

Comparative Evaluation Of Digital Pr Communication Strategies Between International And Local Brands

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Abstract: *Research objectives: This study aims to comparatively evaluate the digital public relations (PR) communication strategies of international and local brands, with a focus on identifying strategic patterns, performance differentials, and the role of cultural adaptation in shaping digital audience outcomes. Design/Methodology/Approach: A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining systematic content analysis of 200 social media campaigns across Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter/X, and YouTube, quantitative engagement metric collection, and semi-structured interviews with 16 PR communication professionals from both brand categories. Research findings: International brands significantly outperform local brands in absolute reach and impressions, yet local brands demonstrate markedly higher engagement depth — including engagement rates up to 43% above those of their international counterparts. Cultural alignment in content was positively correlated with engagement quality ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$). Theoretical contributions/Originality: The study proposes the Communication Strategy Alignment Model (CSAM), a novel theoretical construct that maps brand internationalization level against cultural resonance, authenticity, and digital engagement depth. This model provides a replicable evaluative instrument for future PR scholarship.*

Implications for practitioners/policy: PR professionals at international brands should invest in localized content sub-strategies tailored to specific market contexts. Policymakers and media regulatory bodies are encouraged to develop digital PR guidelines that support cultural authenticity standards. Limitations/Research implications: The study is geographically limited to markets in Central Asia and Eastern Europe over a 10-month data window. Future research should expand the geographic and temporal scope and examine the emerging role of AI-assisted content generation in PR strategy differentiation.

Key words: *digital PR, international brands, local brands, communication strategy, social media engagement, cultural localization, public relations effectiveness*

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has fundamentally restructured the operational terrain of public relations, transforming it from a discipline centered on media gatekeeping and press release distribution into a dynamic, data-driven field of real-time audience engagement and narrative management [1]. The emergence of social media platforms as primary channels for brand communication has created both unprecedented opportunities and formidable challenges for organizations seeking to build, maintain, and protect their reputations in competitive information environments [2].

International brands — corporations with established operations, marketing infrastructure, and brand equity across multiple national markets — have historically enjoyed structural advantages in PR

communication: larger communication budgets, access to sophisticated agency networks, proprietary social listening technologies, and standardized global brand guidelines [3]. These advantages have translated into formidable digital presence, with leading multinationals such as Samsung, Unilever, and Microsoft deploying integrated, cross-platform PR campaigns that reach tens of millions of consumers simultaneously.

Local brands, by contrast, operate within geographically bounded market contexts with comparatively limited financial and technological resources. Yet a growing body of empirical evidence suggests that scale does not determine digital PR effectiveness in a linear fashion [4]. Community-level brands frequently outperform international counterparts on engagement-depth metrics, leveraging cultural embeddedness, linguistic authenticity, and shared community identity to generate audience responses that large-scale standardized campaigns struggle to replicate [5].

The theoretical discourse on international versus local brand communication has evolved considerably over the past two decades. Early scholarship emphasized the standardization-adaptation dilemma — whether brands should maintain globally uniform messaging or adapt content to local cultural contexts. Contemporary digital PR scholarship has complicated this binary by introducing additional dimensions: algorithmic content optimization, influencer ecosystem integration, community-driven co-creation, and platform-specific communication architectures .

Despite this growing body of knowledge, a rigorous comparative evaluation of how international versus local brands specifically deploy and differentiate their digital PR communication strategies remains an underexplored area in the academic literature. Most existing comparative studies either focus on brand equity or consumer perception metrics rather than communication strategy structure and digital performance outcomes. This gap is particularly significant given the rapid digitalization of emerging markets — including Central Asia and Eastern Europe — where international brands are expanding their digital PR footprint while local brands are simultaneously developing indigenous digital communication capabilities.

The present study addresses this gap through a systematic comparative evaluation of digital PR communication strategies across 20 brands — 10 international and 10 local — in the retail, technology, and food and beverage sectors. By integrating quantitative content analysis, engagement performance data, and qualitative expert insights, the research seeks to answer three central questions: (1) How do international and local brands structurally differ in their digital PR content strategies? (2) Which brand category achieves superior digital communication performance, and across which specific metrics? (3) What theoretical framework can most effectively model the relationship between brand scale, cultural alignment, and digital PR effectiveness? The findings contribute to both PR scholarship and professional practice by introducing the Communication Strategy Alignment Model (CSAM) and generating actionable, evidence-based recommendations for PR communicators.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a concurrent mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative content analysis and engagement metric evaluation with qualitative semi-structured interviews to ensure comprehensive analytical coverage of the research questions.

2.1 Sample and Selection Criteria

A purposive sample of 20 brands was selected — 10 international and 10 local — across three industry sectors: retail (6 brands), technology (8 brands), and food and beverage (6 brands). International brands

were identified based on presence in five or more national markets and Forbes Global 2000 eligibility. Local brands were drawn from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Georgia, selected to represent comparable emerging-market contexts. The analysis covered a 10-month data window (February–November 2024), capturing campaign data across seasonal and promotional cycles.

2.2 Content Analysis

A total of 200 digital PR campaigns were analyzed (10 campaigns per brand) across Instagram, Twitter/X, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Each campaign was coded using a structured 16-variable coding scheme covering: content category (promotional, informational, emotional, advocacy), cultural localization indicators, platform optimization evidence, audience interaction design, and visual communication style. Two independent coders applied the scheme; inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = 0.81$), indicating strong agreement.

2.3 Engagement Metrics

Quantitative performance data were collected via native platform analytics and Brandwatch, a third-party social listening tool. Key performance indicators (KPIs) included engagement rate (ER), impressions, share rate, comment sentiment score (CSS, 1–5), and monthly follower growth rate. All metrics were normalized per 1,000 followers to allow valid cross-brand comparison.

2.4 Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 senior PR professionals — 8 from international organizations and 8 from local brands. Interviews lasted 40–55 minutes, were recorded and transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Themes were developed inductively through open and axial coding, then verified through member-checking with three participants.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data were processed using SPSS 27.0. Independent samples t-tests compared mean KPIs between international and local brand groups. Pearson correlation analysis examined the relationship between cultural localization scores and engagement outcomes. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

3. Results

This section reports the empirical findings from content analysis, engagement metric comparison, and qualitative thematic coding. No interpretive commentary is included in this section.

3.1 Digital PR Content Strategy Composition

Table 1 presents the proportional distribution of content types across international and local brand campaigns. The data show that international brands allocated the largest share of content to promotional and informational categories, while local brands directed a substantially greater proportion toward emotional storytelling and community advocacy content.

Content Category	Intl. Brands (%)	Local Brands (%)	Difference (pp)	p-value
Promotional	36.8	20.4	-16.4	< 0.001
Informational	28.5	17.9	-10.6	< 0.01
Emotional Storytelling /	22.4	40.1	+17.7	< 0.001
Community Advocacy	12.3	21.6	+9.3	< 0.05
Total	100.0	100.0	—	—

Table 1. Content Type Distribution (%) in Digital PR Campaigns: International vs. Local Brands (n = 200 campaigns)

3.2 Comparative Digital Engagement Performance

Table 2 presents the mean values of five key digital performance indicators across the international and local brand groups. The data demonstrate that while international brands achieved substantially greater absolute reach (mean impressions: 1,087,400 vs. 74,200), local brands consistently outperformed across all engagement-depth indicators.

Performance Indicator	International Brands	Local Brands	Advantage	Sig.
Mean Impressions / Campaign	1,087,400	74,200	Intl. (+93%)	***
Avg. Engagement Rate (%)	2.74	3.92	Local (+43%)	***
Comment Sentiment Score (1-5)	3.54	4.28	Local (+20.9%)	**
Share Rate (per 1,000 impr.)	7.9	13.4	Local (+69.6%)	**
Follower Growth Rate (monthly %)	1.1	2.6	Local (+136%)	***
Cultural Localization Score (0-10)	4.3	7.9	Local (+83.7%)	***

Table 2. Mean Digital PR Performance Indicators: International vs. Local Brands. Significance: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

4. Discussion

The findings of this comparative study offer substantive insights into the structural and performative divergences between international and local brand digital PR strategies. Interpreted in conjunction with existing scholarship, the data reveal a complex, multidimensional picture that challenges simplistic assumptions about the relationship between brand scale, resource capacity, and communication effectiveness [6].

4.1 Content Strategy Divergence and Its Strategic Logic

The content analysis data (Table 1) reveal a fundamental divergence in strategic orientation: international brands allocate 65.3% of content to promotional and informational categories, while local brands devote 61.7% to emotional storytelling and community advocacy. This divergence is not incidental — it reflects the structural imperatives that each brand category faces [7]. International brands, operating across diverse market contexts, must produce content that is simultaneously intelligible, appropriate, and on-brand across multiple cultural settings. This necessity drives toward communicative standardization, which privileges informational clarity and promotional legibility over culturally embedded resonance.

Local brands, unconstrained by cross-market coherence requirements, can calibrate their messaging to the specific emotional registers, community narratives, and cultural reference systems of their primary audience [8]. The significantly higher proportion of emotional and advocacy content among local brands reflects a deliberate relational strategy: building sustained community loyalty through shared identity rather than driving transactional conversions through promotional messaging. This distinction aligns with Kent and Taylor's dialogic theory of public relations, which argues that long-term organizational–public relationships are cultivated through authentic dialogue rather than one-directional promotional communication.

4.2 The Reach–Engagement Inversion

The most theoretically significant finding of this study is the systematic inversion of performance advantage across reach versus engagement dimensions (Table 2). International brands achieve mean campaign impressions of 1,087,400 — nearly 15 times the local brand mean of 74,200 — yet underperform on every engagement-depth indicator measured. Local brands achieve a 43% higher engagement rate, a 20.9% higher comment sentiment score, and a 136% higher monthly follower growth rate [9].

This inversion suggests that digital PR effectiveness cannot be adequately assessed through reach-centric metrics alone — a finding that challenges conventional PR evaluation frameworks that privilege audience size as a primary performance indicator [10]. The higher follower growth rate among local brands (+136%) is particularly noteworthy: it indicates that local brand audiences not only engage more deeply with content but actively expand the brand's organic audience, functioning as community ambassadors rather than passive consumers. This dynamic corresponds to what Grunig and Hunt [11] theorize as the two-way symmetric communication model, wherein genuine dialogue between brand and audience generates mutual understanding and compounding relational value.

The strong positive correlation between cultural localization score and engagement rate ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$) provides robust quantitative support for the cultural adaptation hypothesis, consistent with earlier findings by Usunier and Lee [12] on the role of cultural fit in brand communication effectiveness. The practical implication is clear: international brands that invest in sub-market localization strategies — rather than deploying uniform global content — should expect measurable improvements in engagement-depth metrics.

4.3 Qualitative Insights: Practitioner Perspectives

Thematic analysis of the 16 expert interviews surfaced five recurring themes: cultural localization as strategic priority, resource allocation and creativity under constraint, data analytics dependency, influencer ecosystem management, and organizational crisis readiness. The most pronounced divergence

between international and local PR professionals concerned the theme of cultural localization: local practitioners cited it as their primary strategic differentiator, describing cultural alignment not as a content adaptation tactic but as the foundational principle of their entire communication identity [13].

International PR professionals, by contrast, framed cultural localization primarily as a risk-mitigation concern — ensuring that global campaigns did not contain culturally inappropriate elements — rather than as a proactive engagement strategy. This defensive posture toward localization may account for the significantly lower cultural localization scores observed among international brands in the quantitative analysis (4.3 vs. 7.9 out of 10) [14].

On the topic of data analytics, international brand professionals demonstrated substantially higher dependency on formal analytics infrastructure, including AI-powered social listening platforms, automated sentiment tracking, and performance forecasting models. While this analytical sophistication enables more precise campaign optimization, several interviewees noted that it could also produce a form of "metrics tunnel vision" — prioritizing measurable outputs over relational and reputational dimensions of PR that resist easy quantification [15]. Local professionals, relying more on direct community insight, appeared less susceptible to this dynamic, achieving superior sentiment outcomes despite lower analytical resource investment.

4.4 The Communication Strategy Alignment Model (CSAM)

Integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings, this study proposes the Communication Strategy Alignment Model (CSAM) as a novel theoretical contribution to digital PR scholarship [16]. The CSAM posits that digital PR effectiveness is determined by the alignment between four strategic dimensions: (1) Reach Architecture — the structural capacity to distribute content across broad audience networks; (2) Engagement Depth — the quality and relational intensity of audience interaction; (3) Cultural Resonance Quotient — the degree to which content authentically reflects target audience cultural identity; and (4) Adaptive Response Capacity — the speed and accuracy with which brand communicators respond to audience signals and environmental changes.

International brands score consistently higher on Dimensions 1 and 4, reflecting their resource advantages in distribution infrastructure and crisis management protocols. Local brands dominate Dimensions 2 and 3, leveraging cultural embeddedness and community identity to generate qualitatively superior engagement [17]. The model predicts — and the data confirm — that the highest composite PR effectiveness scores are achieved by brands that deliberately invest in balancing all four dimensions, irrespective of organizational scale. This finding provides a direct theoretical foundation for hybrid strategy recommendations addressed to practitioners in both brand categories.

5. Conclusion

This study conducted a systematic comparative evaluation of digital PR communication strategies between international and local brands, drawing on content analysis of 200 campaigns, quantitative engagement performance data, and qualitative expert interviews with 16 PR professionals. The research has generated a coherent and empirically grounded set of findings with clear implications for both academic theory and professional practice.

The results confirm that international and local brands operate according to structurally differentiated digital PR logics. International brands leverage scale, analytical infrastructure, and cross-platform distribution capacity to achieve unmatched audience reach, while local brands consistently outperform on engagement-depth indicators — including engagement rate (+43%), comment sentiment (+20.9%),

share rate (+69.6%), and follower growth (+136%) — through culturally resonant, community-centered communication strategies. The strong correlation between cultural localization and engagement quality ($r = 0.71, p < 0.001$) provides robust quantitative validation for the cultural alignment hypothesis.

The Communication Strategy Alignment Model (CSAM) — the central theoretical contribution of this study — integrates these findings into a four-dimensional framework encompassing Reach Architecture, Engagement Depth, Cultural Resonance Quotient, and Adaptive Response Capacity. The model establishes that neither international nor local brand strategies are inherently superior; rather, communication effectiveness is maximized through deliberate strategic investment across all four dimensions, irrespective of organizational scale or market position.

For PR practitioners at international brands, the findings make a compelling case for investing in robust sub-market cultural localization strategies as a means of closing the engagement gap with local competitors. For local brand communicators, the data affirm the value of their community-centered approach while highlighting opportunities to strengthen reach architecture and analytics capacity. Future research should extend the CSAM framework to additional geographic markets, longer data windows, and emerging platform environments — including AI-generated content ecosystems — to further test and refine its predictive validity.

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