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Vietnamese public relations practitioners: Perceptions of an emerging field



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ABSTRACT

Our exploratory research into contemporary PR practice in Vietnam is underpinned by 12 semi-structured interviews with senior Vietnamese PR executives from various agencies. We selectively use professionalism as an underlying theoretical framework to explore key areas of PR as a profession in Vietnam by considering the impact of environmental variables such as culture and the media system. This paper provides a current snapshot of how an industry introduced by Western multinational corporations has adapted to the Vietnamese context.

Demand for PR in Vietnam is still mostly driven by multinational corporations to promote products through media relations. Many Vietnamese companies are unsure about investing in PR due to a limited understanding of what it is, misperceiving the practice as advertorial placement due to a widely entrenched “envelope culture”. We have found interpersonal relationships during and outside of official work hours are highly valued for effective PR practice, and that clients mostly rely on agencies to implement execution rather than advise on long-term strategies. Our findings underscore the need for the establishment of a professional association and more PR training courses to increase understanding about the relatively new Vietnamese PR industry and guide its future development.

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1. Introduction

In a country where “modern” public relations (PR) has been officially practiced for less than two decades, the industry’s positioning in its early stages influences its long-term development. To a backdrop of propaganda used by authorities to build national unity in a previously war-torn country, multinational corporations (MNCs) brought PR to Vietnam in the 1990s after the country opened its doors to the world economy in 1986. In a one-party state co-existing with propaganda, PR in Vietnam is trying to find its way to professionalisation while facing challenges such as limited understanding of what PR practice and its benefits are, a shortage of trained personnel and the absence of legal and professional frameworks. It is also crucial to document the under-researched Vietnamese PR industry to help combat ethnocentrism in PR literature and contribute to international PR scholarship.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to expand the body of knowledge about Asian PR through exploring how professional PR standards apply to Vietnam through the perspectives of senior PR practitioners, who the authors believe are among the industry’s pioneers and are well-informed about the Vietnamese context.

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Our research proves “Western” PR practice introduced to Vietnam by MNCs has adapted to the local context, shown by the prevalence of interpersonal relations, the existence of the controversial envelope culture, and the majority of PR practitioners learning from their seniors on the job rather than undertaking formal PR education. We argue that for optimum long-term development of the industry, there needs to be a better understanding of what PR is and the value it can bring to organisations and society at large, fostered through stronger relations between agency PR practitioners and clients, and the establishment of a professional body with further opportunities for PR education.

The paper reviews literature on PR and professionalism, PR in Vietnam and PR in the Asian region, followed by the methodology, findings, discussions and conclusion.

2. Background

2.1. *Public relations and professionalism*

What exactly constitutes a profession, professionalisation and professionalism is open to debate, especially in PR when the term PR itself draws ambiguity (Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes, 2008). Pieczka and L'Etang's (2006) review of professionalism and PR has found PR is a contemporary profession comprising a body of knowledge, ethics, and accreditation/certification. Professionalisation is the process, or steps taken, to gain professionalism status, deemed a common goal among PR practitioners and educators. Attempts have been made to set common standards and measurements to professionalise the industry and boost its standing as a profession (Cameron, Sallot, & Lariscy, 1996; Lages & Simkin, 2003; Sallot, Cameron, & Lariscy, 1997; van Ruler, 2005). Professionalism is a set of standards, ideal characteristics, and attitudes that PR educators and practitioners are urged to adhere to and promote, mostly shown in the dimensions operationalised by various scholars and the concept of role (Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006).

In a study operationalising PR professionalism, Cameron et al. (1996) categorised eight dimensions of professionalism: (1) technical skills; (2) salary levels; (3) research competency; (4) organisational status; (5) ethical performance; (6) education; (7) gender and racial equity; and (8) accreditation. These dimensions were used as a framework to analyse PR practice in numerous Asian countries including Korea (Park, 2003) to compare the differences in government and corporate PR practitioners' perceptions of professional standards, India (Gupta, 2007) to evaluate the varying degrees of professionalism in different PR areas, and China (Li, Cropp, Sims, & Jin, 2012) to investigate how Chinese PR practitioners perceived of their profession and place it on professional dimensions.

Other studies, while not using the exact same dimensions, approached the topic from slightly different perspectives such as Wu and Taylor (2003) and Abdullah and Threadgold (2008). Wu and Taylor (2003) interviewed Taiwanese PR practitioners to obtain their perceptions of their roles and the general public's perceptions of PR. They found media relations and planning events were two key activities in Taiwanese PR, and suggested practitioners focus on improving education, professionalism, and internationalisation. In Malaysia, Abdullah and Threadgold (2008) used sociology and strategic management approaches to explore where academics, PR practitioners and business leaders met and diverged on PR professional standards.

Pieczka and L'Etang (2006) and Johansen (2001) argued this trait and characteristic approach, while prevalent in PR research, was problematic because it did not take into consideration wider societal factors. However, we maintain that if we cautiously adopt Cameron et al.'s (1996) dimensions by offering them to research participants as ideas rather than predisposition, while considering the five country-specific variables (culture, media environment, the political system, economic system and level of development, and activism) proposed by Vercic, Grunig, and Grunig (1996), and the influence of PR practitioners' differing backgrounds and ages (Cameron et al., 1996), this functional framework will serve as a solid starting point to analyse the Vietnamese PR practice, about which organised data and literature is limited.

We acknowledge criticism of professionalism from scholars such as Pieczka and L'Etang (2006), who call for approaches marking a departure from dominant paradigms to push the boundaries of PR research. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence and the limited amount of published work about the Vietnamese PR industry suggest it is not well understood by society, stakeholders, clients and even people working in the field. Therefore we wish to conduct exploratory research to establish a clearer understanding of the role and work of PR practitioners, as perceived by themselves, to initially identify specific factors and issues affecting the Vietnamese PR industry as it strives to become a profession in a one-party state Asian country.

Our intention is not to strictly measure Vietnamese PR practice against these dimensions of professionalism but rather to diversify the body of knowledge on PR and professionalism and contribute to it where relevant.

2.2. *Public relations in Vietnam*

Published research about Vietnamese PR has been minimal, with anecdotal evidence indicating understanding about PR in Vietnam is limited on a domestic level, and virtually non-existent among international research and industry circles.

To provide context, even before “PR” came to Vietnam in the 1990s, the Communist Government used propaganda during the Vietnam War and its aftermath as part of its nation-building efforts in line with social-authoritarian theory (Lowenstein, 1979, cited in Sriramesh, 2003). Today's media landscape is owned and censored by the government.

When the US embargo was lifted in 1994, major MNCs came to Vietnam, many of whom, along with European companies, “adapted their existing PR capabilities and practices to suit business conditions and activities in Vietnam, and thus started to transfer knowledge to local employees” (Mak, 2009, p. 213). While there are no official figures available about the number

of communication agencies in Vietnam, anecdotal evidence suggests the figure has exploded to 7000 (Dantri, 2010). Ogilvy initially attempted to establish its own office but learnt it was much more viable to benefit from local knowledge through partnership with a local agency, and hence T&A Ogilvy formed in 2009 before Edelman joined forces with AVC in 2012.

PR is still commonly misperceived as bar girls pouring beers and offering other services in Vietnam. One of the country's most popular publications, Cong An Tp. Ho Chi Minh, has attempted to provide a proper definition of PR in a story before explaining how the term is used to describe attractive young ladies pouring champagne (Linh, 2012). Tuoi tre News (2013), another prominent news publication, has labelled "beer girls" as "PR staff".

In academia, the only published work in English about PR in Vietnam comprises two anecdotal journal articles and one empirical study by (McKinney, 2000, 2006, 2007), and literature reviews by Mak (2009) and Loan (2011). In 2000, McKinney declared PR "in its infancy" and largely misunderstood as "guest relations". In 2006, he found PR was perceived as events management and "the business of entertaining officials", and argued the line between PR and advertising was blurred due to confusion about PR and the envelope culture (p. 19). In his empirical study of business managers' perceptions of PR, McKinney (2007) implied PR practice was seen as an important business function despite the Vietnamese not "completely understanding the concept" (p. 46). Mak (2009) concluded Vietnamese PR had potential for further strategic PR practice given its future economic growth. Loan (2011) contended PR in Vietnam "borrows from the West but is practiced in the Vietnamese style", arguing "understanding the local knowledge and establishing personal connections . . . are two of the key principles for doing PR in the Vietnamese way" (p. 307). However, Loan did not further elaborate on the "Vietnamese way" of practicing PR.

The only empirical data on how Vietnamese PR practitioners themselves perceived their role and industry was derived from Hang's (2010) survey conducted in 2007 among practitioners in large PR agencies, published in Vietnamese. She found a heavy focus on media relations and event management, that personal relationships were significant while an envelope culture – in which PR practitioners pay journalists to attend their press conferences and publish their press releases – was widely entrenched. The study cited a lack of professionalism, honesty and a legal framework as industry limitations, calling for more professional training and education, a code of conduct and professional body, and a proper legal framework in Vietnam as solutions to building "professional PR".

The two empirical studies about PR in Vietnam appeared to adopt Western, normative concepts without seriously taking into account environmental factors specific to Vietnam. Hang's (2010) research did not clarify use of a theoretical framework, it was vague about methodology and made various assumptions such as quoting the Public Relations Society of America's code of ethics to inform the establishment of a Vietnamese version. Meanwhile, limitations in McKinney's (2007) study include a small quantitative sample size and research participants being business managers, rather than PR practitioners, with limited understanding of PR.

Additionally, given these empirical studies were conducted in 2007, and the industry has since evolved, the authors believe more current data needs to be generated to provide a better understanding of the Vietnamese PR industry and how it has progressed in recent times from the perspective of local PR practitioners.

2.3. *Public relations in the Asian region*

Despite Vietnam's notable absence, an increasing body of work on PR in Asian countries includes China (Chen & Culbertson, 2003; Li et al., 2012); Malaysia (Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008); Singapore (Lim, Goh, & Sriramesh, 2005; Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009); South Korea (Berkowitz & Lee, 2004; Park, 2003); Taiwan (Huang, 2000; Wu & Taylor, 2003); Thailand (Ekachai, 1996), the Philippines (Panol, 2000). There have also been cross-national comparisons between, for example, India, Japan and South Korea (Sriramesh, Kim, & Takasaki, 1999) and Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the United States (Wu, 2011).

One recurring "non-Western" theme in Asian PR literature is the envelope culture, found further afield in Africa and the former Soviet bloc. In Korea PR practitioners regularly send gifts and "Ddukgab" (money for buying Korean cakes) to government officials and members of the media to solicit favours in return (Park, 2002; Sriramesh et al., 1999). Wu (2011) argued PR practitioners giving journalists gifts and socialising with them were also culturally acceptable in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan but that journalists' acceptance of cash was regarded as unethical in these countries, although it did happen. A study by Lo, Chan, and Pan (2005) found the majority of journalists in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan believed receiving money was unethical, but gift giving in other guises was much more acceptable. While Panol's (2000) profile of PR in the Philippines did not mention an envelope culture, members of the press moonlight as PR workers, with Panol arguing "in a country where per capita incomes are low, there is always economic pressure to augment livelihood sources that may often pose ethical dilemmas . . . there is a need to evaluate the extent of this problem and how it is affecting public perceptions of the profession" (p. 252).

Another characteristic of Asian PR is the power of interpersonal relationships. Wu (2005) stated relationship theory and the personal influence model provided a solid theoretical framework for PR practice in many Asian cultures, with guanxi (interpersonal relations), renqing (favours) and mianzi (face) cornerstones of relationships. Huang (2000) saw interpersonal relationships as the bedrock of Asian PR practice and the wider society. The Vietnamese business managers in McKinney's 2007 study ranked oral skills above written skills which McKinney at the time dismissed as a "less than complete understanding of the importance of writing skills".

To further international PR scholarship, Vercic et al. (1996) identified generic principles and environmental variables – including culture, political ideology, the economic system, the media system and level of activism – and suggested

researchers undertaking cross-national or country-specific analyses adopt these principles and variables critically. While a rise in research outside the traditional territory of the U.S. and Europe has resulted from calls for a more “holistic” body of knowledge (Sriramesh, 2009; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2007; Vercic et al., 1996), international PR studies have been deemed largely ethnocentric. Literature has flagged issues associated with the imposition of best practice “Western” principles, based on directness, accountability and transparency, on high context, hierarchal and collectivist cultures without fully understanding these differing contexts (Macnamara, 2004, 2012). With ideals predominantly derived from the West considered universal and best practice for all contexts, the analysed context then seems less sophisticated and even unethical. This further highlights the need for us to examine environmental factors specific to Vietnam when adopting professionalism dimensions to investigate the local PR practice.

Based on our literature review, our research question is: What are Vietnamese PR practitioners’ perceptions of their role and their industry in relation to professionalism?

3. Methodology

Using the grounded theory approach, we have chosen to interview PR practitioners working in various agencies to explore their perceptions of their role and the industry in Vietnam using seven categories of Cameron et al.’s (1996) professional dimensions – skills, research, organisational status, ethical performance, education, gender equality and accreditation. Questions about salary have been left out because the authors believe it is culturally inappropriate to ask about income, especially when half of the respondents are agency owners. We deliberately posed open-ended questions to the interviewees to encourage elaboration, and slightly revised them to include new concepts as we proceeded with the interviews, as suggested by Daymon and Holloway (2010).

Because there is no directory or database of PR agencies available in Vietnam, the 12 participants have been sourced from the authors’ professional and personal contacts. As McKinney (2007) has implied, it is difficult to garner research participants without pre-existing relations due to the importance of interpersonal relations in Vietnam, but the researchers’ profession requires frequent engagement with the local PR industry, permitting close access to the participants. All participants were contacted via phone to ensure they met the criteria (currently working in an agency in a managerial position with at least five years’ industry experience) and to informally seek their consent to participate. All respondents then received a formal invitation letter with the project’s ethics approval number outlining research aims, confidentiality measures, and participant’s rights and responsibilities.

All of the participants are Vietnamese, and four of them have more than ten years of experience each working in PR. Seven of the participants are female. Half of the participants are managing directors of local or joint-venture PR agencies. The other six participants are PR managers or directors.

Twelve interviews were conducted in May and June 2013 with nine senior PR practitioners based in Ho Chi Minh City and three in Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh City is considered Vietnam’s commercial hub where the vast majority of communication agencies are located (intellasia, 2005) while Hanoi is the capital and political centre.

All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and recorded. The interviews, lasting from 45 to 88 min, were transcribed and translated into English. They were then cross-checked by the researchers to ensure consistency between the English versions and the original Vietnamese interviews. The revised English translations were analysed using NVivo to conduct a thematic textual analysis. We coded the data according to the seven professional dimensions mentioned above, looked for repeating themes across the dimensions, and grouped them in the categories presented in the findings and discussion sections.

This study does not incorporate PR practitioners from in-house communication departments from various organisations. While this allows for consistent data, it also limits insight from clients and does not permit us to understand the strategic role PR might play within an organisation.

4. Findings

Six key findings have emerged from this study

4.1. PR is focused on building and maintaining relationships

All of the 12 PR practitioners interviewed were asked what they believed were the most important tasks and skills needed to excel in their job. The authors counted the number of participants that nominated a particular task and skill, and then listed the most common responses among the participants in descending order (for example, more respondents nominated meeting with clients to various degrees as among the most important tasks than developing proposals) in Table 1.

The agency PR practitioners spend a large amount of their time with clients and in Vietnam, relationships are developed not just for work but also for friendship, further fuelling demand for interpersonal skills. One account manager says:

“I consider them [clients] as my friends. And I have many friends who are my clients . . . I want to be friends with them because I would like to, and that is it. If business is an add-on, that would be great.”

Table 1

The most important tasks and skills needed in PR in Vietnam as nominated by participants.

Most important tasks	Most important skills
Meeting with clients (working and socialising) to various degrees	(Interpersonal) communication
Developing proposals	Writing
Working and socialising with media	Creativity
Supervision of team and campaign quality	English
Planning	Expectation management
Educating (clients) about the media and PR	Building relationships
Execution	Problem solving
Building relationships	Persuasion
	Strategic thinking

Some respondents nominate building relationships as both a task and a skill, and report it happens at all levels of management to varying degrees. Some of the research participants describe the process of developing and maintaining relationships as managing expectations between their agencies, the media, and clients. The respondents generally believe the bulk of their clients do not have expertise in PR and there is a need to spend time educating them about PR and the media landscape.

Developing proposals is the respondents' second most commonly cited task. However, only one respondent mentions the ability to research as among the most important PR skills, although all of the respondents said they undertake research when writing proposals. One managing director says:

“(We have) a week or shorter, two to three days, to prepare a proposal. The quality depends on the time invested.”

According to the participants, research is done to varying degrees of sophistication, ranging from desktop research and media and competitor analysis, to focus groups, monitoring online conversations and buying market research reports. However, due to their large workloads, and immediate deadlines from clients, some respondents lament it is difficult to invest a lot of time and research into one proposal.

English is seen an important skill because most agency clients are MNCs. Numerous respondents consider these corporations as a driving force behind the development of the Vietnamese PR industry. One managing director says:

“MNCs have been aware of and using PR for a long time while Vietnamese companies just see PR as media relations”.

Numerous respondents also name “strategic thinking” as an important skill, particularly the managing directors, while those in lower positions generally focus more on technical tasks. One managing director said:

“In our company, we always ask questions like ‘so what?’ so that they can lead us to the end of an issue. What’s the bottom line of PR? It’s to help businesses to solve their goal, in the local market.”

4.2. Practitioners perceptions of PR are predominantly centred on product PR and media relations

Predominantly focused on product PR and media relations, the respondents' perceptions of PR vary. Almost half of the respondents view PR's role as crafting and delivering “the right message”. One managing director says: “PR is about delivering the message that clients wish for”. One respondent defines PR in terms of its tasks, both short-term and long-term, while another respondent speaks of the need to build a good client image. Meanwhile, another managing director says:

“PR is about providing communication solutions to change people's perception and behaviour, and to help businesses reach their goals”.

Strategic views of PR have emerged during descriptions of its role, with one respondent likening PR to “a safety net” during crises. However, most respondents view PR as consumer and product PR, underscored by their belief clients benefit the most from PR.

Respondents describe the media's view of PR as a revenue and information source, with information not adequately vetted or filtered due to the envelope culture, and say this spurs a perception of PR among many Vietnamese companies as advertorial placement. Some of the respondents believe the perception of PR as media buying hampers PR's potential in Vietnam. This also feeds negative connotations about the media as a commodity that can be bought and controlled with another respondent saying:

“Actually they (the public) now don't trust them (the media) much. But we must consider the content of the writing, and if it is offensive to the public they will hate it, so we need to be clever”.

However, respondents generally believe understanding of PR is increasing on a positive trajectory. One respondent states:

“I think (the perception) has changed a lot. Previously, PR was made in reference to restaurants, bars, which made people misunderstand. But now, the media have become more aware of the role of PR. They no longer see PR as a parasite but rather as a bridge between them and businesses.”

Numerous respondents believe there is much potential for PR in Vietnam if more Vietnamese companies learn more about the value of PR and employ PR services, with one respondent saying:

“There are so many (Vietnamese) companies and they need PR”.

One respondent believes the current state-controlled media environment hinders PR's development:

“The media here is controlled by the government and we do not have the private sector for that. This is a barrier for the media which plays a major part in PR. It cannot develop fast. People have to avoid this and that and try to develop. So the growth rate of the market is slower than other markets, which leads to the situation that our market is still at the beginning phase.”

4.3. *Agency PR practitioners believe clients generally do not value their expertise*

Respondents think clients generally view them as suppliers. A client service director says:

“Most clients now think of PR agencies as suppliers, not partners. They think PR, for example, is media relations. So with such perceptions they obviously will act accordingly. They think: ‘I have an event and I invite journalists to come to amplify that event and produce a number of articles’. If so, that is exactly the work of suppliers”.

Respondents say while clients know PR is important, many do not fully understand what it is. Some of the respondents say clients are unwilling to share business objectives, resulting in disconnection between campaigns and client goals, and that this restricts PR to short-term efforts rather than long-term relationships. According to the respondents, as little as 10% of clients are willing to share their business objectives and forge long-term partnerships.

Respondents also speak of clients refusing to listen to agencies' advice, resulting in poor campaigns. However, some respondents say they have noticed an increase in understanding of, and appreciation for, strategic PR, with one respondent saying:

“Ten years ago in Vietnam, PR was not developed, causing people not to have specific knowledge and strategies. . . the level of demand for (strategic) PR has increased mainly in the past two years”.

Some respondents also show an appreciation of measuring the effects of PR, with one saying:

“You can do pre- and post-campaign research to evaluate the awareness level, to understand how the key message is being perceived, or if it is being delivered in the right way”.

Due to the recent proliferation of agencies, PR practitioners state competition among them is fierce, and this trend harms the industry in the long-term. One respondent says:

“(The biggest challenge) for agencies is unfair and unhealthy competition. There's a difference between skilled and unskilled PR people . . . sometimes clients tend to choose agencies based on price. Thus there should be a minimum standard for fairer competition.”

Respondents say clients holding agencies in low regard also leads to other problems such as clients fielding ideas from agencies and implementing these ideas themselves.

4.4. *Respondents have mixed views about ethics*

There seems to be a lack of consensus among the respondents regarding what constitutes ethics in PR in Vietnam. Two main themes emerge from our analysis: the quality of PR content, and the envelope culture. Participants speak of a need for correct content, harmless to the public. A PR manager says:

“[Ethics to me] is about refusing to give out information that does not exist. That's cheating. Having professional ethics is not about not giving out envelopes. You cannot do PR in Vietnam without it”.

The latter part of this comment is one of mixed views about the envelope culture. Views among participants range from payment to journalists as a given, a “thank you gift”, while others think “journalists need to be paid for what they do” – in light of low official salaries, shrinking advertising revenue and Vietnam's slowing economy. Others are critical with one saying: “I think once I go with the ‘pay for play’, it's not PR . . . it's advertising . . . the wrong perception”.

Some respondents refer to “black PR”, in which agencies are hired to “play tricks” with a client's competitor. However, one respondent points out such a practice actually hurts not only a targeted competitor but also the culprit client themselves as their whole industry is affected. The same respondent, an account manager at a local agency, says his client was the target of “black PR” and warned against the practice:

“This issue relates a little bit to Buddhist philosophy. Luckily my bosses really respect the Buddhist psychology, about causal relations. Although nobody knows you did bad things, sooner or later you will be punished.”

This comment also demonstrates a cultural influence on perceptions of practice.

4.5. *A professional body and more training courses are required*

Most respondents believe a professional PR body is needed to help set standards and encourage sound future development of the industry. They hoped a professional association would lift understanding about PR and help address misperceptions. Reasons raised among them for such an establishment include the need for practitioners to connect and learn from their experiences. One respondent argues:

“We need a professional association so clients better understand us, so the amateur agencies can work more sustainably and so clients respect agencies. I really need clients who respect agencies. . . clients need to see them as consultants, not suppliers.”

Some respondents say coordination among agencies is needed to help the industry’s standing, with one stating: “In the early stages of development, agencies only focus on their own business rather than on the shared goal. To share that goal, they should have to sit down together and run some campaigns to educate consumers, the society about PR’s role.”

All but one of the 12 participants reject the idea of practitioners obtaining a professional license. Some say this is the media’s responsibility, emphasising media relations’ role in PR, while others question how it could be enforced.

The respondents believe Vietnam lacks proper PR training and education to equip people entering the profession. According to them, the more awareness of what PR is, and the more demand there is for it, the more universities may wish to offer it. Respondents say much of the training is on-the-job with subordinates learning from superiors.

4.6. *Lack of understanding about PR persists in Vietnamese society*

When asked about others’ perceptions of PR, the respondents say the general public confuse PR with advertising and marketing. They also believe people who have heard of PR liken it to “exaggeration” and using tricks to create scandals. One respondent says: “Many people even talk to each other saying ‘this [product] is being ‘PR-ed’ too much”.

According to the respondents, misperception about PR exists in both the older and younger generations, but that the youth have a better understanding. The managing director of a local PR agency says:

“Even the professionals working in other departments [of an MNC] do not know what their colleagues in communications do”.

Another managing director attributes the lack of understanding to the local industry’s relatively young age while a few others listed limited exposure to PR and PR training as key reasons.

Eleven out of twelve interviewees have given up explaining what they do to their family and immediate circle of friends but they offer explanations mostly to their potential clients. Only one respondent says he makes the effort to explain PR to relevant people as he sees this as a way to gradually educate and improve people’s perceptions. In contrast, another PR manager says:

“The better educated people are, the more difficult it is to [use PR] to influence them”, preferring to keep the status quo so that “the PR impact can be easily achieved”.

Another respondent says the fact that “PR is a new and abstract concept and does not normally produce something tangible to show” makes it difficult to explain.

5. Discussion

The most important skills highlighted by our respondents point towards the nature of PR as building and maintaining relationships, which is a foundation of PR definitions and literature generally (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Hutton, 1999; Tench & Yeomans, 2009). Interpersonal communication skills are most commonly cited among the participants, confirming the emphasis on building interpersonal relationships based on trust and acceptance in this collectivist society based on Confucian values (McKinney, 2000; Wu, 2005). The importance of interpersonal relations above writing skills can also be explained by the fact Vietnam is a high-context culture, in which communication hinges on use of gestures and space in the physical context, with meaning often already known by the receiver (Hall, 1977).

According to our findings, the lines between personal and professional relationships are blurred – and in some cases the personal is the professional. In contrast to Western concerns professional efforts not be influenced by personal connections to maintain professional integrity, interpersonal relationships here are personal, based on trust and are legitimate to Asian PR practice and the wider society (Huang, 2000). We believe that not only should interpersonal relations resulting in the blending of professional and personal be accepted by PR scholars but also embraced as a culturally appropriate way to attract clients and build and maintain relationships in Vietnam, in which pre-existing relationships, built on trust fostered through personally knowing people, are crucial to successful public relations and wider business practice. It is important to note when respondents were asked about ethics, not one respondent brought up personal versus professional relationships as a conflict of interest, with respondents instead nominating meeting and socialising with clients as vital to effective PR practice.

Just as [Hang \(2010\)](#) found, our research indicates an envelope culture remains entrenched in the Vietnamese media landscape. Anecdotal evidence suggests Vietnamese media organisations, all owned by the government, rely on payment to prop up their budgets and journalists' salaries – Tuoi Tre, for example, openly promotes its media buying packages. Amid increasing internet penetration beginning to threaten advertising revenue, the authors believe the envelope culture will remain entrenched in this developing nation for time to come. Payment to journalists is seen as a “thank you” by some respondents, implying that, in addition to economic subsidy, payment is a “favour”. We also contend the envelope culture is hampering perceptions of PR in Vietnam and subsequently its development, in that it encourages confusion with advertising and advertorial placement, particularly among Vietnamese organisations, at the expense of PR's value as a strategic function to help business achieve its goals. If more Vietnamese companies can see past PR as media buying, the authors share numerous respondents' hope PR in Vietnam will further develop.

There is a heightened sense among the participants of ensuring information given to journalists is not harmful to the public, as an important aspect of ethics. It is encouraging to see these PR practitioners are aware of the relative power they exercise over media coverage content and the need to be cautious in the general public's interest.

Further strategic PR practice is beginning to be realised, particularly among the managing directors surveyed, who state they tend to focus on strategic thinking, advising, problem solving and supervising execution, while the agency PR managers are more involved in everyday interaction with clients. However, progression of strategic PR planning is inhibited due to limited time and resources practitioners can put into research and developing proposals as well as the mere use of PR agencies as “suppliers”. We believe clients should allow practitioners more time to develop strategic proposals based on solid research to improve the quality of PR efforts, further clarifying PR's role in the process, and to permit more strategic, long-term relationships between agencies and clients. If PR is better understood and perceived as a long-term effort, this may also help curtail the unfortunate practice of clients hiring agencies to bring the reputations of their competitors into disrepute.

The authors also suggest practitioners and academics take the lead in forming a professional body in Vietnam to help further develop the Vietnamese PR industry. Despite respondents themselves being from a large variety of educational and professional backgrounds (only two of the respondents had studied a Master of Communication), and of different ages, they show an appreciation for graduates being trained in PR and communication. This runs parallel with the educational need [McKinney \(2007\)](#) highlighted, given many PR practitioners learn on the job and are highly dependent on their bosses. More training and development opportunities need to be provided to potential and current PR practitioners, and a professional body could help address this need. We note a general yearning among the research participants for the industry to develop according to best practice international standards in the future, which is consistent with the Western-influenced origins of the Vietnamese PR industry, and yet the respondents are also keenly aware of drivers needed to succeed within the local context.

[Munshi and McKie \(2001\)](#) state “powerful Western businesses have tried to incorporate the ‘Other’ in the global marketplace in the interest of enlarging profitability” (p. 12) and this is linked to MNCs coming to Vietnam and introducing PR to Vietnam. Yet we note local PR agencies continue to dominate, thanks to their local knowledge and connections, in effect emphasising the influence the local culture and context has had on a construct introduced by the West.

6. Conclusion

There are implications for academia and industry stemming from this study's findings. For industry, education and training are crucial. PR practitioners need to continue to educate themselves, clients, other stakeholders and the general society about the value of PR. The more recent appreciation for strategic PR practice should continue as part of this process. There is also a need for a professional body and training courses to help the industry further develop. A professional body would help facilitate dialogue between PR practitioners while also encouraging them to question and self-assess their knowledge and performance. Given the absence of a legal framework in Vietnam, the need for the establishment of such a body is further magnified to guide and unite PR practitioners towards a common goal of a more advanced industry that includes a more diverse client base such as more Vietnamese organisations, and more sophisticated service scope than product PR and media relations.

For academia, this study has provided a clearer understanding of PR in Vietnam through the eyes of experienced Vietnamese practitioners. Based on the professionalism framework, this study has provided a current snapshot of the under-researched field of PR in Vietnam during a relatively early stage of development, contributing to PR scholarship. The study's findings highlight the need to consider the context in which PR practice operates and the professionalism framework, while prevalent, is not completely suitable in Vietnam and environmental variables must be considered.

We only interviewed PR practitioners from agencies and therefore more research needs to be undertaken with in-house practitioners and other stakeholders to have a more multi-faceted picture of the industry and determine what is unique to Vietnam in the process of professionalisation. While this qualitative research permitted in-depth conversations with the respondents, the results cannot be applied generally to the entire PR industry, especially when the interviewees belong to the upper echelons of agencies.

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