

Intercultural Communication Case Study: Starbucks’ “Race Together” Campaign

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In 2015, Starbucks launched a “Race Together” marketing campaign which empowered their baristas to write the phrase “Race Together” on Starbucks cups to spark conversations about race. The campaign was “inspired by the killings of [two African American men] Michael Brown and Eric Garner and the conversation about racial inequality that surrounded them” (Shah, 2015). Both deaths sparked national controversy and real conversations on race relations. The campaign was one of Starbucks’ ways to “inspire and nurture the human spirit, one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time” (Somaiya, 2015). The campaign was also designed to trigger high psychological arousal that would produce positive emotions (e.g., empathy, community, or collaboration) about an issue that impacts the nation; however, it triggered negative emotions causing national outrage. According to Cooper (2017), “Social media rants, partial truths and snarky comments have fed swift headlines about the initial stages of ‘Race Together’ as being clumsy and terrible, with the ‘internet united in despising Starbucks.’” For this reason, the “Race Together” campaign is a perfect case study to enable an understanding of the contextual model of intercultural communication.

Given the history of race relations in America and the ongoing racial tensions resulting from racially-charged events across the country, Starbucks made a colossal error in foisting race discussions on their customers, considering, that conversations about racial inequality primarily focus on minority groups (e.g., African American, Hispanic, and Asian) and cultural perceptions that have negatively impacted these groups. Perceptions of minority race and ethnicity have created negative and one-dimensional stereotypes, which are often disproportionately shaped by the media. Therefore, Starbucks’ foisting race discussions will only contribute to cultural judgments, negative stereotypes, and racial discrimination against minorities.

The “Race Together” campaign was culturally insensitive because it lacked consideration of how the various communication contexts (environmental, microcultural, and cultural) impact a person’s perception and could introduce biases, prejudices, ethnocentrism, and cultural stereotypes. For this reason, the campaign is associated with the perceptual context of communication. In this context, human perceptions can create cultural judgments, which can lead to cultural stereotypes. When people create categories about other cultures this becomes stereotyping. Neuliep (2021a) explains “stereotyping typically refers to membership in social categories—such as sex, race, age, or profession—believed to be associated with certain traits and behaviors (p. 166). Research shows that minority groups in the United States are largely affected by cultural stereotypes (Johnson et al., 1997; Hall & Smith, 2012; Goodwill et al., 2019); therefore, communication messages should take into account the perceptual context of communication to avoid harmful stereotypes.

Context and Literature Review

Starbucks’ “Race Together” campaign failed to take into consideration the perceptual context of communication, especially since Starbucks has had numerous “allegations from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [(EEOC)] about alleged racial bias” (Lucas, 2021)

against minority employees. The perceptual context examines psychological perspectives that are brought to intercultural communication. According to Neuliep (2021a), each person brings their own psychological perspective to the cultural, microcultural, and environmental contexts, “so intercultural communication is a process of connecting the perceptual contexts of the two interactants within these other contexts” (p. 156). The perceptual context examines cross-cultural differences in processing information and how the information is processed based on constructing categories that are the basis of prejudgments, such as stereotyping. According to Neuliep (2021a) “Several studies indicate that culture affects information retrieval” (p. 163), which could explain why a “Race Together” campaign would be perceived as racially insensitive among minority groups. Starbucks wanting to have a conversation about race, contributes to racial tension and cultural divisiveness, considering, that “Race while socially constructed within this country, impacts our healthcare system, access to education, voting rights, due process under the law, employment opportunities and for some of us, even our multicultural family dynamic at home” (Cooper, 2017, para. 10).

Perceptual Context

The perceptual context affects how people interact. This is because “Every time we enter into a communicative exchange with someone, we bring with us a perceptual frame of reference through which all our messages are filtered” (Neuliep, 2021a, p. 157). People’s perception of the world is subjective and biased because of the influences of their cultural, microcultural, and environmental contexts (Neuliep, 2021a). In general, there are five key factors in the perceptual context that influence the way people communicate: 1) the *geography of thought*; 2) the *model of human information processing*; 3) *cross-cultural differences*; 4) *stereotyping*; and 5) *perceived discrimination*. The following paragraphs detail information on the five perceptual context factors.

The *geography of thought* refers to how individuals perceive their environment, which varies in different cultures. For example, University of Michigan professor Richard Nisbett conducted research using a photo to demonstrate how the perceptual context in communication differs between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Neuliep, 2021a). While American students pointed out the objects in the photo, the Japanese students pointed out things in the general background of the photo. Neuliep (2021a) explains, “because “U.S. citizens, as individualists, are accustomed to a relatively organized environment with distinctive objects in the foreground (e.g., trees, cars, buildings) they attend to specific objects in the scene. Conversely, Japanese, as collectivists, tend to focus more on the holistic background context of the scene and relationships among the objects” (p. 158).

The *model of human information processing* helps to understand how different cultures process information. According to Neuliep (2021a), the human information process involves three stages, 1) input/sensation, 2) storage/memory, and 3) recall/retrieval. In Stage 1, information is taken in via sensory receptors, in Stage 2, information is stored in short or long-term memory, and in Stage 3, information is recalled. When people communicate with one another from different cultures, they are required to take in, store, and recall information. Because culture influences communication in various contexts (e.g., environmental, microcultural, and cultural) the specific styles of the human processing of information differ in each stage. Therefore, as a communication professional, it is important to understand how and why they may differ. People’s information may differ because their sensory receptor receives, and processes information based on contextual influences. For example, a Democratic supporter

may praise a speech given by a Democratic president, while a Republican supporter will criticize it (Neuliep, 2021a).

Cross-cultural differences affect the way we communicate because educational and learning skills vary in different cultures. According to Neuliep (2021a), researcher “Barbara Rogoff claims that to the extent that cultures have different educational systems and methods, their people may have different memory skills” (p. 163). For example, a study was conducted between two groups of university students, one Ghanaian and the other American, and found that Ghanaian students recalled more information than American students when the information was read aloud (Neuliep, 2021a). This is because their educational systems and methods differ.

Often, people create categories of other cultures, which becomes *stereotyping*. Neuliep (2021a) explains that stereotypes are exaggerated images of the characteristics of a particular group” (p. 166). For example, research indicates that exposure to stereotyped media information that depicts Black men as aggressive and violent affects audiences’ judgments and makes them believe that violence and aggression are cultural traits of Black men. Johnson et al. (1997) conducted a study to assess if the effects of exposure to violent media content would differ because of a target person’s race. The study found that Black defendants were more dispositional in the violent condition than White defendants and race-unspecified defendants (Johnson et al., 1997).

Perceived discrimination is a behavioral manifestation of negative or unfair treatment toward people of marginalized groups. Perceived discrimination could inadvertently place mental health stresses on others and contribute to stereotypes, prejudgments, and discrimination. A study assessed the likelihood of young adults experiencing day-to-day perceived discrimination by race, gender, sexual orientation, and body image and found that experiences of perceived discrimination can lead to “negative self-evaluation, with future implications for compromised social development or well-being” (Everett et al., 2016, p. 446). Studies also found that “individuals who are more likely to perceive discrimination may also have previous exposure to earlier mental illness or traumatic experiences or fewer socioeconomic status (SES)-related resources, and resources are also independently related to mental health” (Everett et al., 2016, p. 447).

Literature Review

This case study examines research on cultural perceptions that introduce biases, prejudgments, and stereotypes that could lead to racial discrimination and negative social effects. This paper reviews the literature of six studies on cultural perceptions and stereotypes. Communication professionals can benefit from the information in this case study to understand how the perceptual context of communication is important when designing and creating intercultural communication messages to avoid cultural communication faux pas and cultural stereotypes.

Perceptual Context: Cultural Stereotypes and Perceived Discrimination

Perceptions of minority race and ethnicity have created negative and one-dimensional stereotypes, affected minorities (e.g., racial discrimination, victimization, emotional responses), and left them to utilize their cognitive aptitude to navigate around negative cultural stereotypes.

A study was conducted to assess if the effects of exposure to violent media content would differ as a result of a target person’s race. The study selected 44 male and 56 female students of Caucasian descent who were primarily from North Carolina (Johnson et al., 1997). Participants

were asked to read articles that focused on violent acts that involved two defendants engaged in shootings and killings. Participants were given background information on the defendants (e.g., age, sex, height, a photo) that indicated the defendant was Black, White, or of an unspecified race (Johnson et al., 1997). The study found that depictions of Black men as aggressive and violent affected audiences' judgments and made them believe that violence and aggression are cultural traits of Black men (Johnson et al., 1997).

A study was conducted to investigate how African American girls interpret and navigate around media depictions of race, class, and gender within predominant cultural contexts. Three African American girls were interviewed separately and asked questions about womanhood, teenage pregnancy, and media stereotyping (Hall & Smith, 2012). The study found that African American girls are often forced to use their cognitive ability and cultural experiences to navigate negative stereotypes of African American women as prostitutes, uneducated, from poor urban areas, and uncivilized (Hall & Smith, 2012).

Interviews were conducted with African American men to understand how Black masculinity is perceived in popular culture. The study consisted of 11 male students enrolled in an undergraduate program (Goodwill et al., 2019). The study found that Black manhood is often misunderstood because of negative representations of Black men in media and that Black masculinity has created harmful stereotypes about Black men such as criminals, hyperaggressive, and deadbeat dads, which has resulted in Black men being victimized by the hands of the police (Goodwill et al., 2019).

A study analyzed how race intersects with media depictions of social unrest to provoke heightened emotional responses and influence race perceptions among audiences. A total of 180 undergraduate students participated in the study. The study examined participants' perceptions of current events in news articles. The study found that feelings of agitation and fear were common among those who perceive Blacks as rioters (aggressive or violent demonstrators) as opposed to protestors (peaceful demonstrators) (Stamps & Mastro, 2020).

A study examined how negative media stereotypes of Blacks affected consumers' attitudes. Articles containing stories about Blacks were selected through an online database and emailed to participants. Questionnaires were completed by the participants. The study found a significant positive correlation between stereotypical depictions of Blacks in the media and audiences' negative evaluations of Blacks as criminal suspects and welfare recipients who are lazy, violent, and uneducated (Gaur, 2020).

Weaver and Frampton (2019) conducted an experiment to explore why White audiences exhibited less interest in movies with minority casts than those with White casts. A total of 219 individuals participated, 71% were White (Weaver & Frampton, 2019). A racial makeup of the cast for four movies was manipulated using photos. Each movie consisted of a 70% White and 70% Black cast (Weaver & Frampton, 2019). A sample Twitter feed with 10 positive feedback about the movie was created for each film. Participants were asked to read the movie synopsis, view the Twitter comments, provide their opinions, and answer questions about their interests in each unreleased film. The results show when the movie cast was 70% Black, interest in seeing the movie was significantly lower on the Twitter feed, suggesting biases against Blacks because of negative perceptions and cultural stereotypes against Blacks (Weaver & Frampton, 2019).

These six studies demonstrate how perceptions of race and ethnicity, not just affect character traits, but also affect the way minorities perceive their cultural backgrounds and physical attributes.

Media Analysis

Starbucks' "Race Together" campaign did not take into account the perceptual context and the history of race relations in America that has led to negative stereotypes about Blacks resulting in them being victimized at the hands of the police, arrested, or dead. Having a conversation about race in America triggers painful memories of historic racial events that have impacted African Americans and continue to adversely affect them. Media coverage of the "Race Together" campaign soared at a time when America was experiencing heightened racial tension due to police brutality and the unjust shootings and killings of Black men. The campaign was widely publicized by the media and generated mixed reviews and commentary, which were mostly negative. The media criticized Starbucks for "having a political agenda" (Jay, 2015, para. 3) and "being naive and even using racial tensions to boost its bottom line" (Jay, 2015, para. 2). **Table 1** presents 10 news articles of media coverage of the "Race Together" campaign that were analyzed for positive, negative, or neutral media impact. Detailed information on whether the coverage was exacerbated using media framing, bias, or agenda-setting techniques is highlighted.

Table 1. Media Review of Starbucks' "Race Together" Campaign

No.	Media Outlet	Headline	Rating
1	Business Insider	The real story behind Starbucks' most embarrassing moment in history	Neutral (but blames the CEO Howard Schultz for the communication faux pas)
2	USA Today	Starbucks, USA TODAY team to tackle racial issues	Positive (USA Today teams with Starbucks' CEO for cause-related marketing)
3	Eater (Vox Media, LLC)	Can Starbucks Fix Racism With a Message on a Cup?	Positive (agenda-sets to clean up the issue of Starbucks' EEOC racial bias issues)
4	HuffPost	Starbucks 'Race Together' Campaign Brews Backlash	Negative (serves up the news like a cup of coffee, black w/ no sugar. Lampoons Starbucks' CEO for the misjudgment in communication message)
5	NPR News	Starbucks' 'Race Together' Campaign Begins	Negative (a hilarious comedic conversation with a member of NPR's Code Switch Team who visited Starbucks to discuss its "Malcolm X-presso")
6	The Wall Street Journal (WSJ)	Starbucks Ends Key Phase in 'Race Together' Campaign	Neutral (rationalizes why Starbucks ended the campaign and reports without bias)
7	HuffPost	Starbucks and Race Together... What's Next?	Neutral (acknowledges the communication faux pas, but signals it is time to move past it and have conversations about race)
8	Yahoo! Finance	Why the Starbucks 'Race Together' Campaign Is Bad for Business	Negative (gives all the reasons why the campaign was a bad business idea, with racial insensitivity as the number one reason. This is because race discussions in the USA affect only the minority group)
9	NPR News	Starbucks Faces Criticism Over 'Race Together' Campaign	Positive (a member of NPR's Code Switch team chats with NY consumers and discovers they are open to race discussions. The article agenda-sets the

			issue to race discussions vs Starbucks' communication faux pas)
10	The Washington Post	Starbucks baristas: 'Race together' campaign never found its course	Negative (lampoons Starbucks' CEO Schultz and stakeholders for such a cultural communication error)

Most news media found the “Race Together” campaign to be a colossal error in public relations messaging, which probably stemmed from Starbucks’ diversity shortcomings—failure to properly train staff on diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) and having several EEOC allegations filed against them for alleged racial bias (Lucas, 2021). This was Starbucks’ failed public affairs effort to bridge external threats with its internal problems.

Strategic Plan

The “Race Together” campaign was designed to trigger high-arousal that would produce positive emotions (e.g., empathy, community, or collaboration) about an issue that impacts the nation; however, it triggered negative emotions causing national outrage. Although the campaign produced massive social currency, which is the extent to which people share information on products and services, conversations on race relations created a huge backlash for Starbucks. Berger (2013) explains, “Some emotions, like anger and anxiety, are high-arousal. When we’re angry we yell at customer service representatives. When we’re anxious we check and recheck things” (p. 109). Starbucks did not take into account how a campaign about race would affect Black Americans differently than it would White Americans. In the perceptual context of communication, “Psychological filters include the attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions of the individual. A person’s likes, dislikes, and beliefs about what is right or wrong filter the perception of incoming stimuli” (Neuliep, 2021a, p. 161). For example, Neuliep (2021a) explains, “If someone has a negative attitude about a professor, he or she may perceive that professor’s class as boring or uninformative” (p. 161). Therefore, if African Americans have a negative attitude about how they are perceived by the majority group, they will perceive messages from the majority group as disingenuous, condescending, or insensitive.

To mitigate the backlash from the “Race Together” campaign, Starbucks should have taken one of the following three effective communication approaches. 1) Starbucks should have repurposed the campaign message in support of equality for marginalized groups and avoid the use of the word “race.” For example, a “Together-as-One” campaign would suggest community and change the negative high-arousal that led to the backlash to positive emotions. “Together-as-One” strikes an emotional chord because it suggests community and allows others to feel compassion for those who are marginalized or left behind. 2) Starbucks should have teamed with community activists in support of equality versus a failed public affairs attempt to buffer its reputation due to allegations of racial bias against minority employees. Community activism would likely trigger positive physiological arousal and national community support, encouraging consumers to join in the support against racial inequalities and engage in race discussions on a national scale versus having isolated discussions with Starbucks baristas. According to Berger (2013), positive physiological arousal increases sharing (p. 110). If consumers feel a sense of community, they are more likely to share, thus increasing social currency. 3) Starbucks should have initiated a public affairs campaign that would bridge its internal racial discrimination issues with the external issue of racial inequality nationwide. Teaming with an organization in support of marginalized groups (e.g., Women’s Intercultural Center, Black Men Heal, BEAM (Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective) to issue a Cause-Related Marketing (CrM) campaign,

would have been an effective communication strategy to get the public and stakeholders on board to lobby state and local government to advocate for policy change against racial discrimination in the workplace. Rohit and Panda (2018) explain, “A Cause-brand Association (CBA) can be referred to as a marketing strategy of associating the brand with a social cause for enhancing consumer response” (p. 14). This is because various social initiatives that entail marketing such as CSR, CrM, or cause-brand alliance lead to a cause-brand association (Rohit & Panda, 2018). Cause brand association is more effective in getting the public to support a worthy cause as well as generating revenue for companies impacted by issues and crises that threaten the stability and reputation of the organization. Nichols and Gardner (2017) explain, “cause-related marketing programs are capable of enhancing brand image and generating revenue for the firm” (p. 169).

In general, Starbucks should have taken into consideration the five key factors of the perceptual context of communication before creating the “Race Together” campaign. This would have helped Starbucks to: 1) understand how the *geography of thought* varies in different cultures; 2) understand how the *model of human information processing* varies in different cultures; 3) understand how *cross-cultural differences* affect communication; 4) be mindful of cultural judgments and *stereotypes* that could affect minority groups; and 5) be mindful of mental health stresses that could be inadvertently placed on others through actions that contribute to *perceived discrimination*.

Conclusion

Repurposing the “Race Together” campaign message, teaming with community activists in support of marginalized groups, and issuing a cause-related campaign would have helped Starbucks craft a communication message with the perceptual context of communication in mind and mitigated its insensitive communication error. Communication practitioners need to be mindful of mental health stresses that can be inadvertently placed on others through actions that contribute to perceived discrimination. Starbucks should have avoided contributing to perceived discrimination by being mindful of cultural differences and racial inequalities when communicating information from leadership members in the macrogroup to community members in the microgroup. A White CEO initiating conversations about a subject that has impacted minorities in terms of healthcare, access to education, voting rights, employment opportunities, and due process under the law does not aid in the support for minorities who continue to be impacted by these social challenges, but instead, demonstrates naivety and insensitivity for minorities.

Being mindful of how communication messages can contribute to cultural stereotypes, prejudgments, and discrimination helps to avoid failed communication campaigns like “Race Together” and harsh criticism because of the same. Because the “Race Together” “campaign came straight from Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz” (Peterson, 2015, para. 4), the perceptual context of ethnocentrism, which the CEO may have inadvertently exhibited, was not taken into consideration. Ethnocentrism refers to the idea that one’s own culture is better or superior to another (Neuliep 2021b). Neuliep (2021b) explains, “One of the effects of ethnocentrism is that it clouds our perception of others. We have a tendency to judge others, and their communications, based on the standards set by our own culture” (Neuliep, 2021b, p. 24-25). However, when we learn about the contextual model of intercultural communication it helps us to reduce uncertainty and avoid cultural insensitivity, stereotypes, and ethnocentrism. A Black

CEO crafting a communication campaign to have race discussions in light of the killings of two Black men would be perceived differently from a White CEO doing the same.

The cultural context of communication would have helped Starbucks to avoid such a cultural error in communication. According to Neuliep (2021c), The cultural context “is perhaps the most defining influence on human interaction” (p. 41). This is because “Culture provides the overall framework wherein humans learn to organize their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in relation to their environment. Culture provides people with an implicit theory about how to behave and how to interpret the behavior of others” (Neuliep, 2021c, p. 41); therefore, if Starbucks and its CEO Howard Schultz had considered the cultural context of communication, the campaign message would have included one of humanity, sensitivity, and unity.

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