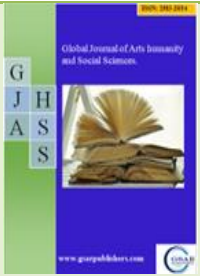
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Communication snags and socialization between foreigners and cleaners at AUCA

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Abstract

Purpose: The study aimed to explore communication challenges between foreign guests and cleaners at the Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA), focusing on how language barriers and cultural differences hinder meaningful social interaction on campus.

Method: Using a qualitative approach, the study employed semi-structured interviews and participant observation to examine the real-life communication experiences of 15 purposively selected participants from three AUCA campuses.

Results: The results showed that most cleaners struggle with English and French, while foreign guests do not speak Kinyarwanda. This linguistic gap leads to misunderstandings, emotional detachment, and avoidance of interaction. Both groups expressed frustration and a desire for language training to bridge the divide.

Limitations: A key limitation was the small sample size and the study's focus on one university, which restricts the generalization of findings to broader contexts. Social desirability may also have influenced participants' responses.

Novelty: This study is among the first to highlight the communication struggles between cleaners and foreign guests in a Rwandan university setting, emphasizing the need for inclusive language training and intercultural engagement.

Key words: *Cleaners, foreigners, multilingualism, communication, socialization*

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized academic environment, effective communication across cultural and linguistic boundaries is vital for fostering understanding, cooperation, and social harmony. At the Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA), foreign guests—comprising visiting faculty, international students, researchers, and volunteers—regularly interact with local cleaners who provide essential services cleaning and maintenance. However, despite a shared institutional space, communication between these groups is often characterized by misunderstandings, awkward silences, and limited social interaction. These communication hurdles not only impede day-to-day efficiency but also hinder meaningful socialization, mutual respect, and the spirit of inclusivity.

This article explores the intricate web of challenges that complicate communication and social engagement between foreign guests and

AUCA's cleaners. Factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, power dynamics, and varying levels of education and exposure to intercultural communication all contribute to this complex dynamic. While English and French serve as official languages within the institution, many cleaners may feel more comfortable communicating in Kinyarwanda, thereby widening the communicative gap with non-Kinyarwanda-speaking visitors. In turn, foreign guests may struggle with the local language and context-specific nuances, creating feelings of discomfort or detachment.

By untangling these hurdles, this study seeks to uncover the root causes of communication breakdowns and identify practical strategies that can enhance mutual understanding and foster inclusive socialization. Ultimately, the article advocates for a more linguistically sensitive and culturally aware campus environment



where every voice—regardless of background or role—is heard, valued, and respected.

Literature Review

Intercultural Communication in Institutional Settings

Scholars like Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980) argue that communication across cultures is influenced by deep-rooted cultural norms, language use, and perceptions of power and hierarchy. In institutional settings such as universities, intercultural communication challenges often arise from differing expectations regarding directness, gestures, personal space, and etiquette. These differences can lead to misinterpretations or discomfort, especially between individuals of varying linguistic competence and cultural orientation.

Language Barriers and Communication Breakdown

Language serves as the primary medium of interaction. According to Gass and Selinker (2008), limited proficiency in a common language impedes the exchange of ideas, weakens social bonds, and increases the likelihood of stereotyping or exclusion. In Rwandan contexts, Kinyarwanda is the dominant local language, while many foreign guests may only speak English or French. This language disconnect can result in strained interactions between foreign guests and local cleaners, especially when either party lacks adequate proficiency in the other's language.

Social Stratification and Workplace Dynamics

The social positioning of individuals in a university setting also influences communication. Tannen (1994) suggests that perceived hierarchies—such as those between academic staff or guests and cleaners—can inhibit open communication. Cleaners may view foreign guests as distant or intimidating, while foreign guests may unconsciously overlook the cleaners's role in community building. Research by Holmes (2005) indicates that positive workplace relationships require conscious efforts to overcome social barriers and create inclusive, respectful exchanges.

Socialization and Informal Interaction

Socialization is a key process in building mutual understanding and belonging. Gudykunst (2004) explains that informal interactions—greetings, small talk, and shared experiences—are critical in reducing anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural contexts. However, in the absence of shared language or cultural scripts, these opportunities for connection can be lost or avoided, reinforcing social divides.

Contextualizing in Rwanda and AUCA

Although few studies directly address communication dynamics at AUCA, broader research on intercultural engagement in Rwandan higher education institutions (e.g., Mukamurera et al., 2018) highlights the importance of linguistic inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. There is a growing recognition that cleaners are essential stakeholders in university communities and deserve to be included in conversations around social cohesion and communication equity.

Language Proficiency Levels

Language proficiency plays a fundamental role in enabling effective communication between individuals from different linguistic backgrounds. In the context of AUCA, disparities in language abilities between foreign guests and cleaners can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and frustration. If either party struggles with a common language such as English, French, or Kinyarwanda, their ability to engage in meaningful dialogue diminishes. Poor proficiency limits the use of polite forms, idiomatic expressions, or culturally appropriate vocabulary—elements that are crucial in fostering respectful and fluid interaction.

Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity

Cultural awareness and sensitivity refer to the ability to recognize, respect, and appropriately respond to cultural differences. Without a clear understanding of the values, norms, and social etiquettes of the host culture or the visitor's culture, communication is prone to friction and unintentional offense. At AUCA, when either foreign guests or cleaners lack cultural sensitivity, interactions may be strained, with each side interpreting behaviors through their own cultural lens, potentially leading to stereotypes or cultural clashes.

Attitudes toward Intercultural Interaction

The willingness and openness individuals have toward engaging with those from different cultural backgrounds greatly influence the nature of their communication. A positive attitude fosters curiosity, patience, and empathy, whereas a negative or indifferent outlook can result in avoidance, tension, or superficial exchanges. If either AUCA's cleaners or foreign guests hold negative assumptions about the other group, they are less likely to initiate or sustain meaningful interaction, thereby reinforcing existing communication barriers.

Training in Cross-Cultural Communication

Formal or informal training in cross-cultural communication equips individuals with strategies to navigate linguistic and cultural diversity effectively. Such training often covers nonverbal cues, conflict resolution, cultural taboos, and the importance of active listening. At AUCA, the presence or absence of such training among foreign guests and cleaners may explain differences in how they handle misunderstandings and build rapport. Those trained are more likely to anticipate cultural obstacles and adjust their communication style accordingly.

Perceived Social Status Differences

Perceptions of social hierarchy can act as invisible barriers to open interaction. If foreign guests are viewed as superior due to their professional or national identity, cleaners may feel intimidated or reluctant to communicate openly. Conversely, foreign guests may unintentionally reinforce this gap by displaying patronizing behavior. At AUCA, these perceived status differences can result in limited, transactional communication, rather than warm and mutually respectful social exchanges.

Effectiveness of Social Interactions

Effectiveness in social interaction refers to how well communication meets its intended purpose—be it information



sharing, relationship building, or cooperation. In the AUCA setting, when communication is effective, both foreign guests and cleaners are able to exchange ideas clearly, address misunderstandings calmly, and achieve mutual respect. Ineffective interactions, however, may lead to confusion, emotional distance, or even conflict.

Frequency of Meaningful Communication

This variable measures how often foreign guests and cleaners engage in conversations that go beyond routine greetings or instructions. Frequent, meaningful communication reflects a deeper level of connection and comfort between the two groups. At AUCA, higher frequency can indicate a thriving intercultural climate, while rare or superficial interactions may suggest unresolved communication barriers.

Level of Mutual Understanding

Mutual understanding involves both parties accurately interpreting each other's verbal and nonverbal messages. It requires empathy, attentiveness, and a shared context. In the AUCA context, achieving mutual understanding between foreign guests and cleaners is crucial to promoting harmony and collaboration. Misunderstandings can lead to feelings of exclusion or disrespect, undermining socialization efforts.

Satisfaction with Intercultural Encounters

Satisfaction reflects the emotional and psychological outcome of intercultural interactions. When individuals feel respected, understood, and valued during communication, they are likely to report high satisfaction. Conversely, experiences marked by confusion, cultural offense, or dismissiveness contribute to dissatisfaction. At AUCA, this variable can serve as a key indicator of the success or failure of intercultural socialization efforts between foreign guests and cleaners.

The Role of Language in Social Interaction

Language is not just a tool for communication; it shapes social interactions and influences perceptions. According to Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Whorf, 1956), the structure of a language affects its speakers' worldview. This notion is particularly relevant in multicultural settings like AUCA, where language differences can lead to divergent interpretations of social cues and behaviors. The implications of this hypothesis suggest that language barriers may contribute to misunderstandings and hinder the development of relationships between foreign guests and local staff.

Cultural Identity and Language

Language serves as a marker of cultural identity. As Bourdieu (1991) posits, language is tied to social power and group identity. Understanding this connection is essential in the AUCA context, where cleaners may feel marginalized due to their limited proficiency in official languages. The power dynamics at play can further alienate them, reinforcing feelings of inferiority and exclusion. This highlights the need for a more inclusive approach that recognizes the cultural identities of all individuals within the university community.

Interpersonal Communication Theories

Interpersonal communication theories, such as Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), suggest that relationships develop through gradual self-disclosure. In the AUCA context, language barriers impede this process, leading to superficial interactions. The theory underscores the importance of effective communication in fostering deeper relationships, which is often compromised by the existing linguistic divide between foreign guests and cleaners.

Emotional Intelligence in Communication

Emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in intercultural communication. Goleman (1995) emphasizes the ability to understand and manage emotions as vital for effective interactions. In multicultural environments, heightened emotional intelligence can facilitate empathy and reduce misunderstandings. For AUCA's cleaners, developing emotional intelligence could empower them to navigate linguistic challenges and engage more meaningfully with foreign guests.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is a powerful aspect of interaction that often transcends linguistic barriers. Researchers like Mehrabian (1972) have highlighted that nonverbal cues—such as facial expressions, gestures, and body language—convey significant information in interpersonal exchanges. At AUCA, nonverbal communication can serve as a bridge where verbal communication fails. Understanding these nonverbal cues can enhance interactions between foreign guests and cleaners, fostering a more inclusive environment.

The Impact of Training Programs

Training programs focused on intercultural competence and communication skills have proven effective in various educational settings. According to research by Deardorff (2006), such training enhances participants' ability to navigate cultural differences and communicate effectively. Implementing similar programs at AUCA could equip both foreign guests and cleaners with skills to overcome communication barriers, facilitating a more harmonious campus environment.

Community Engagement and Social Cohesion

Community engagement initiatives can play a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion. According to Putnam (2000), social networks and norms of reciprocity can enhance trust and cooperation among diverse groups. By promoting community engagement activities that involve both foreign guests and local cleaners, AUCA can strengthen intergroup relationships and create a more inclusive academic climate.

Language as a Tool for Empowerment

Language proficiency is often linked to empowerment and agency. According to Freire (1970), gaining linguistic skills enables individuals to assert their identities and participate fully in society. In the context of AUCA, improving language skills among cleaners can empower them to engage more confidently with foreign guests, enhancing their sense of belonging and participation within the university community.

The Role of Technology in Language Learning

Advancements in technology have transformed language learning and communication. Tools such as language learning apps and online platforms can provide accessible resources for both foreign guests and cleaners. Research by Godwin-Jones (2018) indicates that technology-mediated learning can facilitate language acquisition, enabling individuals to improve their communication skills in diverse contexts. Implementing such resources at AUCA could bridge the language gap and enhance intercultural interactions.

The Importance of Feedback in Communication

Feedback is integral to effective communication, as it allows individuals to adjust their messages and improve understanding. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback influences learning and engagement. In the AUCA context, establishing a feedback mechanism can help both foreign guests and cleaners communicate more effectively, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and mutual respect.

Hypothesis development

The proposed study seeks to explore the barriers to effective communication and social interaction between foreign guests (such as missionaries, lecturers, researchers, or volunteers) and cleaners at the Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA). These barriers can stem from linguistic differences, cultural misunderstandings, power relations, or lack of intercultural training. To guide this exploration, the development of research hypotheses is essential. Based on literature in intercultural communication, sociolinguistics, and workplace socialization, the researcher formulated the following hypothesis: Low language proficiency among AUCA cleaners significantly contributes to communication breakdowns during social interactions with foreigners who do not speak Kinyarwanda.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design. Given the complex and subjective nature of intercultural communication and social interaction, a qualitative approach is best suited to gain deep insights into the lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of both foreign guests and AUCA's cleaners. The goal is to explore and interpret the meanings participants attach to their communication encounters, rather than to quantify them.

Research Setting

The study was conducted at the Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA), focusing on its campuses where interaction between foreign guests and cleaners occurs regularly. The setting is ideal due to its multicultural environment and the presence of diverse personnel with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Participants

Participants included two main groups. The first group was made of foreigners (guests, staff members and students) who have interacted with AUCA cleaners. The second group was made of

AUCA cleaners. As highlighted by the head cleaner at the Adventist University of Central Africa, the University counts twenty (20) cleaners at its head campus of Masoro, and these are the ones who were sampled to represent their fellows from the rest of the campuses. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant experience and exposure to intercultural interaction.

Data Collection Methods

The study primarily used semi-structured interviews to collect data. These interviews allowed flexibility while maintaining focus on language-related challenges.

In addition, **participant observation** was conducted during informal interactions (e.g., during meals, campus events, or religious services) to note real-time communication behaviors, body language, and contextual cues.

Data Analysis

Data collected through interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involves coding the data, identifying recurring patterns or themes, and interpreting the significance of these patterns in relation to the research objectives. NVivo or similar qualitative analysis software may be used to aid in organizing and categorizing the data systematically.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality was strictly maintained, and data exclusively served the purpose of the study. Interviews were conducted in a language participants are comfortable with (English, French, or Kinyarwanda).

Results and discussions

The findings of this study revealed significant communication barriers rooted in language proficiency deficiencies, which substantially affect the quality of social interaction between foreign guests and AUCA's cleaners. Two major themes emerged: (1) Language barriers as a hindrance to interpersonal communication, and (2) Perceived exclusion and emotional detachment among foreign guests. Participants on both sides expressed frustration, discomfort, and in some cases, emotional fatigue stemming from the inability to communicate fluently.

Language Barriers as a Hindrance to Interpersonal Communication

Most AUCA cleaners acknowledged that their limited ability to speak either English or French undermines their confidence and willingness to engage with foreign guests. The lack of basic communicative competence in these official languages often leads to silence, evasion, or reduced social contact altogether. One cleaner remarked:

"Abanyamahanga ndababona nkifuza kugira icyo mbabwira bikanga. Ikintu nzi ni ugusuhuza gusa, ntakindi nshobora kuvuga. Ndamwenyura nkikomereza." This is translated as "I see them (foreigners), I want to say something, but then I get stuck. I only

know greetings like 'Good morning', after that; I don't know what to say. So I just smile and walk away."

This statement illustrates a self-imposed silence that arises not from disinterest but from linguistic insecurity. The cleaners' limited vocabulary makes them avoid potentially embarrassing situations. This limits opportunities for bonding and restricts them to passive roles in communication.

Another cleaner shared similar sentiments:

"Rimwe na rimwe bambaza ikintu mu cyongereza, sinumve. Birambabaza kuba ntabasha kubafasha. Uwampa ubushobozi bwo gusubiza"; translated as "Sometimes they ask me something in English, and I don't understand. I feel embarrassed because I can't help them. I wish I knew how to answer."

Here, we see how language deficiency directly affects self-esteem. The desire to assist is there, but the inability to decode the message leads to frustration and emotional discomfort. The use of "embarrassed" signals an internal struggle that discourages future attempts at interaction.

The struggle to understand even simple instructions or respond appropriately leaves many cleaners feeling inadequate or marginalized. As a result, interactions are kept at a minimum, and any opportunity for social bonding is lost.

In some cases, this inability to communicate even affects task efficiency, as illustrated by this quote:

"Umunsi umwe umushyitsi yashakaga uwamwereka ibiro by'umwe mu bayobozi, ariko uwo yabazaga ntabwo yigeze asobanukirwa n'ibyo yabazwaga. Hacyeho umwanya nta bufasha bituma umushyitsi ataha ababaye cyane. Ibi rero si byiza ku isura y'ikigo"; this can be translated as "One time a visitor was trying to explain where to find a certain office, but the person couldn't understand. It took long, and in the end, the foreigner just left frustrated. It's not good for the image of the institution."

This signals institutional implications of communication failure. Beyond personal discomfort, these gaps can create inefficiencies and harm the institution's image, as guests perceive a lack of support or professionalism in service delivery.

Perceived Exclusion and Emotional Detachment among Foreign Guests

On the side of foreign guests, there was a recurring narrative of disappointment and emotional distance due to the communication gap. Several participants conveyed that the lack of interaction with cleaners affected their sense of belonging, service satisfaction, and emotional comfort on campus.

A visiting lecturer from Pakistan stated:

"It's difficult when the people you see every day—the ones opening the gate, cleaning your office, serving your food—can't talk to you. It's like there's a wall. You feel isolated."

This reflects a missed opportunity for everyday human connection. The cleaners are integral to the foreign guests' daily experience, yet without shared language, these relationships remain

impersonal, contributing to feelings of cultural and emotional separation.

Similarly, a missionary shared:

"They are kind, no doubt, but I want to talk, to learn the local ways, to ask questions—but I can't. I feel like I'm missing something beautiful because we can't understand each other."

This sentiment reveals a strong desire for cultural immersion, hindered by the language barrier. The quote reflects a painful awareness that an entire layer of human and cultural experience is inaccessible, resulting in a sense of cultural deprivation.

This communication gap extends beyond practical matters into the emotional domain, depriving guests of the warmth typically associated with Rwandan hospitality. Another respondent noted:

"You come expecting to make friends and understand the culture, but if you're surrounded by silence or blank stares, it makes you feel like a stranger—even after months."

Here, social isolation becomes internalized. Despite being physically present, the foreign guest remains emotionally and socially detached, reinforcing a feeling of being an outsider. The silence and blank stares are not signs of hostility but of mutual linguistic helplessness.

Furthermore, some foreign guests expressed that the language barrier often results in delays and miscommunication during service delivery:

"If I need a small thing—like asking for help with room cleaning or directions—I can't express it unless someone translates. It's frustrating. It makes me feel like I'm always imposing."

This quote highlights dependence and emotional discomfort. The foreign guest does not experience communication as mutual exchange but as a burden. The constant need for mediation denies them autonomy and discourages regular interaction.

"Iyo numvise bavuga icyongereza vubavuba, mpitamo kuzunguza umutwe nk'aho ndimo kumva, nkifuza ko bagenda batambajije byinshi"; translated as "When I hear them speak fast in English, I just nod and hope they go away without asking more."

This shows a defensive strategy of avoidance. The cleaner feels overwhelmed, intimidated, or helpless in the face of fast-spoken English, and resorts to non-verbal cues to end the interaction quickly. This further widens the social gap and reduces communication to superficial contact.

"Umunsi umwe umunyamahanga yarantombokeye kubera ko ntabashaga kumva ibyo avuga. Kuva ubwo nafashe umwanzuro wo kujya nihisha igihe mbonye hari umunyamahanga uje ansanga". This is translated as "I was once shouted at by a foreigner because I couldn't understand. Since then, I try to hide when I see one coming."

This quote reflects fear and trauma linked to a past communication breakdown. It reveals how negative experiences can create long-term avoidance behaviors and emotional barriers to future

interaction. It also shows how cleaners may internalize blame, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy.

"Ntabwo twigeze duhugurwa muri izo ndimi. Mperuka kwiga igifaransa mu ishuri kera cyane, ariko ibyo nize byose narabyibagiwe. Byaba byiza Kaminuza idufashije kongera kwiga". This is translated as "We were not trained in those languages. I learned French in school long ago, but now I forgot everything. I wish the university would help us learn again."

This reflects a willingness to improve but also a systemic gap in professional development. The quote shows that cleaners feel left behind linguistically, and hints at institutional responsibility to build their communicative capacity for better guest relations.

"Sometimes they all laugh and talk in Kinyarwanda, and I'm just there smiling without a clue. It makes me feel invisible."

This quote reflects exclusion from social cues and informal bonding moments. The foreigner feels emotionally distant and possibly paranoid or self-conscious when surrounded by a language they can't understand, especially in group settings.

"I tried learning some Kinyarwanda words, but people just laughed at my accent. It was embarrassing, so I stopped trying."

This highlights how language learning attempts can be discouraged by unkind responses, even unintentionally. Instead of fostering inclusion, this results in discouragement and withdrawal. It shows that the social climate around language affects willingness to engage.

"I depend on students or colleagues to translate everything. I feel like a baby who can't speak or move on their own."

This vivid metaphor reflects a loss of independence and social confidence. The foreigner becomes dependent on intermediaries, which can be humiliating and exhausting. The inability to speak Kinyarwanda creates both practical obstacles and emotional strain. *"Even greetings—I don't know if I'm saying it right. Sometimes I just say 'Hello' and smile. I wish someone taught me how to blend in."*

This indicates a desire to connect, but a lack of orientation or guidance. Basic linguistic tools like greetings are essential for cultural entry points. Without them, initial rapport is hard to build, and the foreigner remains on the cultural periphery.

Language-Related Deficiencies: A Deeper Analysis

The data suggest that the root of many socialization challenges lies in functional language illiteracy, particularly in English and French. While both are official languages in Rwanda, most cleaners appear to have only basic or no command of either, especially in conversational settings. This limitation:

- Reduces their linguistic confidence, resulting in fewer attempts to interact.
- Prevents natural, spontaneous conversations, limiting relationship-building.

- Causes task-related misunderstandings, slowing down service delivery.
- Fuels interpersonal distance, where warmth is replaced by formality or silence.

On the other hand, foreign guests—who often lack proficiency in Kinyarwanda—find themselves socially cut off from cleaners, relying instead on administrative or academic staff to bridge gaps. The linguistic disconnect thus reinforces social stratification, wherein only those fluent in a common language can access the full cultural experience and relational connection that AUCA has to offer.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the communication challenges that hinder meaningful social interaction between foreign guests and AUCA's cleaners. Through in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis, it became clear that language proficiency—particularly in English, French, and Kinyarwanda—is central to understanding the interpersonal disconnections observed in daily encounters on campus. Both groups expressed frustration and emotional distance, showing that communication is not merely a transactional act but a gateway to human connection, inclusion, and shared belonging.

One of the central findings was that AUCA cleaners generally lack adequate proficiency in English and French—languages widely spoken by foreign guests. As a result, these staff members often avoid conversations, withdraw from interactions, or rely on non-verbal cues, limiting the quality and depth of social engagement. Their struggle is not rooted in unwillingness, but rather in low linguistic confidence and lack of training opportunities. This communication gap not only restricts interpersonal bonding but also affects the delivery of basic services and contributes to institutional inefficiencies.

On the other side, foreign guests reported emotional detachment and a sense of exclusion due to the unavailability of shared language. They often felt isolated, dependent on third parties for translation, or unable to experience the local culture fully. Moreover, those who attempted to learn Kinyarwanda were sometimes discouraged by social responses or their own discomfort with unfamiliar sounds and structures. These experiences point to a dual-language gap: while cleaners struggle with foreign languages, visitors grapple with the challenge of accessing local linguistic resources.

The study also revealed that these communication barriers have deeper psychological and social implications. Cleaners often internalize feelings of inadequacy, while foreign guests experience a loss of autonomy, identity, and cultural immersion. The missed opportunities for mutual learning, empathy, and respect reinforce invisible walls between the two groups, reducing the university's capacity to foster a truly inclusive and multicultural environment.

Moreover, the emotional fatigue expressed by participants highlights the psychological toll that communication barriers can impose. As noted, feelings of inadequacy and exclusion can lead to

a cycle of avoidance, where both groups retreat into their respective linguistic comfort zones. This cycle further perpetuates misunderstandings and reinforces social stratification.

The insights from this study also suggest that the solutions must be systemic. Language training tailored to the needs of cleaners can significantly enhance their confidence and willingness to engage with foreign guests. Conversely, providing foreign guests with basic Kinyarwanda training can foster mutual respect and break down barriers, encouraging deeper intercultural connections.

In addition, the role of nonverbal communication should not be underestimated. As indicated by the findings, gestures and body language can serve as crucial tools for bridging gaps when verbal communication fails. Encouraging awareness of nonverbal cues can enhance the quality of interactions, creating a more inclusive atmosphere.

Furthermore, the importance of community engagement and social cohesion is evident in the discussions around effective communication. Initiatives that promote shared experiences can foster empathy and understanding, breaking down the invisible walls that currently exist between foreign guests and local cleaners. By creating structured opportunities for interaction, AUCA can enhance the social fabric of its multicultural community.

Ultimately, the study reveals that language is not merely a skill but a vital component of identity and belonging. The institutional responsibility lies in fostering an environment where all voices are valued and respected, regardless of linguistic proficiency. As such, addressing these communication barriers not only improved service delivery but also enhance the overall educational experience for both foreign guests and local staff.

In light of these findings, it is evident that improving communication between cleaners and foreign guests requires a systemic and empathetic response. Institutions like AUCA need to invest in practical language training for staff, promote informal language learning for guests, and create a climate that encourages intercultural dialogue. Without tackling these language-related challenges, the vision of a diverse and harmonious academic community remains incomplete. Language is not simply a skill—it is a bridge. And when that bridge is broken, community itself becomes fragmented.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the communication hurdles between foreign guests and AUCA's cleaners, it is not without limitations. Firstly, the study is qualitative in nature and relied primarily on a relatively small sample size, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across the entire university community. Secondly, the study focused only on one institution, which limits the generalizability of findings to other higher education contexts in Rwanda or beyond. Lastly, social desirability bias may have influenced some responses, especially from cleaners who might have felt the need to present themselves or the institution positively. Despite these limitations, the study

provides a meaningful foundation for future research and institutional action on intercultural communication and inclusion.

Suggestions

To address the communication challenges uncovered in this study, one of the foremost suggestions is for AUCA to implement language training programs tailored to cleaners. These could include basic conversational courses in English and French, delivered in flexible formats such as short modules, workplace-based sessions, or after-work classes. Equipping cleaners with functional language skills would not only boost their confidence but also enable more effective and respectful engagement with foreign guests. It would also enhance the overall image of the institution as a linguistically inclusive environment.

Secondly, foreign guests should be provided with orientation sessions or short courses in basic Kinyarwanda upon arrival. This would foster a sense of cultural respect, reduce their dependence on translators, and encourage deeper interaction with local staff and community members. Institutions can make this fun and engaging by integrating local idioms, greetings, and customs through interactive cultural exchange activities. Even basic knowledge of Kinyarwanda can help break the social ice and affirm the guests' willingness to connect across cultural lines.

A third recommendation is to create structured opportunities for intercultural interaction, such as language exchange programs, joint service initiatives, or informal social gatherings that bring foreign guests and cleaners together in non-hierarchical settings. These shared experiences can humanize both groups to one another, reduce stereotypes, and cultivate empathy. Encouraging simple practices like bilingual signage, shared dining tables, and cultural celebration days can also enhance visibility and recognition of each group's linguistic and cultural identity.

Finally, AUCA should consider institutionalizing communication as part of its professional development and hospitality framework. This includes regular workshops on intercultural competence, sensitivity training for support workers to evaluate how communication affects service delivery. By making communication a strategic focus rather than a secondary concern, the university can better fulfill its mission as a multicultural and inclusive academic space. Long-term, these initiatives would not only enhance the experience of international visitors but also empower cleaners as integral and confident members of the campus community.

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