
Culture and Its Impact on Business Strategy:- A Case Study of Unilever

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doi.org/10.51505/IJEBMR.2026.10703 URL: <https://doi.org/10.51505/IJEBMR.2026.10703>

Received: Jun 10, 2026

Accepted: Jun 16, 2026

Online Published: July 06, 2026

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of culture on business strategy through a case study of Unilever's cross-border and global operations. The research study examines how cultural, religious, and institutional belief systems influence strategic choices in multinational corporations. The research identifies three critical areas:- the formulation of strategies that account for political, social, ethical and operational pressures; the integration of inter-organisational planning across diverse cultural contexts; and the application of strategic intelligence to adapt to the fast-changing dynamic and complex global business environments. Findings of the research study show that Unilever navigates cultural complexity by balancing global integration with local responsiveness, relying on its matrix structure, stakeholder engagement processes, and advanced scenario planning tools. Moreover, belief systems including Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, African Traditional Religions, and Western capitalist-bureaucratic frameworks shape consumer expectations, as well as ethical considerations and organisational practices in different markets and business landscapes. For instance, halal certification in Muslim-majority regions, sustainability imperatives in Western markets, and collectivist ethos in Asian societies directly influence Unilever's brand positioning strategy and market entry strategies. The study concludes that culture is not merely an external constraint but a strategic resource. Unilever's ability to embed cultural intelligence, ethical responsibility, sustainability initiatives, and practices within its global strategy provides critical lessons for FMCG companies and other multinational firms seeking resilience and long-term competitive advantage.

Keywords:- Culture, Business Strategy, Belief Systems, Global Integration, Local Responsiveness, Strategic Intelligence, Sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

1. Introduction

In today's interconnected business landscape and global economy, culture has emerged as one of the most decisive factors shaping communication and business strategy. Multinational corporations (MNCs), in particular, face the challenge of navigating diverse cultural landscapes and sensitive markets while maintaining strategic coherence across their global operations. Culture is not only expressed through language, customs, and social norms but also embedded in belief systems, institutional practices, and shared values that influence consumer behaviour,

employee engagements and expectations, and inter-organisational collaborations. Understanding how culture interacts with business strategy in diverse cultural landscapes and sensitive markets makes it central to the success of firms operating across borders.

The notion of culture as a determining factor in the success of organisational strategy is not new. Scholars such as Hofstede (1984), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2011) have long demonstrated that cultural dimensions; power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation shape organisational practices and decision-making. More recently, strategic management theorists (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002; Johnson et al., 2017) have all argued that global companies must embrace "glocalisation," where organisational strategies are standardised globally but adapted to local cultural contexts and business models. This balance is particularly vital for fast-moving consumer goods companies such as Unilever, which operate in culturally sensitive markets and diverse business landscapes where belief systems and ethical norms shape consumer choices and regulatory frameworks.

Belief systems, including Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, African Traditional Religions, and Western capitalist-bureaucratic logics, play an increasingly significant role in global business operations. These systems are not merely personal faith traditions; they represent institutionalised worldviews that influence consumption patterns, workplace norms, and business ethics. For instance, the demand for halal-certified products in Muslim-majority countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates illustrates how Islamic belief systems create both opportunities and strategic imperatives for firms operating in such sensitive markets. Similarly, Christian-inspired ethical consumerism in Western societies such as Germany, the United States of America, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom has driven companies to invest in sustainability initiatives and practices, transparency, fair trade policy, and corporate social responsibility. In nations such as Cambodia, Thailand, Bhutan and Japan where over half of the population practice Buddhism, Buddhism's emphasis is on mindfulness and ethical living, which has also spurred growth in wellness markets. While African Traditional Religions such as Ifa, Sango, Ogun, Adofi, Amadioha, Olokun, and Esu practiced in West African nations such as Benin, Togo, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Ghana, and some parts of Nigeria; (Southwestern Nigeria, Southeastern Nigeria and The Middle Belt), emphasise heavily on truthfulness, community peace, togetherness, respect for nature and the Elderly, paying homage to ancestors and ancestral homes through rituals such as libation, which has collectively shaped consumer behaviours in these culturally sensitive markets. At the same time, Western capitalist and bureaucratic systems establish global norms of efficiency, profit maximisation, and regulatory compliance that frame how businesses operate, compete and cooperate internationally. Against this backdrop, Unilever offers a compelling case study of how culture impacts business strategy. As one of the world's largest fast-moving consumer goods companies, operating in over 190 countries, Unilever embodies the complexity of balancing global business strategy with cultural responsiveness across borders. The company's mission to "make sustainable living a commonplace" requires it to navigate diverse cultural landscapes and sensitive markets, integrate diverse cultural expectations into its product developments, marketing campaigns, and stakeholders engagement processes. Its success has often depended on recognising cultural diversity as a strategic resource rather than an obstacle. For instance, Unilever's Project Shakti in India empowered rural women as micro-entrepreneurs, blending global business strategy with

local cultural values of community togetherness and empowerment. Similarly, the company's core adherence to halal standards in its food products demonstrates how inclusiveness and responsiveness to religious beliefs strengthens Unilever's market positioning strategy.

At the strategic level, Unilever employs a matrix organisational structure, scenario planning, and advanced data analytics to manage the interplay between culture and global business imperatives. However, its ability to navigate cultural diversity also reflects a deeper commitment to ethical responsibility and sustainability practice. The Unilever "Sustainable Living Plan", (2010), launched under the leadership of its former CEO Paul Polman exemplifies how strategic communication, organisational performance, management accountability and corporate strategy can integrate cultural values such as environmental stewardship, social equity, and consumer trust into global business operations. By embedding cultural and ethical considerations into its business strategy, Unilever not only enhances its brand name and reputation but also builds resilience against reputational damage, regulatory frameworks, and compliance competitive risks.

2. Background of Literature

The relationship between culture and business strategy has been widely explored across management, organisational behaviour, and international business scholarship. Culture is often described as a set of shared values, core norms, and practices that influence how individuals and groups behave within social and organisational contexts (Schein, 2010). In cross-border business environments, culture does not only shape consumer expectations but also determines how organisations develop, implement, apply, and adapt their strategies in different markets.

2.1 Cultural Dimensions and Organisational Strategy

Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions theory remains a cornerstone of cross-cultural management research. His framework identifies dimensions such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term versus short-term orientation, which influence organisational behaviours and strategic choices. For instance, in high power distance societies such as China, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and Russia, hierarchical decision-making may dominate corporate cycles, affecting how global firms structure their subsidiaries. Conversely, in collectivist cultures and societies such as India, Mexico, Brazil, Columbia and South Korea, strategies emphasising on group harmony and community benefit are often more pronounced and successful (Hofstede, 2001). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2011) extend this discussion by focusing on how value orientations such as universalism versus particularism or achievement versus ascription affect negotiation, leadership, and business alliances.

For a global firm such as Unilever, these dimensions are not abstract concepts but practical realities. For instance, marketing strategies must be adapted to collectivist societies in Asia, where advertising emphasises on family and community, while in individualistic societies such as the United States, personal achievement and self-expression may be prioritised. Similarly, Unilever's leadership practices must shift from participatory styles in low power distance

cultures such as Germany and the Netherlands to a more hierarchical approach in high power distance contexts (e.g., China, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia).

2.2 Belief Systems as Cultural Institutions

Beyond cultural dimensions, belief systems including religion and ideology constitute deep cultural structures that profoundly influence cross border business strategy. For instance, Islam, shapes consumer preferences through halal certification, restrictions on some types of financial activities (e.g., prohibition of interest), and ethical principles rooted in Shariah law (Temporal, 2011). Similarly, Christianity has influenced Western capitalist ethics, emphasising stewardship, sustainability practices, transparency, fair trade policy, corporate social responsibility, service to humanity, and in some contexts, prosperity theology, which legitimises wealth accumulation within a moral framework (Weber, 1930/2002). Buddhism introduces values of mindfulness, simplicity, and ethical consumption, which resonate in wellness and sustainable lifestyle industries. African Traditional Religion emphasise spirituality, homage, communal responsibility and ancestral respect, thereby shaping collective consumption and community-based entrepreneurship models (Mbiti, 1990). Finally, Western capitalist and bureaucratic systems impose logics of efficiency, profit maximisation, and rational-legal structures that dominate global business institutions of today (Weber, 1947).

2.3 Theories of Global Strategy and Cultural Responsiveness

The tension between global integration and local responsiveness has been central to international business strategy theory. Bartlett and Ghoshal's (1989, 2002) "transnational solution" advocates a balance between centralised efficiency and decentralised responsiveness, achieved through organisational structures such as the "matrix structure". Prahalad and Doz (1987) conceptualise this balance as "the integration-responsiveness framework", where firms must simultaneously balance and pursue global business standardisation and local adaptation. For instance, the Unilever's Project Shakti in India which empowered rural women as micro-entrepreneurs, thereby blending global business strategy with local cultural values of the community and local business empowerment.

The concept of "glocalisation" (Robertson, 1995) further explains how global companies adapt their business strategies to local cultural contexts without losing global coherence or relevance. For instance, McDonald's adapts menus to local tastes of their immediate business environments, while maintaining service standards in their real estate business portfolio expansion and brand identity worldwide. Unilever embodies "glocalisation" through its global sustainability initiatives into their market expansion strategy, which was adapted into local relevant business initiatives such as Project Shakti in India, and its eco-friendly packaging commitments in Europe.

2.4 Strategic Intelligence and Cultural Sensitivity

Strategic intelligence is the systematic collection of data and analysis of vital information so as to guide good decision-making. Cultural sensitivity is another lens through which culture influences business strategy (Fleisher & Bensoussan, 2015). Strategic intelligence must account

for major cultural contexts in order to provide accurate insights before decision is taken by a firm or an entity operating in cross border or global business operation. For instance, consumer research in collectivist societies requires methods that capture community values rather than individual preferences. Scenario planning (Schoemaker, 1995) is also used to anticipate cultural, political, and ethical shifts that may affect strategic outcomes both in the short and long term life-cycle of a business strategy.

Unilever's People Data Centres provide a strong example of integrating strategic intelligence and cultural sensitivity into its cultural intelligence business strategy. By analysing digital conversations across diverse societies and cultural context, the company identifies cultural trends from sustainability discourses in Europe to halal concerns in Asia and the Middle East that inform product developments, market entry strategies, marketing strategies and strengthens market positioning.

2.5 Stakeholder and Resource-Based Perspectives

Stakeholders theory (Freeman, 1984) asserts that business strategy must consider the interests of all stakeholders, including customers, employees, communities, and the environment. This perspective highlights how cultural expectations shape what stakeholders demand from companies. For instance, in Western nations they prioritise green initiatives and sustainable practices. Western consumers in the USA, the UK, Germany and the Netherlands may pressure companies to adopt an environmentally sustainable practice, while communities in West African nations such as Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Chad and Cameroon may prioritise youth employment and rural community empowerment initiatives, which serves as micro-entrepreneurs. This in turn helps to reduce youth unemployment and poverty in such communities, and in Western nations where they prioritise green initiatives, Stakeholders and Resource-Based Perspectives helps in sustainability practices such as reduction in plastic waste and less aquatic pollution.

Furthermore, the resource-based view (Barney, 1991) complements this, suggesting that firms can achieve competitive advantage through unique and culturally embedded capabilities. For instance, cultural intelligence, local market insights and relationships with culturally diverse stakeholders can be considered strategic resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). Unilever's ability to embed sustainability and cultural adaptability into its corporate DNA at local and global business levels exemplifies how cultural resources contribute to green initiatives, core sustainability practices, corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustained competitive advantage such as global business strength and great market positioning.

2.6 Culture, Ethics, and Sustainability

Finally, literature increasingly links culture to corporate ethics and sustainability practices. Porter and Kramer's (2011) concept of "creating shared value" argues that businesses can achieve long-term success by aligning profit-making with societal needs and cultural values. Sachs (2015) reinforces this by emphasising how global firms contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through culturally embedded strategies. For Unilever, sustainability

practice is not only an ethical imperative but also a culturally responsive strategy. In Western societies, environmental sustainability practices align with Christian-inspired stewardship ethics; in Asia, sustainability practice resonates with Buddhist values of balance and harmony; and in African traditional contexts, sustainability practice aligns with communal values, informed strategies around empowerment and inclusive growth.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine the impact of culture on business strategy, with Unilever serving as the focal case. The case study approach is well suited for exploring complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its environment are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018). Culture and strategy are deeply intertwined, making the case study methodology appropriate for capturing the nuances of how belief systems, values, shared values, and institutional contexts shape strategic decision-making in multinational corporations operating across borders.

3.2 The Case Selection:- Unilever

Unilever was chosen for this analysis because it operates in over 190 countries with a diverse portfolio of more than 400 brands, positioning it uniquely at the intersection of global business trade, integration and local responsiveness. Its mission to “make sustainable living a commonplace” requires it to engage with a broad spectrum of cultural contexts, shared values systems, religious belief systems, and ethical institutional frameworks. Furthermore, Unilever’s reputation as a global leader in sustainability initiatives and practices, innovation, and cultural adaptability provides a rich basis for examining the role of culture in shaping corporate strategy.

3.3 Data Sources

The study relies entirely on secondary sources. These include:-

- (i) Corporate Documents:-** Unilever’s annual reports on sustainability plans and strategy updates, which outline its global operations, policies, and commitments (Unilever, 2020; 2021).
- (ii) Academic Literature:-** Theoretical and empirical studies on culture, international business strategy, and belief systems, such as Hofstede (1984), Bartlett and Ghoshal (2002), Porter and Kramer (2011).
- (iii) Industry Reports and Commentaries:-** Independent analyses of consumer goods markets and multinational operations, which provide additional context on competitive dynamics and cultural trends.

Using multiple data sources enhances the credibility of the analysis through triangulation, ensuring that findings are not dependent on a single perspective or variable, but rather through the lens of corporate documents, analysis of academic literature, synthesis of academic literature with corporate documents, commentaries and recent industry reports.

3. 4 Analytical Framework

A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns and insights from the data. Four key themes guided the analysis, They include:-

(i) Strategy Development:– How multinational corporations align political, social, ethical, and operational drivers with cultural diversity in global markets.

(ii) Inter-Organisational Planning:– The dynamics of integrating local and global business strategies across subsidiaries, partners, and stakeholders in different cultural contexts and across borders.

(iii) Strategic Intelligence:– The use of key data, scenario planning, and market research to integrate local and global business strategies to cultural and religious contexts, and adapt them to cross border trades in culturally sensitive markets.

(iv) Belief Systems and Cultural Influences:– The role of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, African Traditional Religions, and Western capitalist-bureaucratic logics in shaping business practices and consumer expectations in different cultural contexts and across borders.

These frameworks provided structures for interpreting how culture impacts business strategy in a global organisation's contexts.

3. 5 Methodological Limitations

There are limitations inherent in this approach. First, the study relies exclusively on secondary data; it lacks the depth that could be gained through primary methods such as interviews or ethnographic research. Secondly, the case study design limits generalisability; findings are context-specific to Unilever, although they offer transferable core insights into other multinationals operating across borders. Thirdly, the interpretation of cultural dynamics carries the risk of research bias. To mitigate these concerns, the study triangulated data across academic, corporate, and industry sources, and consistently cross-validated interpretations with established theoretical frameworks.

3. 6 Ethical Considerations

The research study was conducted using publicly available documents and information, thereby avoiding risks associated with confidentiality or data privacy. All sources have been properly credited, ensuring academic integrity. Moreover, cultural and religious traditions were discussed respectfully, acknowledging internal diversity and avoiding reductionist views or interpretations. The study treats culture as dynamic and evolving, rather than static or homogenous, aligning with ethical research practices in cross-cultural management.

4. Results

The findings of this study are presented across four themes:- **Strategy development, inter-organisational planning, strategic intelligence, and belief systems.** Each theme is illustrated with supporting tables that captures the key patterns in Unilever's global business operations.

4.1 Strategy Development in Culturally Diverse Contexts

Unilever develops business strategies that balance global objectives with local cultural responsiveness. Its “matrix organisational structure“ enables the firm to set broad global priorities while allowing subsidiaries to adapt marketing strategies to local contexts. Product innovation and marketing campaigns are tailored to cultural preferences, as illustrated in **Table 1**.

Table 1:- Examples of Strategy Development Adapted to local Cultural Contexts

Region/Market	Cultural Influence	Strategic Adaptation by Unilever
Middle East & SE Asia	Islam (Halal standards)	Certification of food brands such as halal; Shariah-compliant in supply chain management and adapt to local market and culture.
Europe & North America	Christian--ethics and secular values, (e.g) United Nations Sustainable Development--Goals (SDGs) through culturally embedded strategies and service to humanity.	Sustainability practices, fair trade policy, food labeling regulations; green initiatives such--as--eco-friendly packaging of food products.
South Asia (India)	Collectivism--and empowerment norms.	“Project Shakti“– Unilever Empowerment programmes. (e.g) Empowering rural women as micro-entrepreneurs, this helps to reduce poverty in rural communities.
East Asia (Thailand)	Buddhist mindfulness and harmony	Wellness branding; natural ingredient sourcing from nature.
Sub-Saharan Africa	Communal traditions	Small packaging for affordability; local sourcing initiatives.

This pattern demonstrates Unilever’s commitment to “glocalisation,” where business strategy is globally standardised yet locally responsive to the needs of stakeholders in the immediate business environments.

4. 2 Inter-Organisational Planning Across Borders

Unilever’s inter-organisational planning involves coordination between headquarters, annex offices, subsidiaries, suppliers, and other key stakeholders. Planning effectiveness is shaped by cultural expectations, local autonomy, and key stakeholders engagement. For instance, coordination between headquarters in the USA, the UK and mainland Europe.

Table 2: Cultural Dynamics in Inter-Organisational Planning

Dimension	Global Orientation	Local Cultural Adaptation
Subsidiary Autonomy	Global business strategies and strategic goals set by HQ in the USA and The UK	Local units, annex offices, subsidiaries and suppliers adapt business strategies to fit cultural norms (e.g, Halal Certification, wellness product designs and production).
Partnerships with NGOs	Compliance and sustainability focus. For instance, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through culturally embedded business strategies and service to humanity.	Community empowerment, education, and social inclusion in local contexts. For instance, poverty alleviation programmes designed to lift youths and rural women out of poverty. (E.g) when young people and rural women in the immediate business environments become sales agents, distributors or marketers of Unilever products and services.
Stakeholder Engagement	Broad CSR commitments.	Tailored consultations with local leaders, faith groups, and immediate local communities. (E.g) partnership.
Supply Chain Relationships	Efficiency-driven	Collaboration with smallholder, farmers and community suppliers, which serves as empowerment's programmes and as micro-entrepreneurs, thereby reducing poverty in rural communities.

Unilever's reliance on key stakeholders input demonstrates how inter-organisational planning is not only a managerial activity but also cultural in nature and exemplifies inclusiveness,

stakeholders engagements and the Unilever "Sustainable Living Plan", (2010), launched under the leadership of its former CEO Paul Polman.

Planning effectiveness is shaped by cultural expectations, local autonomy, key stakeholders engagements and in the long term efficiency-driven.

4.3 Strategic Intelligence and Cultural Adaptation

Unilever employs strategic intelligence tools including big data analytics, consumer insights, and scenario planning which helps them to remain culturally adaptive. **Table 3** summarises how strategic intelligence supports cultural adaptation.

Table 3:- Role of Strategic Intelligence in Cultural Responsiveness

Intelligence Tool	Example Application	Cultural Impact
People Data Centres	Social media monitoring, (e.g) the systematic collection of key data and core analysis of information so as to guide good decision-making.	Detects cultural shifts (e.g., sustainability discourse, concerns of “greenwashing” or fake sustainability claims).
Scenario Planning	Anticipates political and religious change. (E.g) Cultural sensitivity, seeing through the lens of cross border business barriers such as political instability, deep cultural influence on business or market entry strategy and market positioning.	Dynamic business landscape and market sensitivity:- Prepares for regulatory framework and sudden cultural shifts in key marketplace.
Market Research	Consumer---surveys, ethnography.	Identifies wellness trends, collective vs. individual preferences.
Competitive Intelligence	Monitoring rivals, (e.g) firms such as Nestlé and P&G offering similar types of products and services in the same marketplace.	Benchmarks against cultural strategies of Nestlé, P&G, etc.

Strategic Intelligence and Cultural Responsive integration:- Integrating both quantitative data and local managers’ cultural insights, Unilever ensures business strategies are evidence-based yet sensitive to cultural nuance. Unilever’s strategic intelligence tools including big data analytics, consumer insights, scenario planning, market research and competitive intelligence helps the company to balance its strategic intelligence with cultural responsiveness, and as well remain culturally adaptive to local market dynamics, local business environments and globally standardised to stakeholders needs.

4. 4 Belief Systems and Business Strategy

Belief systems significantly shape Unilever’s global operations. The company tailors products, services, designs, marketing, and stakeholder engagements in response to religious and ideological systems. **Table 4** summarises these relationships.

Table 4:- Influence of Belief Systems on Business Strategy

Belief System	Strategic Implications for Unilever
Islam	Engagements:- Halal certification, Shariah-compliant and open financial dealings with religious authorities.
Christianity	Emphasis on stewardship, fair trade policy, sustainability, and ethical branding.
Buddhism	Marketing around mindfulness, wellness, harmony, and natural ingredients.
African Traditional Religions	Community empowerment, collective prosperity initiatives, respect for ancestry.
Western Capitalist/Bureaucratic	Corporate governance, efficiency, profit-maximisation, global and local compliance standards.

These systems often intersect. For instance, in multicultural societies such as the USA, the UK, Nigeria and Malaysia, “glocal“ business strategies must accommodate both Islamic halal practices, Christian ethical norms and **African** traditional Religions simultaneously. This helps balance “shared value systems”, long-term business success by aligning profit-making with respect for societal needs and cultural values.

4. 5 Cross-Cultural Strategy Comparison

To illustrate how Unilever manages complexity, **Table 5** compares cultural contexts, belief systems, and strategic outcomes.

Table 5:- Comparative Analysis of Cultural Contexts and Strategic Outcomes

Market and Regions	Dominant and Religious System.	Cultural Religious	Strategic Approach by Unilever.	Strategic Outcome
Middle East	Islam		Halal-certified foods, conservative marketing strategies that fits local markets.	High consumer trust and brand loyalty.
Europe	Christianity,--- secular ethics		Sustainability leadership, eco-packaging. Ethics and secular values. (E.g) United-Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through culturally embedded strategies and service to humanity.	Market and products differentiation, good service delivery, thereby leading to greater reputation, consumer trust and core--brand loyalty.
South Asia	Collectivism, religion & tradition		Rural empowerment projects such as (Project Shakti in India), (e.g) in the form of Corporate Social-Responsibility (CSR). Through empowerments and poverty-alleviation programmes.	Deeper rural penetration, inclusiveness. (E.g) Collaboration with smallholder, farmers-and community suppliers, which serves as empowerment's and as micro-entrepreneurs, thereby reducing poverty in rural communities.
East Asia	Buddhism, collectivism		Wellness branding, and natural sourcing from nature.	Growth in personal care, health focus

Africa	Communal-traditions, and mixed faiths	Community empowerment,- micro-distribution, and micro-entrepreneurs,- thereby reducing poverty in rural communities, particularly amongst women and youths.	Market expansion and true local legitimacy.
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This demonstrates cultural diversity rather than just fragmenting Unilever’s strategy, strengthens its competitive advantage by embedding cultural responsiveness at the heart of its business operations locally and across borders whilst maintaining it global standardised structure yet locally responsive to the core needs of stakeholders in the local business environments.

4.6 Integration of Culture into Global Strategy

Unilever does not treat culture as an external constraint but as a driver of innovation and strategic differentiation. **Table 6** highlights how cultural adaptation supports global business objectives.

Table 6:- Integration of Culture into Unilever’s Global Strategy

Global Objective	Cultural Dimension Integrated	Example of Initiative
Growth and Market Expansion	Respect for local cultures, belief systems and people’s traditions.	Halal certification, small unit-packaging. Shariah-adaptation in supply-chain management, and adapted to local market and cultures.
Sustainability Leadership	Christian ethics, Buddhist balance and mixture of transparent secular values.	Eco friendly packaging such as strict protocol of proper food labeling, integration frameworks and regulations. Green initiatives such as eco friendly packaging of food products for diverse stakeholders

		of different cultures and religions, wellness branding embedded at the heart of responsiveness in its business operations both locally and across borders whilst maintaining global standardised structure.
Social Impact	African communal traditions, empowerment.	Project Shakti, local sourcing, Community empowerment, micro-distribution, and micro-entrepreneurs.
Corporate Governance	Western capitalist bureaucratic systems.	Transparency, compliance and efficiency.

By embedding cultural values within its core business strategic pillars, Unilever converts cultural diversity into strength, global strategy and competitive resource, whilst maintaining its global standardised structure and local responsiveness to the needs of all stakeholders in the local business environments.

5. Discussion

The results of this research study demonstrate that culture exerts a profound impact on business strategy in multinational corporations (MNCs). Unilever’s ability to navigate trade barriers and integrate strategic intelligence tools including big data analytics, and cultural dimension into its global business objectives with local cultural responsiveness illustrates how belief systems, traditions, and institutional logics shape organisational strategy. This discussion interprets the findings through the lens of cultural theory, stakeholder perspectives, and strategic management frameworks, offering a deeper understanding of how culture functions as both a constraint, strength and resource for global businesses strategy and competitive advantage.

5.1 Culture as a Strategic Variable

The findings align with the argument that culture is not merely a contextual backdrop but an active variable influencing business strategies and outcomes (Schein, 2010). Hofstede’s (1984, 2001), cultural dimensions provide useful framework for understanding how Unilever adapts

local and global business strategies across contexts whilst maintaining its global standardised structure and local responsiveness to the core needs of all stakeholders. For instance, the adaptation of participatory leadership in low power-distance societies like Germany and the Netherlands contrasts with hierarchical models employed in high power-distance contexts such as India. Similarly, the collectivism of South Asia demands business strategies centred on community empowerment (e.g., Project Shakti in India), while the individualism of Western markets aligns with consumer-driven sustainability choices and green initiatives.

These patterns suggest that firms like Unilever cannot apply uniform strategy globally but must tailor specific business strategies and approaches to specific cultural dimensions to regions and marketplace. The ability to shift between collectivist and individualist orientations, or between high and low uncertainty avoidance, reflects cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003) a strategic resource and intelligence critical for multinational corporations MNCs.

5.2 Belief Systems as Institutional Forces

Beyond cultural dimensions, the results highlight significance of belief systems in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, African Traditional Religions, and Western Capitalist-bureaucratic logics as institutional forces shaping business practices. Weber's (1930/2002) theory of the Protestant ethic helps explain the link between Christianity and modern capitalist ethics, reflected in Unilever's sustainability practice and stewardship-oriented strategies in Western contexts. Similarly, Islamic traditions enforce halal standards and ethical principles that guide product developments and supply chain decisions in Muslim-majority markets (Temporal, 2011). In Buddhist-influenced societies, principles of mindfulness and harmony inform consumer preferences, which Unilever taps into through wellness branding and natural ingredient sourcing. African Traditional Religions emphasise communal prosperity and respect for ancestry (Mbiti, 1990), shaping Unilever's approach to community empowerment and inclusive growths. Finally, the dominance of Western capitalist-bureaucratic systems imposes governance, service to humanity, transparency, and profit-maximisation imperatives on global corporations (Weber, 1947).

The convergence of these belief systems illustrates the multiplicity of cultural institutions that multinational corporations MNCs must navigate. Rather than treating these systems as business barriers, Unilever converts them into sources of legitimacy, products and market differentiation, global business strategies, brand loyalty, strength and consumer trust both at the local and global levels.

5.3 Global Integration and Local Responsiveness

The tension between global business integration and local responsiveness to stakeholders, articulated by Bartlett and Ghoshal (1989, 2002), is evident in Unilever's cross border operations. Global strategies such as the Sustainable Living Plan and Compass Strategy provide coherence and alignment with green initiatives and global sustainability goals. However, their local implementation varies based on market sensitivity, business landscape and cultural context. For instance, environmental campaigns in Europe focus on carbon neutrality and eco-packaging,

while in Africa the emphasis lies on growth, employment, micro-entrepreneurs and community developments.

This reflects Robertson's (1995) concept of "glocalisation," whereby global business strategies are adapted to local cultures and cultural realities. Unilever demonstrates that "glocalisation," is not a compromise but a source of legitimacy, differentiation, global business strategies, strength, resilience and consumer trust. By embedding cultural values within its global frameworks whilst maintaining its global standardised structures and local responsiveness, the company sustains both global coherence and local legitimacy.

5.4 Strategic Intelligence and Cultural Foresight

The study also underscores the vital role of strategic intelligence in cultural adaptation. Fleisher and Bensoussan (2015) defined strategic intelligence as the systematic gathering of data and analysis of information to guide organisational decision-making. Unilever's People Data Centres exemplify this systematic gathering of data and analysis of key information by capturing real-time cultural trends through digital platforms. For instance, the rising demand for plant-based diets in Asia and sustainability practice in Europe are detected and acted upon swiftly.

Scenario planning further supports cultural foresight. Schoemaker (1995) emphasises the value of exploring multiple future business strategies to prepare for uncertainty in sensitive markets. Unilever's ability to anticipate cultural or religious shifts such as increasing conservatism in some sensitive markets reflects a proactive approach to cultural intelligence. This ensures not only compliance but also sources of competitive differentiation, legitimacy, global business strategies, strength and consumer trust.

5.5 Stakeholders, Legitimacy, and Cultural Sensitivity

Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) is reinforced by findings of the study. Unilever consistently integrates stakeholder expectations shaped by culture into its local and global business strategy. For instance, Christian-influenced Western stakeholders demand strong environmental responsibility, while African communities prioritise youth and women empowerment initiatives. Engaging with religious authorities in Muslim contexts or with traditional leaders in African communities builds trust, legitimacy and reduces resistance to corporate initiatives. Unilever's consistent integration with key stakeholders in these sensitive markets and communities reflects proactive approaches to cultural intelligence whilst maintaining its global standardised structures and local responsiveness to the core needs of all stakeholders in the immediate business environments. This cultural sensitivity enhances Unilever's "social licence to operate," a concept referring to community acceptance and approval of business operations (Gunningham et al., 2004). Without such legitimacy, local and global business strategies risk setback or total failure despite technical and financial feasibility.

5.6 Culture as a Strategic Resource

From a resource-based view (Barney, 1991), culture-specific capabilities such as cultural intelligence, local partnerships, and stakeholders trust constitute valuable, rare, inimitable, and

non-substitutable (VRIN) resources. These capabilities allow Unilever to achieve sustained competitive advantage. For instance, its ability to embed cultural values in its global sustainability initiatives differentiates the company from its competitors who pursue generic strategies. Culture, therefore is not merely a challenge but for Unilever a resource, strategic resources for competitive differentiation, legitimacy, global business strategies, strength and consumer trust. By leveraging core cultural insights, Unilever develops innovative business models, such as micro-entrepreneurs in South Asia (India), micro-distribution networks in Africa, and wellness branding in Asian markets that are difficult for competitors to penetrate and replicate.

5. 7 Ethics, Sustainability, and Shared Value

The findings also connect culture with ethical strategy. Porter and Kramer's (2011) concept of "creating shared value" demonstrates that businesses can align profit-making with societal needs. Unilever's local and global business strategies reflect this by embedding sustainability initiatives and practices in ways that resonate deeply with cultures, cultural traditions, stewardship in Christian contexts, balance in Buddhist cultures, and communal prosperity in African societies. This cultural embedding enhances the authenticity of Unilever's sustainability practice agenda, corporate social responsibility (CSR), reducing accusations of "greenwashing" and reinforcing stakeholders trust. By aligning local and global business strategies with measurable goals and culturally embedded ethics, Unilever contributes meaningfully to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Sachs, 2015).

5. 8 Synthesis

Taken together, these core insights illustrate that culture and belief systems are not merely external challenges but central components of business strategy. Unilever's case demonstrates how global firms can integrate cultural intelligence into its local and global business strategy, strategic planning, inter-organisational relationships, and innovation. By treating culture as a dynamic resource for strength and consumer trust rather than a static barrier, Unilever achieves resilience, strength, consumer trust, legitimacy, and long-term competitive advantages over its competitors.

5. 9 Summary of Findings

The findings of this research study underscore the pivotal role of culture in shaping business strategy within multinational corporations, using Unilever as a focal case study. Evidence shows that Unilever's strategic success lies in its ability to balance global business integration with local responsiveness, by embedding cultural values into its operational and strategic frameworks. This aligns with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions, as the company adapts leadership, stakeholders inclusiveness, product designs, and marketing to reflect societal orientations such as collectivism in South Asia and individualism in Western markets. For instance, Project Shakti in India illustrates how community empowerment can be leveraged as a local business model and micro distribution channel that is fit for purpose, while sustainability-focused initiatives in

Europe highlight the influence of Christian-inspired stewardship and secular environmental values.

The study also finds that belief systems serve as powerful institutional forces that influence consumption, stakeholders engagements, regulatory frameworks, regulations and legitimacy. Unilever's alignment with halal certification in Muslim-majority markets and its wellness branding in Buddhist-influenced societies illustrates how religion and cultural ideology shape consumer expectations, product designs, market entry strategy, and cross border business strategies. This reflects Weber's (1930/2002) observations that culture, cultural and religious values act as structural determinant force of economic behaviour. Importantly, Unilever converts these cultural imperatives into opportunities for legitimacy and competitive differentiation rather than perceiving them as business barriers or constraints.

Another significant finding relates to the application of strategic intelligence such as systematic gathering of big data and analysis of core information which helps guide the organisation's good decision-making. Through tools such as People Data Centres and scenario planning, Unilever demonstrates foresight in identifying cultural shifts, from rising eco-consciousness in Western markets to affordability concerns in Africa. Unilever's ability to anticipate and respond to cultural dynamics and market force reinforces its resilience and competitive advantage.

Furthermore, stakeholders expectations emerged as central drivers of strategic business alignment. Unilever's responsiveness to diverse stakeholders from Western consumers demanding sustainability to African communities prioritising empowerment highlights the importance of markets and cultural sensitivity in securing a "social licence to operate.". By embedding cultural responsiveness within governance and sustainability practice commitments, Unilever sustains both legitimacy and profitability.

Overall, the findings establish that cultures are not merely contextual factors but are strategic resources. Unilever's integration of cultural intelligence, ethical responsibility, and "glocalisation" into its business strategies strengthens its resilience in the complex global business environments. This provides critical lessons for other multinational organisations, demonstrating that cultural adaptability when strategically harnessed can drive both competitive advantage, legitimacy, profitability and long-term sustainability initiatives and practices.

6. Conclusion

Cultural Diversity As Critical Strategic Resources: - This research study has demonstrated that culture plays a decisive role in shaping business strategy for multinational corporations, with Unilever serving as a compelling case study. The findings highlight that cultural diversity is not merely an external challenge but a critical strategic resource that drives core innovations, legitimacy and long-term competitiveness. By balancing global business integration with local responsiveness, Unilever effectively adapts its strategies to reflect diverse sensitive markets, different cultural contexts, belief systems, and stakeholders expectations while maintaining its global standardised structure and coherence with its global mission.

Religious Ideological Frameworks:- Religious ideological frameworks such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, African Traditional Religions, and Western Capitalist-Bureaucratic Logics emerged as influential forces that shapes consumers preferences, regulatory frameworks, communal demands and organisational legitimacy. Unilever’s ability to navigate these sensitive markets and contexts through initiatives such as halal certification, green initiatives, sustainability practice commitments, community empowerment, and wellness branding illustrates the critical importance of cultural adaptability in securing competitive business advantage.

The Role of Strategic Intelligence:- The role of strategic intelligence including big data analytics, scenario planning and stakeholders engagement proved central to anticipating and responding to market sensitivities, movements in market fluctuation, sudden changes in political landscape and cultural shifts. These practices ensures that business strategies remain both evidence-driven, regional and culturally sensitive, thereby enhancing resilience in the volatile global interconnected business environments of today.

Ultimately, the research study underscores that for multinational corporations, cultural intelligence and ethical responsibility are as vital as operational efficiency and financial performance. Firms that embrace culture as a driver of shared value creation, rather than a constraint are better positioned to sustain legitimacy, stakeholders trust, and long-term success in an increasingly interconnected world.

Conflict of Interest:- I, Ivan Ugochukwu Enebeli, the research author declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Declaration:- The research author declare that there was no funding, grant or financial incentive received, or attached to this research work.

Acknowledgement:- I, Ivan Ugochukwu Enebeli, the author of this research study would like to acknowledge the support provided by my academic colleague, Mr A. Emmanuel who helped reviewed the first draft of this manuscript and provided valuable feedback for improvement.

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