

Communication Accommodation in Christian Private University Promotion: A Case Study of Convergence Dynamics at Satya Wacana Christian University

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana (UKSW), a private Christian university in Central Java, employs communication accommodation strategies in its promotional communication. Drawing on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), this qualitative case study explores how UKSW adapts its communication practices to diverse audiences while maintaining its institutional identity as an inclusive and multicultural campus known as “Mini Indonesia.” Data were analyzed through contextual interpretation of promotional materials, institutional narratives, and relevant literature. The findings reveal that UKSW strategically applies communicative convergence, divergence, and maintenance to foster relational closeness, preserve institutional distinctiveness, and sustain long-term trust. Communication accommodation emerges not merely as a promotional technique but as a relational strategy that shapes brand meaning and stakeholder engagement. The findings suggest that effective communication accommodation strengthens brand equity and supports sustainable student recruitment in pluralistic educational contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Private higher education institutions operate in an increasingly competitive environment in which attracting and retaining students is essential for institutional sustainability. In Indonesia, private universities face particular challenges related to competition with public universities, changing student preferences, increasing access to digital information, and the growing diversity of prospective student expectations. Consequently, university recruitment can no longer rely solely on conventional advertising or the delivery of institutional information. Universities must also develop communication strategies that enable them to establish relevance and relational proximity with diverse audiences.

This challenge is particularly important because prospective students are not a homogeneous audience. They differ in terms of regional background, cultural identity, socioeconomic conditions, communication preferences, and digital media practices. In addition, university enrollment decisions involve multiple stakeholders, including prospective students, parents, and school guidance counselors. These different audiences may interpret institutional messages differently and may require different forms of communication. Therefore, the effectiveness of university promotion depends not only on what information is communicated but also on how communication is adapted to audience characteristics.

Previous studies on higher education promotion have primarily examined marketing strategies, brand equity, integrated marketing communication, social media engagement, and institutional reputation. Although these perspectives provide important insights into university recruitment, they provide limited explanation of how universities adapt their communication practices when interacting with socially and culturally diverse audiences. The communicative processes through which institutions reduce social distance, build relational closeness, and maintain institutional identity therefore remain insufficiently explored.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) provides a useful perspective for addressing this gap. CAT explains how communication actors adapt their language, interaction style, relational behavior, and communicative practices in response to their interlocutors. Through strategies such as convergence, divergence, and maintenance, communication actors may reduce social distance, emphasize group identity, or maintain institutional boundaries. Although CAT has been widely applied in interpersonal and intergroup communication, its application to strategic institutional communication and university promotion remains limited.

This study examines Satya Wacana Christian University (UKSW) as a relevant case for investigating institutional communication accommodation. UKSW is widely known as a multicultural university with students originating from diverse regions of Indonesia and is often represented through the institutional narrative of "Mini Indonesia." At the same time, UKSW must communicate its Christian institutional identity while engaging prospective students from diverse cultural, regional, and social backgrounds. This condition

creates an important communication challenge: how can the university adapt its promotional communication to diverse audiences without losing its institutional identity?

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how UKSW applies communication accommodation strategies in its promotional communication and how these strategies shape audience perceptions and responses. Specifically, the study investigates the forms of communication accommodation used in university promotion, the mechanisms through which accommodation creates relational proximity with prospective students and other stakeholders, and the implications of accommodation for institutional identity, credibility, and audience reception. By applying Communication Accommodation Theory to the context of higher education promotion, this study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of communication adaptation as a strategic process in university branding and student recruitment.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Communication Accommodation Theory as the Core Theoretical Framework

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles, provides the primary theoretical foundation for this study. CAT explains how communication actors modify their communicative behaviors in response to the characteristics of their interlocutors. These modifications may involve language, vocabulary, accent, communication style, nonverbal behavior, relational orientation, and interaction patterns. The central assumption of CAT is that communication adaptation influences social distance, relational relationships, and perceptions between communication actors.

CAT identifies three principal communication strategies: convergence, divergence, and maintenance. Convergence occurs when communication actors adapt their communicative behavior to become more similar to their audience. This strategy is generally associated with efforts to reduce social distance, increase interpersonal attraction, and establish relational closeness. Divergence occurs when communication actors emphasize communicative differences in order to maintain group identity or institutional distinctiveness. Maintenance occurs when communication actors retain their existing communication style despite differences in audience characteristics.

In the context of university promotion, CAT can be extended beyond interpersonal interaction to institutional communication. Universities communicate through multiple actors and channels, including promotional staff, student ambassadors, digital media, institutional events, and public relations activities. Consequently, communication accommodation may operate as an institutional strategy through which a university adapts its communication to the linguistic, cultural, relational, and media preferences of different audiences.

Audience Diversity and Social Identity

The need for communication accommodation becomes particularly important when institutions communicate with socially and culturally diverse audiences. Social Identity Theory provides a complementary explanation of how

audience identity influences communication interpretation. Individuals understand themselves partly through membership in social groups, including regional, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic communities. These identities influence how audiences interpret institutional messages and evaluate whether an organization represents values that are relevant to them.

In university promotion, prospective students may evaluate institutional communication based on whether they recognize elements of their identity within the communication process. Communication that acknowledges regional background, cultural identity, and peer experience may create a sense of recognition and inclusion. Therefore, audience diversity represents an important contextual condition that generates the need for communication accommodation.

The relationship can be explained as follows:

Audience Diversity → Social Identity → Communication Expectations →
Need for Communication Accommodation

Dimensions of Institutional Communication Accommodation

Based on CAT and the empirical context of university promotion, communication accommodation can be understood through several dimensions.

First, linguistic accommodation involves adapting vocabulary, tone, language style, and communication complexity to the characteristics of prospective students and other stakeholders.

Second, relational accommodation involves reducing hierarchical distance through peer-to-peer interaction, student ambassadors, and dialogical communication.

Third, media accommodation involves adapting communication channels and formats to audience media practices, particularly through interactive digital platforms and short-form visual content.

Fourth, cultural accommodation involves recognizing and representing the cultural and regional identities of prospective students within institutional communication.

These dimensions demonstrate that communication accommodation in university promotion is not limited to linguistic adaptation. Instead, it represents a multidimensional institutional process involving messages, relationships, media, and identity.

Communication Accommodation and University Branding

University branding is constructed through the meanings that stakeholders associate with an institution. These meanings are shaped not only by institutional messages but also by communication experiences. When audiences experience institutional communication as relevant, understandable, inclusive, and responsive to their identity, they may develop stronger perceptions of relational closeness and institutional relevance.

Communication accommodation therefore contributes to university branding through the following process:

Communication Accommodation → Relational Closeness → Perceived Inclusion and Relevance → Institutional Trust → Brand Meaning Construction

This relationship suggests that communication accommodation should not be understood merely as a promotional technique. Instead, accommodation represents a communicative mechanism through which institutions construct relationships and influence the meanings associated with their brand.

Audience Reception and Message Interpretation

Although institutional communication may be strategically designed to accommodate audiences, audiences do not necessarily interpret messages in the same way. Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding framework provides an additional perspective for examining audience responses to accommodated communication.

Institutional promotional messages are encoded through particular communication strategies and are subsequently interpreted by different audiences. These interpretations may take the form of dominant-hegemonic readings, negotiated readings, or oppositional readings.

In the context of this study, audience reception provides an important mechanism for evaluating the consequences of communication accommodation. A convergent communication strategy may generate positive responses among prospective students while producing more negotiated or oppositional responses among parents or guidance counselors who require stronger academic and financial information.

Therefore, the relationship between institutional communication and audience response can be conceptualized as follows:

Institutional Promotional Message → Communication Accommodation → Audience Interpretation → Brand Meaning and Trust

The integration of CAT, Social Identity Theory, and audience reception provides a stronger theoretical basis for understanding communication accommodation in university promotion. CAT explains how institutions adapt communication, Social Identity Theory explains why identity recognition influences audience relationships, and Encoding/Decoding explains how audiences interpret accommodated messages.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Paradigm

This study adopts a qualitative, constructivist paradigm. Constructivism posits that organizational reality and brand identity are not fixed, objective facts; instead, they are continuously constructed through interaction, interpretation, and communicative negotiation.

A single embedded case study design was selected. UKSW served as the primary case, while embedded units of analysis included the Promotional Division (DIVPROM), Public Relations, student sales ambassadors (Sales Promotion Team – SPT), prospective students, parents, and high school guidance counselors.

Table. 1 Research Design and Paradigm

Level of Analysis	Component/ Unit of Analysis
PRIMARY CASE	Satya Wacana Christian University (UKSW), Salatiga
EMBEDDED UNIT A	Promotional Strategy & Management: Promotional Division (DIVPROM) & Public Relations
EMBEDDED UNIT B	Field Execution Ambassadors: Sales Promotion Team (SPT) & Faculty Representatives
EMBEDDED UNIT C	Message Decoders/ Audiences: Prospective Students, Parents, and Guidance Counselors

Field Setting and Informant Selection

The study was conducted at Satya Wacana Christian University in Salatiga, Central Java. Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure deep insights into promotional design, field execution, and message reception.

Table. 2 Field Setting and Informant Selection

Informant Category	Stakeholder Group	Primary Role / Analytical Focus
Key Informants	1. Head of Promotional Division (DIVPROM) 2. DIVPROM Operational Field Staff 3. Head of Public Relations Office	Strategic Campaign Planning, Field Execution, and Institutional Brand Alignment.
Supporting Informants	1. Student Recruiters (Sales Promotion Team - SPT) 2. Prospective High School Students (\$N=25\$) 3. Parents of Applicants (\$N=25\$)	Peer-to-Peer Convergence, Message Reception Decoding, Economic/Quality Evaluation, and Institutional Mediation.

Informant Category	Stakeholder Group	Primary Role / Analytical Focus
	4. High School Guidance Counselors (\$N=25\$)	

Data collection continued until reaching conceptual data saturation, where additional interviews no longer yielded new thematic insights.

Data Collection Procedures

Data gathering incorporated three qualitative techniques:

1. **Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews:** Conducted using protocol guides anchored in CAT convergence metrics, POAC stages, and reception categories.
2. **Non-Participant Observation:** Observational audits were conducted during university open houses, high school roadshows, educational expos, and live digital interaction sessions on Instagram and TikTok.
3. **Documentary Analysis:** Comprehensive review of official recruitment collateral, including promotional brochures, video advertisements, social media posts, annual enrollment reports, and marketing strategy documents.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), encompassing data condensation, data display (matrices and network displays), and conclusion drawing/verification.

To establish qualitative rigor (trustworthiness) according to Lincoln and Guba's criteria:

1. **Credibility:** Achieved via source and method triangulation, member-checking with promotional staff, and prolonged field engagement.
2. **Transferability:** Provided through thick description of UKSW's socio-cultural and operational recruitment environment.
3. **Dependability:** Maintained through an external audit trail documenting all analytical decisions, transcriptions, and coding schemes.
4. **Confirmability:** Verified by archiving raw interview audio, field notes, and collateral for audit purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

UKSW Promotional Communication Context

UKSW promotional communication operates through a combination of institutional management, field-based recruitment, peer communication, and digital media engagement. The Promotional Division (DIVPROM) coordinates strategic planning and campaign implementation, while student ambassadors, public relations personnel, and regional networks function as frontline

communication actors. Promotional activities include high school visits, educational exhibitions, campus tours, digital campaigns, and direct interaction through social media platforms.

This organizational structure provides the institutional context in which communication accommodation occurs. Rather than being implemented by individual communicators alone, accommodation is distributed across promotional actors, communication channels, and audience segments. The findings therefore demonstrate that communication accommodation in university promotion operates as an institutional communication strategy.

How Does UKSW Implement Communication Accommodation?

The findings indicate that UKSW implements communication accommodation through four interconnected dimensions: linguistic accommodation, relational accommodation, media accommodation, and cultural accommodation.

Linguistic Accommodation

Linguistic accommodation occurs when promotional communicators adjust vocabulary, tone, and communication style according to the characteristics of prospective students. During school visits and direct interactions, promotional actors reduce the use of highly formal academic language and employ more conversational communication styles. In certain regional contexts, student ambassadors also use familiar regional expressions and dialects.

This practice reflects the convergence mechanism proposed by Communication Accommodation Theory. By adjusting communication style to audience preferences, promotional communicators reduce perceived social and psychological distance. The findings suggest that linguistic accommodation is particularly important during initial interactions because it creates communicative comfort and encourages dialogue.

Relational Accommodation

Relational accommodation occurs through the use of student ambassadors and peer-to-peer communication. UKSW frequently involves active students, particularly those originating from similar regions as prospective students, in promotional activities. These student ambassadors function as communicative bridges between the institution and prospective students.

The findings indicate that peer communication reduces the hierarchical distance often associated with institutional promotion. Prospective students perceive student ambassadors as more accessible and relatable than formal institutional representatives. Consequently, communication shifts from a transactional promotional interaction toward a more dialogical exchange involving student experiences, campus adjustment, academic life, and social relationships.

Media Accommodation

Media accommodation involves adapting communication channels and formats to audience media practices. UKSW increasingly uses short-form videos, interactive social media content, direct messaging, and live question-and-answer sessions to communicate with prospective students.

The findings demonstrate that media accommodation represents an extension of convergence beyond language. The institution adapts not only what it communicates but also where and how communication occurs. By using communication formats familiar to prospective students, UKSW creates opportunities for more immediate, interactive, and accessible engagement.

Cultural Accommodation

Cultural accommodation involves recognizing and representing the regional and cultural identities of prospective students. UKSW's institutional narrative as "Mini Indonesia" provides an important foundation for this process. Promotional communication frequently highlights cultural diversity, regional representation, and multicultural student experiences.

The findings suggest that cultural accommodation creates a sense of recognition and inclusion. Prospective students from different regions interpret the presence of familiar cultural identities as evidence that they can belong to the university community. Cultural accommodation therefore connects communication adaptation with institutional identity construction.

How Does Communication Accommodation Influence Audience Response?

The findings indicate that communication accommodation influences audience responses through relational closeness, perceived inclusion, and institutional trust.

Communication Accommodation and Relational Closeness

Linguistic, relational, media, and cultural accommodation collectively reduce the psychological distance between the institution and prospective students. When prospective students encounter familiar communication styles, peer representatives, relevant media formats, and cultural representation, they experience the institution as more accessible and relatable.

The findings therefore suggest the following relationship:

Communication Accommodation → Reduced Social Distance → Relational Closeness

Communication Accommodation and Institutional Trust

Relational closeness alone does not automatically generate enrollment intention. Audience members also evaluate whether the institution provides credible academic and financial information. The findings demonstrate that accommodation must be supported by institutional credibility.

The relationship can therefore be extended as follows:

Communication Accommodation → Relational Closeness → Perceived Inclusion
→ Institutional Trust

Audience Reception

Audience reception demonstrates that different stakeholder groups interpret accommodated communication differently. Prospective students generally respond positively to peer communication, digital interaction, and cultural representation. However, parents and guidance counselors often require additional information regarding academic quality, tuition costs, scholarships, and career outcomes.

The findings reveal three reception patterns: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. This demonstrates that communication accommodation should not be applied uniformly across all audiences. Instead, accommodation must consider the informational needs and decision-making roles of different stakeholders.

What Communication Accommodation Model Emerges from the Findings?

The findings demonstrate that effective university promotion requires a balance between communication convergence and institutional credibility. Excessive convergence may create perceptions that communication is informal or lacks academic seriousness. Conversely, insufficient convergence may create psychological distance and reduce audience engagement.

The findings therefore generate a model of Balanced Institutional Communication Accommodation. This model proposes that universities should apply different accommodation strategies according to audience characteristics and communication objectives.

The model consists of the following process:

Audience Diversity



Audience Identity and Communication Expectations



Institutional Communication Accommodation

- Linguistic Accommodation
- Relational Accommodation
- Media Accommodation
- Cultural Accommodation



Relational Closeness and Perceived Inclusion



Institutional Credibility and Trust



Audience Reception

- Dominant
- Negotiated
- Oppositional



Brand Meaning Construction and Enrollment Intention

This model demonstrates that communication accommodation functions as a strategic institutional process rather than simply an interpersonal

communication technique. Effective university promotion requires both audience adaptation and the preservation of institutional credibility.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that applying Communication Accommodation Theory—specifically through **convergence mechanisms**—provides a valuable framework for private university marketing in diverse socio-cultural environments. By aligning linguistic styles, leveraging peer recruitment teams (SPT), adopting short-form digital media, and framing institutional identity around cultural inclusion, Satya Wacana Christian University successfully reduces psychological distance and builds rapport with prospective applicants.

However, audience reception analysis demonstrates that convergence alone is insufficient to guarantee enrollment conversion. While 48% of sampled stakeholders fully embrace the convergent narrative, 32% negotiate the message by demanding rigorous academic and financial data, and 20% reject informal messaging in favor of traditional academic indicators. Therefore, institutional recruitment requires a balanced approach where youth-centered relational convergence is backed by clear academic credibility and financial transparency.

The theoretical contribution of this study extends beyond the application of Communication Accommodation Theory to a new institutional context. While Communication Accommodation Theory primarily explains how individuals adapt communication to manage social distance and interpersonal relationships, the findings of this study demonstrate that communication accommodation in institutional promotion operates through a more complex process involving audience diversity, organizational identity, institutional credibility, and stakeholder interpretation.

The study proposes the concept of Balanced Institutional Communication Accommodation. This concept explains that effective institutional communication cannot rely exclusively on convergence. Although convergence may reduce psychological distance and create relational closeness, excessive convergence may weaken perceptions of institutional authority and academic credibility. Conversely, insufficient convergence may create social distance and reduce audience engagement. Therefore, effective institutional communication requires a strategic balance between convergence and the maintenance of institutional identity and credibility.

The model identifies four dimensions of institutional communication accommodation: linguistic accommodation, relational accommodation, media accommodation, and cultural accommodation. These dimensions enable institutions to adapt their communication to diverse audience identities, preferences, and communication practices.

However, the findings demonstrate that accommodation alone does not guarantee positive institutional outcomes. Communication accommodation initially produces relational closeness and perceived inclusion, but these outcomes must be supported by institutional credibility. Academic quality, information accuracy, financial transparency, and professional institutional communication

function as credibility mechanisms that prevent accommodation from becoming excessive or superficial.

The proposed theoretical relationship is therefore:

Audience Diversity → Institutional Communication Accommodation → Relational Closeness and Perceived Inclusion → Institutional Credibility → Institutional Trust → Audience Reception → Brand Meaning Construction → Enrollment Intention.

The model also introduces a balancing mechanism between convergence and maintenance. Convergence is particularly relevant for prospective students who value relational communication, peer interaction, digital accessibility, and cultural recognition. Maintenance becomes increasingly important when communicating with stakeholders who require formal information and institutional assurance, including parents and guidance counselors.

Accordingly, the theoretical novelty of this study is the development of Balanced Institutional Communication Accommodation as an extension of Communication Accommodation Theory into institutional promotional communication. The model demonstrates that communication adaptation must be strategically differentiated according to audience characteristics while simultaneously maintaining institutional credibility and identity.

This contribution expands CAT in three important ways. First, it shifts accommodation from the interpersonal level to the institutional level. Second, it conceptualizes accommodation as a multidimensional process involving language, relationships, media, and culture. Third, it introduces institutional credibility as a balancing mechanism that explains why convergence alone may not produce positive audience responses.

The Balanced Institutional Communication Accommodation Model therefore provides a stronger theoretical framework for understanding how universities and other institutions communicate with diverse audiences while simultaneously maintaining organizational identity, credibility, and long-term trust.

Strategic and Managerial Recommendations

For UKSW Promotional Management (DIVPROM):

1. **Implement Layered Content Portfolios:** Maintain short-form convergent content on social media platforms for initial student engagement, while developing targeted analytical dossiers (detailing accreditation levels, faculty credentials, graduate employment rates, and scholarship breakdowns) for parents and counselors.
2. **Standardize Peer Ambassador Training:** Equip Sales Promotion Team (SPT) members with structured guidelines to balance friendly, relatable dialogue with accurate academic information during high school roadshows.
3. **Enhance Direct Digital Lead Conversion:** Transition social media engagement into direct support by pairing automated inquiries with immediate follow-ups from admissions counselors.

For Private Higher Education Institutions (PTS):

1. **Adopt Data-Driven Geographic Targeting:** Use historical enrollment data to identify key feeder regions (*kantong*) and deploy recruitment teams native to those communities.

Balance Relational Appeal with Academic Proof: Ensure marketing campaigns feature both authentic student life experiences and clear indicators of academic quality and career outcomes.

FURTHER STUDY

This study focused on qualitative reception and convergence strategies at a single multicultural private university in Central Java. Future research could expand on these findings by:

1. Conducting quantitative impact studies to measure how specific convergence interventions directly affect enrollment conversion rates across different geographic regions;
2. Exploring the longitudinal effects of recruitment convergence on student retention, institutional satisfaction, and alumni brand advocacy;
3. Investigating the comparative dynamics of **divergence** and **maintenance** strategies across non-denominational, state, and international higher education institutions.

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