. This research problem focuses on whether these formal documents substantially reflect inclusive multicultural cultural values, or simply serve as image marketing tools without in-depth value analysis. The purpose of this study is to qualitatively analyze the manifestations of multicultural culture in Unilever Global's code of ethics and annual reports, to reveal how diversity is transformed into a structured descriptive narrative and the organization's ethical commitment.

In theory, this study uses a multi-theoretical approach based on the Grand Theory of Legitimacy Theory, which is used to express multicultural values in the 2024 annual report to gain social recognition from global stakeholders regarding equality issues. Then, it is dissected with the Cultural Dimension Theory to understand the interaction between cultural values, reinforced by the concept of Diversity Management as a strategic asset for decision-making and better talent development of a company. From an organizational communication perspective, strategic documents are seen as narratives that build the social foundation of a company, so this qualitative analysis is relevant to discussing the company's foundation in terms of cross-cultural diversity.

Based on Suchman's Legitimacy Theory (1995) Legitimacy is the generalized assumption that an entity's actions are desirable and in accordance with a system of social norms and values. In this context, transparency of multicultural policies becomes a strategic instrument for companies to align corporate values with global public expectations. However, this social recognition will not last long without an inclusive internal climate. Nishii & Leroy (2022) emphasizes that diversity management goes beyond mere demographic representation, but requires an inclusive leadership framework that is capable

of integrating individual comparisons into an organization to ensure the psychological safety of employees. This is also reinforced by Cox & Blake (1991) which reports that efficient cultural diversity management is a competitive advantage for organizations and is dedicated to increasing creativity and flexibility in heterogeneous markets.

However, the implementation of these global policies often encounters obstacles due to differences in national culture. Hofstede (2011) emphasized that cultural dimensions, such as power distance and collectivism, significantly influence how central policies are interpreted by local units. Therefore, previous literature has focused largely on the impact of diversity management on financial performance across the board, and there is limited qualitative research that examines in-depth how large-scale corporate companies like Unilever Global synchronize global integrity standards (The Speak Up System) with the complexities of local cultural sensitivities. This study aims to fill this gap by evaluating the effectiveness of official company policies in bridging the tension between global norms and local realities. Therefore, this study is expected to provide a tangible contribution to the development of international human resource management literature, both in terms of practical guidance for multinational companies in formulating ethical policies that are sensitive to cultural diversity in the future.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Legitimacy Theory from the Perspective of Multinational Corporations

Within the scope of global strategic management, legitimacy theory is a primary framework for understanding the industrial world and ensuring its survival amidst dynamic public expectations. This theory is rooted in the notion of a "social contract" between organizations and society. Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as the universal belief or assumption that an entity's actions are desirable, appropriate, or suitable within a socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs. In Multinational Corporations (MNCs), legitimacy is not merely a static attribute, but rather a strategic modality that must be managed, due to its vulnerability to changes in public opinion across national boundaries.

This research also extends the concept into corporate reporting applications. Velte (2022b) emphasized that in modern business, industries are no longer judged solely by financial performance, but also by their social contributions. Disclosure of governance and diversity data in annual reports is a crucial tool for multinational corporations in building trust with global stakeholders. In line with this, Koh et al. (2022) in their analysis of sustainability reports found that industries with good social performance tend to provide higher-quality and more transparent disclosures. This application serves as an explicit signal to maintain political and social legitimacy in the eyes of investors and the international community.

Multinational companies operating in global markets often face operational shifts. Bu & Chen (2023) argue that during the internationalization process, multinational industries tend to shift from a focus on pure efficiency to a focus on legitimacy. This is because these companies often face challenges in the form of comparing ethical standards and expectations in each region. In this context, the implementation of well-documented diversity and inclusivity policies serves as a reputational buffer and as an industry effort to align itself with common humanitarian values.

Integrating Global Policy Amidst National Cultural Dimensions

Global policy integration often confronts alterations in sociocultural values across countries. The primary theoretical basis used is Hofstede's (2011), Cultural Dimensions Theory, which identifies six national cultures, such as power distance and individualism, as determining factors in organizational behavior.

Research conducted by Oyewo et al. (2025) also confirms that the national cultural environment moderates the effectiveness of corporate policies without synchronization with local values, putting global policies at risk of resistance. This finding is further supported by Jain (2024) who reports that multinational companies must navigate the strategic dilemma between efficient global integration and responsiveness to local cultures.

Furthermore, Bathesta et al. (2024) emphasize that cross-cultural communication management is established to bridge these competing expectations. Successful policy implementation depends heavily on leadership that adapts to the local cultural context (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2026). Thus, the effectiveness of inclusion policies and global industrial ethics cannot be separated from their ability to adapt to cultural distance in each region (Setti et al., 2022).

Diversity Management Strategy as a Global Standard

Diversity management has transformed from mere moral compliance to an essential strategy for multinational corporations (MNCs) in achieving competitive advantage. The fundamental theoretical foundation used by Cox & Blake (1991) explains that efficient diversity management provides added value to organizations through six key aspects: cost savings, acquisition of superior human resources, marketing strategies, creativity, problem-solving, and system flexibility. Research by Yadav et al. (2025) further supports this argument by positioning diversity management as a global standard that stimulates innovation and employee satisfaction internationally. In its implementation, multinational companies are now adopting a more systematic Global Diversity Management (GDM) framework. Ciuk et al. (2023) also emphasize that this strategy focuses not only on demographic comparisons but also on the principles of fluidity and reciprocity to achieve true inclusion.

Furthermore, integrating diversity into Strategic Human Resource Management (Strategic HRM) is key to improving overall organizational performance (Jayarathna et al., 2026; Okatta et al., 2024). Cultural diversity is now viewed as a legacy that can enhance industry capabilities to adapt to the global market (Pérez, 2022). Therefore, standardizing diversity management applications across global branches plays a role in upholding the unchanging values of inclusivity while mitigating communication barriers within multicultural teams (Ogedengbe et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach based on descriptive-analytical content analysis. This method aims to deeply examine how multicultural narratives are constructed and incorporated into company policies and reporting. The research data is secondary data derived from two key documents at Unilever Global: the Code of Business Principles as an ethical instrument, and the 2024 Annual Report and Accounts as a guide for company implementation. The data collection technique used documentation study by

downloading documents from the official Unilever Global website to ensure the validity and authenticity of the data sources.

Data analysis was conducted systematically, starting with data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions based on the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. During the coding process, documents were analyzed based on categorizations derived from the Cultural Dimensions theory and global diversity management principles, including inclusivity, local identity, and mitigation of cross-cultural discrimination. To ensure data validity, this study applies data triangulation and source triangulation techniques, by intersecting the data findings with multi-theoretical approaches from legitimacy theory, cultural dimension theory, and diversity management theory. This analysis is compared according to field analysis with supporting theories and relevant previous research results from international and national journals. This triangulation process is directly integrated into the analysis of the discussion chapter to provide accurate and in-depth results regarding governance at Unilever Multinational.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1.
Unilever Global Strategic Document Display Data

Analysis Categorization	Textual Findings (2024 Annual Report & CoBP)	Theoretical	Interpretation
Inclusivity	<i>“As at 31 December 2024, our board of directors comprised 44% female directors”</i>	Legitimacy	The company fulfills its “social contract” to align with global social standards.
Local Identity	<i>“We apply the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for all land-based transaction”</i>	Cultural Dimension	The company adapts to local and global values across its various distribution areas.
Mitigating Discrimination	<i>“In 2024, we handled 652 reports through our ‘Speak Up’ channels, and 193 were upheld as breaches”</i>	Diversity Management & Cultural Dimension	Enforces internal laws with integrity and psychological safety in a global work environment.

Unilever's global approach to multiculturalism, as reviewed in its 2024 Annual Report and Code of Business Principles, demonstrates a connected commitment to business strategy and social ethics. Based on the data analysis obtained from these findings, three key findings emerged regarding the multicultural culture within Unilever Global.

Gender Representation of Global Legitimacy Inclusivity

This finding suggests that 44% of directors will be female delegates by 2024, indicating that Unilever is implementing a strategy of obligation, in line with legitimacy theory, in managing corporate governance in line with equality norms. This statement is reinforced by

Gómez Martínez et al. (2024) who emphasized that gender diversity on boards of directors has a positive and significant impact on a company's ESG score, demonstrating that the presence of women can provide new perspectives in decision-making on sustainability issues. Furthermore, Eriqat et al. (2024) further corroborates these findings, stating that the high number of female directors delegated at Unilever globally is aligned with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) disclosure, which is positively and significantly correlated with building corporate reputation, in operational areas with high cultural complexity. Increasing trust and company value through strong mediation can also be achieved through inclusive social and government disclosure (Dwiputranto et al., 2026).

Regarding organizational performance, Odriozola et al. (2024) stated that the relationship between gender diversity and performance is strongly influenced by the organizational context. Unilever successfully retained 44% of its board of directors, owing to the company's ability to integrate inclusive values into local cultures. Thus, gender inclusivity at Unilever globally serves as a strategy for maintaining moral responsibility and corporate assets in the global marketplace.

Customary Land and Rights: Adapting Global and Local Cultural Dimensions

This analysis found that Unilever respects land rights and implements the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in its activities. Using this cultural dimension theory, it can engage communities while maintaining strong collectivist values. Research by H Fan et al. (2021) suggests that the collective culture of each community strongly protects its ownership of groups and assets, such as land.

With the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) at Unilever, it is clear that concrete recognition of collective identity can mitigate cultural clashes between the company's global cultural standards and local values. The effectiveness of this policy is based on a perspective of fairness and transparency, which will depend on the negotiation process. Cheng et al. (2024) emphasize that land negotiations and transparency will have a positive impact on communities due to the perceived fairness they create. This demonstrates that Unilever's initial steps were a strategy of providing information without coercion to reduce power distance.

This research is further supported by Hasibuan et al. (2023) and Van (2022) who argued that increasing community engagement and supporting program success in rural areas requires active and sincere stakeholder involvement. Therefore, respect for land and asset rights is not simply compliance, but rather a cultural imperative that fosters stability and legitimacy at the local level.

Analysis of the Implementation of the Speak Up Integrity and Reporting System

This study found 652 reported violations due to the effectiveness of Unilever's Speak Up system. This figure is crucial for an organization in detecting ethical risks. Based on Diversity Management theory, this system is a company effort to create an inclusive and non-discriminatory work environment for employees. However, this can be significantly understood from the Cultural Dimensions Theory, which relates to the challenge of power distance.

In global companies, barriers to honesty and integrity arise from differing cultural backgrounds. Rocha (2025) stated that increasing power distance hinders individuals from being honest when dealing directly with authority. Given this barrier, Unilever quickly established a confidential reporting platform to provide psychological safety for its

employees. du Plessis (2022) stated that using a whistleblowing mechanism makes it easier for employees to speak their truth to those in power to achieve social justice and change. Therefore, ensuring a retaliation system and employee voice are sustainable assets that need to be optimized (Zhu et al., 2022).

Standardization in multinational companies is crucial for ensuring ethical consistency across regions (Blind et al., 2025). Applying the same standards globally ensures procedural fairness for Unilever. Research by Cheng et al. (2024) revealed that handling complaints has a significant positive impact on perceived fairness. This reporting system makes Unilever a proactive managerial strategy for accountability in modern organizations (Zafar et al., 2025).

Furthermore, an integrity system also directly impacts capital market value. According to Velte (2022a) increasing firm value requires a robust corporate governance system through integrated reporting. Successfully managing this integration provides Unilever with a global legitimacy instrument that serves as a deterrent against risks for investors. This research aligns with Landi et al. (2022), which confirms that a transparent governance system has a positive impact on investors by mitigating systemic fraud and ethical violations. Therefore, the Speak Up system is not only a control tool but also a strategy for corporate credibility and sustainability at the global level for Unilever.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study demonstrate that Unilever Global successfully employed a multi-theoretical approach in implementing its global vision strategy with local socio-cultural contexts. Gender representation and respect for local community rights are not merely a means of fulfilling social norms, but also a strategy for gaining international legitimacy. Furthermore, a standardized complaint system (Speak Up) is key to addressing employee miscommunication due to cultural differences and high power distance within the operational area.

Data triangulation revealed that transparency in reporting can maintain employee psychological safety and a sense of procedural fairness. Ultimately, the integration of diverse management and a global integrity system has a positive impact on the capital market, enabling the company to mitigate ethical risks systemically. Therefore, for Unilever Global, strong governance support for inclusiveness policies makes the company a key pillar of business sustainability and enhances corporate value in the era of globalization.

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