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Cross-Cultural Communication and the Perceived Performance of Multinational Corporations in Kericho County, Kenya

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Abstract
This study examined the relationship between cross-cultural communication and perceived organisational performance in large-scale tea-sector MNCs in Kericho County. Guided by Social Exchange Theory, the study adopted a quantitative approach and a cross-sectional survey design. Participants were selected through stratified sampling by role and simple random sampling. Of 426 questionnaires distributed, 282 were returned complete, comprising 38 managers and 244 subordinates, yielding a 66.2 per cent response rate. Cross-cultural communication was operationalised through collaborative communication, communication adaptation, language inclusivity, conflict resolution, and cultural awareness programmes. Organisational performance was assessed using cultural adaptability, achievement of strategic goals, quality of service or products, operational efficiency, and employee productivity. Spearman's rank correlation indicated a moderate positive association between cross-cultural communication and perceived performance ($\rho = .500$, $p < .001$). A one- predictor OLS model with HC3 robust standard errors was significant (Wald $F(1, 280) = 106.80$, $p < .001$), explaining 45.7 per cent of the variability in performance ratings. Cross-cultural communication was positively associated with performance ($B = 0.645$, $\beta = .676$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.522, 0.768]). Collaborative communication had the highest mean rating ($M = 4.66$), while language inclusivity had the lowest ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.67$). Given the cross-sectional design and self-reported data, the findings indicate associations rather than causality. Managers should sustain collaborative communication and strengthen language inclusivity through multilingual instructions and accessible grievance procedures.

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication, Kericho County, multinational corporations, organisational performance, tea sector.

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INTRODUCTION

Multinational tea companies in Kericho coordinate production and managerial work among employees with varying language, ethnic, occupational, and organisational profiles. Communication in these workplaces influences how employees perceive operational change, express concerns, settle disagreements, and coordinate work. Different communication expectations may lead to misunderstanding or exclusion in culturally diverse workplaces (Langaas & Mujtaba, 2023). Preferences for explicit or implicit communication differ within and between firms and societies (Riskó & Csapó, 2024). Thus, the underlying management question is whether communication practices facilitate culturally diverse employees to communicate effectively.

Cross-cultural communication is the process of exchanging information and practices between individuals of diverse cultural origins in MNCs (Pop & Sim, 2022). For this research, the construct is depicted by five interrelated practices. Collaborative communication represents the information sharing between cultural subgroups; communication adaptation represents recipient message and interaction behaviour adaptation; language inclusivity refers to whether the working languages are inclusive or not; conflict resolution deals with the communication utilised to manage disputes; and cultural awareness programmes signify institutionalised attempts to enhance knowledge of cultural variance (Pop & Sim, 2022). These dimensions are relevant for performance since they relate to how information is interpreted. Information is essential for cultural adaptability, accomplishing strategic goals, providing quality products or services, operating efficiently, and having productive employees. Thus, performance is considered in terms of respondents' perception of non- financial organisational performance.

General implications for organisational communication are integral in plantation-style firms. This is justifiable because production rests on the coordination of field operations with factories, offices, supervisors, and an expansive frontline workforce. Kenyan horticultural evidence ties employee communication to organisational performance and operational efficiency, though that is general employee communication rather than communication across cultural boundaries (Otieno et al., 2015). Abugre and Debrah (2019) found that cross-cultural communication competence was associated with expatriates' work outcomes, based on expatriates working in multinational subsidiaries in Ghana. However, current literature does not demonstrate that similar patterns exist among local plantation or factory workers in tea-sector MNCs. The nature of the plantation enterprise therefore makes locally grounded evidence vital.

The case of Kericho is relevant as Kenya is a leading exporter of tea, with a high concentration of large-scale multinational tea operations within the county (County Government of Kericho, 2023; Galal, 2023). These companies have a workforce that is culturally and occupationally diverse in plantation and factory settings. Previous research on the tea sector in Kericho has highlighted tensions in relations between multinational firms and local stakeholders (Koech & Kirui, 2022). This context makes communication across organisational levels and cultural boundaries relevant. Still, it would be unwise to attribute workplace tensions to a single culture. Communication is influenced by labour relations, technology, job security, hierarchy, and working conditions.

The high stakes are evident when firms make major changes. After Ekaterra's Tagabi estate introduced tea-plucking machines in October 2022, there was a violent strike that led to 10 machines being burned (Kimutai, 2022). This incident is an example of the high level of workforce resistance that can arise in response to technological changes in the tea industry. This is not to say that poor cross-cultural communication was the sole or even primary cause; other factors like broader labour relations may have played a role. The incident is thus contextual evidence for the current study that communication practices surrounding operational change should be examined as a process and not as causal evidence.

Cross-cultural communication competence has been found to predict expatriate adjustment and work outcomes in a Sub-Saharan African MNC setting (Abugre & Debrah, 2019). Employee communication has been linked with performance in the Kenyan horticulture industry (Otieno et al., 2015). Also, Bett et al. (2023) found no independent association between interactive communication training and performance in their Nandi County model. The knowledge gap is the relationship between a more multidimensional measure of cross-cultural communication, including collaboration, adaptation, language inclusivity, conflict resolution, and cultural awareness, and perceived performance in Kericho's MNCs. Previous research has

varied by industry, respondent group, communication construct, and outcome measure, such that this particular relationship has not been adequately tested.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether cross-cultural communication was related to and could predict perceived performance for employees working in the tea-sector MNCs in Kericho County. Hypothesis (H01) predicted that cross-cultural communication would not be correlated with perceived MNC performance. The rest of the paper elaborates the Social Exchange Theory rationale for this association, reviews the empirical evidence, and discusses the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory (SET) emerged through several contributions. Homans (1961) described social behaviour as an exchange involving rewards and costs, while Blau (1964) extended this perspective by emphasising social relationships, obligations, trust, and power. SET suggests that social interactions involve a reciprocal exchange of rewards and costs, suggesting that an individual's motivation to interact with others stems from their perception that the benefits will outweigh the costs (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2023; Deng et al., 2021; Hsieh et al., 2019). In cross-cultural management, the theory justifies how relationships in multicultural settings exist through cost-benefit analysis between parties.

Social Exchange Theory has four key components: 1) reinforcement tools, 2) mechanisms of exchange, 3) social structures and capital, and 4) reciprocity (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2023). Firstly, reinforcement tools like rewards and resources drive social interactions and relationships. Resource values influence one's decision to maintain relationships. Secondly, mechanisms of exchange shape how individuals evaluate and engage in relationships, leveraging cost-reward analysis to determine the benefits versus costs involved, ultimately maximising rewards (Deng et al., 2021). Also, past experiences influence future interactions, and subjective value evaluation varies among individuals. Thirdly, social structures and capital build interactions through dependence, which refers to the influence of initial connections on relationships (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2023). Social capital includes norms and expectations that shape social interactions, with outcomes like power dependent on how individuals navigate social capital. Fourthly, reciprocity governs the exchange of benefits between parties. Ahmad et al. (2023) affirmed that obligations arise when one party provides a benefit, creating a sense of duty to reciprocate.

For the present study, SET is a plausible mechanism through which communication leads to perceived performance. Communication that is respectful, accessible, and reciprocal may lead employees to perceive organisational support. Outcomes may involve greater cooperation, discretionary effort, and reliable coordination, which may be reflected in terms of productivity and operational efficiency. However, the relationship is probabilistic. Reciprocity is different in different cultures and situations, and performance is also a function of leadership, job design, resources, or working conditions (Deng et al., 2021). SET offers a relational explanation for the hypothesised link, not evidence that communication is the sole driver of performance differences in a cross-sectional survey.

Empirical Review

The most compelling Sub-Saharan African context addressing cross-cultural communication issues is provided by Abugre and Debrah (2019). In a mixed-method study of MNC subsidiaries in Ghana, Abugre and Debrah (2019) combined interviews with 21 expatriate executives and survey data from 204 expatriates. They found that host-country culture was positively related to cross-cultural communication competence, while expatriates' competence was also shaped by multicultural team effectiveness and interpersonal skills (Abugre & Debrah, 2019). The study therefore provides empirical evidence on cross-cultural communication in an African MNC context rather than relying only on conceptual discussion. However, the study's transferability to Kericho is limited. The respondents were expatriate employees, the companies varied across subsidiaries and sectors rather than being uniform plantation-style MNCs, and the results were not directed toward operational performance. It thus supports a communication-performance link, but not in the organisational context.

Furthermore, Otieno et al. (2015) conducted a cross-sectional study on 14 flower farms in Naivasha and found employee communication to be positively related to organisational performance ($r = .466$, $p < .001$). The respondents also associated communication with operational efficiency (Otieno et al., 2015). The agricultural labour context renders this evidence more

applicable to tea plantations than generic MNC studies. Nevertheless, Otieno et al. (2015) assessed communication among employees in general and could not determine temporal or causal direction. So, communication matters for operational stakes, but leaves open whether culturally specific practice, including language accommodation and communicative adaptation, accounts for additional performance variance.

So far, evidence from within Kenya's tea sector has affirmed that communication intervention does not necessarily lead to better performance. Focusing on a sample of 353 employees from 2,988 employees working in tea companies in Nandi County, Bett et al. (2023) applied stepwise multiple regression to investigate the continuance of ISO-related training. The study established that interactive communication training was not significantly related to performance (Bett et al., 2023). Soi et al. (2024) found a positive and statistically significant relationship between technology communication and firm performance among Kenyan tea producer companies. The results are not directly comparable as Bett et al. (2023) investigated the continuation of a specific ISO-related communication-training practice, while Soi et al. (2024) examined technology-enabled communication at the organisational level. However, the conflicting results indicate that the communication-performance link is contingent upon the type of communication being measured and the involved organisational context.

According to Riskó and Csapó (2024), communication expectations are related to the high- and low-context communication framework, but dimensions of this kind are heuristic and should not fundamentally describe all national citizens. Langaas and Mujtaba (2023) also demonstrate that workplace culture and interactional norms influence cross-cultural communication. In the broadest terms, Stahl and Maznevski (2021) argue that cultural diversity introduces the potential both for process gains and process losses, with the resultant being shaped by cohesiveness, conflict, task, and the subsequent management of team processes. This finding provides alternative interpretations of organisational performance, whereby communications may be important, but so too may be team design, leadership, conflict, and social integration of teams.

The literature defines what is known and identifies what is not. Cross-cultural communication competence is linked with work outcomes in a Ghanaian MNC, and general employee communication relates to performance in Kenyan horticulture (Abugre & Debrah, 2019; Otieno et al., 2015). However, the evidence in the tea sector is not consistently positive, and previous studies have used different communication constructs, respondent groups, sectors, and performance measures (Bett et al., 2023). No reviewed study directly tests the hypothesis that collaboration, communication adaptation, language inclusivity, conflict resolution, and cultural awareness are simultaneously associated with perceived organisational performance among managers and subordinates in multinational tea operations in Kericho. This study seeks to bridge the identified empirical gap by assessing the associations between the variables.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, which was appropriate for estimating contemporaneous associations between cross-cultural communication and perceived performance among a defined workforce using standardised measures collected during the same study period (Saunders et al., 2023). The design also enabled managers and subordinates in the participating multinational corporations (MNCs) to respond to comparable measures. However, because a cross-sectional design does not establish temporal order, it cannot determine whether cross-cultural communication precedes perceived performance. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted as predictive associations rather than causal effects.

The study involved managers and subordinates working for multinational tea-based corporations in Kericho County, Kenya. The County Government of Kericho identified two large-scale multinational tea companies operating in the county during the 2023–2027 planning period (County Government of Kericho, 2023). Independent farmers were excluded because they were not directly employed by, managed within, or involved in the internal communication practices of the MNCs. The units of observation were managers and subordinates selected from the participating tea corporations, with subordinates comprising plantation field workers and factory processing employees. The findings are specific to the sampled workforce and should be extrapolated cautiously to other plantation-style MNC settings.

Respondents were categorised into manager and subordinate strata and selected through simple random

sampling within each stratum. The study targeted a sample of 426 participants, comprising 71 managers and 355 subordinates.

Data were collected using two parallel closed-ended questionnaires, one designed for managers and the other for subordinates. Although the questionnaires were worded differently to suit the respective respondent groups, they assessed the same indicators. Cross-cultural communication was assessed in terms of collaborative communication, communication adaptation, language inclusivity, conflict resolution, and cultural awareness programmes. Perceived performance was assessed using cultural adaptability, achievement of strategic goals, quality of service or products, operational efficiency, and employee productivity. All study items were evaluated using a five- point Likert scale.

A pilot study involving 43 participants was conducted in Bomet County prior to the main data collection. The county was selected for the pilot because, like Kericho, it is a tea-producing area where the same MNCs operate, thus offering a comparable setting for evaluating the clarity of the research items and the data collection procedures. The Kabarak University Research Ethics Committee and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) approved the study. Before taking part in the study, participants received an information sheet and provided informed consent. The survey was administered anonymously online through official communication channels by the human resource managers of the participating corporations, with the survey instructions emphasising that participation was voluntary.

For analysis, responses from managers and subordinates were combined into a single dataset by collapsing the parallel questionnaire items into common indicator labels. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the individual items and composite scores, while internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Given the non-normality of the composite score distributions, Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed to determine the bivariate relationship between cross-cultural communication and perceived performance. An ordinary least squares (OLS) simple regression model was subsequently estimated, with perceived performance specified as the dependent variable and cross-cultural communication as the independent variable.

Diagnostic tests were conducted to assess the assumptions underlying the regression analysis and to address potential sources of estimation error. The Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that the residuals departed from normality ($W = .916$, $p < .001$), while the Breusch–Pagan test indicated the presence of heteroscedasticity ($\chi^2(1) = 12.324$, $p < .001$). The diagnostic results supported the use of Spearman's rank-order correlation for the bivariate analysis, while HC3 heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors were applied to the regression coefficients and model tests to ensure more robust inference under heteroscedasticity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate and Descriptive Statistics

Of the 426 questionnaires sent out, 282 were completed, giving a response rate of 66.2%, which is satisfactory. The final sample consisted of 38 managers and 244 subordinates, representing both managerial and subordinate perceptions. Since subordinates made up 86.5% of the final sample, the pooled estimates are largely representative of non-managerial views. So, findings should be cautiously generalised beyond the sampled workforce.

Cross-cultural communication yielded an average value of 4.55 (SD=0.37), and perceived performance had a mean of 4.54 (SD=0.35). All five communication items received high mean ratings. Collaborative communication ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 0.58$) obtained the highest rank, followed by cultural awareness programmes ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.60$) and conflict resolution ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.55$). Communication adaptation had an average of 4.51 (SD=0.56). The lowest rating ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.67$) was for language inclusivity, and this was also the factor on which there were the most varied opinions. The five-item cross-cultural communication scale had a Cronbach's $\alpha = .773$, and the five-item performance scale had a Cronbach's $\alpha = .710$. Therefore, the two scales are sufficiently reliable for the constructs under investigation.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Spearman Correlation

Variable	Mean	SD	Correlation with performance
Cross-cultural communication	4.55	0.37	.500***

Perceived performance of MNCs	4.54	0.35	1.000

Note. N = 282. *** p < .001

The clearest communication gap is the item pattern within the language accommodation rather than in the daily work willingness to cross cultural boundaries. Respondents most strongly agreed that employees from different cultures worked together and that they share information openly. They were more divided as to whether the languages of employees were accommodated in written communication in the workplace.

Correlation and Regression Analysis

Spearman's rank-order correlation indicated a moderate positive correlation between cross-cultural communication and MNC performance ($\rho = .500$, $p < .001$). Respondents who rated communication more highly also tended to report higher performance. The association was thus tested further by means of regression analysis.

The regression was significant (HC3 Wald F (1, 280) = 106.80, $p < .001$), accounting for 45.7% of the variance in perceived performance ($R^2 = .457$, adjusted $R^2 = .455$). Cross-cultural communication was a positive predictor of performance (B = 0.645, HC3 SE = 0.062, $\beta = .676$, t = 10.334, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.522, 0.768]). A one-point increase in communication ratings was associated with a 0.645-point increase in rated performance. The statistics were internally consistent, whereby $\beta = .676$ corresponded to $R^2 = .457$, while t = 10.334 corresponded closely to F = 106.80.

Table 2: HC3-Adjusted Regression Estimates for Perceived MNC Performance

Predictor	B	HC3 SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Intercept	1.612	0.291	-	5.549	< .001	[1.040, 2.184]
Cross-cultural communication	0.645	0.062	.676	10.334	< .001	[0.522, 0.768]

Note. N = 282. Dependent variable = perceived performance of MNCs

The null hypothesis (H01) predicted that there would be no statistically significant association between cross-cultural communication and perceived performance in the MNCs under study. The analysis yielded a positive and statistically significant regression coefficient, and because the confidence interval did not include zero, H01 was rejected.

Discussion

Perceived performance had a moderate positive correlation with cross-cultural communication ($\rho = .500$, $p < .001$), and the one-predictor regression coefficient was positive (B = 0.645, $\beta = .676$, $p < .001$). This finding is similar to the findings of Abugre and Debrah (2019) in MNCs in Ghana. The finding is also consistent with that of Otieno et al. (2015), who found a positive communication-performance link in Kenyan flower farms. However, their study examined general employee communication rather than cross-cultural communication specifically. The present result thus builds upon previous evidence by placing the relationship within the context of the plantation and factory workforce in Kericho.

This result should also be weighed against less positive evidence for a uniformly positive effect of communication. In tea firms of Nandi County, Bett et al. (2023) reported that interactive communication training was not a significant predictor of performance ($\beta = -.034$, $p = .842$). The difference may be due to the fact that the previous construct was specific to an ISO-related training element, while the current construct encompasses ongoing collaboration, adaptation, language inclusivity, conflict resolution, and cultural awareness. Further, these dimensions were also not equal within the current sample: Collaborative communication was rated the highest (M = 4.66), and language inclusivity the lowest (M = 4.47), with the latter also exhibiting the largest amount of variance (SD = 0.67). Therefore, the overall positive association should not be taken to imply that every communication practice is intrinsically consequential. The item sequence suggests that formal language accommodation is the least reliably practised element in an otherwise highly rated communication climate.

Cooperative and responsive communication can provide employees with information and support. When employees view such communication as supportive, Social Exchange Theory suggests they may respond with greater cooperation and positive work behaviour (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2023). The language-inclusivity finding holds particular relevance as disparities in the accessibility of plain workplace information may impact perceived support even within the context of a solid foundation of routine multilateral cooperation. Cultural-context theories are helpful here; however, general high/low context distinctions should not be applied deterministically. Riskó and Csapó (2024) and Stahl and Maznevski (2021) suggest that communication and diversity-related outcomes are contingent upon the organisational context. The Kericho results are therefore best regarded as findings about what happened within these workplaces in terms of communication, rather than as representative of a single Kenyan cultural style.

Communication and performance were reported by the same respondents and at the same point in time, introducing the potential for common-method variance to inflate the observed relationships (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The extremely high mean ratings could also indicate social-desirability bias or unwillingness to report negative work experiences despite the survey being anonymous. The underlying bias could have been reinforced by the channel of distribution, which was through employer-based communication networks. Also, employees at higher-performing organisations can be more positive in their assessments of communication. Unmeasured factors, including leadership, staffing, technology, or working environment, might affect both. These alternatives restrict causal interpretation of the significant association's magnitude and direction.

The sample composition further defines the contribution and its limits. The analysis draws on managers and subordinates, although 244 of the 282 respondents were subordinates; thus, the aggregate relationship is primarily representative of individuals subject to the daily plantation and factory routines rather than those who formulate communication policy. Moreover, only two large tea-sector MNCs in Kericho were investigated. The findings thus provide context-specific support that cross-cultural communication is significantly linked to perceived performance in this particular workforce. The practical implication is more focused and actionable, whereby collaboration gains rhetorical representation, while formal language inclusivity is the most pronounced relative weakness within the quantified communication construct.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study investigated the link between cross-cultural communication and perceived performance in two large-scale tea-sector MNCs in Kericho County. Employees who rated cross-cultural communication more highly also reported higher perceived organisational performance. Communication was a statistically significant positive predictor in the regression model. Therefore, cross- cultural communication is significantly associated with perceived performance in the studied workplaces. However, the cross-sectional evidence does not prove that communication causes performance changes.

The top-rated practice was collaborative communication, while language inclusivity was the lowest-rated and least consistently experienced. Collaborative communication was rated more highly than language inclusivity. This distinction is consistent with the SET view that access to valued information and respectful exchange may be instrumental in shaping employee-organisation relationships. However, the prominent subordinate weight, dependence on self-reported perceptions, common-method risk, and the fact that the analysis is limited to only two firms limit the generalizability of findings.

Recommendations: For managers of multinationals in Kericho, language inclusivity is the first communication priority because it was the lowest-rated item and had the widest range of responses. Important instructions, safety material, grievance information, and announcements of operational change should be made in Kiswahili and the main local languages in addition to English. Supervisors should also verify understanding, rather than assuming that sending a message means it was received and understood. Grievance channels should be able to receive complaints in the language an employee is most comfortable using.

Respondents generally reported strong communication within their organisations. Simple measures such as regular cross-unit briefings and written follow-up after major announcements may help to lessen the chances that direct and indirect communication styles lead to different interpretations. These processes should be evaluated using anonymous employee feedback and operational indicators.

Future studies need to combine survey-based measures with objective indicators such as productivity, turnover, error rates, and audited output. Longitudinal studies will establish if changes in communication predict changes in performance, while mixed-method studies will permit employees to articulate how language and communication practices influence their work. Research in other tea-producing counties and industries would reveal if the relationship identified in Kericho is replicated in other workplaces across Kenya.

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