International Public Relations and the Circuit of Culture: An Analysis of Gawad Kalinga

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This paper examines the intersection of meaning construction and culture through a case analysis of a non-profit organisation in the Philippines. By employing the circuit of culture as a framework, the paper illustrates how Gawad Kalinga’s discourse has incorporated a culture-centred approach to communication. While the organisation’s strategic use of the discourse of faith and care resulted in its popularity, it also presented issues of power. Moreover, its highly optimistic and positive claims resulted in gaps between its rhetoric and actual behavior. In acknowledging the importance of integrating cultural values in discourse production, we remind international public relations practitioners that meaningful community development programs require time and contextual sensitivity. This paper contributes to international public relations scholarship from the perspective of a non-profit organisation in a developing country.

Keywords: public relations, Philippines, Gawad Kalinga, circuit of culture

Introduction

Since public relations involves communication, it influences and is influenced by culture. In fact, the intersection of culture and PR, both at the macro (societal) and micro (organisational, interpersonal) level, has been explored by a number of scholars (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011; Culbertson &
Chen, 1996; Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Huang, 2000; Rhee, 1999; Sison, 2009; Sriramesh, 2007; Sriramesh & Takasaki, 1999; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009; van Ruler, 2003).

Using the circuit of culture model as a conceptual and methodological framework, this paper examines the construction of meaning and the cultural context of a public relations campaign in contemporary Philippine society and in a globalised world. The study recognises the centrality of culture at both its local and global dimensions because humans are essentially interpretive beings. As such it subscribes to the idea that public relations practitioners are potentially cultural intermediaries (Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Hodges, 2006) or as ‘mediators between producers and consumers who actively create meanings by establishing an identification between products or issues and publics’ (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 210).

By anchoring this work on the circuit of culture model, it follows the basic assumption that stakeholders of public relations campaigns are engaged in dynamic meaning-making that is context specific and is constantly changing as it is negotiated over time. The model-driven conceptual analysis is aimed at distilling the cultural forces that promote or constrain Philippine strategic communication programs. In addition, the study explores how elements of colonial history possibly embedded in cultural values are made manifest in public relations.

The knowledge gained from the study will contribute to the literature in international/global public relations and more specifically in the area of cultural approaches to public relations. By focusing on a homegrown non-profit organisation in a developing country, this study is a modest attempt to fill a relatively unexplored territory in international public relations research, which tends to privilege corporate as well as huge and powerful non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Since this private non-profit is flexing to expand globally, it provides a fascinating counterpoint to the normative West to East flow of communication and cultural influence.

**Circuit of culture model**

The central premise of the model is the primacy of power in relationships and the convergence of culture, knowledge and power. The circuit has the following ‘moments’ where meaning is created: representation, production, consumption, identity and regulation (du Gay, Hall, James, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). To provide alternative pathways for theory building in public relations that ‘reflect its wide range of actual applications and cultural contexts and not just privilege Western, corporate settings’, Curtin and Gaither (2005, p. 96) articulated the modeling of the circuit of culture in public relations.
Briefly, the discursive process of manufacturing and shaping cultural meaning is called representation. ‘We give things meaning by how we represent them’ (Hall, 1997, p. 3). Production, on the other hand, refers to meanings associated with products, services, experiences or in the case of PR the messages strategically crafted for targeted publics. Consumption is where meaning is fully realised ‘because meaning does not reside in an object but in how that object is used’ (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 101). Meanings derived through the production and consumption process form identities which are at once malleable, fragmented and complex as they include subjective and socially developed constructs such as class, gender, ethnicity and so on. Finally, regulation comprises the formal and informal cultural control mechanisms that run the gamut of social norms, technology, and institutional as well as economic, religious and political systems.

The circuit of culture model has been applied and extended to examine the closure of Starbucks in Beijing (Han & Zhang, 2009), Napster (Taylor et al., 2002), the Adidas ‘Beat Rugby’ campaign (Scherer, 2007) and the World Health Organization’s polio eradication campaign (Curtin & Gaither, 2006), to name a few. Goggin (2006) used the model to advance understanding of cell phones as cultural artifacts. With the model as analytical framework, Terry (2005) reported on culture and public relations in Kazakhstan.

In the Starbucks case, researchers illustrated the tension between the ‘coffee or fastfood culture’ and the ‘museum culture’. The dissonance generated in having an icon of Western fast food or low culture inside the Forbidden City, which represents the finest of Chinese cultural legacy, spun a vortex of controversy that ultimately resulted in the closure of Starbucks in the Forbidden City.

The Napster study chronicled another clash of cultures, between old and new media, a clash that radically transformed habits of music distribution and consumption. Napster essentially became the symbolic locus of a multi-perspective struggle ‘where different discourses alternately make contact, affiliate, and clash with each other’ (Taylor et al. 2002, p. 614). The conflict between regulatory and journalistic values, for instance, pitted copyright protection against First Amendment freedom.

Similarly, the advertisement called Black that promoted the Adidas brand using Maori imagery blended with pictures of an international rugby match drew intense criticism in New Zealand regarding the commodification and misappropriation of Maori culture. The dispute occurred despite enormous effort during production to consult with the Maoris regarding the use of indigenous cultural representations, the critical acclaim received by the commercial from the advertising industry and Black’s wide distribution.
in more than 70 countries. This promotional campaign is a cautionary tale for producers of media products about the absence of guarantees as to how consumers decode commercial messages. The unintended communicative effects in this case underscore the fluidity and unpredictability of consumer articulations, and the role of domestic power relations (Scherer & Jackson, 2008).

Focusing on the moment of identity, Curtin and Gaither (2006) found that polio meant ‘scientific entity, expensive nuisance, tool of colonialism, political liability, source of shame and fear, weapon of international diplomacy, wartime enemy, public health emergency, part and parcel of everyday life, site of religious struggle’ (p. 81) to different people in various parts of the world. The researchers wrote: ‘This examination of how the discursive formation of multiple identities of an issue can inform an international public relations campaign suggests ways in which the circuit of culture extends the body of public relations knowledge’ (p. 83).

The model however is not without its critics and has been called a ‘little more than metaphor’ (Fine, 2002, p. 106). This paper aligns itself with the view that public relations is a ritual or a cultural form which is ‘synergistic, nonlinear and dynamic’ (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p. 93). As such it departs from the ‘empirical–administrative tradition’ (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000) and broadens the analytical spectrum to the larger social, cultural and political contexts of public relations as it is practiced in the Philippines and at a particular juncture in the country’s history and lived experience.

**Method**

Employing the case study approach, this article is an in-depth analysis of the *Gawad Kalinga* program. Because of the complexity of the issue and the need to ‘pay close attention to the influence of its social, political, and other contexts’ (Stake, 2005 cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 256), the case study approach is employed in this analysis. Case studies are useful in providing ‘a holistic understanding of a problem, issue, or phenomenon within its social context’ (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 256). Case studies are appropriate when contextual conditions are relevant to the problem under investigation, especially in studying phenomena where the researcher has little control (Yin, 2009). For this reason, the case study will employ analysis of media texts and websites.

Based on published data, media and other institutional reports, the case study utilised the five elements of the circuit of culture model as both analytical and organising principles. To collect data, the search terms ‘GK’, ‘Gawad Kalinga’, ‘nation building’ and ‘community development Philippines’ were used on several online databases (Lexis-Nexis, Factiva, ProQuest,
Infotrac's Expanded Academic and Google Scholar). This technique yielded materials from a variety of fields including architecture, anthropology, economics and urban planning as well as sources (news stories, technical reports and scholarly articles). The researchers perused these materials in addition to interviewing a local source via email and in person.

_Gawad Kalinga_ was chosen because the program spans domestic and cross-national borders and therefore provides a rich multi-layered site for cultural production. It also offers the exploration of a mostly harmonious communicative experience that incorporated Filipino cultural values despite shifting articulations where meanings were socially constructed, contested, negotiated and managed as the program grew.

**Case study**

_Gawad Kalinga_ or GK (Filipino for ‘to give care’) is a community-building, humanitarian movement that started in 1995. GK aims to eradicate poverty through志愿ism following the Filipino _bayanihan_ way. From its early beginnings as an out-of-school youth intervention program run by a Catholic group, Couples for Christ (CFC), GK evolved as a secular foundation that builds homes and communities and includes livelihood programs with a mission to ‘end poverty for five million Filipino families by 2024’ (http://www.gk1world.com/NewOurVision). Combining infrastructure, capacity development and public–private partnerships, its program is implemented in 2000 communities in the Philippines as well as in other Asian and African countries.

The application of the circuit of culture model in analysing _Gawad Kalinga_ reveals the importance of understanding cultural values in communication campaigns. While GK started as a local community development project by a religious group, it developed into a national and global program that shows the interplay of culture, religion and communities in generating meaningful social change in the Philippines.

As a grassroots community development entity, GK is ‘fueled by a massive army of volunteers who are working together in _bayanihan_ to bring about change and to restore the dignity of the poorest of the poor’

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1 _Bayanihan_ is ‘a Filipino tradition wherein neighbors would help a relocating family by gathering under their house, and carrying it to its new location … a communal spirit that makes seemingly impossible feats possible through the power of unity and cooperation’. (http://vrplus.dswd.gov.ph/index.php/component/content/article/7-bayanihang-bayan-program-bbp/-11-what-is-bayanihan). The word has roots in _bayan_ (country) and when ‘i’ is added, it becomes _bayani_ (hero), the latter being what the volunteers become with their _padugo_ (bloodletting) or selfless sharing of self, talent and/or resources.
The use of a military discourse such as ‘army’ or ‘war against poverty’ with poverty as the insidious enemy evokes determination, solidarity, padugo (bloodletting) or sacrifice and heroism among its multitudes of stakeholders that include government, corporations, donors, beneficiaries and volunteers.

GK emerged from the abject squalor of Bagong Silang, one of the biggest slums in Metro Manila. Here the CFC, a Catholic charismatic group in the Philippines, organised a youth camp that also reached out to families of gang members to work on community rehabilitation projects. The effort led to the first Gawad Kalinga community.

Rapid urbanisation in the Philippines produced numerous problems such as congestion, pollution, crime, poverty, environmental degradation and lack of sufficient housing. The continuous influx of migrants from rural to urban areas resulted in burgeoning numbers of informal settlers or squatters (‘iskwater’ is the derogatory slang used locally). In 2004, the Philippines had 1,408,492 informal settler households of which 51.6% live in Metro Manila (HUDCC, 2004). It was the need to provide adequate shelter as a means to break the cycle of poverty that gave birth to GK.

The following milestones mark the historicity of the GK movement (Habaradas & Aquino, 2010):

2000: First GK village outside of Bagong Silang was established.

2002: Impressed by the rate that 2000 Singles for Christ volunteers built 16 GK homes in Dumaguete, Negros Oriental, former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo gave GK 30 million Philippine pesos to build 1000 homes. GK rose to the challenge and built houses in 70 locations in the country in a year’s time. This widely publicised presidential initiative led to more assistance from governors to mayors and even from opposition leaders such as Senator Aquilino Pimentel, who provided PHP 40 million from his Countryside Development Fund for GK villages.

2003: GK777, ‘a global movement to build homes for 700,000 families in 7000 communities in seven years’, was launched.

2005: First GK Highway of Peace started with the building of the first Muslim GK village in Datu Paglas, Maguindanao.
2006: GK received prestigious awards including the Ramon Magsaysay and Manuel Quezon Awards. It became a genuine nation-building movement whose vision of a slum-free Philippines was embraced and supported by competing businesses, politicians, overseas Filipino workers and civic organisations.

2007: GK and CFC split due to organisational, ideological and personal conflict between CFC co-founder Frank Padilla and GK founder Tony Meloto.

2008: *Gawad Kalinga* Builders Institute, the training and think-tank group, was founded in the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila University. GK obtained financial support from the Singapore and Canadian governments.

2009: GK2024 was inaugurated for ‘one generation of Filipinos who will journey from poverty to prosperity, from neglect to respect, from shame to honor, from third world to first world, from second-class to first-class citizen of the world’. (GK Website). Its Asian model of development was unveiled at the first GK Global Summit in Boston, Massachusetts.

**Regulation**

The moment of regulation in the Philippine context reflects the process taken by the GK founders. Philippine culture is complex, with its 350 years of Spanish colonial history and 50 years of American rule. Eighty per cent of its population is Catholic and the Catholic Church is the country’s most trusted institution (Philippine Trust Index 2011). However, its American-styled government and robust free press have not curtailed corruption, which has impeded the country’s progress. In 2006, 44% of its population or 40 million Filipinos lived below $2.00 a day. About 20% of its GDP comes from remittances of overseas Filipino workers.

Aside from faith, Filipino culture is also characterised by strong families, which often include extended members who live in the same house. With these in mind, GK tapped into the Filipino values of helpfulness, neighbourly care and cooperation and focused its messages on ‘poverty alleviation with human dignity’.

Philippine society has a legacy of authoritarian regimes. It is a culture steeped in respect for authorities. GK clearly enjoys the support of a broad

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constituency that includes known authorities – the Catholic Church from which it traces its genealogy; many levels of government that allowed it to draft legislation that will institutionalise the GK model in addition to government budget appropriation for GK’s home building; the military; and the Filipino diaspora (Villanueva, 2010). In other words, GK has engaged two powerful agencies that control the country’s wealth: the State and the elite class. In fact, GK volunteers, several of whom are CFC members, belong to the elite stratum of entrepreneurs/business titans, high-ranking government officials, professionals and corporate leaders. The elite in the Philippines is about 10% of the population but controls at least a third of the economy (Villanueva, 2010).

While its partnership-based model and strategic engagement policy are understandably and tactically needed to address widespread poverty and help historically marginalised slum populations, GK sadly finds within its fold the confluence of powerful economic, political, social and religious forces. Motivated by faith and admirably driven by altruistic fervor to help the powerless and disenfranchised, GK has embodied the enduring ironies and inequalities of Philippine society. While ostensibly trying to empower its diverse stakeholders, remnants of paternalism and the very cycle of dependency that it aims to break are still evident.

How the benefactor–beneficiary, donor–recipient power relations are determined and negotiated is key to the facilitation or disruption of GK’s programs. To its credit, GK has demonstrated a desirable capability to adapt. It has carefully accommodated and modified its discourse from an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (rich versus poor) to a ‘we’. As such it thoughtfully minimised differentiation or ‘otherisation’ that has plagued many similar movements.

Home building requires land. GK navigated through property laws, land reform, squatter relocation policies and the bureaucracy that implements these regulations. By engaging the government, fees and permits were either waived or facilitated. Land acquisition is in the form of donations, rent/lease arrangements or reasonably priced purchase from private owners or the government (Villanueva, 2010).

Structurally, GK has used adaptive and decentralised leadership, with GK management boards at the provincial and community levels. Its clever approach to community building with caretaker teams is not only participatory and grassroots-oriented but might just be the panacea to the ningas-cogon (flaming grass) mentality of Filipinos. This cultural trait refers to enthusiastically starting things, but then quickly losing enthusiasm, resulting in non-completion of tasks (Gorospe, 1988).
GK’s caretaker teams use a team-based method, require a long-term community presence (at least three years) and employ a multi-faceted and interdisciplinary program ranging from livelihood, health and nutrition, education and arts/music/culture, to food sufficiency, environmental awareness and tourism (Habaradas & Aquino, 2010). The ‘Mabuhay Ladies’, who are trained to be effective tour guides that welcome visitors in GK villages, provide a template for community tourism (Esteves, 2008).

Production

GK’s vision expresses its approach – empowering people with faith and patriotism by building a nation comprised of caring and sharing communities ‘dedicated to eradicate poverty and restore human dignity’ (http://www.gk1world.com/NewOurVision). The use of the discourse of care is underpinned by the Filipinos’ cultural values of bayanihan and allows the shift of responsibility from government to the people. Communicating social development resonates loudly with various sectors of society, and encourages public–private partnerships. To meet its national and international ambitions GK, however, had to deal with questions raised by the Catholic hierarchy about some of its partnerships.

Every Filipino schooled in the vagaries of the nation’s centuries of struggle against colonial masters knows its heroes, from Jose Rizal to Andres Bonifacio. GK successfully harnessed the heroism appeal. Its Isang Milyong Bayani (One Million Heroes) campaign was launched in 2006 to encourage Filipinos to volunteer at least four hours a month in GK activities; the message that being a GK volunteer means becoming a hero appeared irresistible.

GK indeed acknowledged and integrated a number of Filipino cultural values into its own organisational culture and message strategy. In fact, a crucial element of its poverty eradication program is values formation. The movement is anchored on faith, primarily Roman Catholic, the importance of family, kapwa (caring, sharing), mapagkapwa-tao (empathy), kapitbahayan (community solidarity), karangalan (dignity) and tulong (mutual aid and self-help), among others.

The deliberate positioning of GK as building communities of hope, trust and dignity with clean, beautiful houses and programs that address basic household needs captures the essence of production in both its material and cultural qualities.

On material production, development experts estimated GK total development infrastructure at PHP 8.0 billion in 2007: 3.0 billion for housing, 0.5 billion for schools and clinics, 2.0 billion for land development,
and 2.5 billion for social programs, health, education and livelihood, donated professional services and volunteerism (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 2007).

To rally support for its vision, GK produced stirring slogans. Examples are *Lakas ng Pagbabago* (Power of Change), *Bawat Pilipino, Bayani* (Every Filipino, A Hero), *Bayan, Bayani, Bayanihan* (Country, Hero, Collective and Heroic Action), *Walang Iwanan* (No One is Left Behind).

More important, GK defines poverty not as economic but behavioral. It has shifted signification of the problem of poverty from class conflict to the ‘breakdown of relationships’. For a personalistic culture that values *pakikisama* (getting along), this messaging is potent because it brings the issue to the personal, relationship level. In fact, GK’s production process moved from building houses to building dreams and hopes (from the material to the cultural).

It does help a great deal to have professional communication expertise. GK was a beneficiary of a multi-million dollar public relations campaign to elevate visibility of Tony Meloto and GK. This is strategic co-branding that attracted many other corporations to GK (Habaradas & Aquino, 2010; Villanueva, 2010).

By several measures, GK is a study of an ecosystem where positive cultural meanings are utilised to change the culture of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion that bred violence and hopelessness in the slums. So what’s GK’s scorecard on production?

As a manufacturer of material culture it fell short of its GK777 goal of building 700,000 homes in 7000 communities. As of 2009, GK had built 33,439 homes in 1400 Philippine communities (Habaradas & Aquino, 2010). Undeterred, GK intensified its campaign to uplift the lives of five million impoverished Filipinos by 2024.

In the production of cultural inspiration, GK is doing well so far. But what happens when unfulfilled aspirations collide with harsh realities, when credibility deficits are mounting? GK indeed has numerous challenges: sustainability of its villages, replicability, possible donor fatigue and issues of corruption, power struggles and internal strife (Villanueva, 2010). It appears that GK needs to narrow the gap between mobilisation and organisation, between rhetoric and action.

**Consumption**

Different groups interpreted the GK rhetoric in various ways. On one hand, GK’s initial success may be attributed to strongly articulated Christian
values of providing care to the less fortunate. As previously mentioned, the GK campaign focused on the ‘discourse of care’, which leveraged on Filipinos’ innate desire to help others.

On the other hand, these same values were viewed as alienating other potential volunteers and donors. Apparently, GK’s Catholic roots and evangelical strategy were turning away potential volunteers and financiers, limiting its ability to become global. Like many NGOs, sustainable funding is a main concern. GK was no different. There are only so many private companies and individuals that can be tapped in the country to provide financial assistance. Funding had to be sourced externally and doing so required the organisation to broaden its membership base, be more inclusive and become more secular.

The latter view led to GK’s 2007 separation from its original Catholic group, which paved the way for GK to expand its programs and consequently its funding sources. Following the split, founder Tony Meloto said:

GK is non-partisan. We do not take any side in building a nation in the same manner that we do not pass judgment on any corporation that we engage. We do not even ask them what their products are as long as they want to help. (http://sfldop.webs.com/onemansview.htm)

He also said: ‘We believe that the work with the poor should not suffer because of our differences’ (http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/159950/news/nation/gawad-kalinga-to-part-ways-with-cfc-faction).

For some quarters, GK’s broadening of its partnership base was tantamount to ‘selling out’, particularly when donors included pharmaceutical companies that manufactured contraceptive and abortive pills (Manila Times, 2007). When the Vatican sent a letter admonishing GK for moving its focus from the spiritual to the social and ‘its overemphasis on social work’ it was actually protesting GK’s partnership with companies promoting artificial family planning (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2008).

With the organisational split, GK’s discourse morphed to ‘nation building’. Its message encouraged Filipinos to dream, as dreaming generates hope and persuades overseas Filipinos and foreign benefactors to become ‘saviours’ as volunteers or fundraisers. For many Filipinos who have migrated abroad or worked overseas as contract workers, GK’s approach provided a tangible opportunity to help their country (Business World, 2007). Building clean, aesthetically appealing houses
counterbalances some of the negative social impact faced by overseas contract workers separated from their families.

From another perspective, the infusion of funding from the private sector and the Filipino diaspora enabled GK to build more houses, and even expand its programs outside the Philippines. In 2007, GK went global and one of the first international projects was a 48-house settlement called Singapore Village, because it was built on donations and skills of Singaporean and Filipino volunteers (Channel News Asia, 2007). The seeming success with its public–private partnership approach inspired GK to ‘export’ its community development model to other countries with poor communities, such as Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Cambodia.

GK’s business partners view the program as an excellent corporate social (CSR) responsibility opportunity, with many leveraging their corporate brands with GK’s positive reputation in local and overseas communities (Habaradas & Aquino, 2010). Companies in telecommunications, food manufacturing, energy and finance are among GK’s 500 partners. As an indicator of its ‘inclusive’ and ‘non-partisan’ approach to partnership, organisations such as the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR), a government entity tasked to regulate the gaming industry, directed revenue to build 100 classrooms (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2011).

But not all companies are involved purely for altruistic reasons. For example, SM Development Corporation donated 3.4 hectares of land to a GK housing project as part of a compliance measure from the Philippine Board of Investments. Housing projects are required to ‘develop an area for socialised housing’, which in this case would include a site that will house 200 families with road networks, drainage and water systems, as well as cash to build 24 houses and a kindergarten (Manila Standard, 2011).

Despite its massive popularity, GK is not without its critics. The few who dared post blogs questioned whether GK can really eradicate systemic poverty (http://witnessstatement.blogspot.com.au/2011/02/gawad-kalinga-will-not-solve-poverty.html) and whether building colorful houses is the solution to every community problem (http://sirmartin.wordpress.com/2007/04/10/the-myth-of-gawad-kalinga/). The first blog warned that the Philippine government’s dependence on the success of GK could eventuate in the government’s absconding its basic responsibility to its people and the nation. Furthermore, the writer queried whether GK’s approach to poverty eradication through building houses masked the real reasons for poverty in the country. In a similar vein, the second blogger revealed a case where GK’s intervention in a particular indigenous community was a disaster. By replacing the Aetas’ traditional huts with architecturally designed colorful
houses, which did not suit their culture and lifestyle, GK did not adequately consult the needs of the community. This example revealed that not all ‘poor’ communities would view the GK way as a universal solution to poverty.

**Representation**

As previously mentioned, GK’s beginnings as the social arm of the Catholic lay organisation, Couples for Christ, reflected how it was represented to the Filipinos. The religion-specific discourse, however, proved to limit GK’s ability to expand and eventually led to disengagement from the Catholic Church hierarchy.

GK’s rhetoric mirrored the organisation’s deliberate approach in how it wants to be represented in public and its strategic goals. For example, media reports often referred to GK’s belief in the ‘politics of caring and economics of sharing’, which echoes the first principle of ‘The GK Way’ on its website. From its early beginnings as a training project to help young people out of poverty, GK has evolved into a global movement aimed at ‘building communities to end poverty’ (http://www.gk1world.com/NewHistory). GK defines poverty not as a ‘lack of resources, but a lack of caring and sharing’ (http://gk1world.com/whatispoverty).

The change in the rhetoric to poverty alleviation enabled GK to move outside its national borders, with GK villages being established in other countries. The ‘poverty’ rhetoric also allowed GK to leverage its brand to generate human and financial resources from international agencies and institutions interested in international development. Students from overseas universities are encouraged to participate in research and internship programs through the Gawad Kalinga Builders Institute (http://gk1world.com/newgkbuilders).

Furthermore, employing the ‘poverty alleviation’ message in their organisational strategy aligns with the key priorities of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG). While most GK funding comes from the private sector rather than international aid agencies, focusing on poverty alleviation provides GK a global forum in which to engage. For example, Meloto shared a panel session at a World Economic Forum (WEF) in Jakarta in 2011 with Jeffrey Sachs, where he was able to discuss GK’s model of public–private partnerships in poverty alleviation efforts (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0aL_tzhWQ0o).

While GK’s global outreach effectively generated much-needed funds and services from people overseas, it may also be seen as a manipulative effort to exploit ‘the poor’. In Meloto’s talk at the WEF, he described an
approach similar to C.K. Prahalad’s *Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* (2004) model in convincing corporate partners to participate in the GK program. This approach suggests that the poor at the bottom of the pyramid must not be seen as ‘victims’ but rather as partners in wealth creation, and their affluence will mean an expanded market for the private sector.

The current GK discourse also reflects a faith-based (vs Catholic orientation) social justice approach. This rhetoric enables the organisation to work in and with communities of different faiths. For example, the website section on Peace Building features images of Tony Meloto with hijab-clad Muslims and a statement on GK communities being a ‘venue for convergence of different religions, tribes and cultures’ ([http://www.gk1world.com/NewPeaceBldg](http://www.gk1world.com/NewPeaceBldg)). As reported in the media, GK houses have been built in Muslim communities (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 2007).

Additionally, the use of the more generic and more inclusive term ‘faith’ rather than ‘religion’ broadens the support base and the ability to tap into international and more secular organisations. Furthermore, in its efforts to tap into the business community, GK employs the term ‘social entrepreneurship’.

**Identity**

While GK has not strayed from its original social development cause, its autonomy has resulted in a stronger identity for the organisation beyond its Philippine borders. As Curtin and Gaither (2007, p. 41) suggest, ‘the challenge for practitioners when designing a campaign is to create an identity that a product or issue and publics can share’. While the faith and care discourse continues to underpin its messages, the organisation has scaled up its programs to include reconstruction, peace building, ‘volunteer-tourism’ and social entrepreneurship. Furthermore, by offering various opportunities to become donors, volunteers, advocates, partners and researchers, GK enables its stakeholders different experiences to construct their identity within and of the organisation.

As Motion and Leitch (2002, p. 52) contend, ‘Organizations create meaning through every action or inaction, every statement or silence. These multiple meanings constitute identity – not as an object, but as a mutable and dynamic process.’

GK’s evolution from a social project unit of a Philippine Catholic lay organisation to a global organisation dedicated to poverty alleviation may be attributed to the ‘social constructions emerging from discursive
practices’ (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 168). GK’s vision and mission statements reflect the aspirations of a people where 26.5% of the country’s 94 million population are below the poverty line (http://www.adb.org/countries/philippines/main). Its roadmap to 2024 also reveals an ambitious goal for the country to become ‘first world’ through a three-staged approach. Undoubtedly, GK has constructed its discourse beyond its organisational identity and into a national identity. By focusing on nation-building, GK has inevitably engaged in nation-branding (Business World, 2007).

With most Western media and literature having portrayed the Philippines from a poverty perspective, developing a ‘first world’ national identity seems far-fetched and almost unrealistic. Media representations are integral to the development of national identity; however, it must be acknowledged that national infrastructure, systems, governance and cultural values are equally important. While national identities are critical to foreign investment, they also risk losing, or diluting, intrinsic cultural values in the name of globalisation.

Nevertheless, postcolonial Philippines will continue to negotiate its identity in a globalised environment. Through its social development program, GK hopes to facilitate the creation of a new national identity for the country and the many Filipinos around the world. And the construction of organisational and national identities requires a strategic communication component to achieve GK’s goals.

**Conclusion**

By employing the circuit of culture model in analysing this case study, we demonstrated the importance of a culture-centred approach to public relations and communication. The analysis reflected how Filipino values were considered not only in program development, but also in its associated discourse. By constructing its vision, philosophy and messages around faith and patriotism, GK has gained multitudes of followers and seemingly very few detractors. The discourse analysis also revealed the power relationships between the Catholic hierarchy in the Philippines and local communities. This discussion shows that religion remains a key element in the Philippine context and will need to be addressed in any public communication effort. The case study also demonstrated how GK negotiated these controversial issues.

While GK has addressed claims of elitism and ‘otherisation’ through its adoption of ‘we’ in its discourse, there is still the risk of objectifying ‘the poor’. Purely philanthropic efforts, where the wealthy ‘provide’ resources to the poor, merely strengthen the economic divisions in society. Caution must be exercised that power relationships between rich and poor, donor–
recipient, sponsor–benefactor and notions of paternalism are not further perpetuated. The current approaches of participative community consultation combined with sustainable capacity building that empower community members seem to tackle these concerns.

However as one of the ‘disastrous’ examples of GK intervention showed, there is danger in developing a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. Understanding the cultural nuances, traditions and values of a community is critical to effective and meaningful community development work. Doing so takes time and requires sensitivity to cultural differences. However, in the context of business, where ‘time is money’, deep understanding of the communities’ needs and lifestyle could very well be threatened. Therefore private sector companies need to incorporate sufficient resources for meaningful stakeholder engagement if they wish to participate in sustainable social development work.

Furthermore, assumptions of modernisation as ‘good’ for communities need to be continually challenged. While CSR efforts have been known to thrive in societies where the government is weak (Waldman, de Luque, Washburn, & House, 2006), these should not encourage local and national governments to give up their responsibility to communities and the nation. The rush for developing countries to ‘globalise’ to participate in the global economy and move to ‘developed country’ status comes with risks to culture values.

Similar concerns in public relations scholarship and practice exist. Theorising in international public relations requires a deeper understanding of cultures, histories and politics. This case study attempts to contribute to building knowledge in this area. While focused on one country, this case builds a stronger argument for considering cultural approaches in public relations scholarship and practice.

References


