

ENHANCING ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH INTERNAL COMMUNICATION: A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION OF CHANNEL EXPANSION THEORY

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Abstract. This conceptual paper delves into the augmentation of organizational effectiveness through internal communication with specific focus on the Channel Expansion Theory. Consequently, organizations strive to enhance their overall effectiveness by diversifying and broadening their array of communication channels for stakeholders' satisfaction and organizational excellence. While the theory highlights the influence of experiences on channel richness and the importance of prompt feedback, its practical application faces challenges across different organizational contexts, influenced by industry, size, and culture. Besides elucidating the foundational tenets of the theory, this paper provides a nuanced comprehension of communication dynamics within organizational contexts. In high power distance culture like Nigeria, the paper scrutinizes how expanded communication channels empower employees voice while concurrently reinforcing internal communication strategies. Against the backdrop of existing research which underscores impediments to internal communication in Nigerian firms by attributing hindrance to internal communication to corporate politics, hierarchical structures, centralized communication, technological gaps, and power distance cultural disparities. To address these impediments, the paper advocates for further research on power dynamics and hierarchies in organizational setting as well as how channel expansion can mitigate arbitrary managerial powers to ensure the intended goals and purposes of channel expansion are achieved while also ensuring organizational listening.

Keywords: *internal communication, communication channels, organizational communication, organizational effectiveness, communication dynamics*

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving business environment communication lies at the heart of organizational success. The seamless flow of information and ideas within an organization is not merely a desired attribute but a prerequisite for sustained growth and competitiveness (Musheke and Phiri, 2021). As the global business environment becomes increasingly interconnected and dynamic, organizations face the dual challenge of disseminating information comprehensively and fostering collaborative relationships among employees (Adomako and Nguyen, 2023). A powerful response to this challenge is to enhance organizational effectiveness through internal communication and by implication expansion of communication channels to accommodate communication needs and demands of the organization. Given that communication is important for organizational functioning, effective communication is pivotal in fostering collaboration at workplace necessary for organizational performance and decision making (Okundaye et al., 2019). Effective communication is paramount in achieving organizational excellence, serving as the cornerstone that fosters collaboration, innovation, and alignment towards common goals.

On the other hand, internal communication is the lifeblood of any institution as it facilitates the exchange of information, knowledge, and ideas between and among employees and management of the organization (Akarika et al., 2021). Thus, internal communication bridges the gap between leadership (management) and employees (workers) and aligns employees with organizational objectives to ensure that everyone is on the same page (Verčič and Špoljarić, 2020). As technology continues to reshape the workplace, traditional communication methods are on the brink of facing out and to remain agile and responsive, firms must adapt by expanding and diversifying their communication channels.

The term internal communication has been used interchangeably by several scholars with some referring to it as employee's communication, internal branding, interpersonal communication (Verghese, 2017). However, internal communication is largely focused on communication between the organization (managers/management) and its employees or subordinates (Mwale and Shaju, 2022). Traditionally, internal communication has been viewed as merely providing employees with directives and information (Ruck and Men, 2021). However, in contemporary organizational settings, the simplistic view of internal communication as mere provision of information to employees does not hold true as scholars argued that internal communication impacts every aspect of organizational functions and performance (Andersson, 2019). Similarly, as organizations are becoming increasingly connected and digitized, internal communication becomes prerequisite for organizational excellence. Khan et al. (2022) stressed that dissatisfaction of employees with the internal communication practices can result to absenteeism, burnout employee and occupational stress. On the premise that employees (internal publics) help shape the perception of external publics as they are often viewed as brand advocates, ambassador, and authentic voice of the organization (Men, 2021). Thus, employee's perception of employers reflects on employee's commitment towards organizational success (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2021).

Essentially, communication channel expansion lies in diversifying how employees interact, share information, and collaborate with management for organizational success. This entails more than just embracing new technologies; it requires a holistic approach that aligns communication strategies with the organizational culture, objectives, and the needs of the workforce to work together with organization management. By expanding communication channels, organizations can foster a culture of transparency, innovation, and inclusivity (Wolfgruber et al., 2021). Hence, channel expansion can enhance organizational effectiveness by boosting employee engagement, improving knowledge sharing, and creating a more responsive and adaptive organization for (Li et al., 2021).

Background

In the realm of modern organizational dynamics, the ability to communicate effectively is indispensable. Clear, timely, and accurate communication forms the backbone of every successful enterprise as it enables efficient information flow and decision-making (Ubogu and Orighofori, 2020). However, research indicates that empirical studies on internal communications in Nigeria are scanty and limited (Amaeshi et al., 2017). Likewise, research findings also indicate available scholarship on internal communication in Nigeria largely focuses on financial institution (Yusuf et al., 2016; Adetipe, 2020) while other sectors like universities, small scale business, government agencies are lacking in the scholarships. Traditionally, Nigerian firms relied

mainly on conventional communication channels, such as face-to-face meetings, phone calls, memos, and email, to facilitate internal communication. However, the digital revolution of the 21st century has transformed the workplace dramatically (Rotatori et al., 2021). As such, the advent of the internet, social media, and a proliferation of digital platforms has revolutionized the way employees interact, share information, and collaborate within their organizations (Hamburg, 2019).

The 21st century information and communication revolution is yet to fully impact internal communication practices in Nigeria. Entities in the country continue to grapple with the evolving demands of information and communication and this made worst by economic and infrastructural lapse thereby widening technological gap that hinders effective internal communication of firms (Yusuf and Mohd, 2023). Internal communication practices in Nigerian firms are complex and shaped by a multitude of factors, including knowhow, cultural diversity, and organizational structures (Eyo et al., 2021; Jacob et al., 2021). These challenges pose significant obstacles to effective communication as many firms face challenges in embracing, adopting, and using digital tools for communication, especially communication with staff. On the other hand, these challenges also present unique opportunities for innovation, collaboration for organizational growth (IseOlorunkanmi et al., 2021). Hence, in the face of inadequate internal communication enhancing organizational effectiveness channel expansion has emerged as strategy firms must embrace to improve employee communication.

The scenario

In the bustling landscape of Nigerian firms, the pulse of internal communication struggles against a backdrop of entrenched obstacles. Corporate politics weave intricate webs of influence, entangling the flow of information within hierarchical structures, where communication channels are often constricted by centralized decision-making. Technological gaps further exacerbate the disconnect, leaving employees stranded in a sea of digital disparities. Yet, perhaps the most glaring chasm lies in the cultural fabric, where power distance widens the divide between management and staff/employees. In this cacophony of organizational dynamics, the concept of channel expansion emerges as a beacon of promise, but its allure is lopsided. In Nigeria, business endeavors feverishly court external publics, seduced by the allure of market appeal and brand visibility. Yet, amidst this fervent pursuit, the voices of internal stakeholders (employees) those who fuel the engine of productivity are muted, relegated to the periphery of corporate discourse.

Picture the scene: sleek advertisements adorn billboards, captivating the attention of passersby with promises of grandeur and prosperity. Social media platforms buzz with the latest marketing campaigns, beckoning consumers with tantalizing offers. Meanwhile, within the confines of office walls, employees toil in anonymity, their voices stifled by the deafening silence of organizational indifference. As the spotlight shines brightly on external engagement, the internal landscape languishes in neglect. Employee concerns languish unheard, their ideas cast adrift in an ocean of apathy. The narrative of organizational communication becomes a tale of two worlds-a dichotomy where the external façade gleams with vitality while the internal infrastructure withers in neglect. Amidst this discordant symphony, the need for a paradigm shift becomes glaringly evident. Channel expansion must transcend its narrow confines, extending its reach beyond the confines of consumer markets to embrace the heartbeat of organizational success-its employees. Only by amplifying the voices of internal

stakeholders can Nigerian firms hope to bridge the chasm of communication and chart a course towards organizational excellence.

Hindrances to internal communication in Nigeria

Top among the numerous challenges and hindrance of internal communication in Nigeria is the continuous widening of technological gap (Okoye et al., 2023). The gap is characterized by disparities in access to and proficiency in digital communication tools (Okocha and Edafewotu, 2022). As such, lack of access to cutting-edge communication technology results in information lag and inefficiencies as many companies face challenges in embracing digital tools for communication due to inability to afford it, poor connectivity, and lack of skills to manage or operates these tools (Olannye-Okonofua, 2023). Thus, uneven adoption of modern communication technologies creates a divide between employees, with some comfortably navigating digital platforms while others struggle to keep pace. This disparity inhibits the seamless flow of information, collaboration, and knowledge sharing, leading to a fragmented and less effective internal communication environment. Furthermore, the underutilization of digital tools perpetuates inefficiencies and delays timely dissemination of critical information and potentially impeding the organization's overall performance.

Equally, centralization of communication restricts information flow and disparities as per when and who participate in conversation with management (Israel, 2022; Joseph and Gaba 2020). Information and communication emanate from the authority (management) who regulates how and when employees should participate or access information within the firm. This brings to question the effectiveness of communication channel deployed by Nigerian firms of internal communication as centralization hinders the flexible communication network in the firm. Structure complexity and management agenda contributes to challenges facing internal communication of Nigerian firms. This is rightly so because Nigerian firms often comprise of various departments and administrative units resulting in communication bottleneck due to a complex organizational structure. Thus, fragmentation of communication units leads to delays in information sharing which impacts organization functioning and decision-making (Adetipe, 2020). In the same vein, management agenda and business focus are among the myriad of challenges facing internal communication in Nigeria. Thus, prioritization of short-term financial objectives take precedent over any other goals couple with hierarchical top-down decision-making structures which stifle open and transparent communication channel (Osazefua Imhanzenobe, 2020). This frequently leads to a lack of information sharing, diminished employee engagement, and a diminished capacity for innovative problem-solving prospect (Biriowu and Ofurum, 2020).

Furthermore, management focus on performance targets often encourages selective and distortion of reporting ultimately hindering honest exchange of information crucial for effective decision-making and fostering a culture of trust and collaboration within the organization (Xu et al., 2021). This is because performance targets impose pressure on employees to meet specific numerical goals or metrics and this draws manager's attention to individual performance as well as employees prioritizing individual performance over collaborative communication (Echaaobari et al., 2018). Hence, the tendency of employees becoming myopically fixated on achieving their individual goals at the expense of open and constructive dialogue is a product of communication breakdown. And often this can lead to reluctance to share challenges or alternative approaches, for fear of falling short of targets and incurring negative repercussions.

Furthermore, employees are often not recognized as primary or important stakeholders in Nigerian firms, and this has led to deviant behaviours by employees at workplace and breakdown in communication as management business interest takes precedent over anything else. This has resulted in marginalization of employees thereby highlights leadership style and management culture as the leading reasons behind low internal communication, employee's engagement, and poor internal brand awareness and conflict management in Nigerian firms (Adamu and Mohamad, 2019).

The power distance culture in Nigerian society and by extension workplace adds to the poor employees and employers' (internal) communication. As such Oruh and Dibia (2020) found the dynamics of high-power distance cultures in Nigeria encourages servant-master relationship at workplace and this has become very challenging for employees to voice concerns to their employers regarding stress-inducing factors like excessive workloads, unfavorable work settings, work-life imbalance, and burnout. In addition, the bureaucratic nature of Nigerian institutions slows down internal communication processes thereby making decision-making and dissemination of information time-consuming and convoluted (Ukeje et al., 2019). It is imperative to understand how channel expansion theory can be leveraged to improve internal communication and enhance organizational effectiveness as well as address the evolving communication dynamics in contemporary organizations. Hence, this conceptual paper embarks on a journey to explore the multifaceted realm of organizational effectiveness through internal communication aided by channel expansion.

Theoretical underpinning

Channel Expansion Theory (CET) developed by Carlson and Zmud (1999) is a fundamental theory within the realm of internal communication and organizational effectiveness. The theory provides a theoretical framework that explores how an organization can optimize its communication channels to enhance its overall performance. At its core, the theory is rooted in several key theoretical underpinnings that illuminate its significance and applicability in contemporary organizational context. While internal communication practices and by extension employee communication in Nigerian firms is faced with a range of challenges, addressing these challenges through channel expansion offers organization the opportunity to create a more effective and inclusive internal communication environment of stakeholders. The central premise of the theory holds that experience is a key factor that influences perceptions of a channel's (D'Urso and Rains, 2008). Thus, experiences in the usage of a communication channel shape perceptions of the channel and allow users develop relevant knowledge, opinion, beliefs, and feelings about the channel to translate and decipher a message, information, and communication more effectively (Carlson and Zmud, 1999).

While the selection and usage of information and communication channel by organization and its members has long interested scholars, and as such theories and models have been developed that offer explanations and rational with the aim of improving organizational effectiveness. Most of these theories and models are founded on various assumptions. However, in an organizational setting these assumptions are fundamentally based on the perception of members of the organization of communication channels as key motivating factor for channel use especially for internal communication (Verčič and Špoljarić, 2020). Thus, expanding and diversifying communication channels can lead to improved internal communication and, in turn,

greater organizational effectiveness. The theory is particularly relevant in contemporary organizational contexts, where the rapid evolution of technology has revolutionized the way employees communicate and collaborate with management for organizational excellence.

Given that channel expansion theory is focused on effective communication, the theory draws from other theories. One of such is the information/media richness theory which posits that various communication channels have the capacity to deliver information, but they vary in their ability to convey rich information effectively (Daft and Lengel, 1986). As such, the relative abilities of channel to convey messages or capacity of channel to facilitate shared meaning and understanding denote information richness. While face-to-face communication and telephone were identified as the richest channels of communication as it offers real time delivery, feedback, and message transmission (Rice et al., 1990). However, in a dynamic and contemporary communication landscape, face to face communication and telephone as channels suggest that communication richness through these channels is an objectives view of channel (Mirzaei and Esmailzadeh, 2021). Contrary, people with experience using new media are more likely to perceive communication richness differently compared to people without experience using new media (Hew and Kadir, 2016). Hence, individual dispositions, situational constraints, and local social influence are critical factors in explaining media, information and channel uses for communication richness.

Secondly, Dennis and Robert (2008) Media Synchronicity Theory (MST) supplements the channel expansion theory by emphasizing the synchronicity or degree of real-time interaction required in communication. The theory suggests that different tasks or communication purposes demand different levels of synchronicity. The theory contends that organizations must choose a communication channel that matches the synchronicity requirements of the task at hand (Dennis et al., 2008; Dennis and Valacich, 1999). Thus, choosing the right channel for communication depends on communication need and perhaps nature of receiver according to the theory (Diwanji et al., 2020). As such, asking a friend out for dinner is less complex than explaining a project to clients via face-to-face talk to get the message across. The theory helps in deciding which tool to use for better communication as the receiver may not be able to decode message or meaning if the wrong channel is used to convey the message. This aligns with Channel Expansion Theory's core tenet of matching the channel to the purpose thereby promoting a nuanced approach to internal communication.

Likewise, the theory also draws from Diffusion of Innovations Theory. Introduced by Rogers et al. (2014), the theory also influenced the development of channel expansion theory by highlighting the dynamics of how new communication channels are adopted within organizations. it recognizes that the diffusion of innovations, including new communication technologies, is a complex process that is influenced by the organization's culture, leadership, and the characteristics of the innovation itself (Tayapiwatana et al., 2022). Channel expansion theory acknowledges that embracing new channels requires a keen understanding of the factors that influence the adoption and diffusion process to ensure that organizational communication strategies remain adaptable and in line with technological advancements of our time. As channel expansion theory seeks to understand and optimize the use of different communication channels for information dissemination, diffusion of innovations theory on the other hand offers valuable principles about how innovations are adopted by different groups, the factors that influence their adoption, and the role of communication channels in this

diffusion process (Tayapiwatana et al., 2022). By understanding the diffusion dynamics, Channel Expansion Theory offers strategize for selection and integration of communication channels for effectively reaching and influencing various stakeholders thus leading to expansion of existing channels for better communication.

Also, the Social Exchange Theory (SET) is a very significant social exchange theory, rooted in the work of Blau (2017) and Homans (2016), offers insights into the relational aspects of internal communication within organizations. This theory posits that individuals engage in a process of social exchange where they seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs within their relationships (Cropanzano et al., 2017). And as such, channel expansion theory takes this into account this position by recognizing that employees are more likely to embrace new communication channels when they perceive them as offering benefits such as increased efficiency, reduced effort, or enhanced collaboration. Therefore, understanding the social exchange dynamics within the organization is crucial for effectively implementing channel expansion as strategies breach the communication gap (*Figure 1*).

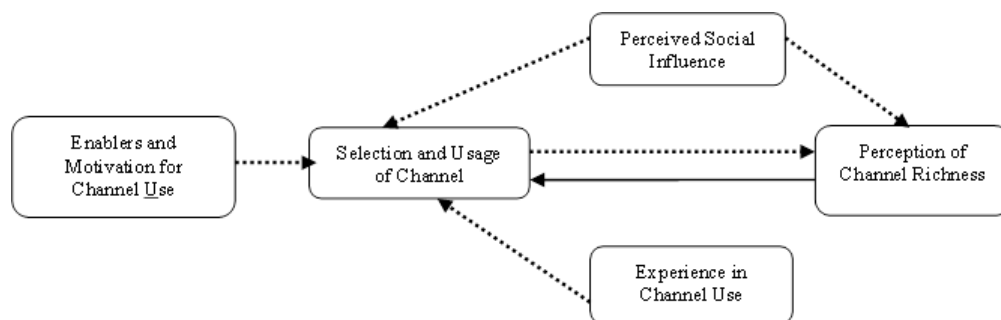


Figure 1. Generalized conceptual model for the use and perception communication channel.
Source: Carlson and Zmud (1999).

Theoretical contribution of channel expansion theory

The theoretical foundation of channel expansion theory draws from a rich tapestry of communication theories that encompass information richness, media synchronicity, the diffusion of innovations, and social exchange (Carlson and Zmud, 1999). By integrating these theoretical perspectives, channel expansion theory provides a holistic framework for organizations to strategically adapt their communication channels to improve information flow, task synchronicity, and the overall effectiveness of internal communication in today's dynamic and technologically evolving organizational landscape. It is worthy of note that richness of communication channels can be classified along continuum of richness. Perhaps face-to-face communication and direct telephone calls are seemingly the richest due to their ability to convey verbal and nonverbal cues with prompt transmission and feedback (Passarelli et al., 2020). According to the theory, the richness of a communication channel depends on an individual's familiarity with the channel. As such, one's experiences with using a particular channel shape their perceptions of the channel and perception builds experience thereby leading to richness of channel.

Challenges of channel expansion theory

Channel Expansion Theory is indeed a valuable framework for enhancing communication within organizations, however it is not without its limitations. As noted

by D'Urso and Rains (2008) the theory primarily focuses on the quantity and diversity of communication channels, potentially overlooking the quality and content of the messages conveyed. If the purpose of expanding channel of communication is to bring about change and give employees a voice, if such goals are not achieved, then expansion of channel of communication is a futile activity. This is bearing in mind that corporate politics, management business goals take precedent over any other interest particularly in a high-power distance environment like Nigeria. The premise that: (1) experiences shapes perception of channel richness; (2) communication with prompt feedback like face-to-face talk or phone calls as the richest channel is a far cry from practical reality of channel richness in an organizational setting. This is rightly so because communication with prompt feedback via face-to-face talk or direct phone calls are limited in terms of audience reach compared to communication via new media and internet where numerous function and activities can take place simultaneously and conveniently. Consequently, channel expansion theory incorporates various concepts that emphasizes on the need for organizations to diversify their communication channels to ensure that richness of information and communication aligns with the specific communication goals and objectives of the organization.

In addition, scholars like Kramer and Cook (2004) have noted channel expansion theory does not sufficiently address the role of power dynamics and hierarchies in organizational communication, potentially neglecting the impact of unequal access to channels. And as such, questions remain as to how channel expansion can circumvent management business agenda and goals, technological gap, cultural obstacles and embracing innovative, digitally driven solutions for communication. Particularly, in a high distance culture country like Nigeria where employees are least on the organizational chart irrespective of their contribution to organization success (Oruh and Dibia, 2020). How are employees able to get to a place where expansion of communication channel becomes a strategy for employee's voice and strengthens internal communication? The expansion of channels does not mean lack of internal communication, rather the focus is on if the purpose for expanding and using new channels for communication purposes is met. For instance, critical decisions may warrant a face-to-face meeting with parties to ensure communication and channel. On the other hand, routine updates through email or intranet can efficiently convey richness in real time and to a large audience along with visuals. Hence, the purpose of expanding channel must be met for richness to occur. If this is the case, in the realm of structural complicity employees are subject to management goals and this can limit hinders internal communication as only decides the nature and channel of communication which may not meet the needs of employees. Hence, the applicability of channel expansion theory across the board in the realm of different cultural and contextual settings is a subjective notion. This is owing to Papa et al. (2008) observation that in view of the peculiar difference that exist in time and space, effectiveness of communication strategies can vary significantly based on local norms and practices.

Enhancing organizational effectiveness through internal communication is a critical endeavor, and the application of channel expansion theory within the Nigerian context offers valuable insights into the practice of internal communication in Nigerian firms. Nigeria, with its diverse culture and geographic dispersion, presents unique challenges for communication within organizations. Channel expansion theory suggests that organizations can improve communication effectiveness by diversifying communication channels, tailoring them to meet the needs of the organization, and promoting

interactive dialogues between employees and managers/management. Enhancing organizational effectiveness through internal communication by way of channel expansion has emerged as a strategic imperative for an organization to bridge communication gaps. Organizations in Nigeria are increasingly recognizing that adopting multifaceted approach to communication to accommodate the needs and preference of employees lead to organization success (Olannye-Okonofua, 2023). As such, the concept of communication channel expansion extends beyond mere adoption of new technologies; it encompasses a holistic strategy that aligns communication methods with the organizational culture, objectives, and the evolving needs of employees.

However, management business agenda and goals, technological gap and cultural obstacles are hindrances to Nigerian firms embracing innovative digitally driven solutions to improve internal communication. Undoubtedly, information and communication technology has transformed workspace into digital landscape thereby ushering in an era where the workforce is no longer confined to a physical office space (Beauty, 2019). Likewise, remote work, telecommuting, and virtual teams have become commonplace for employees spanning across diverse geographic locations and time zones (Jaafar and Rahim, 2022). As a result of this, traditional communication channels are being supplemented, and sometimes replaced by a myriad of digital tools and technologies. This shift in the organizational landscape poses both challenges and opportunities for internal communication of Nigerian firms. However, Nigerian firms can create a more effective and inclusive internal communication environment of stakeholders through Channel expansion. At its core, channel expansion envisions a dynamic and inclusive communication ecosystem where employees can engage, collaborate, and receive information through various channels, such as intranets, instant messaging, video conferencing, social media, and collaborative platforms (Verčič and Špoljarić, 2020). This ecosystem enables employees to access information seamlessly, irrespective of their location, device, or the time of day. Thus, the benefits of channel expansion are multifaceted and can lead to improved decision-making, as leaders gain access to real-time data and insights from employee's feedback and inputs. Research findings indicated that employee engagement often surges when employees feel more connected and involved in organizations decision making (Verčič, 2021). Thus, by implication denotes that communication between employees and managers is cordial and that medium or channel of communication deployed to engage employees are rich enough to rally employees behind organization functioning.

In this era of relentless change and fierce global competition, organizations that capitalize on internal communication channel expansion are better positioned to thrive (Kovaitė et al., 2020; Verčič, 2019). This is rightly so because their expansion is geared at ensuring organization effectiveness through communication. However, the expansion must be such that employees' needs are taken care of and not just having a communication rich channel without achieving the goals of communication. Consequently, merely expanding channels for communication purposes could lead to information overload and dilution of key messages, ultimately hindering effective communication. Thus, while Channel Expansion Theory offers valuable options to enhance internal communication, it is essential for organizations to adapt the theory to their specific needs and circumstances. Further studies can focus on addressing critical issues such as investigations into the nuanced interplay between culture and communication channels, considering cultural diversity in a country like Nigeria.

Likewise, a deeper exploration of how power dynamics and hierarchies affect channel expansion's effectiveness can help elucidate the dynamics of power in hierarchical organizational structures common in Nigeria. Further research can also undertake a comparative analysis of the theory's applicability in different sectors and industries within Nigeria context to shed more light on sector-specific variations as it pertains to internal communication relative to channels of communication. Lastly, research should also delve into the implications of channel expansion on employee engagement and organizational performance in Nigeria by providing practical insights for enhancing overall effectiveness of channel richness for communication purposes. These research directions will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Channel Expansion Theory's limitations and its optimized application in the Nigerian organizational context.

Conclusion

The exploration of Channel Expansion Theory within the Nigerian context underscores the significance of adaptable and informed internal communication strategies in enhancing organizational effectiveness. Nigeria's unique blend of cultural diversity and geographic dispersion presents both opportunities and challenges for effective communication, necessitating a context-specific approach. By embracing a mix of traditional and digital communication channels, considering cultural nuances, promoting interactive dialogues, and addressing power dynamics, organizations in Nigeria can bridge communication gaps, foster trust, and improve their overall effectiveness. The journey toward organizational excellence in Nigeria and beyond is, indeed, intrinsically tied to the way organizations leverage the principles of Channel Expansion Theory within its workforce to ensure meaningful, context-aware, and engaging internal communication practices.

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Conflict of interest

This study was conducted entirely through the author's personal efforts and resources, without any commercial or financial contributions from external parties. As a result, there are no conflicts of interest or involvement of any external parties.

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