



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

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