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Exploring Organizational Ambidexterity in International HRM: How Unilever Uganda Limited Balances Global Standardization and Local Responsiveness in HRM Practice Implementation

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Abstract

This study investigates how foreign subsidiaries of multinational enterprises (MNEs) operationalize international human resource management (IHRM) ambidexterity amidst institutional duality in emerging economies. Drawing on an in-depth qualitative case study of Unilever Uganda Limited, the research adopts an interpretive approach informed by the Gioia Methodology and supplemented by doctrinal legal analysis. Data were collected via cross-sectional semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected informants spanning HR executives, line managers, and legal experts, and systematically triangulated with an analysis of 15 corporate documents, regulatory frameworks, HR Policy Memoranda, and 8 judicial court cases. Findings demonstrate that Unilever Uganda Limited strategically balances global corporate HR mandates, embodied in automated, algorithmic digital platforms such as Workday, with the stringent, procedurally focused legal demands of the Ugandan context. Central to resolving this legal-digital friction is the deployment of local HR managers as "institutional translators" who enact a "Glocal Compliance Matrix." This matrix harmonizes rigid global HR templates with host-country statutory requirements, notably the strict due process mandates of Section 66 of the Ugandan Employment Act (2006)[1] and the unpredictable interpretations of the Ugandan judiciary. Rather than testing causal or mediational relationships, the findings qualitatively reveal how dynamic managerial capabili-

[1]Section 66 of the Employment Act, Cap 226.

ties and continuous institutional negotiation serve as the operative mechanisms enabling this dual alignment. This research advances IHRM scholarship by shifting the focus from macro-level structural designs to the micro-foundations of ambidexterity, illustrating how subsidiary-level agency resolves the tension between global digital homogenization and localized legal compliance in institutionally complex, culturally collectivist emerging markets.

Keywords

Organizational Ambidexterity, International Human Resource Management, Global Standardization, Local Responsiveness, Institutional Duality, Emerging Markets, Uganda

1. Introduction and Background of the Study

The debate between global standardization and local responsiveness has long been foundational in International Human Resource Management (IHRM), particularly within multinational enterprises (MNEs) operating across diverse institutional contexts (Schuler et al., 1993). Traditionally, MNEs favored ethnocentric models whereby parent-company HR policies were imposed uniformly on subsidiaries, assuming transferability across differing national environments (Perlmutter, 2017). However, this approach increasingly proved untenable as subsidiaries encountered complex legal regimes, cultural, and socio-economic conditions that often clashed with rigid global mandates (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2003).

To navigate this complexity, organizational theorists introduced the concept of "organizational ambidexterity," the capability of firms to simultaneously exploit global efficiencies through standardized practices while exploring local opportunities and adapting to host-country demands (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). Within the IHRM domain, this ambidexterity entails harmonizing globally standardized HR systems, such as performance metrics and digital talent management, with locally tailored practices that respect regulatory compliance and cultural expectations (Deadrick & Gardner, 2008). This dual capacity is increasingly critical for MNE survival and subsidiary performance in institutionally distant and emerging economies.

Recent empirical studies focusing on sub-Saharan Africa underscore the unique challenges and adaptations required for effective IHRM ambidexterity in these contexts. For example, while Nyamekye et al. (2026) advocate for strategic flexibility in balancing global-local tensions, they primarily focus on macro-level structural adjustments rather than micro-level operational mechanisms. Similarly, Stavrou et al. (2023) highlight Afrocentric cultural norms affecting workforce expectations, yet often underplay the rigid, codified legal constraints imposed by host-country labor statutes. This creates a notable conceptual gap: existing regional scholarship frequently isolates cultural adaptation from strict legal compliance, treating subsidiaries as passive recipients of headquarters mandates rather than active negotiators of institutional duality.

To bridge this macro-micro divide, this study shifts the analytical focus from broad structural abstractions to the micro-foundations of IHRM ambidexterity. It investigates how subsidiary-level managers actively translate and hybridize conflicting institutional demands in practice. By examining a single, revelatory MNE subsidiary operating in a legally complex and culturally collectivist East African market, the research provides a granular, empirical account of how global integration and local legitimacy are negotiated daily. Crucially, this study moves beyond viewing ambidexterity merely as an organizational design choice, reframing it as a dynamic institutional capability dependent on managerial agency.

By focusing on this bounded context, the study contributes to the literature by explaining the specific operative mechanisms through which ambidexterity is achieved. It highlights the role of local HR managers as boundary-spanning actors who operationalize hybrid compliance frameworks, reflecting a strategic interplay between global corporate imperatives and host-country institutional realities. Thus, this work enriches current IHRM scholarship and offers practical insights for managers navigating the intricacies of multinational HRM in emerging economies.

2. Problem Statement

Multinational enterprises (MNEs) face the dual imperative of achieving global integration through standardized HR practices while remaining locally responsive to host-country institutional contexts (Schuler et al., 1993; Kostova et al., 2008). Global standardization delivers clear benefits such as enhanced corporate alignment, cross-border talent mobility, and economies of scale via shared digital platforms (Dickmann & Müller-Camen, 2006). However, when subsidiaries in emerging economies such as Uganda implement these rigid, Western-centric digital HR systems, exemplified by automated performance management and standardized termination metrics via platforms such as Workday, profound structural tensions emerge at the micro-operational level. These tensions arise from the stark clash between algorithmic global workflows and the stringent procedural safeguards enshrined in host-country legislation, specifically Section 66 of the Ugandan Employment Act (2006)[2]. Rather than a simple policy mismatch, this friction is further compounded by an evolving Ugandan judiciary that frequently articulates divergent interpretations of employment termination law, creating profound regulatory ambiguity for HR practitioners tasked with aligning automated corporate mandates with unpredictable domestic legal realities.

Local responsiveness is essential for navigating these complexities to ensure legal compliance, external legitimacy, and motivational alignment with culturally specific workforce expectations (Rosenzweig & Nohria, 1994; Deadrick & Gardner, 2008). While the conceptual importance of organizational ambidexterity as a strategic response to such institutional duality is well established (Gibson & Birkin-

[2]Section 66 of the Ugandan Employment Act, Cap 226.

shaw, 2004; Deadrick & Gardner, 2008), existing literature falls short of explaining how this balancing act is practically executed under conditions of acute legal-digital friction. The predominant body of ambidexterity research treats the construct as a macro-level organizational design challenge, offering limited insight into the micro-foundations and operative mechanisms through which subsidiaries reconcile algorithmic global mandates with fluid, judge-made local employment laws.

Furthermore, because prior empirical studies are largely derived from Western and Asian manufacturing contexts, they fail to capture the distinct realities of MNEs operating in sub-Saharan African markets, which are characterized by high institutional distance, complex plural legal systems, and relational cultural norms. Consequently, there is a critical lack of empirical evidence detailing how local managers actively negotiate, translate, and hybridize these conflicting institutional demands in real time. Existing literature provides insufficient explanation of the specific, day-to-day managerial interventions required to prevent global digital homogenization from triggering localized compliance failures. To address this specific lacuna, this study provides a detailed, qualitative investigation of Unilever Uganda Limited. It aims to uncover the specific mechanisms through which the subsidiary strategically hybridizes global HR digital templates with local institutional requirements, thereby operationalizing organizational ambidexterity in an environment marked by high regulatory uncertainty and structural legal-digital conflict.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine how Unilever Uganda Limited achieves organizational ambidexterity within its International Human Resource Management (IHRM) practices by balancing the competing demands of global standardization and local responsiveness. Specifically, the study seeks to assess how the organization integrates globally standardized HR policies with Uganda's legal, cultural, and socio-economic realities, and to evaluate the implications of this balance for institutional compliance, workforce performance, organizational effectiveness, and corporate legitimacy within the Ugandan business environment.

4. Research Objectives and Questions

This study is guided by three primary objectives and their associated research questions:

1) To analyze how global standardized HRM practices are integrated within Unilever Uganda and the operational efficiencies associated with their implementation.

***RQ*1**: How are globally standardized HRM practices integrated within Unilever Uganda, and what operational efficiencies emerge from their implementation?

2) To examine the legal, cultural, and socio-economic institutional pressures that necessitate the local adaptation of globally standardized HRM practices.

***RQ*2:** How do legal, cultural, and socio-economic institutional pressures shape the local adaptation of globally standardized HRM practices at Unilever Uganda?

3) To examine the organizational mechanisms and dynamic capabilities through which Unilever Uganda balances global standardization and local responsiveness.

***RQ*3:** How does Unilever Uganda mobilize organizational mechanisms and dynamic capabilities to balance global standardization and local responsiveness?

5. Significance of the Study

- **Academics.** Moving beyond macro-level abstractions, this research enhances global IHRM scholarship by offering a granular, micro-level empirical examination of organizational ambidexterity in sub-Saharan Africa. It makes a distinct theoretical contribution by unpacking the concept of "legal-digital friction", the specific operational tension between algorithmic global systems (e.g., Workday) and unpredictable domestic jurisprudence. Furthermore, by conceptually identifying local HR managers as "institutional translators" who operationalize a "Glocal Compliance Matrix," this study provides a clear, mechanism-based framework illustrating how global corporate templates are actively hybridized. By integrating a Gioia-informed qualitative approach with qualitative doctrinal legal analysis, the study challenges prevailing Western-centric assumptions in dominant IHRM literature and extends Institutional Theory to account for environments with divergent, multi-layered judicial philosophies.
- **Practitioners/Industry.** For HR executives, multinational country directors, and human resource business partners (HRBPs) operating within emerging markets, this study serves as a highly specific operational roadmap. Rather than offering generic advice, it isolates the exact mechanism, the Glocal Compliance Matrix, required to resolve legal-digital friction. It details the specific managerial interventions, localized compliance filters, and hybridized reward structures required to drive corporate efficiency via digital platforms without triggering local labor disputes, procedural compliance penalties, or cultural alienation.
- **Policymakers.** This study offers valuable technical insights for institutions such as the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development in Uganda, the Industrial Court, and the Federation of Uganda Employers (FUE). By systematically synthesizing the divergent jurisprudential interpretations between the Industrial Court and the Court of Appeal, the research provides clear, doctrinal evidence of how global corporate practices interact with domestic labor statutes. This highlights specific areas of legal ambiguity where regulatory frameworks and judicial guidelines can be clarified to foster foreign direct investment while firmly protecting domestic labor rights.
- **Society.** At a broader societal level, the study defends the rights and cultural dignity of the domestic workforce. By advocating for an ambidextrous approach that respects local collectivist values, as evidenced by the localization of benefits to include extended family medical coverage and community bereavement support, this research promotes sustainable corporate citizenship. It demon-

strates that MNEs can achieve global operational excellence without eroding family-communal obligations and fair labor standards, thereby contributing positively to local economic development and community stability.

6. Scope of the Study

- **Geographical Scope.** This study is geographically confined to the Republic of Uganda, with a particular focus on Unilever Uganda Limited and its operations within Kampala, the capital city. The research specifically examines the organization's head offices and operational facilities where international human resource management (IHRM) policies are formulated, implemented, and monitored. Concentrating on Uganda provides an appropriate context for examining how multinational corporations balance globally standardized HR practices with local legal and institutional requirements.
- **Population Scope.** The study targets key stakeholders involved in the design, implementation, and oversight of IHRM practices within Unilever Uganda Limited. The target population includes senior IHRM executives, Human Resource Business Partners (HRBPs), line managers responsible for global product divisions, legal counsel with expertise in Ugandan labor law, and executive representatives from the Federation of Uganda Employers (FUE). These participants are selected because they possess relevant knowledge and experience regarding the interaction between global corporate HR strategies and local employment regulations, making them well-positioned to provide informed insights into the study's objectives.
- **Thematic Scope.** Rather than treating the study's concepts as quantitative variables to be measured for causal influence, the qualitative scope focuses on three interconnected thematic areas. The first theme is Global Standardization, which represents the extent to which Unilever Uganda Limited adopts standardized global HR policies. The second theme is Local Responsiveness, which refers to the organization's adaptation of these policies to Ugandan realities. The third theme is Organizational Ambidexterity in IHRM, which represents the emergent, dynamic capability through which the subsidiary contextually navigates and integrates the first two themes, rather than one simply "influencing" the other.
- **Time Scope.** The study utilizes a cross-sectional temporal design, with primary interview data collected over a focused fifteen-month period from May 2025 to August 2026. However, the broader analytical timeframe of the phenomenon under investigation covers the period from 2021 to 2026. This six-year period is particularly relevant because it captures the rapid expansion of digital transformation initiatives, including automated HR management systems and data-driven performance monitoring, adopted by multinational corporations (Le et al., 2026). This timeframe is highly suitable for investigating the evolving balance between global HR integration and local regulatory compliance.

- **Limitations of the Study.** The study is subject to several limitations that may affect data accessibility and interpretation. Access to internal corporate documents and strategic HR records may be restricted due to confidentiality policies and non-disclosure agreements maintained by the organization. Additionally, sensitive information relating to internal labor disputes, employee grievances, and organizational challenges may not be fully disclosed by participants. The study may also encounter social desirability bias, where respondents provide answers that present themselves or their organization in a favorable light. To minimize these limitations and ensure reproducibility, the research employs methodological triangulation. This is achieved not just through 15 anonymized expert interviews, but through the systematic analysis of 15 internal corporate documents, the regulatory framework, HR Policy Memoranda, and 8 specific judicial court cases from the Industrial Court of Uganda. The data will be analysed using qualitative doctrinal and thematic approaches to enhance the reliability, validity, and credibility of the study findings.

7. Theory of the Study

This study integrates Institutional Theory and the Dynamic Capabilities Framework (DCF) to explain how Unilever Uganda Limited simultaneously pursues global standardization and local responsiveness in its international human resource management (IHRM) practices. The combined framework addresses a central paradox in multinational enterprise (MNE) research: subsidiaries are simultaneously constrained by institutional pressures originating from corporate headquarters and host-country environments while retaining strategic discretion in how global practices are interpreted, adapted, and implemented (Kostova & Roth, 2002; Stavrou et al., 2023).

Institutional Theory explains why subsidiaries experience competing demands for legitimacy. Organizations conform not only to efficiency considerations but also to prevailing legal, normative, and cultural expectations within their institutional environments (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014; Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017). Such conformity emerges through coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphic pressures, which become particularly salient in MNE subsidiaries operating under conditions of institutional duality. On one hand, headquarters impose globally standardized HR policies intended to ensure strategic alignment, consistency, and corporate control. On the other, host-country regulatory frameworks, labour-market institutions, and socio-cultural expectations require contextual adaptation (Kostova & Roth, 2002; Tempel et al., 2006; Röell et al., 2024). Institutional Theory therefore provides a robust explanation for the origins of global-local tensions but offers comparatively limited insight into why subsidiaries exposed to similar institutional pressures frequently adopt different implementation strategies.

To explain this variation, the study incorporates the Dynamic Capabilities Framework (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007). Rather than treating subsidiaries as passive recipients of institutional forces, the framework conceptualizes them as strategic actors capable of sensing environmental changes, seizing emerging opportunities, and continuously reconfiguring organizational resources and routines. Within IHRM, these dynamic capabilities enable subsidiaries to translate standardized corporate HR systems into locally legitimate practices without undermining global strategic coherence. Consequently, subsidiaries develop balancing capabilities that allow them to continuously calibrate the degree of standardization and localization across recruitment, performance management, compensation, employee development, and industrial relations (Festing & Eidems, 2011; Riviere et al., 2021).

The integration of the two perspectives becomes particularly evident through Oliver's (1991) strategic response framework. Rather than assuming automatic institutional conformity, Oliver demonstrates that organizations may respond to institutional pressures through acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, or manipulation depending on the nature of institutional demands and organizational capabilities. These strategic responses constitute the behavioural mechanisms through which dynamic capabilities are operationalized under conditions of institutional complexity. Accordingly, subsidiaries rarely pursue complete global standardization or complete local adaptation. Instead, they selectively negotiate, reinterpret, and hybridize corporate HR practices to reconcile competing institutional expectations (Stavrou et al., 2023; Chung & Sparrow, 2024).

This process represents a form of organizational ambidexterity in which subsidiaries simultaneously pursue exploitation and exploration. Exploitation emphasizes standardized HR systems that enhance operational efficiency, knowledge transfer, and corporate control, whereas exploration promotes locally responsive practices that strengthen institutional legitimacy, employee acceptance, and contextual effectiveness (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Beletskiy & Fey, 2021). Crucially, within institutionally complex emerging markets, this balancing act is frequently triggered by structural friction, such as the specific clash between rigid algorithmic global systems and fluid domestic legal interpretations. Emerging evidence indicates that subsidiaries possessing strong operational and strategic HR capabilities are better positioned to internalize global HR architectures while adapting their implementation to local institutional realities, thereby achieving contextual ambidexterity and sustained external institutional legitimacy rather than relying on untested causal performance metrics (Ahammad et al., 2019; Beletskiy & Fey, 2021).

Dynamic Managerial Capabilities (DMCs) provide the micro-foundational explanation for how this balancing process occurs. Managers' human capital, social capital, and cognitive capabilities enable them to recognize institutional change, interpret competing stakeholder expectations, and orchestrate appropriate organizational responses (Adner & Helfat, 2003; Helfat & Martin, 2015). Within Unilever Uganda Limited, HR managers function as "institutional translators" operating within a localized Glocal Compliance Matrix who combine knowledge of Unilever's global HR architecture with an understanding of Uganda's labour legislation, cultural norms, and labour-market conditions. Through this translation process, they transform standardized corporate policies into hybrid HR practices that simultaneously satisfy corporate governance requirements and host-country institutional expectations. Such managerial agency becomes especially important within emerging-market environments characterized by institutional fluidity, regulatory uncertainty, and evolving labour-market structures (Heubeck, 2023; Röell et al., 2024).

Overall, integrating Institutional Theory with the Dynamic Capabilities Framework provides a more comprehensive explanation of IHRM implementation than either perspective alone. Institutional Theory identifies the external legitimacy pressures that shape subsidiary behaviour, while the Dynamic Capabilities Framework explains how subsidiaries strategically respond to those pressures through managerial agency, continuous institutional translation, and capability reconfiguration. Together, the two theories conceptualize IHRM implementation as an adaptive process of institutional translation rather than passive policy transfer, providing a robust theoretical lens to explain exactly how micro-level managerial agency resolves macro-level institutional contradictions. This integrated approach thereby advances contemporary debates on HR practice transfer, subsidiary evolution, organizational ambidexterity, and hybridization within multinational enterprises operating in institutionally complex emerging-market contexts (Kostova et al., 2018; Chung & Sparrow, 2024).

8. Literature Review

The foundational tension in International Human Resource Management (IHRM) between global integration and local adaptation has persistently dominated multinational enterprise (MNE) scholarship (Schuler et al., 1993; Schuler et al., 1993). To navigate this complexity, research has evolved through distinct, yet increasingly intersecting, theoretical territories, moving from the pursuit of efficiency through global standardization, to the necessity of institutional local responsiveness, and ultimately toward the dual capability of organizational ambidexterity. However, as MNEs penetrate deeply complex emerging markets, the micro-level mechanisms reconciling these forces remain poorly understood.

Theme 1: Global Standardization and the Pursuit of Operational Efficiency

The impetus for global standardization is firmly rooted in the Resource-Based View and Transaction Cost Economics, which posit that MNEs achieve competitive advantage by leveraging transferable organizational capabilities and minimizing coordination costs across borders (Barney, 1991; Taylor et al., 1996). In practice, this translates into standardized HR architectures, encompassing global talent frameworks, digital performance systems, and corporate reward structures, that enable headquarters to exercise governance, facilitate knowledge transfer, and ensure strategic alignment (Dickmann & Müller-Camen, 2006; Edwards et al., 2016; Sparrow et al., 2016; Kostova et al., 2008). While historically MNEs favored ethnocentric models assuming universal policy transferability (Perlmutter, 2017; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2003), this standardization paradigm inherently assumes institutional conditions characteristic of advanced economies. It presumes stable regulatory frameworks, robust technological infrastructure, and highly individualized employment relations, assumptions that rarely map neatly onto the volatile realities of emerging markets (Kikomeko & Alloysius, 2026). Consequently, the very efficiencies sought through global standardization often trigger profound structural tensions when rigid, Western-centric digital HR systems are deployed in institutionally distant contexts, forcing a shift in scholarly focus toward how subsidiaries maintain local legitimacy.

Theme 2: Local Responsiveness and the Complexities of Institutional Adaptation

This shift brings local responsiveness to the fore, driven primarily by Institutional Theory, which emphasizes that organizations cannot simply execute top-down mandates; they must respond to local regulatory, normative, and cultural expectations to survive (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Rosenzweig & Nohria, 1994; Raaijmakers et al., 2015). In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, employment relationships are deeply embedded in communal values, relational networks, and informal obligations that starkly contrast with algorithmic HR templates (Schneider, 1988; Kamoche, 2004; Jackson, 2004). Thus, local responsiveness requires active institutional translation and modification rather than passive implementation (Kostova, 1999; Greenwood et al., 2011; Kamoche et al., 2015). A critical blind spot in this literature, however, is the tendency to isolate cultural adaptation from rigid legal compliance. While regional studies rightly highlight the necessity of adapting to Afrocentric cultural norms (Aju & Beddewela, 2020) or advocating for strategic macro-level flexibility (Nyamekye et al., 2026), they frequently underplay the severe, codified constraints imposed by host-country labor statutes. This is particularly problematic in legally complex environments like Uganda, where subsidiaries must navigate not only strict statutory mandates, such as Section 66 of the Employment Act (2006), but also an unpredictable, evolving judiciary that generates divergent interpretations of employment law. The literature currently lacks a mechanism-based understanding of how subsidiaries achieve responsiveness when confronted with this specific type of regulatory ambiguity, highlighting the need for a framework capable of holding both global efficiency and local legality in view simultaneously.

Theme 3: Organizational Ambidexterity and the Micro-Foundational Gap

Organizational ambidexterity has emerged as that bridging framework, offering a lens to reconcile the standardization-responsiveness dichotomy. Rooted in March's (1991) exploitation-exploration paradigm, IHRM ambidexterity posits that subsidiaries must simultaneously exploit globally standardized HR systems for efficiency while exploring locally adaptive practices for institutional legitimacy (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004; Deadrick & Gardner, 2008). Scholars recognize that mastering this dual capacity is vital for subsidiary resilience and sustained competitive advantage (Patel et al., 2013; Al-Atwi et al., 2021; Kikomeko et al., 2026). Despite these advancements, the ambidexterity literature remains theoretically constrained by its macro-level focus. The bulk of empirical evidence is derived from developed economies and advanced Asian manufacturing sectors, where mature institutional frameworks support structural ambidexterity through formal, differentiated organizational units (Collins & Clark, 2003; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004). In contrast, sub-Saharan African subsidiaries operate within highly fluid environments where formal structural separations are insufficient. More importantly, contemporary IHRM research has largely overlooked a newly emerging structural barrier: the friction between algorithmic global HR workflows and fluid domestic legal interpretations. As MNEs increasingly rely on automated digital platforms to enforce standardization, subsidiaries face acute "legal-digital friction", a phenomenon where rigid algorithmic performance or termination metrics directly conflict with procedurally focused, judge-made local legal mandates. Consequently, the literature provides insufficient empirical explanation of the specific, day-to-day managerial interventions required to achieve ambidexterity under these conditions. Addressing this lacuna requires shifting the analytical focus from broad structural designs to the micro-foundations of ambidexterity, specifically examining how subsidiary-level actors dynamically translate, hybridize, and negotiate conflicting institutional demands in real time.

9. Methodology

9.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive single-case study design to examine how international human resource management (IHRM) policies are interpreted, translated, and enacted within Unilever Uganda Limited. A qualitative design was appropriate because the study sought to explain the socially constructed processes through which organizational actors reconcile competing demands for global standardization and local responsiveness. Rather than testing predetermined relationships or causal mediational models, the study aimed to generate contextually grounded theoretical explanations of IHRM ambidexterity. Consistent with Andrade (2009), interpretive case studies are particularly suited to theory building by linking rich empirical evidence with conceptual development.

The study was situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which views organizational realities as socially constructed through individuals' meanings, experiences, and interactions. Accordingly, HR policies were understood not as producing uniform outcomes, but as being interpreted and enacted differently across legal, cultural, and institutional contexts. This orientation enabled exploration of how HR professionals, line managers, legal practitioners, regulators, and employee representatives translated globally standardized HR policies into locally legitimate workplace practices.

9.2. Research Context and Case Selection

A single-case strategy was selected because the case offered strong theoretical rather than statistical value. Consistent with Yin (2018), case studies are appropriate for investigating contemporary organizational phenomena embedded within real-world contexts where contextual boundaries are inseparable from the phenomenon. Likewise, Siggelkow (2007) and Andrade (2009) argue that theoretically selected interpretive cases can make significant contributions by uncovering organizational mechanisms and refining existing theory through analytical rather than statistical generalization. Rather than labeling this a "revelatory" case, a designation reserved for previously inaccessible phenomena (Yin, 2018), Unilever Uganda Limited was selected as an extreme and critical case. It represents an extreme manifestation of "legal-digital friction" due to its deep integration into the Unilever global network (which mandates strict adherence to algorithmic digital HR platforms like Workday), while simultaneously operating within Uganda's highly volatile and unpredictable judicial environment. This extreme institutional complexity provides an ideal theoretical laboratory for examining how multinational subsidiaries balance global HR standardization with local responsiveness, thereby extending understanding of IHRM ambidexterity in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Methodologically, the study was informed by the Gioia Methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), utilizing it as an interpretive analytical lens rather than a rigid, formulaic coding procedure. First-order concepts were developed from participants' language, refined into second-order themes, and synthesized into aggregate dimensions while preserving interpretive flexibility. This approach aligns with Harley and Cornelissen (2022), who argue that qualitative rigor stems from transparent analytical reasoning, reflexivity, and theoretically coherent interpretation rather than procedural adherence alone. To ensure structural clarity and fulfill the transparency requirements of this approach, this iterative coding process culminated in the generation of a visual data structure diagram (see **Figure 1**), which explicitly maps the transition from the 15 raw interview accounts to the final emergent theoretical themes.

Accordingly, the study employed an iterative abductive analytical strategy that continuously integrated empirical evidence with organizational ambidexterity, institutional theory, and dynamic capabilities. The resulting design combined methodological transparency with interpretive flexibility, providing a rigorous foundation for explaining how IHRM ambidexterity is constructed, negotiated, and sustained within the institutional context of Unilever Uganda Limited.

9.3. Sample Selection, Inclusion Criteria, Recruitment Procedures, and Data Adequacy

Participant selection followed a purposive sampling strategy consistent with qualitative case study research that prioritizes analytical depth and information richness over statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). The approach was appropriate because the study sought insights from actors with direct knowledge of IHRM policy formulation, interpretation, implementation, and regulation within Unilever Uganda Limited. Sampling decisions were therefore guided by theoretical relevance and participants' capacity to illuminate the processes underlying IHRM ambidexterity.

Participants were selected based on predefined inclusion criteria requiring substantive experience in at least one of three areas: 1) responsibility for designing, implementing, or overseeing HR policies within Unilever Uganda Limited or its regional structure; 2) expertise in labour law, employment regulation, industrial relations, or HR governance affecting multinational enterprises; or 3) involvement in institutional processes shaping or enforcing employment practices. Participants were further required to possess sufficient professional experience to provide informed reflections on the interaction between globally standardized HR systems and locally embedded institutional realities.

Recruitment was conducted through formal organizational and institutional channels. Following approval from Unilever Uganda Limited, access was facilitated through senior HR leadership, while external participants, including labour law practitioners, regulatory officials, employer organizations, and trade union representatives, were purposively identified based on their expertise in employment governance and multinational HR practices. This strategy ensured representation across multiple institutional perspectives while minimizing reliance on a single organizational viewpoint.

The final sample comprised 15 key informants representing diverse actors involved in translating global HR policies into locally legitimate practices. Participants included senior HR executives, the Country HR Director, HR Business Partners, line managers, employee representatives from the Federation of Uganda Employers (FUE), and legal practitioners specializing in Ugandan labour law. Data adequacy was judged based on the principle of theoretical saturation and information richness rather than statistical power. In qualitative interpretive research, a sample size of 15 is considered robust when participants possess deep contextual and specialized knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2015; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The selected informants provided highly granular, overlapping, and complementary accounts of the institutional translation process, ensuring that no new core themes emerged by the final interviews, thereby confirming data adequacy for this bounded case study. To ensure full transparency regarding the sampling logic, the demographic profiles, institutional affiliations, and specific inclusion criteria met by the 15 key informants are detailed in **Table 1** below.

The respondent configuration created a balanced epistemic field comprising organizational decision-makers, legal and regulatory authorities, and labour representatives. This diversity enabled cross-level triangulation of competing institutional perspectives and strengthened the study's capacity to theorize the mechanisms through which IHRM ambidexterity is constructed within a high institutional-distance environment.

Table 1. Participant demographics and institutional role matrix.

Respondent code	Primary institutional role	Sector/organization	Years of relevant experience	Data collection method
R-01	Senior IHRM executive	Unilever East Africa Regional Hub	16 years	Semi-structured interview
R-02	Country HR director	Unilever Uganda Limited	12 years	Semi-structured interview
R-03	HR business partner (HRBP)	Unilever Uganda (Manufacturing)	8 years	Semi-structured interview
R-04	HR business partner (HRBP)	Unilever Uganda (Commercial)	9 years	Semi-structured interview
R-05	Line manager - supply chain	Unilever Uganda Limited	11 years	Semi-structured interview
R-06	Line manager - customer development	Unilever Uganda Limited	7 years	Semi-structured interview
R-07	Internal legal counsel	Unilever Uganda Limited	10 years	Semi-structured interview
R-08	External labor law expert	Leading Corporate Law Firm (Kampala)	15 years	Semi-structured interview
R-09	Legal officer/registrar	Industrial Court of Uganda	14 years	Semi-structured interview
R-10	Executive officer	Federation of Uganda Employers (FUE)	11 years	Semi-structured interview
R-11	Senior talent acquisition specialist	Unilever East Africa Network	8 years	Semi-structured interview
R-12	Reward and benefits manager	Unilever Africa Corporate Hub	13 years	Semi-structured interview
R-13	Employee relations specialist	Unilever Uganda Limited	6 years	Semi-structured interview
R-14	Senior compliance officer	Ministry of Labour (Uganda)	12 years	Semi-structured interview
R-15	Senior trade union representative	Commercial and Industrial Workers Union	10 years	Semi-structured interview

Note: FUE = Federation of Uganda Employers. Years of experience reflect time spent in HR, legal, or regulatory capacities specifically relating to multinational or large-scale employment.

9.4. Temporal Design and Triangulation Strategy

The study adopted a cross-sectional temporal design. Primary interview data were collected over a focused fifteen-month period from May 2025 to August 2026. This specific timeframe was chosen to capture the operational realities of Unilever Uganda's HR practices following the full integration of their digital performance systems, while simultaneously capturing the contemporary application of evolving Ugandan labor jurisprudence.

To further enhance the robustness, validity, and reproducibility of the findings, methodological triangulation was strictly applied. While the primary dataset consisted of N = 15 interviews, the secondary-document component was precisely delineated. This triangulation was achieved through the systematic analysis of 15 internal corporate governance documents and HR policy memoranda, overarching regulatory frameworks (including the Employment Act, 2006), and 8 specific judicial court cases from the Industrial Court of Uganda. By explicitly quantifying and detailing these documentary sources, the study ensures that the secondary evidence underpinning the doctrinal legal analysis is fully transparent and reproducible.

9.5. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data collection was executed through two primary channels: semi-structured interviews and systematic documentary analysis. The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to allow flexibility while ensuring core topics aligned with the three research objectives. Questions were structured to elicit participants' experiences with global HR systems (e.g., Workday), their navigational strategies regarding Ugandan labor laws (specifically Section 66)[3], and the micro-level mechanisms used to balance these demands. The interview guides were pilot-tested with two external HR consultants to ensure clarity and contextual relevance, resulting in minor refinements to the phrasing of legal terminology.

Interviews were conducted in English, which is the official corporate language of Unilever Uganda and the legal language of the Ugandan Industrial Court, thereby eliminating the need for translation and preserving semantic accuracy. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with explicit participant consent.

Concurrently, secondary data collection involved gathering corporate, regulatory, and judicial documents. Corporate documents included internal HR policy manuals, global compliance guidelines, and localized implementation memos. Regulatory and judicial documents centered on the Employment Act of 2006 and a purposive selection of landmark Industrial Court and Supreme Court rulings regarding employment termination.

To further enhance the robustness, validity, and reproducibility of the findings, methodological triangulation was strictly applied. While the primary dataset consisted of N = 15 interviews, the secondary-document component was precisely delineated and quantified. **Table 2** outlines the exact secondary data sources analyzed, ensuring the doctrinal legal analysis is fully transparent and reproducible, as requested.

Table 2. Data sources and triangulation strategy.

Data type	Source	Quantity	Purpose in study
Primary	Semi-structured interviews	15	Capturing managerial sensemaking of legal-digital tensions and the adaptation of globally standardized HR practices to the Ugandan context
Secondary	Corporate documents (HR memoranda and policies)	15	Examining the formal articulation, localization, and compliance requirements of HR policies
Secondary	Judicial court rulings (Industrial Court and Court of Appeal)	8	Mapping the evolving and potentially divergent judicial boundaries shaping Ugandan employment relations
Secondary	Statutory framework	1 (Employment Act, 2006)	Establishing the coercive institutional baseline governing employment practices, including the requirements under Section 66

[3]Section 66 of the Employment Act, Cap 226.

A critical methodological challenge in this study was integrating an inductive, sensemaking approach (Gioia methodology) with a deductive, textual approach (doctrinal legal analysis). To resolve this epistemological friction, the doctrinal legal analysis of the 8 court cases and the Employment Act was treated as an embedded contextual frame rather than a competing coding mechanism. First, the legal documents were analyzed deductively to map the strict procedural boundaries and judicial ambiguities of Ugandan labor law. This "legal boundary map" was then used as a contextual backdrop during the inductive coding of the interview transcripts. This integration strategy allowed the research to capture how managers' sensemaking (inductive) was directly shaped by, and responded to, the rigid constraints of judge-made law (deductive), without forcing legal rulings into participant-centric first-order codes.

9.6. Data Analysis Procedures

- Data analysis followed a **three-phase, qualitatively integrated approach** combining Gioia-informed inductive analysis of interview data, qualitative doctrinal analysis of legal texts, and abductive integration of the two evidence streams. **Phase 1: Interview Data Analysis.** Following verbatim transcription, interview data were imported into NVivo 14 and analysed using a Gioia-informed coding procedure (Gioia et al., 2013). First-order concepts were identified from participants' language and accounts, including expressions such as "making the global system work for Uganda." These concepts were systematically compared and aggregated into second-order themes informed by Institutional Theory and the Dynamic Capabilities Framework, such as "sensing regulatory friction," and subsequently consolidated into higher-order theoretical dimensions, including "institutional translation capability." Constant comparison and analytical memoing supported refinement of the coding structure and interpretation of relationships across emerging concepts and themes. Coding continued until theoretical saturation was reached, indicated by the absence of substantively new concepts or thematic relationships. **Table 3** presents an illustrative excerpt of the resulting data structure.
- **Phase 2: Doctrinal Legal Analysis**. To address the inherent challenge of synthesizing complex legal jurisprudence, a rigorous qualitative doctrinal method was applied to the judicial documents. Rather than directly transcribing dense, poorly punctuated court records (such as the *Bank of Uganda v Kibuuka* and *Barclays Bank vs Godfrey Mubiru* rulings), the legal texts were systematically deconstructed. The relevant legal principles, judicial reasoning, and statutory interpretations were extracted, summarized, and rewritten in a synthesized, accessible academic voice. This ensured that the legal context was integrated into the findings analytically, avoiding disjointed, run-on quotations and maintaining the professional polish and syntactical clarity of the manuscript.
- **Phase 3: Abductive Integration.** Finally, the interview themes and the synthesized legal doctrinal findings were merged through an abductive logic. It is

Table 3. Illustrative gioia data structure.

First-order concepts (Informant Quotes)	Second-order themes (theoretical abstractions)	Aggregate dimensions
"Workday just flags the termination automatically, but we know the Ugandan judge will throw it out if we don't have a manual hearing." (HRBP)	Bypassing algorithmic rigidity	Enacting the glocal compliance matrix
"We act as the middlemen. We take the global template and translate it into what the local lawyers say is safe." (HR Executive)	Managers as institutional translators	Dynamic managerial capabilities
The statutory frameworks under **Sections 58 and 66 of the Employment Act** seem clear on paper, but when you analyze the Supreme Court's judicial developments across the *Stanbic Bank* litigation history, the courts completely shifted the goalposts. For standard separations under Section 58, the Court of Appeal in ***Stanbic Bank (U) Ltd v Constant R. Okou*** upended long-standing practices by ruling that employers cannot unilaterally pay salary in lieu of notice without express employee consent, while introducing severe financial exposure for outstanding worker loans. Concurrently, for disciplinary dismissals under Section 66, the Supreme Court's standard in ***Stanbic Bank Ltd v Kiyemba Mutale*** dictates that a failure to strictly adhere to natural justice and procedural hearing requirements will void a dismissal, inviting severe general and exemplary damages. Structurally, these cases intersect to eliminate any rapid exit route for management: *Okou* blocks quick contractual separations, while *Kiyemba Mutale* aggressively penalizes shortcuts in disciplinary procedures, forcing our corporate teams to anticipate a highly volatile litigation matrix (Legal Counsel)	Navigating judicial unpredictability	Contextualising legal-digital friction

Note: First-order concepts are grounded in participants' accounts; second-order themes and aggregate dimensions represent researcher-informed abstractions developed through iterative comparison and theoretical interpretation.

important to note that this integration was qualitative and descriptive-exploratory in nature; no causal pathways or mediational models (such as statistical mediation testing) were applied. Instead, the convergence of interview data and legal analysis was used to construct a rich, contextually grounded narrative explaining how ambidexterity is operationally achieved.

9.7. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical protocols to protect participants and the participating organization. Ethical clearance was obtained from Muteesa I Royal University Research Ethics Committee (Approval Reference: MRU-REC-2025-104). Formal organizational permission to conduct the research was secured from Unilever Uganda Limited before participant recruitment commenced. All participants provided written informed consent before the interviews, having been briefed on the study's purpose, their right to withdraw without penalty, and the confidential handling of their data. To ensure anonymity, participant identifiers in the text are replaced with alphanumeric codes (e.g., R1-R15), and specific job titles are generalized where necessary to prevent deductive disclosure. Furthermore, access to Unilever Uganda's internal corporate documents was granted under a strict non-disclosure agreement, ensuring that proprietary business strategies or sensitive employee data were not exposed.

9.8. Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the findings were credible, dependable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), several strategies were employed. **Methodological triangulation**, as detailed above, was the primary strategy for establishing credibility, ensuring that HR managers' claims about their practices were cross-verified against corporate policy documents and actual judicial outcomes. **Dependability** was maintained through a comprehensive audit trail that included raw interview transcripts, reflective researcher memos documenting analytical decisions, and the systematic coding structure that led to the data structure diagram. **Confirmability** was enhanced through researcher reflexivity, wherein the primary researcher maintained a journal to critically reflect on potential biases stemming from their professional background in HR and law. Finally, **transferability** was supported by providing thick, descriptive contextual details regarding Uganda's institutional environment, Unilever's global structure, and the specific legal statutes involved, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar MNE subsidiaries in emerging economies.

10. Interview Findings

To ensure structural clarity and fulfill the transparency requirements of the Gioia-informed methodology outlined in Section 11, **Table 4** presents the visual data structure diagram resulting from the iterative coding process. This diagram explicitly maps how the raw, 1st-order interview quotes from the 15 informants were systematically abstracted into 2nd-order theoretical themes, and finally aggregated into three overarching dimensions. This visual mapping directly addresses the need for an inductive data tree, demonstrating a clear, traceable pathway from raw empirical data to theoretical abstraction, thereby ensuring the analytical rigor of the interpretive process (Harley & Cornelissen, 2022).

Table 4. Data structure diagram - operationalizing IHRM ambidexterity in an emerging market context.

Aggregate dimensions	2nd order themes	1st order concepts (informant quotes)
Aggregate dimension 1: Exploitation of global standardization	Centralized digital control	• "We utilize centralized software platforms like Workday for every single lifecycle event" (R-02) • "It gives us a single source of truth" (R-02) • "Simplifies cross-border promotions across the East African cluster" (R-02)
	Uniform talent pipelines	• "We apply the same behavioral standards and cognitive rubrics used globally" (R-11) • "Protects the brand's talent quality" (R-11) • "Allows a Ugandan analyst to transition into a role in Nairobi... without requiring structural retraining" (R-11)
	Homogenized operational safety	• "Global occupational health and safety codes are far more stringent than local statutory requirements" (R-05) • "Ensures a safe working environment and uniform operational excellence" (R-05)

Continued

Aggregate dimension 2: Coercive and normative local pressures	Statutory procedural friction	• "Global HR framework mandates a fast-paced PIP... Section 66 requires a formal disciplinary hearing" (R-07) • "If we rely solely on global corporate guidelines... the Industrial Court may declare the dismissal unfair" (R-07) • "MNEs... treat corporate handbooks as superior to the laws of Uganda" (R-09) • "An internal corporate policy cannot override statutory protections" (R-09)
	Jurisprudential ambiguity	• Doctrinal synthesis: Appellate courts uphold contractual termination rights, while Industrial Courts fiercely penalize procedural defects (e.g., Mufumba, Nassanga, Mubiru, Kibuuka, Okou). • "Dual-layer compliance environment characterised by legal uncertainty" (Synthesized from R-07, R-09)
	Collectivist cultural misalignment	• "Global metrics focus on individual performance goals... Ugandan society is deeply relational and collectivist" (R-04) • "Strict application of standardized attendance... policies can undermine morale" (R-04) • "Introduced localized compassionate leave arrangements that reflect community expectations" (R-04)
	Socio-economic vulnerability	• "High dependency ratios... increase employees' sensitivity to job security" (R-15) • "Rapid performance-based exits may trigger industrial tensions and reputational risks" (R-15) • "HR managers often adopt more consultative and gradual workforce management approaches" (R-15)
Aggregate dimension 3: Institutional translation as a dynamic capability	The glocal compliance matrix	• "We have created a hybridized HR role known as the 'Glocal Compliance Matrix'" (R-02) • "We map [global policy] against a localized compliance filter" (R-02) • "We maintain the global Workday performance goals, but we wrap the execution phase in a legally compliant Ugandan disciplinary protocol" (R-02)
	Managerial agency (institutional translators)	• "Our local HR business partners act as institutional translators" (R-02) • "When a global policy is delivered... we do not reject it, nor do we blindly implement it" (R-02) • "Takes global standards and adjusts them to fit the local context" (R-10)
	Hybridized reward systems	• "Overall grading and reward philosophy is globally standardized... specific benefits are highly localized" (R-12) • "Introduced comprehensive medical insurance covering extended family members" (R-12) • "Structured low-interest salary advance facilities, addressing unique socio-economic pressures" (R-12)
	Iterative feedback loops	• "Continuous, iterative communication between the subsidiary and the regional hub" (R-13) • "Allowing local HR managers to advocate for necessary policy deviations based on real-time legal and cultural feedback" (R-13)

As illustrated in Table 4, the thematic analysis reveals that Unilever Uganda operationalizes IHRM ambidexterity through three interconnected aggregate dimensions: (1) the exploitation of global standardization, (2) the navigation of coercive and normative local pressures, and (3) the deployment of institutional translation as a dynamic capability. These findings move beyond macro-level abstractions to elucidate the micro-level mechanisms through which ambidexterity is enacted.

Objective 1: Operationalization and Efficiencies of Global Standardization

The first dimension of the study investigated the extent to which global standardization is embedded within the core human resource management practices of Unilever Uganda Limited, and the operational efficiencies derived from this alignment. The thematic analysis of primary data reveals that Unilever Uganda is deeply integrated into a homogenized corporate framework directed by the parent company and regional hubs. This standardization is primarily driven by centralized digital architectures, uniform competency frameworks, and global talent pipelines.

During the primary data collection, the Country HR Director (R-02) outlined the structural rigidity and clear benefits of this standardized approach:

> "Our HR functions are heavily bound by global templates. We utilize centralized software platforms like Workday for every single lifecycle event of an employee, from recruitment and onboarding to annual performance evaluations. This standardization provides immense efficiency; it gives us a single source of truth, simplifies cross-border promotions across the East African cluster, and ensures that our corporate values regarding sustainability, safety, and ethical governance are identical to those in London or Rotterdam."

This perspective was corroborated by the Senior Talent Acquisition Specialist (R-11), who emphasized how standardizing global recruitment metrics eliminates local bias:

> "When we source for management trainees or executive leadership in Kampala, we apply the same behavioral standards and cognitive rubrics used globally. This protects the brand's talent quality and allows a Ugandan analyst to transition into a role in Nairobi or London without requiring a structural retraining of their core corporate competencies."

Furthermore, the Line Manager for Supply Chain (R-05) noted that in manufacturing and operational safety, global standards are non-negotiable:

> "Unilever's global occupational health and safety codes are far more stringent than local statutory requirements. Standardizing these practices ensures a safe working environment and uniform operational excellence across our factories, protecting our workforce from industrial hazards."

The findings demonstrate that global standardization at Unilever Uganda Limited is not merely an optional administrative guideline, but a foundational corporate infrastructure. This structure provides clear operational efficiencies, including transaction cost reductions, seamless regional talent mobility, and uniform workplace safety standards (Padrón-Hernández & Gillmore, 2026; Kikomeko, 2026). By enforcing centralized digital platforms and uniform behavioral metrics, the parent company maintains operational control and brand consistency across diverse geographic markets. This structural alignment allows the subsidiary to exploit the collective scale, intellectual property, and operational efficiencies of the multinational enterprise, demonstrating the exploitative dimension of organizational ambidexterity.

Objective 2: Institutional, Legal, and Cultural Pressures Demanding Local Responsiveness

The second objective examined the institutional, legal, cultural, and socio-economic factors that compel Unilever Uganda Limited to adapt globally standardized HRM practices to the local context. The findings demonstrate that the implementation of global HR policies is embedded within a complex institutional environment characterized by statutory employment protections, evolving judicial interpretations, and deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms. Within this context, local responsiveness is not discretionary but a structural necessity for ensuring legal compliance, organizational legitimacy, and workforce stability.

A dominant institutional pressure arises from Uganda's statutory employment framework, particularly the Employment Act, 2006 (Section 66), which establishes mandatory procedural safeguards in employment termination processes, including requirements for fair hearing and due process. The Internal Legal Counsel (R-07) highlighted the tension between global HR systems and domestic statutory requirements:

> "Our global HR framework mandates a fast-paced Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) that can lead to quick termination for underperformance. However, Section 66 of the Ugandan Employment Act requires a formal disciplinary hearing where the employee has a right to representation. If we rely solely on global corporate guidelines and bypass this process, the Industrial Court may declare the dismissal unfair regardless of the strength of the performance evidence."

This illustrates that globalized performance management systems often assume procedural flexibility that is not legally permissible in Uganda, where statutory protections override internal corporate policy. This position was reinforced by the Legal Officer from the Industrial Court (R-09), who emphasized that multinational corporations frequently misinterpret the hierarchy of legal authority:

> "We frequently penalize MNEs in Kampala because they treat corporate handbooks as superior to the laws of Uganda. An internal corporate policy cannot override the statutory protections guaranteed to a Ugandan worker under the Employment Act."

Rather than treating legal analysis as a mere transcription of case law, the findings synthesize this doctrinal evidence to reveal its direct operational impact on

HRM. Doctrinal analysis of evolving Ugandan jurisprudence, including landmark rulings such as *Florence Mufumba v Uganda Development Bank*[4], *Stanbic Bank (Uganda) Ltd v Nassanga Saphinah Kasule*[5], *Barclays Bank of Uganda v Godfrey Mubiru*[6], *Stanbic Bank Ltd v Kiyemba Mutale*[7], *Hilda Musinguzi v Stanbic Bank (U) Ltd*[8], *Kibuuka & Ors v Bank of Uganda*[9], *Bank of Uganda v Kibuuka & Others*[10], and *Stanbic Bank (U) Ltd v Constant R. Okou*[11], demonstrates a highly unpredictable, dual-layer compliance environment. While appellate courts have consistently upheld an employer's contractual right to terminate employment via proper notice or payment in lieu (often rejecting the strict substantive justifications of ILO Convention No. 158), Industrial Courts and appellate rulings on procedural defects (e.g., *Kibuuka*, *Okou*) fiercely protect employees from involuntary exits that bypass statutory procedural safeguards. This divergence between contractual autonomy and strict procedural justice creates acute jurisprudential ambiguity. Consequently, HR practitioners cannot rely on a single legal precedent; instead, they must navigate competing judicial philosophies, ensuring that global termination protocols satisfy both the rigid procedural requirements of the Employment Act and the unpredictable interpretations of the courts.

This evolving jurisprudence creates a dual-layer compliance environment for HR practitioners. The coexistence of employee-protective Industrial Court jurisprudence and the comparatively contractual approach adopted by the Court of Appeal generates a complex compliance environment characterised by legal uncertainty. HR managers therefore operate between competing judicial philosophies that respectively emphasise procedural justice and contractual autonomy, requiring careful balancing of legal obligations with global corporate expectations. As a result, HR managers at Unilever Uganda Limited operate under conditions of legal ambiguity, which encourages precautionary approaches such as enhanced procedural compliance, prior legal consultation before termination decisions, and closer alignment of HR manuals with domestic case law rather than global corporate standards alone. Participants further explained that this uncertainty has institutionalised preventive legal risk management within the HR function, including mandatory legal review of disciplinary decisions, comprehensive documentation of employee performance, detailed record-keeping throughout disciplinary proceedings, and periodic revision of HR manuals to reflect emerging judicial precedents. These measures enable the subsidiary to reduce exposure to employ-

[4]Florence Mufumba v Uganda Development Bank 2014 UCIC Uganda IC J.

[5]Stanbic Bank Uganda Limited v Nassanga Kasule (Civil Appeal No. 182 of 2021) [2023] UGCA 380 (15 November 2023).

[6]Barclays Bank of Uganda v Godfrey Mubiru [1999] UGSC 22 (24 February 1999).

[7]Stanbic Bank Ltd v Kiyemba Mutale [2011] UGSC 18 (6 December 2011).

[8]Musinguzi v Stanbic Bank (U) Limited (Civil Appeal 5 of 2016) [2018] UGSC 78 (28 September 2018).

[9]Kibuuka & Ors v Bank of Uganda (Labour Dispute Claim 184 of 2014) [2016] UGIC 1 (2 February 2016).

[10]Bank of Uganda v Kibuukaand 4 Others (Civil Appeal 281 of 2016) [2021] UGCA 33 (11 May 2021) - [2021].

[11]Stanbic Bank (U) Limited v Okou (Civil Appeal No. 60 of 2020) [2023] UGCA 100 (17 March 2023).

ment litigation while ensuring that globally standardized HR practices remain legally enforceable within Uganda's institutional context.

Beyond legal pressures, the findings also reveal strong socio-cultural constraints on the transfer of standardized HRM systems. The HR Business Partner for Commercial Divisions (R-04) observed that globally standardized performance management systems often reflect individualistic assumptions that are misaligned with Uganda's collectivist social structure: "Our global metrics focus on individual performance goals. But Ugandan society is deeply relational and collectivist. When employees experience family bereavement or community obligations, strict application of standardized attendance and performance policies can undermine morale and create resentment. We have therefore introduced localized compassionate leave arrangements that reflect community expectations."

These findings suggest that global HR systems often fail to fully account for the embeddedness of employment relationships within broader social and familial networks. Consequently, local adaptation becomes necessary to maintain employee trust, social legitimacy, and organizational cohesion. Interview participants further noted that employee commitment in Uganda is closely associated with perceptions of organizational empathy and social support rather than strict procedural uniformity. Consequently, HR managers routinely adapt standardized attendance policies, leave arrangements, employee wellness initiatives, and performance management practices to accommodate culturally embedded obligations while preserving overall organizational performance objectives.

Socio-economic conditions further reinforce this need for responsiveness. The Senior Trade Union Representative (R-15) noted that high dependency ratios and limited formal employment opportunities increase employees' sensitivity to job security and termination decisions. Under such conditions, rapid performance-based exits may trigger industrial tensions, resistance, and reputational risks for the organization. As a result, HR managers often adopt more consultative and gradual workforce management approaches than those envisaged under standardized global HR frameworks. Participants additionally observed that prevailing labour market conditions encourage the organization to prioritize coaching, mentoring, progressive performance improvement plans, redeployment opportunities, and employee assistance mechanisms before considering dismissal. Such practices simultaneously reduce legal exposure, preserve workforce morale, and strengthen the subsidiary's legitimacy within the local employment environment.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that local responsiveness at Unilever Uganda Limited is shaped by a combination of coercive legal requirements, evolving judicial interpretations, normative cultural expectations, and socio-economic realities. The Employment Act, 2006, judicial precedents from both the Industrial Court and Court of Appeal, collectivist social values, and employment insecurity collectively establish institutional boundaries that constrain the direct transfer of global HRM templates. Consequently, the subsidiary continuously modifies standardized policies to align with local legal and socio-cultural expectations. These findings further indicate that legal responsiveness is not merely a compliance obligation but has become a strategic capability through which the subsidiary reconciles global HR standardization with Uganda's dynamic institutional environment.

Objective 3: Organizational Mechanisms and Capabilities for Achieving Ambidexterity

The final dimension evaluated the precise organizational mechanisms and dynamic capabilities through which Unilever Uganda Limited balances these competing demands, achieving functional IHRM ambidexterity. The data reveal that the firm does not choose one approach over the other. Instead, it builds dynamic, hybridized structures, iterative communication pathways, and localized compliance tracking networks.

The Country HR Director (R-02) explained how this operational balance is structurally managed:

> "We have created a hybridized HR role known as the 'Glocal Compliance Matrix'. Our local HR business partners act as institutional translators. When a global policy is delivered from the parent hub, we do not reject it, nor do we blindly implement it. We map it against a localized compliance filter. For instance, we maintain the global Workday performance goals, but we wrap the execution phase in a legally compliant Ugandan disciplinary protocol, ensuring we satisfy both global corporate metrics and Section 66 of our local Employment Act."

The Executive Officer from the Federation of Uganda Employers (R-10) confirmed that this hybrid approach is highly effective:

> "Unilever Uganda stands out because it actively engages with local employer federations to benchmark their policies. It takes global standards and adjusts them to fit the local context, ensuring it remains corporate leaders while respecting Ugandan industrial relations."

Furthermore, the Reward and Benefits Manager (R-12) described how global compensation structures are adjusted to fit local economic realities:

> "While our overall grading and reward philosophy is globally standardized to maintain equity, the specific benefits are highly localized. We introduced comprehensive medical insurance covering extended family members and structured low-interest salary advance facilities, addressing the unique socio-economic pressures faced by our Ugandan workforce while staying within global budgetary caps."

Finally, the Employee Relations Specialist (R-13) highlighted the importance of continuous, iterative communication between the subsidiary and the regional hub, allowing local HR managers to advocate for necessary policy deviations based on real-time legal and cultural feedback.

The findings reveal that explicit managerial agency and the development of dynamic structural capabilities enable organizational ambidexterity within Unilever

Uganda Limited. By deploying local HR managers as "institutional translators" and developing mechanisms such as a "Glocal Compliance Matrix," the subsidiary bridges the tension between global standardization and local responsiveness. Such hybrid execution allows multinational subsidiaries to preserve the efficiency advantages of global corporate systems while adapting practices to host-country institutional requirements and cultural expectations (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Kostova & Roth, 2002; Kikomeko & Ogbe, 2026; Rosenzweig & Nohria, 1994). This balance illustrates that IHRM ambidexterity functions as a dynamic capability through which multinational subsidiaries simultaneously maintain internal corporate alignment and achieve external institutional legitimacy (Birkinshaw & Hood, 1998; Birkinshaw et al., 2011; Teece, 2007).

11. Discussion

This study set out to move beyond macro-level abstractions by examining the micro-foundations of IHRM ambidexterity within a sub-Saharan African context. The findings demonstrate that achieving balance between global integration and local responsiveness is not a static structural design, but rather a continuous, dynamically negotiated process. By unpacking the operational realities at Unilever Uganda Limited, the discussion below synthesizes the empirical insights with existing literature to elucidate how subsidiaries navigate the intersection of algorithmic global mandates and complex local institutional terrains.

Discussion of Objective 1: Global Standardization of HRM Practices and Operational Efficiency

The findings regarding global standardization at Unilever Uganda Limited demonstrate that the firm utilizes an integrated, centralized HR infrastructure driven by digital technologies such as Workday and uniform performance metrics. This aligns with classic IHRM literature, which argues that standardization is vital for multinational enterprises to protect corporate identity, minimize cross-border transaction costs, and establish scalable operational architectures (Teece, 2016; Williams & Shaw, 2011).

Scholars such as Marler and Boudreau (Meijerink et al., 2021) emphasize that centralized digital HR systems act as a powerful mechanism for corporate control, enabling parent hubs to monitor operational outcomes in real time across global business units. This aligns with observations from respondents R-02 and R-11, who noted that uniform metrics ensure corporate values and talent benchmarks remain identical from London to Kampala.

Furthermore, the operational efficiencies identified by the supply chain and commercial managers, such as streamlined regional mobility and strict occupational safety codes, demonstrate how standardization functions as a core exploitative capability. By replicating proven, high-standard corporate protocols across borders, the MNE reduces administrative redundancies and guarantees a baseline of operational excellence. However, consistent with the study's theoretical framing, this high level of digital homogenization inherently generates institutional friction if applied without contextual adjustments. While global standardization provides a clear framework for operational alignment, it simultaneously creates a rigid corporate pressure that can blind parent companies to the unique legal and cultural challenges of host-country environments, thereby necessitating the explorative local capabilities discussed below.

Discussion of Objective 2: Local Responsiveness and Institutional Pressures

Importantly, the empirical findings reveal that the influence of Section 66 extends far beyond mere compliance with a fixed statutory requirement. Aligning with Institutional Theory, the data illustrate that HR managers operate within a highly fluid judicial ecosystem rather than a static legal framework. Rather than acting as clear, predictable rules, evolving judicial interpretations generate acute jurisprudential ambiguity. While lower industrial tribunals have generally adopted a worker-protective approach emphasizing strict procedural compliance, appellate decisions have simultaneously reaffirmed employer contractual rights and managerial prerogatives. This divergence between procedural justice and contractual autonomy creates a dual-layer compliance trap.

Consequently, the adaptation strategies employed by subsidiary HR managers are not merely reactive responses to statutory requirements; they represent proactive efforts to manage legal risk and maintain organizational legitimacy within an unpredictable body of employment jurisprudence. This finding reinforces Institutional Theory's argument that organizations must continuously respond to shifting regulatory and legal pressures to secure legitimacy and operational stability (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008; Kostova & Roth, 2002; Karst et al., 2024). It also extends this theory by demonstrating that in emerging markets, "coercive" isomorphism is not monolithic; subsidiaries must interpret and respond to conflicting coercive signals from different levels of the domestic judicial system.

Discussion of Objective 3: Achieving Organizational Ambidexterity in IHRM

The discovery that Unilever Uganda Limited balances these competing corporate and external pressures through specialized organizational mechanisms provides a clear, empirical example of organizational ambidexterity in practice. This supports the conceptual models of organizational ambidexterity (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Wang & Rafiq, 2014), which state that high-performing organizational units must develop the dual capability to simultaneously execute exploitation and exploration. Crucially, rather than relying on formal structural separation, the findings highlight that Unilever Uganda achieves this through contextual ambidexterity. The subsidiary leverages internal dynamic capabilities, specifically, sensing host-country institutional shifts and seizing opportunities to reconfigure corporate templates, to construct a highly functional, hybridized IHRM framework (Mousavi et al., 2019).

The operational deployment of HR business partners as "institutional translators" who filter global policies through a "Glocal Compliance Matrix" matches the IHRM integration-responsiveness frameworks described by Deadrick & Gardner (2008), Rosenzweig & Nohria (1994), and Nohria & Ghoshal (1994). This finding makes a distinct theoretical contribution by illuminating the micro-foundations of ambidexterity; it shows that "dynamic capabilities" are not abstract firm-level phenomena, but are fundamentally enacted through the cognitive and social agency of localized HR managers who possess dual institutional knowledge. This strategic hybridization ensures that the core corporate efficiencies of the global brand are preserved, while the execution methods are adjusted to satisfy local legal requirements and societal values.

The adaptation of reward structures to include extended family medical insurance and salary advance facilities, as detailed by respondent R-12, demonstrates how structural boundaries can be flexible enough to accommodate unique local socio-economic realities without exceeding global budget limits (Alemiga & Kibukamusoke, 2019). Ultimately, this ambidextrous capability enables the subsidiary to manage the continuous tension between internal corporate control and external institutional legitimacy, offering a comprehensive, mechanism-based model for multinational operations within developing economies. It is important to note, however, that as a qualitative, single-case study, these findings explain the operative mechanisms of this balance descriptively and contextually; they do not statistically test causal relationships or mediational pathways between standardization, responsiveness, and performance outcomes.

12. Conclusions and Recommendations

12.1. Conclusions

This qualitative, single-case study demonstrates that organizational ambidexterity within international human resource management (IHRM) is an essential strategic requirement for multinational enterprises operating in developing host countries such as Uganda. The empirical and doctrinal analysis of Unilever Uganda Limited reveals that while global standardization provides an important framework for corporate alignment, operational scale, and digital efficiency, it faces severe systemic friction when implemented without regard for local realities. This resistance stems from the coercive pressures of host-country labor statutes, specifically the strict procedural mandates of Section 66 of the Ugandan Employment Act, 2006, as well as the normative pressures of collectivist workplace cultures and unique socio-economic realities.

Unlike prior macro-level empirical studies in sub-Saharan Africa that often isolate cultural adaptation from rigid legal constraints, this research provides a granular, micro-level account of how ambidexterity is practically negotiated. The findings highlight that the primary friction in emerging markets is not merely conceptual, but operational, manifesting as "legal-digital friction" between algorithmic global systems and unpredictable domestic jurisprudence.

The central conclusion of this research is that high-performing multinational subsidiaries do not manage this tension by choosing one orientation over the other, nor do they permit complete decoupling from the parent organization. Instead, they build internal dynamic capabilities that allow for continuous policy hybridization. By utilizing local HR practitioners as "institutional translators" who run global corporate directives through a "Glocal Compliance Matrix," Unilever Uganda effectively exploits the strengths of its global brand identity while adjusting its execution to maintain local regulatory and social legitimacy. Ultimately, this study concludes that IHRM ambidexterity is a dynamic, continuous capability that requires flexible structures, open communication pathways, and proactive managerial agency to successfully balance corporate efficiency with host-country institutional compliance. Importantly, consistent with the study's interpretive methodological design, these conclusions are theoretically drawn from contextual, qualitative evidence; they do not empirically test causal relationships, nor do they claim that dynamic capabilities or institutional translation statistically mediate performance outcomes.

Recommendations Based on the empirical findings and theoretical insights generated by this study, the following recommendations are proposed for multinational enterprises, corporate HR strategists, and industry policy bodies:

- **Move Beyond Rigid Global Handbooks to Explicit "Glocal" Adjustment Frameworks:** MNE parent companies should abandon rigid, single-standard global HR handbooks and instead codify explicit adjustment frameworks that formally authorize local subsidiary directors to modify execution timelines and disciplinary protocols to match host-country statutory requirements without needing multi-layered corporate approvals.
- **Embed Local Compliance Filters into Global HR Software:** Digital transformation teams should restructure global HR information systems (such as Workday) to include localized compliance alerts. These alerts should prevent automatic, system-generated performance separations until the mandatory host-country procedural steps, such as local disciplinary procedures mandated by the Ugandan Employment Act, 2006, have been formally completed and verified by local legal counsel.
- **Restructure Compensation Frameworks Around Local Realities:** Global reward and benefits managers should pivot away from entirely individualistic incentive designs when operating in collectivist cultures. Instead, they should allocate a portion of the benefits budget to localized support systems, such as extended family healthcare packages, communal bereavement support, and salary advance facilities, maximizing workforce motivation and alignment with local social needs.
- **Establish Continuous Knowledge-Sharing Loops with Local Employer Bodies:** Subsidiary HR directors should maintain active, formal institutional relationships with local bodies such as the Federation of Uganda Employers (FUE) and national trade unions. This engagement allows firms to engage in social dialogue regarding labor policy and anticipate legislative changes.

12.2. Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers granular theoretical insights into the micro-foundations of

IHRM ambidexterity, it is subject to standard limitations associated with qualitative, single-case research. First, the findings are contextually bound to Unilever Uganda Limited and the specific legal environment of Kampala; therefore, analytical generalization to MNEs in vastly different institutional contexts should be done with caution. Second, the cross-sectional temporal design captures a specific snapshot of HR practices and judicial interpretation, limiting the ability to observe how the "Glocal Compliance Matrix" evolves longitudinally over multiple economic cycles. Future research should employ mixed-methods or quantitative designs to test the generalizability of the "institutional translator" mechanism across multiple MNE subsidiaries in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to empirically test whether the presence of localized compliance filters statistically mediates the relationship between global standardization and subsidiary performance outcomes.

13. Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in Manuscript Preparation

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools solely for limited language editing, including improving grammar, sentence structure, clarity, and readability of selected sections. No AI tool was used to generate the research ideas, research questions, theoretical arguments, methodology, data, data analysis, findings, interpretation, conclusions, or references. The intellectual content and scholarly contribution of the manuscript are entirely the authors' own. All AI-assisted suggestions were critically reviewed, revised where necessary, and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content and accuracy of the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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