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“EVERYTHING IS NOT WHAT IT SEEMS”: DISCOVERING PUBLIC RELATIONS IN BUSINESS SECTORS IN VIETNAM

Ba-Anh-Tu Truong

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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“EVERYTHING IS NOT WHAT IT SEEMS”: DISCOVERING PUBLIC RELATIONS IN BUSINESS SECTORS IN VIETNAM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Mass Communication

in

Manship School of Mass Communication

by
Truong Ba Anh Tu
B.A., Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, 2015
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For my father, Trương Bá Trọng, who always supports me wherever he is.

This page is very cliché, but it is also an opportunity to express my gratitude to loved ones who have always been there for me. Firstly, “cảm ơn” (thank you) to my grandma, mother, sister, and daughter for always caring for me from thousands of miles away. Secondly, “cảm ơn” to Dat and Uyen, “đôi GDP,” for caring for me physically and mentally since the day I landed in the US; if I did not have this couple, I would be more miserable. Thirdly, “cảm ơn” chị Panda for being a diamond sponsor, sheltering me in HCMC.

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I will never forget to thank myself (a CĐML) for braving to complete a small study journey in the U.S. to learn a lesson: “I know that I know nothing.”

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Abstract

Vietnam is a shining star in emerging markets, with an annual economic growth rate of 6-7%. Its abundant labor supply, stable political climate, and geographic proximity to major global supply chains make it an ideal candidate for manufacturer planning in advanced economies such as the United States, Europe, Australia, Japan, China, and Korea. Investing in public relations and communication management, especially understanding the Vietnamese market, effectively prepares multinational corporations for future business expansion. This mission is difficult for academia and industrial professionals since Vietnam is a “silent country” in public relations research. To fill the gap, this thesis employs the Excellence Theory, contingency theory, and a conceptual framework for environmental variables to identify three significant aspects: (1) conceptualization and operationalization, (2) environmental variables affecting operation, and (3) professionalism and education of public relations in Vietnam. This phenomenon suits conducting in-depth interviews with 20 experienced Vietnamese public relations practitioners. The findings reflect the diversity of public relations practices in Vietnam's business sectors, which are international practices and local practices influenced by socio-cultural factors. Although public relations is thriving in Vietnam, the absence of formal academic knowledge, professional associations, and a code of ethics impedes the field's development.

Chapter 1. Introduction

In September 2023, U.S. President Joe Biden visited Vietnam, which resulted in a comprehensive strategic partnership, opening numerous future cooperation between the governments and people of the two countries in many fields. In particular, the focus will be on investing in three main areas: science and technology; education and training; trade and investment; and economic development (White House, 2023). The U.S. president's visit is not the first step in opening these opportunities for cooperation between the two nations; it is an official announcement for upcoming investments. Indeed, in March 2023, various large U.S. businesses, such as SpaceX, Netflix, Boeing, and many others, went to Vietnam on the "biggest ever" U.S. business mission for discussion and sales opportunities in the booming Southeast Asian nation (Guarascio, 2023).

Vietnam is commonly referred to as the Vietnam War. Currently, this country is recognized as "one of the biggest winners in the U.S. – China trade dispute" (Lee, 2019, para. 1). Vietnam is a prominent player in the emerging markets, boasting a robust economic growth rate of 6-7%, which is comparable to that of China. Additionally, its exports are valued at an amount equivalent to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as reported by Vanham in 2018. In addition, Vietnam has a plentiful supply of labor, a politically stable environment, and a geographically advantageous location in close proximity to major global supply chains (Sebastian Eckardt et al., 2018). According to Statista's 2023 ranking, this country has achieved the seventh position globally, second in Asia, and first in Southeast Asia as one of the top trading partners of the United States regarding import value for trade goods. Inevitably, numerous American enterprises will probably broaden their market presence in Vietnam. Countries such as China, Germany, the Netherlands, Korea, and Japan, which are also prominent economic powers in Europe and Asia,

have comparable strategies.

For a better-serving business expansion, public relations and communication can play a crucial role in building a reputation with the host country, especially in Vietnam, a country with environmental factors emphasizing the reputation. Understanding the Vietnamese landscape of public relations and communication management is essential to achieve this goal. However, this may be a challenge because Vietnam is a quiet country in the field of research. Most of the prior published research in Vietnamese public relations was conducted a long time ago, such as Doan and Bilowol (2014), Huyen (2011), McKinney (2000, 2006, 2007, 2011), and Van (2013), which cannot reflect the status quo of current practice. One mutual key finding of these previous studies is the perception of public relations among Vietnamese practitioners due to the lack of formal academic training in the public relations body of knowledge. The current anecdotal evidence also remains this short, even in the context of many Vietnamese universities running public relations for undergraduate programs. If so, what are the reasons behind this phenomenon?

The above question sheds light on this thesis, further investigating professionalism and education in Vietnam. However, in an attempt to understand this affair more comprehensively, this thesis traces back to the underlying foundations of one public relations practice: the conceptualization and operationalization of public relations (Grunig, 1992). Additionally, environmental variables or socio-cultural factors, including infrastructure, culture, and media environment, must be considered when researching public relations practice and research (Sriramesh, 2004). These factors help to explain why and how Vietnam's public relations practice from other countries, which is investigated for the first time. Since the thesis is related to professional experience, knowledge, brands, products, and practices related to the political system, culture, and media environment, an in-depth interview with Vietnamese public relations is appropriate to seek the answers to the above issues.

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1. Understanding the concepts of public relations in the business sector

People form organizations to maximize their combined resources and work toward shared objectives (Chandler, 2019, p. 50). Organizations interact with others within the broader context of society as they work toward these objectives. Based on purpose, organizations are classified as government, nonprofit, or for-profit. The government organization (public sector) defines the laws and social structures that govern the world in which all organizations must function. For-profit organizations (e.g., businesses, corporations, entrepreneurs) aim to turn a profit. The last type of organization, nonprofits (NPOs), which include NGOs or nongovernmental organizations, fill the gaps left by government or business when two these organizations fail to address societal needs. All three types of organization co-exist within society. A well-functioning society comprises a patchwork of exchange interactions (of goods and services, capital, social and financial, etc.), each of which plays a distinct role but also depends on the others' field.

Different types of organizations lead to differences in public relations and communication management practices. Scholars and professionals frequently consider how corporations handle their interactions with various audiences when considering public relations. Public relations in government, however, is as important as it is in business. To mention a few, leaders in nations like Ecuador, Zimbabwe, or Russia have altered or rejected term limits clauses in their constitutions to maintain their positions of authority for extended periods of time. Even though they remained divisive figures on the global stage, they could still maintain enough support in their own nations and have consistently claimed their people's will, which is why they are still in power (Myslik & Kiouisis, 2019).

Negotiating complex relationships with other stakeholders is central to fulfilling nonprofit missions. Strategic positioning is even more important because these nonprofits frequently lack the funds for pricey outreach and communication initiatives. In addition, a nonprofit needs to establish connections with the government, advocates, volunteers, and recipients of its services. The industry's vitality lies in maintaining and fostering mutually beneficial relationships with each of these audiences (Pressgrove & Waters, 2019).

Hence, this study only focuses on clarifying the business sector's public relations and communication management practices in Vietnam. The purpose is to isolate the organizational form to provide more accurate research results. In addition, previous studies have shown that multinational corporations play an important role in popularizing public relations and communication management practices in Vietnam after this country opened and carried out economic reforms (Doan & Bilowol, 2014). Therefore, applying the theoretical frameworks of public relations and communication management in Western countries will be appropriate for discovering the practice in Vietnam.

2.2. Vietnam and its public relations at a glance

Southeast Asia's Indochina peninsula is home to Vietnam. Its land borders are as follows: to the north, China; to the west, Laos and Cambodia; and to the east, the Eastern Sea (South China Sea) of the Pacific Ocean (*Vietnam's Geography*, n.d.). Vietnam is a multicultural nation with a diverse culture. Chinese feudal dynasties ruled it for over a millennium, followed by a century of French colonization (1858–1954) and a final thirty years of American invasion. Since Vietnam's founding, nationalism and patriotism have been essential to the country's history. They have helped the nation maintain its unique identity in the face of significant foreign influence and have fostered social cohesion that has kept the nation united despite significant cultural and other divides that have existed for a century (Edwards & Phan, 2008). Vietnam was

among the world's poorest nations until its transition from a centrally planned to a market economy, raising its income to the lower middle class. In the East Asian region, Vietnam is currently one of the most dynamic emerging nations (*Vietnam At-A-Glance*, n.d.). Later, in the section on environmental variables or social-cultural factors, this thesis will present a detailed context of Vietnam because of the connection between the theoretical framework to understand the public relations field and the country's context.

The concept of public relations is still young in Vietnam, with very little published research on the topic. Doan and Bilowol (2014) found that multinational corporations introduced modern corporate PR to Vietnam in the mid-1980s. Due to misunderstandings about its definition and its confusion with marketing and advertising, the relatively new public relations industry faces many questions that need to be clarified. This thesis attempts to underpin three standpoints, including (1) how public relations are conceptualized and operationalized in Vietnam, (2) the perceived effects of environmental factors on public relations practices among Vietnamese public relations practitioners, and (3) the professionalism and education of public relations based on Vietnamese public relations professional's perspectives.

2.3. Public relations conceptualization

2.3.1. Public relations and communication management and related activities

The definitions of public relations are diversified based on this discipline's evolution and perspectives. Based on the excellence theory in public relations and communication management, some definitions have been applied to conceptualizing public relations activities: public relations, communication management, organizational communication, and public affairs (Grunig, 1992, pp. 4-5).

Although the public relations term is “the oddest concept used to describe the

communication activities of organizations,” there are such terms as business communication and public affairs to describe these activities. However, many communication practitioners define communication more broadly than public relations. They argue that communication is the management of organizational functions and public relations as a narrow communication function. Public relations tasks include publicity, promotion, media relations, or marketing support (Grunig, 1992, p. 4).

In contrast, other practitioners argue that public relations is broader than communication. Public relations practitioners narrowly apply communication to construct press releases, publications, or audiovisual materials. This school of thought also sees public relations as an organization's policy-making function. These practitioners often use the term public affairs to extend the scope of public relations work, including the interaction with the target public and government, leading to public policy. Thus, the term public affairs describes the realm of communication with government officials and others involved in the public policy discipline. However, not all public relations programs have to deal with public affairs. For instance, marketing communication or employee communication.

Both public relations and communication management are also broader ways of communicating organizationally. In academic terms, communication management has been mainly applied to the communication of individuals inside organizations. That is, organizational communication is related to all employees communicating with each other in an organization. Scholars in this realm focus on interpersonal communication among individual members of an organization.

2.3.2. Public relations and marketing

For a modern business, marketing and public relations are both crucial tasks. The marketing department identifies markets for the company's goods and services. After that, they

oversee marketing communication campaigns to generate and maintain consumer demand for goods and services. Conversely, the public relations department oversees communication programs for the public, which are self-organizing groups of people impacted by or affected by a business. The consumer sector of an organization's surroundings is its only market. Publics can be found among various stakeholder categories, including workers, communities, governments, stockholders, members, students, suppliers, donors, and customers. Therefore, marketing and public relations have distinct purposes, and public relations cannot function at their best if they are subservient to the marketing function. An organization loses a crucial tool for managing its interdependence with its strategic public when it turns public relations into a marketing function, relegating practitioners to the technician role (Ehling et al., 1992, p. 357).

In the Vietnamese context, the boundary of public relations, marketing, and advertising is still blurred (Doan & Bilowol, 2014; Van, 2013). Some businesses consider public relations as an extended marketing plan. These businesses call public relations the fifth “P” in the context of the famous 4Ps in marketing (product, price, place, and promotion). The public relations executive in these businesses will have the role of technician supporting the publicity for the marketing plan. However, some businesses consider the role of public relations to be different from the marketing department, as Ehling et al. (1992) predicted. Along with the economic development, Vietnam has also recognized various terms related to public relations, as mentioned above in this section. With diversified terms, this thesis will call all related definitions under public relations and communication fields, including public relations, communication management, communication and media, marketing and communication, public affairs, external affairs, and so on.

2.3.3. Various public relations definitions

Scholars and practitioners have coined the term public relations in various ways. Public relations is the “management of communication between an organization and its publics” (J. E.

Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This balanced public relations and communication management. In this definition, the scope of works of public relations and communication management consisted of overall planning, execution, and evaluation of both internal and external communication of one organization's public that "affect the ability of an organization to meet its goals" (J. E. Grunig, 1992).

According to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), public relations, originating in the early 20th century, has evolved over time, focusing on press agency, publicity, engagement, and relationship building. In 1982, PRSA adopted a definition emphasizing mutual adaptation between organizations and their publics: "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics." Public relations is a strategic approach to shaping an organization's public perception by influencing and engaging with key stakeholders. It involves anticipating and analyzing public opinion, advising management on policy decisions, and protecting the organization's reputation. It also involves conducting research and evaluating programs to achieve informed public understanding. Public relations also involves planning and implementing efforts to influence public policy, setting objectives, managing resources, and overseeing content creation to drive customer engagement and generate leads. It is crucial for organizations to consider public ramifications and their social or citizenship responsibilities (PRSA, n.d.).

According to the International Public Relations Association, "Public relations is a decision-making management practice tasked with building relationships and interests between organizations and their publics based on the delivery of information through trusted and ethical communication methods." In 2023, a monograph on Vietnamese government public relations, public relations is defined as the two-way, dialogical, and planned communication process of an individual or organization, aiming to create understanding and positive relationships between

that individual or organization and the groups of the public concerned (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023, p. 17).

Public relations disciplines include corporate communications, crisis communications, executive communications, internal communications, investor relations, marketing, integrated marketing, media relations, content creation, events, social media, multimedia, reputation management, speechwriting, and brand journalism (PRSA).

2.4. Models of public relations and communication management

As mentioned, public relations scholars and practitioners usually conceptualize and operationalize strategies and techniques differently. To understand these various strategies and techniques as well as explain why public relations activities in organizations differ, Grunig and Hunt (1984) first presented four public relations and communications models based on two key criteria: purpose and nature of communication. Four models include (a) press agency/publicity, (b) public information, (c) two-way asymmetrical model, and (d) two-way symmetrical model.

Table 1. Summary of four models of public relations

Name	Press agency/publicity	Public information	Two-way asymmetric	Two-way symmetric
Characteristics	One way asymmetrical	Asymmetrical	Communicate flows from the organization to its publics/stakeholders	Involves dialogic communication between an organization and its publics; Feedback is integral
Purposes	To persuade and manipulate the public for its benefits	To inform its public by disseminating truth and factual information	To manipulate the public for good purposes	To obtain mutual understanding between it and its public
Nature of communication	One way; is propagandistic PR, complete truth is not essential, and seeks media attention as much as possible	One way, seek favorable reputation by media and other stakeholders/publics, PR practitioners as journalists-in-residence to write press “handout” explaining their actions	Two-way; imbalanced effects; understanding motivations of people and using research to navigate public’s attitude and behaviors desired of organizations.	Two-way; balanced effect; resolve a possible conflict and build respect, taking feedback from public to rethink its strategies and techniques.
Research correlation	Based on the behavioral and social sciences, use these research to identify messages to motive or persuade publics	Based on the behavioral and social sciences, use these research to identify messages to motive or persuade publics	Positive in formative and evaluate research; positively correlated in the counsel management report	Positive in formative and evaluate research; highest positively correlated in the counsel management report; positively correlated; contacting government officials and thought leaders

Sources: Adopted from Grunig & Hunt (1984, p. 22), Grunig and Grunig (1992), Grunig et al. (1995), Hellweg (1989, as cited in Grunig & Grunig, 1992), Laskin (2009), Van (2013).

The first model, press agency or press publicity, applies one-way communication to deliver half-truths to audiences, but this is not always the case. This model aims to persuade and manipulate audiences to behave according to organizations' expectations. Hence, the first model is likely propagandistic public relations and communication management (Grunig et al., 1995; Van, 2013). The second model, public information, uses one-way communication to disseminate objective information via mass media and controlled media (e.g., newsletters, brochures, and direct email). In this model, public relations practitioners are in-house journalists (Grunig et al., 1995). Both two models are not based on research and strategic planning. However, some public relations practitioners can base their work on behavioral and social sciences to motivate and pursue the public rather than using research to facilitate understanding and communication (Grunig et al., 1995, p. 288 - 289).

The third is the two-way asymmetrical model, which applies two-way communication to convince and influence audiences to behave according to organizational desires. This model will conduct formal research and incorporate the audience's feedback for communication tactics. Hence, this model has another name, "scientific persuasion." As a result, a large portion of contemporary, professional public relations practice is exemplified by the two-way asymmetrical paradigm. However, according to Grunig (1989, as cited in Grunig & Grunig, 1992, p. 82), PR practitioners applying this model still attempt to manipulate the public for good purposes, such as good behaviors (e.g., environmental protection, should not smoking for good health) (Grunig & Grunig, 1992).

The fourth two-way symmetrical model, using two-way communication to negotiate with the public, is ideal. This model expects to resolve the conflict and support the benefits between the organization and the key public. In the two-way symmetrical model, practitioners implement formal research and attempt to communicate openly and honestly with the audience. This model

has symmetrical effects that an unbiased observer would characterize as advantageous to both companies and the general public. Businesses that engage in two-way symmetrical public relations employ negotiation, bargaining, and dispute-resolution techniques to affect symbiotic changes in the organization's and its audience's beliefs, attitudes, and actions.

The four models of public relations and communication management have become dominant in helping scholars understand PR practices in most Western countries. However, two notable models exist in other countries with distinct cultures from Western nations. The first one is the personal influence model (e.g., Grunig et al., 1995; Sriramesh et al., 1999) that is practiced in Asian countries such as India, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and China (Grunig et al., 1995; Van, 2013). The second one is cultural translators or cultural interpreters, which were identified in Greece (Grunig et al., 1995) and Kenya (Kiambi, 2010).

Personal influence model with some characteristics: Establish and develop personal relationships, beginning from friendships with some key opinion leaders of key stakeholders (e.g., media, government, and activist groups). One of the key factors influencing PR practices is the media, which will be presented in a later section. With media stakeholders, PR practitioners of this model attempt to obtain favorable PR outcomes (e.g., positive news, articles, and information from news organizations). For example, hospitality relations build lasting relationships with key influencers or decision-makers related to their organizations' field (Grunig et al., 1995). However, according to Sriramesh and Jolene (2021), the personal influence model is usually seen as an unethical practice, primarily by Western critics who argue that personal influence is a type of corruption that mainly occurs in other societies, like those in Asia (p. 354). However, a closer look at the idea shows that corruption is transaction-oriented, while personal influence is relationship-oriented (Valentini 2009; Vanhonacker 2004). The cultural interpreter model is the practice in a multinational business that hires a local, experienced public relations practitioner to handle

public relations strategies and techniques.

The excellence theory has greatly influenced the public relations field's organizational thinking (Pang et al., 2021). It implies that the ideal strategy is two-way symmetrical communication between an organization and its audiences, in which both parties communicate before deciding on an acceptable solution. This model helps organizations practice public relations successfully and is regarded as normative and ethical (Grunig, J. and Grunig, L. 1992; Grunig, L. 1996). Contrarily, the contingency theory concentrates on an organization's stance—the stance or position it takes concerning the public (Pang et al., 2021). It provides insight into how an organization interacts with the public by taking a position toward a strategic public in a particular circumstance and at a particular moment in time. It also implies how quickly these positions can shift and what factors affect these shifts (Cancel et al. 1997). Based on observations, excellence theory, public relations literature, and grounded theory, Cameron (1997) developed a matrix of 87 contingent factors grouped into six main characteristics. They are the public relations department, dominant coalition, internal threats, individual (PR practitioners, domestic coalition, and line managers), and relationship characteristics. Any one of the 87 variables may impact where an organization is located on the continuum "at a given time regarding a given public" (Cancel, Mitrook, and Cameron, 1999, p. 172; Yarbrough et al., 1998, p. 40). Given this section, the first research question is:

RQ1: How do Vietnamese PR professionals (a) conceptualize public relations and communications management and (b) operationalize PR and communication management in daily tasks?

2.5. Environmental variables affecting public relations practice in Vietnam

The foundation of public relations theory, excellence theory, has its key finding in the connection between environmental variables and public relations practice. From there, five environmental variables or socio-cultural variables are proposed: political ideology, economic

system (level of development of economy), level of activism, culture, and media system. Other scholars have also highlighted the importance of three factors, social, political, and economic contexts (SPE), in public relations practice (Culbertson & Jeffers, 1992). These environmental variables have been developed into a theoretical framework that was tested in ten Asian countries under the research line of understanding PR practice and research in the Asia region. In the conceptual framework of understanding PR practice and research in Asia, the five environmental variables had been collapsed into three main factors: infrastructure, culture, and media environment (Sriramesh, 2004). Each main factor will be explained in detail in the next paragraph.

2.5.1. Infrastructure factors

The three most important variables that affect the public relations practice of a nation are the political system, the level of economic development, and the level of activism in that country. Because each factor is interrelated, these can be collapsed into one factor named infrastructure (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003).

Political system. According to Sriramesh (2004), a country's political system influences its social structure, and public relations thrive on public opinion. Pluralistic societies provide a conducive environment for strategic public relations, while upvaluing public opinion leads to one-way propagandistic practices. The political systems in the world are classified into seven categories: Democracies, Restricted democratic practices, Monarchies, Authoritarian regimes, Totalitarian regimes, Colonial and imperial dependencies, and protectorates.

According to its constitution, Vietnam is a socialist country run by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) (Bui, 2013; ConstitutionNet, 2013; London, 2014). Scholars have characterized VNGov's one-party rule as either a soft authoritarian (Cain, 2014; Thayer, 2009) or semi-authoritarian (Bui, 2013; Lam, 2022). According to Saxonberg (2013), Vietnam is still a

communist nation because the CPV still holds political sway and authority over issues relating to politics, culture, and the media (of all kinds). Vietnamese government (VNGov) has employed propaganda strategies to interact with its populace, provide information and education, manage and limit the flow of information, foster national cohesion, and acquire approval and legitimacy (Le & Block, 2023). Therefore, social organizations and associations have communicated and propagandized most socialist ideologies (Gillespie & Nicholson, 2005, as cited in Nguyen et al., 2018). Moreover, such organizations serve as party transmitters to uphold socialist values in providing education, health care, and social security to foster social consensus and maintain national unity (Edwards & Phan, 2013, as cited in Nguyen et al., 2018). This factor can affect the public relations activities of business sectors in Vietnam, such as implementing public relations campaigns in partnership with the government and supporting the government in gaining favorable approval from authority (Truong & Tran, 2023).

The level of economic development. Sriramesh and Verčič (2001) suggested a country's economic development level is closely linked to its political system. For public relations practitioners, this means that they can both find opportunities and face challenges. People who live in market economies and believe in pluralism tend to support more economic freedom and market forces. This makes players compete for the attention of the public. Because of this, strategic public relations is more critical in market economies than managed ones. Even though there is a link between public relations and market economies, organizations in developed countries often put urgent needs ahead of public relations. Strategic public relations does well in developed countries because businesses in those countries have more flexibility and freedom to compete. Many companies that offer goods and services are trying to get the public's attention, support, and approval (Sriramesh, 2004).

The "Doi Moi" (or renovation) policy, which is founded on market socialism and the

establishment of a rule-of-law state, was implemented by the VNGov starting in the middle of the 1980s and 1990s (Bui, 2013; London, 2014; Quang, 2007). The country's integration into the global economy was facilitated by the 1986 Reform Policy, which also increased the uptake of the technological and telecommunication advancements brought about by the development of the Internet. The creation of the first stock market in 2000 and several bilateral trade agreements clearly indicate that the party-state has passed legislation in trade and investment to support private businesses and foreign direct investments (FDIs) during this time. Today, Vietnam has placed in twelve of the top 20 countries with the highest economic growth rate in the last ten years (Hamid, 2023).

Nonetheless, the economy is still developing socially and under state supervision. Preserving state-owned enterprises (SOEs) as the economy's foundation is arguably one of the most distinctive aspects of a socialist market economy. These state conglomerates are, in fact, economically and ideologically indispensable, giving the government a reliable source of revenue, fostering national prosperity, and bolstering ideological hegemony (Ashwill & Diep, 2005; Rowley & Truong, 2009; Vuong, 2014, as cited in Nguyen et al., 2018). The VNGov added some PR techniques and tools to the arsenal of governmental propaganda in response to the arrival of foreign investors who brought PR practices with them (McKinney, 2006; Huyen, 2006).

Activism. This is an infrastructure factor because it is strongly associated with a nation's political system and development level. The political structure of a nation affects how much activism occurs because societies that value pluralism accept different viewpoints. The degree and type of activism are also strongly influenced by economic development. In the past, people in Asia's developing nations frequently work long hours to support their families, leaving little time for leisure pursuits (Sriramesh, 2004). However, this is changing due to many factors, such as

globalization, the free opening of the market economy, and the growing intellectual development. After Vietnam reformed its economy in 1986 and joined world organizations, activism in Vietnam witnessed many changes.

Mak (2009) argued that most activism in Vietnam has been political. Regarding non-political issues, multinational companies (MNCs) are the main force behind CSR concepts, which is also a relatively new idea in Vietnam. It is crucial to remember that MNCs first introduced and initially implemented CSR and PR into the Vietnamese market (Hamm, 2012). Brammer et al. (2012) suggested that CSR be viewed as an institution of transnational governance, which was crucial in the nation's shift to a socialist market economy. MNCs support CSR by establishing benchmarks, encouraging regional companies to adopt international standards, and providing financial and technical support. Even though some parts of Vietnamese society still view CSR as merely PR or image brand promotion, it has, in many ways, helped ease the lack of sufficient governmental resources to fund social programs by emphasizing livelihood generation, education, and health care (del Rosario, 2011). The VNGov has promoted CSR through legislation, in which new environmental regulations and a sustainable development agenda have been released along with the official establishment of the environmental police authority (Hieu, 2011).

Legal system. Public relations practitioners face difficulties because political and economic development are intimately associated with a nation's legal system. According to the Vietnamese constitution, the National Assembly is the highest body of state power, which also exercises the right to make laws and amend laws (CPV. 2021). The Supreme People's Court (SPC) is the highest in Vietnam, and it is the court for final appeal and review. SPC answers to the National Assembly, which also approves the president's nominations to the Supreme People's Procuracy and SPC and controls the judiciary's budget. Arrest warrants are issued by the

Supreme People's Procuracy, occasionally retroactively. According to the US Library Congress (2005), administrative, economic, and labor courts are ranked below the SPC, as are military tribunals and district and provincial people's courts (the courts of first instance).

According to unofficial statistics, Vietnam currently has 230 laws in effect (The Library of Law, 2023). Some of the laws affecting public relations practice are the Cyber security law in 2018, the Press law in 2016, the Law on network information security in 2015, the Publishing law in 2012, and the Advertising law in 2012. It should also be noted that these are fundamental laws that affect the fields of journalism, communications, publishing, advertising, and the Internet environment. Businesses are also influenced by other legal frameworks depending on the industry in which they operate.

2.5.2. Culture

Communication is crucial in shaping public relations, as it is the profession's foundation and helps build relationships between organizations and the relevant public (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Sriramesh, 2004). Most studies linking culture with public relations have been conducted in Asia, mainly due to the increasing number of Asian students studying public relations in the United States (Sriramesh, 1991, 1992, 1999, 2004). However, these studies have been limited to a few countries (e.g., China, India, and Korea), necessitating more studies from other Asian countries, and this thesis is an example.

The term "culture" has over 164 definitions and 300 variants, making it a flexible concept. Kaplan and Manners (1972, as cited in Sriramesh, 2004) identified four determinants of culture: technoeconomics, social structure, ideology, and personality. Technoeconomics studies how a society's economic growth affects its cultural norms; modern societies are shaped by technological artifacts such as the Internet and satellites. With this definition, the economic factor has been described above and is one of the factors affecting the public relations operation of a

country. Social structures that define the relationships between various groups are characterized by social institutions such as caste and feudalism. The values, customs, worldviews, knowledge, philosophies, and religious beliefs that members of a society uphold are called ideologies. Lastly, personality describes an individual's traits from upbringing, education, and professional experience. In these four determinants, personality and ideology are closely related to each other. In contemporary societies, these four factors still significantly influence cultural formation. Diverse family and other backgrounds (e.g., nationality, education, religion) within an organization can result in distinctive corporate cultures (Sriramesh et al., 1996).

The researcher must operationalize culture as a variable to determine how culture affects public relations practices in a particular society (Sriremesh, 2024). Hofstede has proposed more generic (common across many cultures) cultural idiosyncrasies that are important and useful (Sriramesh et al., 1999). However, the significance of cultural dimensions that are specific to a given nation or region, like the concept of *wa* (harmony with fellow humans) and *amae* (the desire to depend on another's goodness) in Japanese culture, for example, should not be discounted. Hence, this thesis presents the dimensions of societal culture based on Hofstede's data (2001; 2010; 2011) as an overview and introduction to Vietnamese culture, helping readers to understand it more easily. The followed societal culture is corporate culture, and the linkage between Vietnamese culture and public relations practice is based on prior research.

Societal culture. Scholars have defined the elements that define a society's culture and discussed how culture is exhibited within a society. Having studied societal culture in organizational contexts, Hofstede (1980, 2001) acknowledged that he had not been able to measure culture entirely due to its malleability and our changing conceptual perspectives on it. Throughout time, Hofstede's dimension of societal culture has been developed into a "6-D" model, including power distance, individualism, motivation towards achievement and success,

uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence. It is also noted that culture does not imply that everyone in a society is programmed similarly. Individual differences in a country's values are typically more significant than national ones. By examining Vietnamese culture via the prism of the 6-D model, readers can gain a clear understanding of the fundamental elements that distinguish Vietnamese culture from other cultures (Hofstede, 2001; 2010; 2011).

Power distance. The cultural perspective on social inequality is called the Power Distance dimension. It gauges how well-adjusted power distribution among weaker members of institutions and organizations is accepted. Vietnam has a high score (70 points) in this area, indicating a hierarchical structure in which everyone is assigned a position without explanation. Centralization is common, and organizational hierarchy is thought to reflect innate inequality. Subordinates expect directives, and a kind autocrat makes the perfect boss. Leadership challenges are not well received.

Individualism. The degree of interdependence within a society is crucial because it affects how people see themselves. Collectivist societies value loyalty and sustained commitment to a group, whereas individualist societies place more value on family and self-care. Vietnam scored 30, which is considered a low score, indicating that it is a collectivistic society where strong relationships are valued and loyalty is expected. In collectivist societies, transgressions can result in humiliation and face loss. Hiring and promotion decisions are based on an employee's membership in their in-group; employer-employee relationships are seen as familial ties, and management is “management of groups.”

Prior studies (McKinney, 2006; Van, 2015) suggested that Vietnamese public relations practice is influenced by collectivism instead of individualism because of the importance of the “face.” The face concept should be understood as maintaining a “positive face” or reputation (McKinney, 2006), and “saving face” is even “more important than telling the truth” (Phuong-

Mai et al., 2005, p. 409). It also prioritizes collective over individual goals (Dinh and Ho, 2020; Mak, 2009). Consequently, everyone must cooperate and uphold harmony. The group's objectives include keeping quiet to "save face" in front of others and avert conflicts or confrontations (Phuong-Mai et al., 2005). According to Mak (2009), "face" is "the PR industry's best ally for the future in Vietnam" (p. 118) since the nation places high importance on cultivating and maintaining an audience's perception of it.

Motivation towards achievement and success. A society that values competition, achievement, and success—with the victor defining success—is indicated by a high score in the dimension of motivation towards achievement and success. This value system is instilled in students and persists throughout their time in an organization. A low score (consensus-oriented) denotes a society where quality of life and compassion are valued highly. Vietnam has a consensus society score of 40, which is medium-low on the motivation towards achievement and success scale. This nation emphasizes "working to live," with employees appreciating equality, solidarity, and quality in their professional lives and managers aiming for consensus. Compromise and negotiation are the methods used to resolve conflicts, with incentives such as flexibility and free time favoring well-being. An effective manager provides support and involves others in decision-making.

Uncertainty avoidance. One aspect that illustrates how a society views future uncertainty is avoidance. Many cultures have evolved strategies to deal with this anxiety; Vietnam received a score of 30 on this dimension, which is a low preference. Minimum Uncertainty Avoidance societies preserve a lax mindset, giving practice precedence over values and permitting departure from the norm. These societies' members feel that schedules should be flexible and rules should be ambiguous or changeable as needed. Preciseness and punctuality are not natural traits, and hard work is only done when absolutely necessary. It is not considered

threatening to innovate, and avoiding uncertainty is not significantly influenced by the fear of ambiguity.

Long-Term Orientation. The dimension concerns how societies deal with current issues and preserve ties to the past while embracing the future. Societies with high culture scores promote modern education and thrift, while normative societies place a higher value on upholding customs and traditions. With a score of 47, Vietnam takes a moderate stance, balancing adherence to modern influences and traditional values. This harmony recognizes the value of ingrained cultural customs while emphasizing the necessity of advancement and creativity. Vietnam's culture excels in this area, showing a strong desire to change with the times.

Indulgence. The degree to which young children are socialized—that is, have their impulses and desires controlled by their upbringing—presents a challenge to humanity. Strong control characterizes restraint, whereas weak control characterizes indulgence. Vietnam's culture has a low score of 35, making it a Restrained society that can breed pessimism and cynicism. People in restrained societies feel that indulging is wrong and that their actions depend on social norms, making them less focused on leisure time and more control over their desires.

Corporate Culture. The relationship between culture and public relations is essential since it determines how societal culture affects organizational culture. Corporate culture is different from societal culture, even though it is influenced by the culture of the society to which the company belongs. Different corporate personalities exist amongst organizations within the same societal culture, depending on variables like size, age, leadership, and type. Corporate culture is clear and tangible, offering a shared framework for building unity (Schein, 2010; Sriramesh et al., 1992). Subcultures and countercultures are common in organizations that do not have a single culture. Subcultures can either slightly deviate from the mainstream culture or completely oppose it, or they can support the dominant culture by promoting fidelity to core

values. In a counterculture, a compelling leader can fundamentally alter the company culture and weaken the existing one (Martin & Siehl, 1983).

Communication is essential to developing solid corporate cultures, as it is the "normative glue" that holds an organization together (Tichy, 1982). Research indicates that corporate cultures with weaker cultures have a more challenging time achieving their goals, which lowers employee morale and results in subpar customer service. Furthermore, orthogonal and countercultures are more likely to emerge in weak corporate cultures (Martin & Siehl, 1983; DiSanza, 1995; Holladay & Coombs, 1993).

The linkage of Vietnamese culture and public relations practice.

Since foreign investors established themselves in Vietnam in the 2000s, public relations have grown significantly and gained prominence in the country (McKinney, 2000). However, Vietnamese PR practices vary from Western practices in some ways because Vietnam's sociocultural, political, and economic context has dramatically influenced the PR industry in that nation (Huyen, 2006). The discipline has had to adapt to a sociocultural environment that the rise of the Communist party-state, cultural collectivism, and the war with the United States has greatly influenced. The peculiarities of Vietnamese culture have also impacted the development of the PR industry (Le & Block, 2023). Three distinct cultural traits stand out: (1) the emphasis on interpersonal relationships over professional relationships, which presents ethical challenges, primarily conflict of interest, to Western public relations practitioners (Doan & Bilowol, 2014; McKinney, 2000; 2006; Van, 2015); (2) the so-called "envelope culture," which refers to a normalized practice in which media relations practitioners pay reporters to cover their events and publish positive content (or not publish negative content) (Doan & Bilowol, 2014); and (3) the value placed on "face," which already explained in the section of dimensions of societal culture – individualism.

In contrast, the professional, non-academic literature has focused more on PR practice; however, this has primarily been achieved by applying Western normative frameworks, such as the normative, systemic, and Americanized four models of PR by Grunig and Hunt in 1984 (Van, 2013). For instance, Van (2013) argued that Vietnamese PR practitioners practice the two-way symmetrical model of Grunig and Hunt (1984) by exchanging information with journalists before the article is published.

As noted earlier in the section Vietnam and its public relations at a glance, Vietnam's culture is complex because of the combination of its original and the influence of foreign nations throughout its history. Recently, Western values have influenced Vietnamese society, particularly among the younger generation, which has challenged traditional values and impacted their thinking and behavior. However, it is crucial to recognize that the core values of traditional Vietnam remain deeply embedded in the hearts of most Vietnamese. As culture is well-established and stable, these long-lasting cultural values persist at the deepest levels of contemporary society, with tradition being considered the root of various aspects of modern Vietnamese society (McCargo, 2004; Kelley, 2006; V. Tuan & Napier, 2000; Vuong, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2018). If this is true, how are these cultural values embedded in society, and does corporate culture directly influence public relations practitioners working daily?

2.5.3. Media environment

Public relations scholars concur that the media and public relations industries are symbiotic, although this issue is frequently combative (Miller & Broussard, 2019; Sriramesh, 2004). Despite disagreements, it is essential for the two professions to have a solid working relationship built on respect (Wilcox & Nolte, 1997, as cited in Sriramesh, 2004). For operations to run smoothly, public relations professionals must keep positive working relationships with media personnel (Newsom et al., 1996, as cited in Sriramesh, 2004). A critical aspect of public

relations is media relations, which includes advice on developing strong spokespersons and getting them ready for interviews. According to Cutlip et al. (2000, as cited in Sriramesh, 2004), media relations are an economical and efficient way to reach broad audiences. Media relations requires a significant amount of time for public relations practitioners because mass publicity comes from the media. It is defined as a symbiotic relationship when public relations experts provide information subsidies to the media (Sriramesh, 2004).

Public relations professionals may apply the framework of three factors—media control, media outreach, and media access—offered by Sriramesh (2004) to create strategies that are appropriate for one particular media environment. This framework can assist scholars in analyzing the relationship between public relations practice and the media, in addition to assisting international public relations professionals and scholars in maintaining efficient communication channels between their client organizations and the pertinent media worldwide.

Media control. Media control can be conceptualized in terms of public relations professionals understanding media ownership and its impact on editorial content, as ownership depends on political and economic development. Capitalist systems, primarily sustained through advertisements and limited subscription revenue, allow for broader editorial freedom (Sriramesh, 2004). This is different in Vietnam, a socialist country.

Communist propaganda techniques have dominated the media landscape of Vietnam since the end of the war in 1975 and the victory of the Communist North and its reunification with the South, despite the fact that American cultural industry had already influenced Vietnamese media content after World War II (Huyen, 2006; Mak, 2009; Nguyen-Thu, 2018, 2020). Thus, for nearly fifty years, the regime's primary means of communication to garner public support for its policies, shape public opinion, and inspire citizens to work toward the regime's objectives and acquire legitimacy has been propaganda (Dinh and Nguyen TMH, 2022;

Vu, 2022).

According to Mach and Nash (2019) and McKinley (2009), the government owns and controls the majority of news media outlets in Vietnam. The central agencies in charge of monitoring propagandist activities and managing and regulating the media system are the Central Propaganda and Education Commission (CPEC) and the Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC). Under the Vietnamese Communist Party, the CPEC is directly run as the gatekeeper of ideology, giving the government and regional propaganda networks central guidance. The media, publishing, telecommunication, and information technology sectors are all under the exclusive jurisdiction of the MIC (Mach and Nash, 2019; Nguyen-Thu, 2018). Together, CPEC and MIC act as gatekeepers of the media, ensuring that government agendas are carried out. The required weekly meetings between media outlets and the CPEC and MIC are a prime example of media censorship; these meetings frequently result in penalties for media outlets that, in the opinion of these official media censoring bodies, have published, intended to publish or produce problematic content. As a result, state media coverage is typically "uniform and coordinated" (Nguyen-Thu, 2018, p. 897). In 2020, VNGov started a national press development and management plan, which is a "reconstruction scheme" aimed at addressing some issues of the Vietnamese press, such as arranging the press system, overlapping newspapers, scattered investment, loose management, and activities that deviate from the press's principles.

Media is influenced by politics, especially in the context of Vietnam, where there is no private journalism. Media control no longer causes many difficulties for PR workers since they are familiar with this. Vietnam is witnessing the rapid growth of the Internet, mobile devices, and new emerging media platforms. These media are both opportunities and challenges for PR practitioners.

Media outreach. This is crucial for evaluating a story's success but does not guarantee

a "magic bullet" effect. Changes in knowledge, attitude, message comprehension, and audience exposure occur next. To measure message exposure, practitioners must be aware of media saturation levels in their countries. Media access is another side of media outreach. Media outreach refers to how well the media reach everyone in a society. In contrast, media access refers to how well different groups of people can use mass media to spread messages that are important to them. This happens because of different levels of public access to mass media in different societies (Sriramesh, 2004).

Media access. It is essential for organizations, especially activists, as activism can challenge and provide opportunities for public relations (L. Grunig, 1992). Access to diverse perspectives increases the fluidity of the environment, forcing two-way communication for public relations activities. Understanding media access helps practitioners understand the opposition and avoid publicity-oriented activities (Sriramesh, 2004).

According to Vietnam News Agency (2023), Vietnam has six key multimedia media agencies (state-owned media outlets), 127 newspaper agencies, 671 magazine agencies (including 319 scientific magazines and 72 literary and art magazines), and 72 radio and television agencies. Journalistic personnel number about 41,000, including approximately 16,500 people in the radio and television sector. Six key multimedia media agencies are Nhan Dan newspaper (The People newspaper), Vietnam Television (VTV), Voice of Vietnam (VOV), Vietnam News Agency, Quan doi Nhan dan newspaper (the People's Army newspaper), Cong an Nhan dan newspaper (the People's Police newspaper). However, the three newspapers on this are not the most viewed newspapers regarding online readership. Based on the data of Similar Web (n.d.), the ten most viewed Vietnamese online newspapers and digital information pages are vnexpress, 24h, zingnews, Dan Tri (the Intellectual People newspaper), Thanh Nien (the Young People newspaper), Tuoi Tre (the Youth newspaper), Vietnamnet, kênh14 (the Channel for teens –

digital information page), Bao Moi (the New Newspaper – digital information page), and Tien phong (the Pioneer newspapers).

Although official media, such as newspapers, television, and broadcasts in Vietnam, are under government censorship, new media, such as social media, chat apps, and internet-based platforms, strongly developed. The internet penetration stood at 79.1% (*Digital 2023: Vietnam, 2023*). According to Statista (2024), Vietnam is one of the nations with the largest global population of social media users. Particularly among Gen Y, Facebook has dominated the nation's social media scene. Zalo, a Vietnamese messaging app, is the only brand in the top five and is ranked as the second most popular social media platform, right behind Facebook. In the meantime, TikTok is gradually taking the top spot among the most popular platforms and has lately become one of the networks in Vietnam with the fastest growth in user numbers.

Vietnam is developing a national press management plan, and the media landscape is changing significantly. Investigating the effect of the media system on public relations practice can provide empirical insights for the research community. This thesis states the second research question by incorporating three key factors affecting the public relations industry in Vietnam.

RQ2: How do Vietnamese public relations practitioners perceive the influence of (a) the infrastructure, (b) culture, and (c) the media environment on their practice?

2.6. Public relations education and professionalism

A broader investigation of professional struggles also frames the debate about how academics, professional associations, and critics portray the public relations profession. This illustrates how various facets of the profession attempt to align or deviate from the term public relations (Fawkes, 2021). In Vietnam, professionalism is especially critical among public relations professionals since they do not even understand what they are doing. The development of a profession depends on the advancement of research about the profession, as the findings of

Ehling (1992). This makes the topic matter since Vietnamese public relations is dealing with an inconsistent body of knowledge of public relations, no code of ethics, no formulated professional objectives and norms, and no accreditation, which is reviewed in this section.

Education plays a crucial role in professional development in public relations (Ehling, 1992). The relationship between education and professionalism manifests through pedagogy, as a public relations practitioner can provide essential knowledge and skills to complete his or her tasks and responsibilities in public relations activities. However, professionalism in public relations is difficult to conceive because public relations is not filed like doctors or lawyers who pass qualification examinations and become professionals. More often, some can argue that public relations professionals work in public relations-like activities and get paid for that. If so, what are the differences between professionalism and skilled occupation (Ehling, 1992)? Hence, many scholars developed the criteria for public relations professionalism, and their findings are research, scholarly inquiry, the body of knowledge, and the role of education (Cutlip et al., 1985; Ehling, 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Fawkes, 2021). Public relations practitioners, in turn, establish a code of ethics, formulate professional objectives and norms, and obtain accreditation through examination.

With these criteria, public relations and communication management scholars and practitioners in the U.S. have developed educational commissions, practical organizations, and accreditations to strengthen professionalism and education (Ehling, 1992). To name a few, there are the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), the Public Relations Division (PRD) of the Associate of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), the Commission of Public Relations Education (CPRE), and the Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) under PRSA. If leading countries in the public relations field (e.g., the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Korea) are well

prepared for professionalism and education by many public relations education committees or associations, there is still no public relations education committee in Vietnam.

Although McKinney (2011) predicted that the Vietnamese public relations industry would bloom in the future, after over ten years, this industry is still stuck in one place because of lacking formal academic knowledge. Most Vietnamese practitioners serving in the public relations industry hold bachelor's degrees in other fields (e.g., business, marketing, linguistics) or related fields (e.g., journalism and communications) instead of being well-trained in academic knowledge. Professionals gain knowledge from practical experience, mainly from their senior colleagues (Doan & Bilowol, 2014; Van, 2013). The demand for human resources in public relations is increasing, paving the way for public relations programs to open at Vietnamese universities (Van, 2013). Most programs have a few courses focusing on general public relations knowledge and courses from other related majors, such as journalism and communications. In addition, the instructors do not have academic public relations knowledge, while the practical instructors only focus on experiences in their lectures. This issue is a rationale for public relations professionals to realize and emphasize the essentials of professionalism and education for Vietnam. The study by Van (2013) pointed out that there is a need for systematic public relations training programs and the establishment of public relations associations in Vietnam. There is one named Vietnam Public Relations Network (“Homepage – VNPR,” n.d.), but this association has been actively working for about two years. However, the association only gathers public relations practitioners without the participation of scholars in public relations.

Doan and Bilowol (2014) already approached professionalism based on Cameron et al.'s (1996) professional dimensions: skills, research, organizational status, ethical performance, education, gender equality, and accreditation; this thesis supplements public relations professionalism and education in Vietnam among Vietnamese professionals.

RQ3a. What do public relations practitioners in Vietnam think about public relations professionalism and public relations education?

RQ3b. What are the recommendations for developing long-term public relations professionalism and education in Vietnam?

Chapter 3. Methodology

This thesis aims to understand a part of Vietnam's public relations and media management industry: to understand, analyze, and interpret a social phenomenon that focuses on clarifying the three main issues. The first is conceptualizing and operationalizing public relations and communication management in Vietnam, which means the definitions and the daily duties. Another issue pertains to the perceived effects of environmental factors on this industry, including socio-cultural factors (e.g., politics, economics, activism, and legal system), culture, and media system. Finally, the affair of professionalism and education among Vietnamese public relations practitioners. To investigate these issues in depth, qualitative methodology is the appropriate design for this thesis. Moreover, the contextualized nature of qualitative research arises from the intertwining of communication relationships with the social and historical contexts in which they occur (Daymon & Holloway, 2010).

3.1. Research design

The three research questions in this thesis are primarily about the opinions and experiences of Vietnamese public relations and communication management practitioners. There is also much sensitive information about environmental factors affecting the public relations industry; hence, this thesis employs in-depth interviews with semi-structured questionnaires. Field Stacks (2016) explains that the rationales, questions about definition, value, policy, and investigating the causes of particular practices or phenomena are best addressed through in-depth interviews. These interviews offer research rigor and are usually focused on a particular subject, such as professional experience, knowledge, brands, or products.

Another advantage of the in-depth interview is the richness of information it offers. In-depth interviews yield more accurate responses on sensitive issues (e.g., political system, culture,

media system) than conventional survey methods. Specific topics that might be taboo in other approaches are more accessible to discuss when there is rapport between the interviewer and the respondent. Furthermore, there might be some groups for which conducting in-depth interviews is the only helpful method (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). In this case, it is the public relations and communication management practitioners.

A semi-structured list of questions is employed because of the nature of Vietnam's public relations and communication management. According to prior research, the body of knowledge on public relations in Vietnam is inconsistent (Doan & Bilowol, 2014; Van, 2013). Hence, semi-structured questions allow participants of this paper to express their opinions and experiences freely. This design also allows the researcher to clarify the knowledge and some definitions from the theoretical background, which might not be understood in Vietnam (Van, 2013). The questions related to public relations and communication management concepts are employed from the excellence theory (Grunig, 1992). Questions associated with public relations models were built on the theoretical foundation, including Grunig and Hunt (1984), Grunig and Grunig (1992), and other models being found in other countries, especially in Asian nations as Sriramesh et al. (1999) and Sriramesh (2004). To understand three key environmental factors influencing the public relations industry, this study employed the suggested framework and questions of Sriramesh (2004). The professionalism and education issues are based on the theory of Grunig and Hunt (1984), Ehling (1992), and key findings from prior research in the public relations field in Vietnam (Doan & Bilowol, 2014; McKinney, 2007; Van, 2013). A list of questionnaires will be presented in the appendix section.

3.2. Sampling

Intending to understand public relations and communication management practice in Vietnam's business sector, the participants of this thesis are public relations and communication

management practice in Vietnam. Vietnamese professionals in this field can be divided into two groups: those who work for public relations and communication consultants, also known under the popular term public relations – Communication agencies, and those who work for public relations, communication, public affairs, media, or many names related to public relations like activities, also known under a term: in-house team or client side. Prior researchers on the same topic of public relations in Vietnam usually described two groups of practitioners in this way to differentiate the working background. However, this may not be appropriate for the contemporary public relations of Vietnam because the human resources department in this field continuously shifts its working background from agencies to clients and vice versa. Hence, this thesis will diversify sampling by choosing participants from various industries in Vietnam (see Table 1.2. for details). Additionally, a wide range of company types: multinational corporations, Vietnamese corporations, global agencies, and local agencies.

The multinational and Vietnamese corporations are chosen based on two factors: (1) the company name in the Top 500 Companies in Vietnam based on their capital and (2) the reputation of public relations and communication campaigns, which is determined by the news coverage of the top 10 popular online newspapers in Vietnam, which Commsights Vietnam, a leading media monitoring service in Vietnam, offers the data. Commsights Vietnam suggested a list of corporations and companies that dominate many industries regarding the volume of news and articles. These criteria indicate the ability to implement sophisticated public relations and communication activities. In-house public relations practitioners suggested the agencies since these agencies contribute to the volume of news and articles of large corporations.

A large sample in qualitative research may be beneficial for uncovering important perceptions, but too large a sample size can become repetitive and superfluous. Hence, the sample size in qualitative research should follow the concept of saturation, where new data does

not provide further insight into the issue under investigation. This ensures that diverse opinions are captured and the study remains relevant (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Mason, 2010). However, how many participants is sufficient for a qualitative study? The answer to this question depends on the study's purposes. In particular, the study's purpose is to discover grounded theory methodology; it should go with 20-30 interviews. Phenomenology should begin with 5-25 interviews (Creswell, 1998, p. 64, as cited in Mason, 2010, para. 10) and all qualitative research with a minimum acceptable sample of fifteen (Bertaux, 1981, p. 35, as cited in Mason, 2010, para. 10). Mason (2010, para. 43) conducted a study to analyze 560 qualitative research for a common sample size. The most common sample sizes were 20 and 30. Specifically, for phenomenology discovery purposes, the sample size should be around 20 participants. All in all, a sample size of 20 participants is acceptable and suitable for study with the nature of discovering phenomena.

The sampling framework consists of Vietnamese practitioners who have worked in the industry for over five years to ensure the public relations practice is understood. This research excludes foreign practitioners because the study attempts to discover the culture, a factor that only Vietnamese practitioners can fully understand. Regarding demographics, participants should work in Ho Chi Minh City, the Vietnamese economic locomotive and the central hub for public relations of the business sector. In sum, the thesis found that 18 participants met all criteria in the sample framework, and the two other respondents were found by snowball sampling method by asking 18 participants about their network. After checking with the sampling framework, two participants (F11 and F13) are selected.

Female professionals are dominant, with 80% of participants; male professionals account for 20%. This suggests that social culture can affect public relations practice, as explained in the section on results and analysis. The professionals in this thesis are between 28 and 44 years old

and have 6 to 20 years of experience in the Vietnamese public relations industry. Most of them hold bachelor's degrees (16 participants), three respondents hold master's degrees in the United Kingdom and Australia, and one participant has an associate degree. Demographics and their working experiences are briefed in table 2.

Table 2. List of participants with their background in brief

Num ber	Part icipant code	Gen der	Educational background	Working background						Inte rvie w dur atio n	Inte rvie w date	Rema rk
				Experienced industries	Year of experi ence	In-house departme nt (Client)		Consultan t (agency)				
						Glo bal	Loc al	Glo bal	Loc al			
Pilot study												
1	F01	F	BA in Journalism & Communication	Major applicant and consumer electronics, and real-estate	6	✓	✓			49	05/31/2023; 01/22/2024	
2	F02	F	BA in International relations	Movie distribution, major applicant and consumer electronics, and FMCG	7	✓		✓	✓	95	6/1/23; 1/22/24	
3	F03	F	BA in International relations	Major applicant and consumer electronics, and the electronic commerce	10		✓	✓		107	9/30/23; 1/20/24	
Main study												
4	F04	F	BA in Business Administration	Technology, FMCG, ride-hailing, major applicant and consumer electronics, and pharmaceuticals	13			✓	✓	131	12/1/23	
5	F05	F	BA in English Linguistics and Literature	Major applicant and consumer electronics, diary, and pharmaceuticals	12		✓		✓	71	12/15/23	
6	F06	F	BA in International Business Administration	Major applicant and consumer electronics, FMCG, and food and drink processing	14				✓	67	12/19/23	

Notes: F: female, BA: bachelor, FMCG: Fast-moving Consumer Goods.
(table cont'd.)

Num ber	Part icipant code	Gen der	Educational background	Working background						Inte rvie w dur atio n	Inte rvie w date	Rema rk
				Experienced industries	Year of experi ence	In-house departme nt (Client)		Consultan t (agency)				
						Glo bal	Loc al	Glo bal	Loc al			
7	F07	F	BA in Journalism & Communication	Former was a journalist for educational column in one of leading newspapers; PR for real-estate and educational institution including kindergartens, primary, middle, high schools, and colleges	10	✓			✓	95	12/2 1/23	
8	M01	M	BA in English Linguistics and Literature	Franchise, magazine publishers, technology, jewelry, banking, diary, health – beauty - and home care products, logistic and package delivery. A literacy translator, specialized for communication	14	✓	✓	✓	✓	79	12/2 2/23	
9	F08	F	BA in Mathematics Teacher Education	Major applicant and consumer electronics, technology, whole sales, construction, ride-hailing, insurance, banking, and pharmaceuticals	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	97	12/2 4/23	
10	F09	F	BA in Oriental studies	Major applicant and consumer electronics including products and CSR, diary, and business-to-business products	12			✓		83	12/2 5/23	
11	M02	M	BA in Chinese Linguistics and Literature	Major applicant and consumer electronics, technology, FMCG, pharmaceuticals, diary, life insurance, and liqueur	13		✓	✓	✓	94	12/2 6/23	

Notes: M: male, F: female, BA: bachelor, FMCG: Fast-moving Consumer Goods, CSR: corporate social responsibility.
(table cont'd.)

Nu m be r	Part icip ant code	Gen der	Educational background	Working background						Inte rvie w dur atio n	Inte rvie w date	Rema rk
				Experienced industries	Year of experi ence	In-house departme nt (Client)		Consultan t (agency)				
						Glo bal	Loc al	Glo bal	Loc al			
12	F10	F	BA in Economics, MA in Marketing in Australia	Major applicant and consumer electronics, technology, FMCG, life insurance, digital applicants, healthcare. Managing director at one leading local agency	10				✓	90	1/5/ 24	
13	F11	F	AD in accounting	Life insurance, liqueur, telecom, theme park, luxury fashion, energy (oil and gas provider).	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	83	1/10 /24	SS from M01
14	F12	F	BA in International Relations, MA in Public Relations in the United Kingdom (U.K.)	Automobile manufacturer, major applicant and consumer electronics, dietary supplements, medical corporation, cosmetic, banking, and consumer finance provider (payment, lending, insurance, investment).	13	✓	✓	✓	✓	124	1/12 /24	
15	F13	F	BA in English Pedagogy, MBA in the U.K.	Audit, major applicant and consumer electronics, smart city solution, digital automation, and energy management	10	✓	✓			63	1/13 /24	SS from F09
16	F14	F	BA in Journalism & Communication	Major applicant and consumer electronics, technology, FMCG, CSR,	11	✓		✓	✓	41	1/14 /24	

Notes: F: female, AD: associate degree, BA: bachelor, MA: master of arts, MBA: master business administration, FMCG: Fast-moving Consumer Goods, CSR: corporate social responsibility, SS: snowball sampling.

(table cont'd.)

Num ber	Part icipant code	Gen der	Educational background	Working background					Inte rvie w dur atio n	Inte rvie w date	Rema rk	
				Experienced industries	Year of experi ence	In-house departme nt (Client)		Consultan t (agency)				
						Glo bal	Loc al	Glo bal				Loc al
17	M03	M	BA in Communication , specialized in public relations in Indonesia and Singapore	Technology, FMCG, finance, Human Resource Consulting, real estate, stock market, Dairy, liqueur, brewing industry, cigarettes. A founder of one local agency (specialized in consumer communication), a few NGOs and NPOs are also his client	14			✓	✓	48	1/17 /24	
18	M04	M	BA in English Linguistics and Literature	Major applicant and consumer electronics, FMCG, medical corporation, ride-hailing (transportation and food delivery), e-commerce, online travel, automotive manufacturer, manufacturing and processing industries, real-estate, construction. Former managing director of one leading local agency, now working for an NGO	9		✓		✓	70	1/20 /24	
19	F15	F	BA in Journalism and Communication	Sport, game online and mobile game (local corporation with oversea business operation)	12		✓		✓	64	1/22 /24	

Notes: M: male, F: female, BA: bachelor, FMCG: Fast-moving Consumer Goods, NGO: non-governmental organization, NPO: non-profit organization.
(table cont'd.)

Nu m be r	Part icip ant code	Gen der	Educational background	Working background						Inte rvie w dur atio n	Inte rvie w date	Rema rk
				Experienced industries	Year of experi ence	In-house departme nt (Client)		Consultan t (agency)				
						Glo bal	Loc al	Glo bal	Loc al			
20	F16	F	BA in Journalism and Communication	She has worked for only one corporation that is one of the largest conglomerates of Vietnam, focusing on technology, industry, real estate development, retail and services ranging from healthcare to hospitality, and education. Its products are selling in the U.S. Former instructor in journalism and mass communication, journalist.	9		✓			109	1/26 /24	

Notes: F: female, BA: bachelor.

3.3. Recruitment procedures

The significance of interpersonal relationships in Vietnam makes recruiting research participants without pre-existing relationships challenging (Doan & Bilowol, 2014; McKinney, 2007). However, close access to the participants is permitted because the researcher has worked in public relations and communication management for ten years, necessitating regular engagement with the local public relations industry. Every participant was contacted by phone to confirm that they satisfied the requirements (having at least five years of experience in the field) and to request their consent to participate formally. A formal invitation letter detailing the research objectives, confidentiality protocols, and participant rights and responsibilities was sent to each respondent, along with the project's ethics approval number via email. An invitation letter will be presented in the appendix.

3.4. Interview process and data collection

The interview process is conducted offline (only with the pilot study) and online (with the main study) via the Zoom platform, lasting from 41 to 124 minutes, with an average duration of 77 minutes. Vietnamese is the language used to ensure precise information, which is most important when participants answer about the sensitive factors mentioned above. Schwandt (1993, as cited in Van, 2013, p. 98) and Guba & Lincoln (1994, as cited in Van, 2013, p. 98) both assert that the interviewer's role was an essential aspect of the interviews. Hence, the interview often begins with questions about educational background and work experience to collect information about professionalism and education and create a comfortable vibe for participants. This facilitates answering questions about opinions, values, and factors later affecting the public relations industry. Because of the different backgrounds of participants, the order of questions is not the same. This also often happens with in-depth interviews. As Daymon and Holloway (2010) suggested, the interview guide questions focus on specific topics and lines of inquiry. The

sequencing of questions varies for each participant, but the guide ensures similar data types from all informants, saving time and reducing the “dross rate.” The guide also allows for question development before interviewing and allows for self-determination of which issues to pursue. This approach saves time and reduces the 'dross rate' compared to unstructured interviews. The list of questionnaires is in the appendix section.

After the interview, the author employs a “Voice memo” application to transcribe the voice into Vietnamese text. The coding for thematic analysis is conducted in Vietnamese to retain the original meaning using MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software. Then, the researcher wrote the result and analysis in English to ensure the accuracy of the meaning.

Chapter 4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1. RQ1: Conceptualization and operationalization among Vietnamese public relations

4.1.1. Conceptualization

Six participants defined a public relations job as carrying out communication activities for an organization on purpose through communication channels to promote and distribute information products, services, and corporate information so that the public can understand (respondents F04 and F07). Practitioners who think of public relations this way assume that the public is primarily the end user or customer who uses the company's products or services (participant F12). The marketing department often coordinates product and service promotion and publicity (F15, F01, F02).

However, the responses varied when participants answered about media channels employed for communication activities based on the differences in their duties. One group with seven participants (F04, F05, F06, F07, F08, M02, F16) said that media is traditional or mainstream press channels (e.g., printed and online newspapers, broadcast, and television). For them, doing PR means doing traditional/mainstream journalism. Another group with three respondents (F01, F02, F04) broadly employ media channels as traditional media and social media; this group often prefers to describe their jobs as communication management or integrated marketing and communication (IMC) or marketing–communication (mar-com) instead of public relations.

One participant stated that public relations is everything related to the relationship between the organization and its stakeholders, and common stakeholders are often journalists, the government, and customers. The nature of public relations is to solve problems in

relationships, as participant F10 stated:

“But the most special thing is that we have to build and maintain relationships. Wherever there are relationships, there will be PR.”

Three participants' concept of public relations jobs was that they worked for both communication and relationships for their companies. For these participants, public relations is working on everything related to building relationships with the target public group through communication. (F08, M01, and F15). Also, for these participants, public relations is a channel to promote brand value, build mutual understanding, and maintain relationships with stakeholders, including journalists, government, and both internal and external organizations.

"It is a channel (for organization) to publicize the value of a business's brand, and secondly, organizations build and maintain relationships with related stakeholders." (F10)

One respondent adds that public relations in the business sector means building a corporation's reputation and image. For participant F05, her public relations job is delivering messages through third parties and interacting with stakeholders to convey objective messages to the public, with the ultimate goal of building, maintaining, and protecting the reputation.

Participant F05: “The ultimate goal of PR is reputation management. Reputation management includes dealing with risks that may affect that reputation.”

Based on the differences in the corporation characteristics (e.g., dominant coalition, the public relations department, and the nature of business), Vietnamese public relations practitioners define PR jobs mainly as carrying on communication, building reputation and image, and enhancing the relationships between their organization and its public. However, some professionals prefer only traditional media for communication channels, while others prefer broader, including social media. This difference can indicate the diversity in practice and the rise of social media in Vietnam's media environment.

4.1.2. Operationalization

Since practice is diverse, Vietnamese PR practitioners often classify PR practice into two main branches based on the main scopes of their duties: corporate communication and consumer communication. PR professionals usually name corporate communication or corporate public relations, "corp. com," or corporate affairs. Consumer communication is also known under many other names, such as branded PR, product PR, brand communication, and marketing communication (mar-com). The main scope of public relations focuses on media management, building and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders, and related jobs. Daily public relations work includes planning, execution, evaluation, and measuring the effectiveness of public relations activities. Some scopes of work will intersect, such as media relations and crisis communication management.

Vietnamese PR practitioners also practice strategic management based on corporate and consumer communication (F05, M02). These two segments interact with each other. Practitioners of the in-house department will manage these two branches based on the budget (F08). In contrast, on the agency side, managers manage in more detail services as client services, such as reputation management, crisis management, corporate social responsibility, sustainability, events related to PR activities (press conferences), conducting one-on-one interviews, media tours, internal communication, and product branding. The name of this service can vary depending on the agencies.

Communication management. This includes scopes related to building and deploying content and messages for the enterprise's internal and external affairs through communication channels. For large corporations with many subsidiaries, this work will be expanded to include consulting on media orientation for subsidiaries (F16). Specific tasks include information management, controlling all relevant information for the business, building content

and messages such as message house, storytelling for the business entity (corp. com), and both products and services.

For external communication, Vietnamese PR practitioners usually seed information to reporters for editorials (pitching articles as the preference of Vietnamese practitioners), which is a crucial task under the more extensive scope of media relations. Practitioners will also prepare content for key opinion leaders (KOLs) in brand influencers to convey messages according to the organization's desire. Vietnamese PR practitioners can practice advertorials through booking or brand journalism when the reporter cannot achieve the editorials. In exceptional cases, such as a business incident or a crisis, communication management will become crisis communication management.

For internal stakeholders, Vietnamese PR practitioners will be in charge of internal communication or employee branding by maintaining two-way communication channels and engagement programs to build strong relationships between employees and employees (M03, F12). Practitioners are also in charge of brand consulting, advising subsidiaries based on parent companies' communication direction. (F16).

Building and maintaining relationships between the business and its stakeholders. As mentioned above, the key objective of this task is to build mutual understanding between for-profit organizations and the targeted public (F04, F07, F02). Vietnamese PR professionals identify key business stakeholders as government, media, customers, and notable stakeholders, depending on the business operations. To build and maintain the relationship with the government, the public relations department's government relations work depends on the businesses and describes this task as government relations, public affairs, or external affairs. Some corporations will separate or merge the government relations department with the legal and compliance department. In this case, PR practitioners will

personally or collaborate with legal departments to prepare messages and documents to serve specific business purposes (e.g., government advocacy, government partnership).

According to respondents, regarding the relationships with media, the main job is to build, maintain, and preserve healthy relationships with reporters by continuously updating information about business activities and utilizing it effectively in times of crisis. In particular, becoming a reporter's source of information plays a vital role in media relations. Additionally, Vietnamese PR practitioners also handle media tours (escort reporters to visit factories), media trips (escort reporters to conferences, exhibitions, and product launching abroad), or organizing meetings with reporters on special occasions (e.g., Vietnamese Journalist's Day, New Year, Lunar New Year) with the participation of a coalition of businesses, usually Chief Executive Officer or equivalent C-level.

Regarding other stakeholders, such as business partners, the public relations department may prepare documents and introduce business activities and products to tie business-to-business (B2B) partnerships for internal stakeholders as employees, as described above in employee branding.

Developing activities related to sustainable development. Seven public relations practitioners (F03, F05, F06, F08, F09, F10, and M04) reveal that the PR department is also in charge of activities related to the sustainable development of corporations. Concepts related to these affairs are corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate shared value (CSV), corporate social advocacy (CSA), sustainability, and environment–sustainability–governance (ESG). Specific tasks include creating content and communications and building, implementing, and evaluating sustainability initiatives. This job will partly relate to government relations if businesses coordinate strategically with the government.

4.1.3. Role and function of public relations

From a broader perspective, the role and function of public relations are related to how participants practice public relations; explaining the role and function will help understand the public relations landscape more clearly. At the organizational level, public relations is now operationalized as a communication channel rather than a field. This is a perception usually of the marketing department of corporations for consumer communication. Twenty percent of the participants also said that the role of PR is shrinking (F10), with only the main scopes remaining: content creation, crisis management, and corporate affairs (e.g., sustainability and corporate social responsibility) (F05). For content creation, public relations (usually in traditional media) is a place to fact-check business information and create discussion, paving the way for smaller discussions on digital platforms (M04, F02). Crisis management remains crucial because if any significant issue happens in the press, it will damage the brand's health (M04), and public relations is still associated with firm belief.

4.1.4. Models of public relations practiced in Vietnam

The personal influence model and cultural interpreter model receive consensus from all public relations practitioners practicing in Vietnam due to the impact of two main environmental factors: infrastructure and culture, which will be presented more clearly in section 4.2. (RQ2). When asked about the four models of public relations by Grunig and Hunt (1984), most practitioners responded that they did not know these models and excused that the theoretical models were not applicable because public relations is a field that focuses on practice. The only person who knows precisely the four models is participant F12, who holds the United Kingdom's master's degree in public relations. She also confirmed that she is still applying these models in Vietnam, depending on the nature of the campaign and communication. From there, the researcher switches the questionnaire to ask about the characteristics of the four models of public relations. In general, all four models are applied depending on the business and the nature of the

PR campaign.

The press agency/publicity model. The press agency/publicity model is recognized in the real estate business and Vietnamese corporations in automobile manufacturing, and the two-way symmetrical model is recognized in multinational banking and Vietnamese technology corporations but operates internationally. Participant F01 said the real estate business often produces advertorials containing untrue information to persuade its consumers. Moreover, participant F12 acknowledged this model in internal communication at a Vietnamese corporation automobile manufacturer because the purpose of the coalition board is to promote discipline among company employees.

Public information and two-way asymmetry. These are two models mentioned most among participants and are employed in mixed ways based on the purposes and nature of communication. These two models are presented based on three main themes. As mentioned above, because practitioners do not know four models of public relations, the researcher switched to pose questions about the three characteristics of communication: the information-sharing approach (one-way and two-way communication), the application of research, and the journalist role (journalist-in-residence).

The information-sharing approach. Participants mostly mentioned two-way asymmetrical, sometimes one-way. The difference between one-way and two-way information is receiving feedback from stakeholders, especially reporters (message mediators) and customers (message receivers). According to respondents, PR practitioners collect feedback in small groups through focus groups, short interviews via calls, surveys, or chatting through popular chat applications. Receiving feedback is often implemented during the project planning stage or when the project starts early to probe how the information is being obtained, specifically how customers and reporters react to this message. One participant explained, "because multinational

corporations will adopt key messages from the global and regional side, but sometimes this message will not work in the Vietnamese market due to political, economic, and cultural factors. So, I have to recognize this through journalists” (F09).

However, M01 believes that asymmetric two-way communication is theoretical and takes place at the planning stage. When the PR campaign enters the execution phase, receiving feedback as described by the participants is just fine-tuning and optimizing the campaign message more effectively. The two-way can occur when a business is urgently needed, for example, during a communication crisis.

The application of research. Vietnamese PR practitioners usually use research, meaning secondary research or reports, to understand customer behavior, serve to build better plans and provide evidence to serve communication goals (persuasion). In other words, research for Vietnamese practitioners is not gathering their own primary data to understand problems and gain insights directly from the public. They instead conduct secondary research by using these four types of reports: (1) Media research report (trends, media influence on public target groups); (2) Report on the industry, the market they are working in, and the government's white paper on that industry; (3) Report on products, recorded in the business in the nutrition industry, because it is related to health and scientific information; (4) Report on consumer behavior. Some companies own users' behavior data when operating in the digital economy and behavioral data in media consumption because they operate in the field of brand journalism. These companies can extract data during the planning process.

They are in a journalist role (journalist-in-residence). When asked whether PR practitioners perform the role of reporters in their daily work, practitioners are divided into two main groups: those who serve the role of reporters (10 participants) and those who deny the role of reporters (3 participants). The group believes that PR professionals performing the role of

reporters account for about fifty percent of participants. Specifically, these are jobs related to thinking about topics, developing them into articles, interviews, editing, and publishing articles. Participant F16 explains how editing skills help a lot when delivering necessary messages for the press. One conclusion of participant F15: “A PR plan is like a reporter's topic list.”

Participant F09 shared that PR practitioners also play the gatekeeper role because they sense what topics the government and the public can implement.

“When reporters can not understand the topic, they find it unattractive to readers, so I have to inspire reporters so they can understand the benefits of that campaign.” (F13).

This helps explain the phenomenon of some corporations preferring to recruit PR practitioners with a working history as reporters because these former reporters will be fluent in information distribution and have relationships with other reporters in that field, which will be more convenient in media relations (F07, F08, and F16). Most participants argued that their role as journalists-in-residence is to be in charge of technicians.

The second group believes that PR practitioners do not play the role of a reporter because of the clear distinction between the duties of a PR practitioner and a reporter. Reporters will be responsible for conveying information in a balanced and objective manner to readers (F08, M04). Meanwhile, PR people will tend to create pseudo-events, create information sources by using PR buzz to attract reporters (F08, M04), and manipulate information to increase the message's persuasiveness (F08). Similarly, F10 says that PR people need to balance between the brand and the public, while reporters are the ones who pursue the truth. This group consists mainly of three public relations managers.

The model of two-way symmetrical. This is recognized in internal and policy communication within a large corporation (the top 30 companies in Vietnam) in the technology industry. The number of employees is around 60,000 globally, with 30,000 working in Vietnam.

With this background, when this corporation issues a new policy, the public relations department has to ensure mutual understanding between employers and employees. Hence, this corporation has to employ a two-way symmetrical approach by building platforms to facilitate dialogue. Participant M02 from this company said they must focus on three elements: infrastructure to ensure dialogue, turn feedback into a solution, and manage crisis communication if the input is still unsatisfactory.

The personal influence model. The vast majority of participants (18 out of 20) highlighted the importance of relationships (interpersonal relationships) in the work of PR practitioners. F10 and F11 shared the same thought: “If you do PR, you should have relations because, in the phrase public relations, there is already the word relations.” When discussing this model, participants mainly discussed media relations, with only one case discussing government relations. Respondent F04 said that a project that needs to reach out to a public group needs to go through local officials. creating relationships with the officials before the launch of the project government would help the program achieve better results in terms of approaching a more targeted public.

The advantage of interpersonal relationships. Two participants (F02 and M01) said interpersonal relationships with media reflect the professional level of Vietnamese PR practitioners. PR professionals will have more advantages in their work when they have a good relationship with reporters, such as receiving priority from reporters when processing information. Moreover, processing information also means manipulating information when necessary and intervening in temporarily not posting information if the enterprise evaluates it as unfavorable for business (F16). Good media relations also create a seamless information circuit between a PR practitioner and journalists so that journalists will find PR practitioners when the press needs further information. And vice versa.

Media relations come into play when PR practitioners handle communication crises. Similarly, F07, M01, F10, and F03 believe that support is efficient when a media issue requires immediate action. If PR professionals do not build and maintain relationships, when a media issue occurs, reporters will be more cautious and on guard with them. (F07). However, F01, F02, F03, and M03 consider interpersonal relationships with media should be understood to confidently approach, start a conversation, and seed organization's information for reporters. More critical is the morality of the PR practitioner

“But there is a certain level. They (PR practitioners) need to be compared with their morality.” (F12)

The disadvantages of interpersonal relationships. Reporters can have two faces when working with PR professionals. On the one hand, journalists exchange favorable information from news agencies so that PR practitioners can prepare reactive plans during crisis communication. On the other hand, journalists can use this information to publish negative news or editorials in other newspapers (M02). The relationship between PR professionals and reporters may follow a “ask-give mechanism.” This phrase is frequently used to describe a system of governing society through commands rather than the application of the law, in which decisions made by subordinate officials are subject to approval from superiors in exchange for a variety of "favors" (Dat, 2016). In public relations practice, the “ask-give mechanism” reflects a relationship between journalists and PR professionals, in which journalists are superiors and PR professionals are subordinates, rather than a win-win relationship. Favorable public relations outcomes made by PR practitioners are subject to journalists' approval in exchange for various "favors" linked to the “envelope culture” or other cultural aspects (e.g., interpersonal relationships and good attitudes from PR practitioners). Hence, Vietnamese PR practitioners may play a role as servants for journalists, and leading the information process may not be as objective as the answer of

participant F05. Similarly, professional M04 added that "feeding" or sending information to reporters through interpersonal relations interferes with the fairness and equality of readers' information, and PR workers manipulate information.

When brand journalism becomes popular, publishers' advertising departments (other names are the commercial and sales departments) become more potent in raising incomes for media outlets. It becomes a counterweight to reporters in terms of distributing information in media. Reporters no longer hold the monopoly on information as before. The relationship between reporters and PR professionals becomes fairer and more win-win as participant F05 addressed:

“However, the shift gradually progressed, especially thanks to the restructuring of the press system. Temporarily called the power of reporters and the advertising department, it is more separate than before. There are issues that reporters cannot directly handle like before. This helps balance the two sides. Both sides will have to be smarter in how to handle the problem. Suppose they (PR practitioners) approach reporters as friends or professionals at work who can support each other. In that case, the relationship between the two sides will be increasingly tightened naturally. The working process is also more convenient, so both sides get better together, not in a one-way. That means I work in PR and have that responsibility, and you (journalists) work in journalism. I have to approach you appropriately. I think the approach and way of working with media relations play an important role. That is, we should not approach it in a technical or gimmicky way, which is, for me, this way of working is ineffective and very ridiculous.”

Appropriately apply interpersonal relationships. Participants said they should use personal influence as confidence to reach out to reporters to seed the information rather than manipulate the reporter's information process.

Participant F09 shared that we (PR practitioners) should only approach and let interpersonal relationships account for 20% of information processing/problem-solving. This 20% is for the PR practitioners to contact the reporter. The remaining 80% should be based on the nature of the information (quality), not forced or begged (the reporter to publish the news or the article).

Similarly, respondents F09, M01, and F02 also emphasized the importance of information quality when conducting editorials. The information must be new and satisfy the

news outlet's requirements, such as editorial criteria, readers' tastes, or business reactions to a specific government policy or activity. In crisis communication, information quality becomes more crucial because reporters always want to cover the business's opinion objectively.

Respondents also acknowledged the “envelope culture” or practice media tips/ media allowance practice, as explained in the section on the linkage of Vietnamese culture and public relations practice. However, one participant, an agency founder focusing on consumer communication, described the media pitching practice as gradually decreasing. As mentioned above, the second important factor is the information quality, which most participants consider the most important; a few participants expressed an opposing viewpoint. Respondent F08, who used to work for an American PR agency, said that when this company did not use “envelope culture,” some Vietnamese reporters complained about the lousy treatment of journalists. However, professional F12 expressed that without money and only focusing on information quality, her banking corporation still regularly maintains a good public relations performance by being mentioned in the mainstream press. Many Vietnamese journalists ask her to be on the media list to receive a press release from this banking corporation.

Another widespread PR practice in Vietnam is using advertorials. Along with the development of the Vietnamese PR industry, this practice has been professionalized, becoming brand journalism, with other names such as content partnership or content booking. This approach is prevalent in consumer PR (product PR, branded PR). Respondents say that evaluating brand journalism helps classify information better: information transparency. Brand journalism combines the organization's desired message and the audience's information needs so that information is conveyed more naturally and relevantly to readers instead of being one-sided with information from the business as sharing of practitioner F10.

“Because the public is now brilliant. If they recognize a piece of one-way

information, they immediately skip it.”

Two professionals, F14 and F11, believe that brand journalism is a way for newsrooms to restrict reporters' freedom to write articles because reporters are used to receiving “envelopes” from PR practitioners to publish editorials. In addition, the quality of brand journalism content needs to be improved because the writer is not a reporter. Hence, PR professionals prefer to hire reporters to write articles and then publish these advertorials through the advertising department.

“Editorials from a reporter still bring more value in terms of content quality while advertisements bring more value in terms of branding.” (F08)

Similarly, respondent M01 has opposing opinions because it is impossible to determine the effectiveness of brand journalism, and the downside is that the editors' boards of some media outlets can use brand journalism to blackmail businesses. On the other hand, large companies can take advantage of these brand journalism packages to ask the editorial board of news outlets for support when these companies face negative news stories. The supports are approached as not posting negative articles or not mentioning the business name. However, newsrooms with high credibility are often not affected by this request. Other newsrooms, often tabloids, will use this to blackmail businesses, as participant M01 mentioned.

4.2. RQ2: The perceived effects of environmental variables

4.2.1. Infrastructure

Participant F07 summarizes the perceived effects of infrastructure: “From my point of view, the infrastructure is like a common root, a sky, like a limit of the story of public relations and communications operations in Vietnam.”

The perceived effects of the political system. Political factors are the most prominent factors in the Vietnamese market because they will significantly affect the remaining factors (economy, activism, legal system, culture, and media). In general, the political system

affects the strategic management of PR practitioners, specifically in preparing PR plans, special events, content, messages, and cooperation with the government. However, politics is becoming more open, and it is not a factor that challenges Vietnamese PR professionals.

For leading corporations in some industries that usually cooperate with the government, their special events can include welcoming heads of state or diplomatic delegations; the preparation must be implemented carefully and based on the principles of national welcoming, as participant F16 stated:

We need more resources when organizing events that welcome national and international heads of state. We (PR practitioners) need to borrow the resources of specialized units to standardize the processes.

PR professionals should have a sense of the emerging political situation. This situational awareness may come from sources within the state apparatus or from political gossip. Four participants, including F20, M03, F14, and F16, are examples of political gossip that could change a critical designation in the national "big four" leaders. Upon hearing this news, four participants had to prepare backup plans for their ongoing campaigns, such as changing the project timeline and preparing to suspend entertainment activities temporarily (in case Vietnam announces a state funeral).

“Temporarily suspend entertainment and entertainment activities and back up plans for media activities (in case Vietnam declares state funeral)” by participants M03, F14, F16, and F20.

PR practitioners should also be politically sensitive to better prepare for partnerships with the government, including content, messages, and business advocacy for the government and vice versa. Politics in Vietnam plays a vital role in shaping advocacy information for issues related to national development. As participant F16 suggests, a safe choice for PR practitioners is to avoid political content in their PR planning and execution.

Professional F10: “Because political changes will lead to changes in the direction of public opinion or the way politicians start a campaign.”

Practitioner F12: “Planning, in terms of message delivery, is in line with what the VNGov is aiming for and is implementing.”

Besides, when politics changes in some macro policies, reporters expect to cover the businesses' response to these policies. Professional F03 said that in the e-commerce industry, tax policies often change; journalists often ask for their corporation's response as an endorsement from the business sectors. The political system can be an effective approach in some industries, such as clean energy solutions. For example, respondent F13 usually cites VNGov's commitments to clean energy at international forums for her PR activities (e.g., preparing business leaders' speeches); then, the reporters will quote both information from VNGov and her corporation, which increases the corporation's reputation.

The political system also affects businesses' participation in national and industrial organizations and associations. Companies will participate in these associations appropriate to their field to maintain cooperative relations between the two sides and to seek support and protection when necessary, usually during a media crisis. Respondent F12 said that according to the nature of the company's business, her corporation chose central VNGov agencies and organizations to align their business strategies with VNGov's direction. For example, the banking industry will cooperate closely with the State Bank of Vietnam. In addition, when a business plans to implement corporate social responsibility activities (rescuing agricultural products), the company must also coordinate with local state agencies. As participant M01 argued, coordinating with the local state agencies is for legitimacy; if not, it is illegal.

However, in strategic partnerships with VNGov, PR practitioners must be "flexible and cautious," as the response of two professionals, F05 and M02. When PR activities are related to the government (cooperating with ministries or equivalent), “You (PR professionals) need to be

careful to harmonize the information elements of all involved parties to avoid the exposure of businesses in the press more dominant than the governments,” participant M02 said.

Two respondents also assessed that Vietnam's political system is gradually becoming "more open," leading to more openness in censoring the press content. VNGov allows the ongoing practice of brand journalism, creating the diversification of publishers, not just state newspaper groups, bringing the richness of business content as the response of participant F09. Sensitive issues, rarely discussed publicly before, such as rights for the LGBTQ+ community, were examined more directly (respondent F05). However, another opinion is that the LGBTQ+ issue is only agreed upon to a certain extent and is only conferred on social media rather than in mainstream media.

About twenty percent of participants (F08, F09, F13, and F16) admitted that political factors are not challenging for business PR practitioners, so they need to follow the guidance of the Vietnamese political system.

The perceived effects of economic development. Since 1986, Vietnam has undergone economic reform with a socialist-oriented market economy. The open economy has changed Vietnam on a macro and micro scale. On the macro level, the open economy creates conditions for developing professional occupations, including journalism (F08). In addition, Vietnam is undergoing a national press development and management plan, which will be discussed in detail later in the media environment section. Professional F08 explains that economic factors are the main factors for developing more professional careers, changing the business model of journalism, and changing the income model of newspapers.

The market economy also introduces many new industries, such as the digital economy: ride-hailing applications, e-commerce, digital media (games), etc., forcing Vietnam PR professionals to adapt and keep up with economic trends to do their jobs as the sharing of two

practitioners, F02 and F12.

On a micro level, economic development affects budget planning for public relations. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, when the economy has been in recession, businesses have prioritized product PR budgets and reduced corporate communication budgets. Four participants (F06, F05, F04, and F03) explained how to prioritize product sales. Therefore, PR professionals should also choose communication channels for promoting and selling products (M04).

Participant F15 in the digital media industry shared: “With economic development, more people can play games, which leads the PR department to have a larger budget for media promotion activities.”

In addition, PR content also needs to be more modest, simpler, and more realistic to suit the declining economic situation, as noted by practitioners F01, F03, and F14. Contrary to the idea of cutting the budget in public relations, M03 believes that PR has never been a field that receives a lot of expense. During the prime of PR in Vietnam, businesses realized that investing in PR was more effective than other channels, so they allocated more budget to PR. Now, enterprises have shifted these budgets to digital marketing. Hence, PR workers should play wisely based on this shift. However, public relations also have the advantage of flexibility in evaluation and measurement (M03).

The perceived effects of activism. In Vietnam, activism is often associated with corporate social responsibility and is affected by the political system. Proactive topics usually revolve around national development, and in recent years, the general trend has been sustainable development goals. Choosing appropriate activism activities will help businesses enhance their reputation.

Activism in Vietnam is affected by the political system. No matter whether activism is a strength, it must have the state's consent (participants F08 and F16). Consequently, activism in

Vietnam is often closely related to national development through the policies and guidelines of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the VNGov. This leads some practitioners to take a neutral position because these practitioners are concerned that there will be activism against the government. Participant F12 added that her corporations definitely advocate for some activism initiatives as long as these activities are appropriate to the business plan of her corporation and must be approved or consented to by VNGov. The activism receiving attention in Vietnam concerns green living, clean electricity, environmental protection, child labor, worker's rights issues, and gender equality (F04, F15, M04). However, participant F10 said that any activism would need to consider the political system and economic development because these two factors are Vietnam's core capacities.

Activism in Vietnam has grown and changed over the past few decades. In the early steps, when Vietnam faced challenges in poverty and illiteracy, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives focused on charity, humanitarianism, and learning encouragement. In recent years, CSR has emphasized issues such as sustainable development, environmental protection, and livelihoods for farmers (F05). The selection of CSR programs is also based on the business's suitability with goals associated with business benefits such as "building reputation" (F11), supporting marketing and communication activities, or preparation for the Environment – Social – Governance (ESG) reports as participant F07 describes how she chose activism that aligns with her organization's business objectives.

“For example, it only applies to my field of education. In Vietnam, the mother is still the decision-maker for their kids' schooling or related educational affairs rather than the father. Hence, women and children are our target audience for business objectives. Then, when choosing activism for my corporation (educational institutions), we (public relations professionals) have prioritized activities and organizations (activism) related to our target audience. By doing this, activism related to mothers and kids sees the fitting between their audience and our ones (F07's corporation), and this activism also supports our communication strategies. Participant F07 added.

Similarly, internal communication is conducted based on employee activism and interest in large corporations. Thus, three respondents shared that activism is not a way for businesses to respond to the public but for companies to attract and deploy marketing activities based on user tastes (F06, F07, and F16). From there, CSR activities often receive attention from the media, and PR professionals do not need to “pay to play” (M02). Respondent F16, however, stressed that PR practitioners must consider cultural factors when implementing activism. Some activism messages could go viral worldwide, but when brought back to Vietnam, corporations forcefully combined them and caused offense, which became crisis communication.

The perceived effects of the legal system. Vietnamese PR practitioners often coordinate with the legal and compliance departments to resolve legal issues, focusing on the industry in which the business is operating. The legal system mainly affects PR practitioners regarding messages conveyed to external and logistical tasks if the PR activities involve foreign elements. Based on the participants' responses, the PR department will consult with the legal and compliance departments on issues related to the PR campaign before starting projects (F05).

Respondent F07, who works for an educational institution system, stated, " To work with foreign experts in educational projects, you (the corporation) must apply for some legal documents."

Businesses operating under “the black industry,” such as alcoholic drinks (liqueur, wine, beer, etc.) and tobacco, will be subject to more legal control and management. It is also noted that Vietnam is a communist country; the CPV holds political sway and authority over issues relating to politics, culture, and the media of all kinds (Saxonberg, 2013). CPV can influence legal issues in some way, as the sharing of participant F11 talked about how practitioners must approach more strategically in “the black industry” when implementing PR activities.

Participant F11 said: “At that time, Vietnam's Ha Long Bay was in the voting competition to become one of seven world cultural heritage. So, my client was a liquor corporation that donated a 6-liter bottle of wine at the auction gala to fund

this election. This 6-liter bottle of wine was auctioned for considerable value in money, and the Central Propaganda and Education Commission (CPEC) allowed my client's corporate name to be mentioned in mainstream newspapers. This was a straightforward way to appear in mainstream media because, in Vietnam at that time, alcohol product was only allowed in bars and could not appear in newspapers."

Participant F15 added that VNGov also does not support businesses in some digital media, such as online or mobile games. These are governed by more legal frameworks, leading to more steps to obtain a game publishing license. Consequently, in this case, the PR professionals will be in the business's external affairs team to prepare the necessary information and documents to carry out official practices related to policy lobbying.

One opinion of respondent F12 is that Vietnamese law protects businesses at a basic level. However, participant M04 shared the opposite view is that the law and state management are flexible, leading to some companies circumventing the law, such as in the dairy industry; he stated:

"It is in the milk industry. Nowadays, many brands are circumventing the law by adding an ingredient called milk in a permissible amount to get the name milk on the label. Consumers also believe it, so they drink it. This story is stupid, but I (my clients) cannot try to clarify it in this environment (in Vietnam). In the end, it will involve state management, and the law does not allow us to do that. Additionally, our (Vietnam) competition law is insufficient to protect everyone in the media."

Respondent F11 assessed that political and legal factors are not too difficult because the regulations are evident in terms of do—and do—nots; hence, follow them.

4.2.2. The perceived effects of culture

Vietnamese culture shows complexity due to its diversity, richness, and intersection of traditional and modern cultures influenced by globalization. Vietnamese social culture differs between regions and generations, and corporate culture differs between foreign and local corporations. Combined, culture affects public relations practice in various ways, and each corporation chooses how to incorporate it. Cultural factors mainly influence the construction and

transmission of PR content and messages and how corporations reflect their media relations with the media environment.

The perceived effects of societal culture. One-fourth of the participants think that Vietnamese society is witnessing a generation gap. Thus, PR practitioners should consider what different audience groups are interested in (F14 and F16). Hodge's sociocultural dimensions may be applied to the baby boomer and millennial generation groups, but for Gen Z, it is different due to globalization (F02, M03, and M04). Previous Vietnamese generations may behave in a typical way, but this is not the case for Gen Z. This thing shocks PR professionals but also brings an unconventional way of working, breaking old ways and rules (M04).

Social culture affects the way PR content and messages are built and transmitted. PR professionals should be careful since some PR messages may be supported by the younger audience but not supported by the more senior audience (F16). Consequently, practitioners should be wise and experienced when choosing critical messages for each target group if the campaign has various audience segments.

In addition, participant F16 shared that Vietnamese social culture is complex, and there are differences between regional cultures, most notably between the North and the South. Communication elements such as story, images, and text must also be noted (F09). PR practitioners must understand the culture in order to plan and execute PR activities (F06) and have a plan for how they react to this message.

Participant F07 examined the differences between North and South cultures in the educational institution system. In the North, if students take one competition, they (student parents) expect their children to win a prize, while in the South, they see the exam as just for fun and an opportunity for their children to engage with other students. The language is also different; hence, we (PR practitioners) must adapt appropriate messages, including text, mood, and tone.

Cultural differences between the two regions also affect how media relations

are practiced. Participants F11, F08, and F12 recorded this result.

Participant F12 explained: “In media luncheon or dinner, South Vietnamese reporters can be comfortable and open when meeting PR practitioners at street food, but in the North, you should meet reporters at a neater and tidy restaurant. When communicating with Northern reporters, PR professionals must pay attention to hierarchy and status and use more honorifics, whereas, in the South, it will be more liberal and friendlier.”

M02 said that some localities (provinces) still emphasize interpersonal relationships: one must establish relationships before work. This led to building relationships with the local press (press in a particular province) by building friendships with reporters before working with them.

Social culture also affects corporate culture. Both professional F06 and F08 elaborated in the same company; the Northern and the Southern offices work in a different style. This can affect the employee's mindset and working style (F06). The multinational corporation usually works with an agency in a win-win manner, but with Vietnamese corporations, the client can treat agencies as their servant. Another case is one American PR agency that had to adapt to Vietnamese culture by conducting newspaper reviews (F08). The PR practitioners in that agency would translate Vietnamese news into English so that the managing director could understand the political and cultural context.

Additionally, social culture influences choosing communication channels. Participant F07 said that an educational institution in the system operates in a province with many Catholic residents, so the PR department would cooperate with churches as a communication channel. This school also lets students off on Christmas day so that students can attend church services with their families.

However, some sustainable developments, such as applying clean energy, have not been well-received by the public. Although sustainable development is one crucial mission in national development planning, it is driven by the political system rather than ordinary people's

awareness. That is why participant F13 could not effectively communicate about energy solutions for the masses and had to switch to a top-down approach through the government, as mentioned in the section on the political system.

Societal culture influences the workforce of PR practitioners. Females will dominate and be the majority because their personality matches the social culture: sensitive, soft, profound, and sharp, as shared by one-fourth of participants (F01, F02, F03, F04, and F08).

The perceived effects of corporate culture. Two participants, F09 and F12, stated that the opposition between corporate culture and societal culture can turn corporate culture into a barrier to positioning the corporation's image and message.

“My company is 150 years old with many long-standing values, but the main consumer is GenZ, so doing PR is very difficult because one side (my company) wants to position premium messages (to match its long-standing corporate culture), and the other side wants snack, sharp, and short content. Ultimately, I must prioritize the business-driven,” participant F09 explained.

From there, eight respondents showed that corporate culture affects the PR practices and styles of businesses, especially within multinational and large Vietnamese corporations with overseas operations.

As the responses of F09, F11, F12, F14, and F16 show, some media work requires creativity, but large corporations also consider safety factors. Before implementation, PR professionals must consider each business's PR style to understand what should and should not be done (F09).

One example from participant F11: “My company is working in life insurance, and the brand guidelines highlight art so that all PR and communication programs will often be related to art, artists, and beauty.”

Similarly, participant F12 worked for a large Vietnamese corporation in automobile manufacturing. The coalition board expected the employees to respect and obey the company regulations; then, the PR department had to promote the message that subordinates should

follow their superiors and respect company rules. When this participant worked for a large international banking corporation emphasizing a dialogue culture, the PR department encouraged the employee to speak up. For speaking up purposes, smooth two-way communication is also ensured between the employee and this banking corporation.

Professional F16 argues corporate culture affects the position of the PR department in a business. Businesses that value the PR department will prioritize PR work, and then PR professionals feel they are more valuable and want to be more loyal to the company.

Corporate culture affects PR practice. A company's size determines its approach to media relations, which is M04's response.

He shared: "Small and medium-sized Vietnamese businesses tend to fear the press while large Vietnamese businesses tend to manipulate media at the expense of removing negative articles when encountering crisis communication. Some multinational corporations clearly understand the rules of the game in Vietnam, so they also spend money to intervene in all press matters. The remaining number will focus on building with their best in business activities and CSR activities. Start-up companies pay little attention to the press and social media but focus on investors and end users. Hence, when the media attack them, they (start-up companies) do not care because start-up companies can give it up and build a new one."

Some multinational corporations choose not to apply "envelope culture" to pay for reporters in case of pitching positive articles or removing negative articles. Participant F12 explained that, at first, PR professionals at these corporations would find it a barrier to practicing PR. However, after practicing for a long time, PR professionals have realized better outcomes. Without "envelope culture," the reporters approaching them are called "true reporters," who are only interested in the information quality. As a result, her corporation has always been mentioned in mainstream media and many journalists desire to be in her corporation's media lists. This practice also reflects a win-win relationship, as participant F05's expectation.

4.2.3. The perceived effects of the media environment

Participant F10 asserted: “Infrastructure (political system, economic development, activism, and legal system) affects Vietnamese journalism, so they have a close, independent, and complementary relationship. Politics guides the press and ensures it carries out its tasks. Press freedom is partly to reflect society, also known as activism.” However, these movements need to be under the theme of national development.

The perceived effect of media control. On the one hand, media control negatively influences PR projects regarding content, timelines, and operation, which are recognized in the pharmaceutical industry and government cooperation projects as the response to participant F04. The combination of media control and political factors also affects the effectiveness of campaigns in some cases, as the experiences of participants M02 and F16.

Participant M02 stated, “The PR campaign may be diluted due to the sudden national political events.”

Respondent F16 added: “Media control and political factors can cause waste of communication efforts, so PR workers need to sense and prepare for it.”

Regarding the change in PR project operation, Vietnamese newspapers can be suspended by VNGov if CPEC and MIC “feel” something inappropriate (participants F02 and F06). Hence, respondent F06 suggests that PR professionals should prepare a plan for it, such as switching articles in suspended newspapers to other newspapers. Also, the media control factor can be a barrier since “the editorial leader in some media outlets has a bias towards the gaming industry; they will limit publishing information about this industry in their newspapers,” professionals F15 explains.

On the other hand, positive media control ensures businesses' rights because the news has been verified and authenticated; “not everyone can say whatever they want” (participant F07). At the same time, this has allowed corporations to “play around” (manipulate information) based on

the rule “pay to play” as long as the political factors are not mentioned (participant M04).

Participant F16 also revealed how public opinion is shaped by the communication plan of VNGov and a few critical corporations, which means business objections to state policies previously consented to by the government. However, this participant refused to share it in detail.

The perceived effects of media access and media outreach. The two remaining dimensions of media are presented under two media groups: emerging media and traditional media, which are receiving concerns from PR practitioners. TikTok has become the biggest social media platform in Vietnam, gathering most of the population (M01, F12), causing challenges for both PR practitioners and traditional media.

Media consumption behavior is changing, forcing PR practitioners to take advantage of a strategic approach. Depending on the campaign's objectives, PR professionals must choose appropriate channels for the target audience. This will be a challenge for some specific fields, such as education, as the sharing of respondent F17: “The payers are parents, but the beneficiaries are students (under 18 years old but also participating in the decision process).”

Participant M03 examines the combination of traditional and social media to increase communication effectiveness, including using a brand influencer (KOL: key opinion leaders) to share a campaign article link on social media. Similarly, respondent F16 said that PR practitioners must know how to choose the main communication channel as the first source of information to maximize communication effectiveness, not simply putting the message across multiple channels.

The public prefers short content with short video and image formats. Hence, PR messages must adapt to suit this taste. However, PR professionals usually write PR messages on traditional media platforms, and some PR professionals keep an ideal role of PR as having a

positive impact on society. When PR activities must fit the majority's tastes, participants F09 and M03 find their jobs become superficial, shallow, and have no depth.

“PR activities are just to make the best-cut video... and do not care about PR effectiveness” was F09's response.

This is also an alternative explanation for businesses in Vietnam, who may view PR as a narrow channel in a communication campaign.

Participant M04: “The taste of the audience causes the role of PR to be narrowed: if businesses look at PR as a channel, it is the place to highlight a campaign (amplify) and handle crises.”

However, respondent M04 recommends it is also an opportunity for Vietnamese PR professionals to upgrade their digital knowledge, abilities, and skills: “It also causes the content to be fragmented and no longer focused, requiring PR workers to have visual and social media skills.”

The rise of social media not only influences Vietnamese PR practitioners but also affects the operation of traditional media. Professional F08 stated that newspapers also started digitalization by building their TikTok channels. Although Vietnam does not have private journalism, some private businesses have operated through advertisements and PR articles in the online newspaper. From here, these publishers expand their business activities thanks to data investment and digitalization on multiple platforms to possess readership (F08). PR practitioners need to understand this to be more efficient.

However, traditional media has yet to completely lose its space in the media landscape. Print newspapers are still influential in some industries. Businesses still need the support of VNGov agencies and associations familiar with reading Vietnamese state-printed newspapers. Then, PR practitioners choose specialized newspapers depending on their corporate industry. For example, mass media is ineffective in the energy management industry, so participant F13

has selected newspapers that lean toward politics as a top-down strategy. The similarity happens with respondents F05 and F07.

F07 works in the educational institution system: “To promote the application process of our schools in the western provinces, we still use broadcast.”

Respondent M01 added that Vietnamese are unfamiliar with mainstream newspapers' subscription model. Some newsrooms have implemented it, but users have yet to respond. One opinion from F15 also suggests that a massive gap in media outreach and media access exists between urban and rural areas within the same target audience. From there, PR professionals usually prioritize audiences living in urban areas, causing information inequality.

When social media gathers millions of users, controlling and censoring information becomes more complex, especially in Vietnam, where PR professionals are used to censoring information in mainstream media. The law only holds registered users, while many users own cloned accounts, creating many challenges. For example, TikTok has uncensored short content that harms children, causing one TikTok to boycott the sharing of participant F09.

Professional F09 added: “Once a business's content has been shared, it cannot be stopped from spreading (even if the information is not authentic).”

If the mainstream newspaper can remove or correct the article after the information is clarified, users can capture it and continue sharing it on social networks. Similarly, M01 said that just one scandalous video on TikTok could spread overnight and could not be removed, raising concerns about fake news on social media.

4.3. RQ3: The professionalism and education of public relations in Vietnam

Research question 3 seeks to understand Vietnamese PR practitioners' perspectives on professionalism and education. The respondent's answers will be presented in three main sections: professionalism, education, and suggestions for improving these two aspects. In general, depending on the perspective of PR practitioners, PR Vietnam is professional, partially

professional, or nonprofessional. Practitioners who believe that PR should be considered a profession in Vietnam pointed out the need for Vietnam to develop a systematic formal academic curriculum, a code of ethics, and a professional association. Those are also suggestions for improving this industry.

4.3.1. Professionalism

Public relations in Vietnam is professional. This perspective is collected based on participants F10, F02, M04, F13, M03, F14, and F16. Participant F10 argues that it depends on the definition of professionalism. For instance, comparing the practices of countries with differences in environmental variables is comparing apples and oranges. However, “if we compare practical knowledge, operations, tactics, working ability, and some common global principles,” thanks to participating in leading industrial conferences in the region, Vietnamese practitioners reflect and see that they are professional, similar to other countries. (F10, M04, F02, F15, M03).

“When I talked to my colleagues in New York, I saw the similarity” (M04).

“We achieve the professionalism compared to Singapore, Taiwan, and some Pacific Asia” (F10).

Two respondents, F14 and F16, added that PR is a “hot field” in current years. Many schools already offer undergraduate public relations programs; PR professionals are not those without training as before, and the PR department is increasingly respected. However, participant F13 said PR is a professional field within Vietnam but is not comparable to international practitioners.

Public relations in Vietnam needs to be more professional. This group of participants argues that Vietnamese public relations has not achieved professionalism yet because of the industry's lack of definition as the response of F04, F07, F09, M02, F16, F04, and F15; as F04 believes this is a "flexible industry; you can do whatever you want."

The industry is developing because you can work everything, but there are no standards” (F07).

Because of the lack of definition, the scope of work in public relations is not explicitly regulated. From there, insiders and outsiders are “perceiving and misusing the term public relations” (F09). Perception and abuse of the word PR (often understood as publicity and confused with advertising).

“Lack of basic processes and knowledge that everyone in the industry knows” (M02).

“There are no certain standards while methodical communication work is becoming increasingly popular” (F16).

“Some perceptions that PR work is based on an ask-give mechanism, not a win-win between the PR professionals and the reporters” (F15).

Eight practitioners agree that a professional association and a code of ethics should be established to achieve the professionalism of public relations in Vietnam. A professional association should be established to develop this industry independently and objectively (standardizing order values, for example) as respondents F04 and M03; this association should be associated with academia as the suggestion of M04. PR practitioners expect the professional association to raise PR working standards, share common practices, and develop a measurement matrix (currently having no mutual measurement matrix). This association will also impart practical knowledge to balance theory and practice. M02 added that there is a need for a professional website as a knowledge hub so that PR workers and students can understand the core body of knowledge of PR. However, participant M01 shares, “There is VNPR (a professional association), but it is only a place to buy and sell prizes, not do research.”

Three participants, F05, F09, and F11, argued that self-studying professionals could improve professionalism, including lessons learned from effective campaigns and practices.

4.3.2. Education

Due to the lack of systematic public relations education, the public relations pedagogy in

Vietnam faces many problems, such as the sharing of M01, F04, and M04.

The reason is educators need more academic knowledge, practical knowledge, and public relations research. Educators and facilities are instructors without theoretical expertise and who do not conduct research in public relations. They only have a doctorate in a related field (M04). Hence, the curriculum is unrealistic and ridiculous. Similarly, participants F06 and M03 raised the issue of practitioners' ability to teach from their experience. However, the instructors have no experience, do not do research, and are not adequately trained. This leads to the PR program inviting practitioners in the industry to become instructors. However, the quality of these practitioners is another challenge.

Practitioners' knowledge is based on their experience rather than systematic knowledge. They do not even know any communication theories (F04 and M04). Also, two sharing from M01 and M02: “Instructors rely on only personal experience, so their knowledge cannot be generalized.” Respondents F08 and F12 are worried about the quality of these practitioners. A few PR professionals are instructors, but their capacity is insufficient. So what will they teach the students?

“Many PR professionals are working, but no one studies the right major” (M04).

Hence, respondents F07 and F11 suggested that public relations educators should do more research to keep up with the status quo of the public relations industry.

PR pedagogy in Vietnam is a vicious circle. Participant M04 states that the undergraduate is messy, so a systematic, formal academic curriculum needs to be implemented. M01 added: “There is no systematic training program, although there is one, and it teaches about culture.” The lack of fundamental theoretical knowledge and core values makes students unstable in theoretical and practical knowledge, causing discouragement when students face realities different from what they have learned (F11). F12 also believes that the training program

is being "idealized."

Three participants, F13, F14, and F15, said the PR undergrad program had too much theory and little practical knowledge. Another opinion (F07) believes that PR education and training is biased towards multi-tasks for students, which will cause them to lose fundamental knowledge. F16 added that the theory cannot be applied in Vietnam because social-cultural factors and PR research need to be stronger.

Consequently, the PR program has not standardized both input and output, so students with existing qualities can learn from jobs quickly and vice versa (M03, M04). Many training programs are of poor quality and are chaotic because Vietnamese PR educators have patchy knowledge, and the market is developing too quickly, leading to learners not knowing where to go. Similarly, F08 believes that PR education is not up to standard because graduate students are similar to students who take short-term PR courses.

Two other factors also mentioned are writing skills (F15) and soft skills such as flexibility (F09), building relationships, and communication (F11, F13, F15), both of which do not meet employers' expectations.

Professionals' suggestions for improving public relations in Vietnam. Two respondents, F07 and F11, recommended that "theory and practice should be in harmony because the foundation can be taught, while in-depth knowledge should be achieved through practice. From there, PR students can choose the appropriate direction for further development.

Regarding theoretical knowledge, public relations pedagogy in Vietnam needs a foundation and fundamental theories, such as communication principles in Vietnam. From there, the learners can study appropriate and effective communication to achieve adaptability that responds to the changes in business and society (F16).

For practical knowledge, more than twenty-five percent of participants (F06, F07, F09, F11, F13, F14) suggested bringing practical expertise into the early years of the curriculum. The PR program also should invite PR practitioners to share their experiences so students can understand them at different levels. For example, at the entry-level, public relations practitioners should specialize in technicians, but at higher levels, they should shift to the management level. Teaching more soft skills also focuses on communication, relationship building, and flexibility (F09, F13, F15). Writing skills need to be emphasized (F15), and students need to be trained in mindset and thinking (F15).

PR programs also need to improve their teaching facilities (F07). Two participants, F12 and M04, added, “Schools need to dialogue with businesses to receive employer feedback regularly.” Moreover, the college also needs to evaluate training quality seriously. The final idea of respondent F07 is to bring in foreign development by learning from overseas graduate students.

Chapter 5. Discussion and Implication

5.1. Discussion

Based on the responses from the sample size in this thesis, public relations from business sectors in Vietnam reflect the diversity of practices, which can be described as “glocal,” a word that combines global and local. The global public relations practice transferred from multinational corporations, while the local is the social-cultural factor of Vietnam. The “glocal” happens thanks to the advantages of globalization and foreign investment based on the strengths of the young population, potential market, and a stable political system. However, the Vietnamese PR industry began to experience some challenges due to the lack of a solid foundation from the beginning, such as perception of PR, equating PR with marketing and advertising, overuse of the personal influence model, lack of theoretical knowledge, a professional association, and a code of ethics. These issues make corporate coalitions skeptical about the effectiveness of public relations.

5.1.1. RQ1: Conceptualization and operationalization among Vietnamese public relations

Public relations definitions and operations in Vietnam. In section 4.1. RQ1, Vietnamese PR professionals defined public relations as conducting communications activities, building and maintaining relationships between their organizations and the public, building corporations’ reputation and image, or mixing definitions. The scope of work of daily public relations varies; for external stakeholders, the PR department mainly manages communication (ensuring positive PR articles and messages in media through various tactics) and relationship management (both media and government relations), depending on each corporation. The PR division conducts employee branding for internal stakeholders to tie the relationship between

organizations and their employees. Vietnamese PR practitioners usually use “corporate communication” and “consumer communication” as their primary duties to differentiate the function of public relations.

As some participants defined it, corporation communication is close to public affairs, as defined by Grunig (1992), which describes the realm of communication work with the target public and government, leading to public policy. Consumer communication is close to the marketing perspective that considers public relations to be one element of the communication mix (Kotler and Keller, 2009). From there, the definitions of consumer communication are also an explanation for the finding that the line between public relations, marketing, and advertising is blurred in Vietnam (Doan & Bilowol, 2014; Van, 2013) and in other Asia countries (Dühning & Zerfass, 2015).

Some participants prefer their jobs in communication management to public relations since they argued that public relations could be understood with something terrible (manipulating information) as sharing of participants F08 and M04. This aligns with the finding of L'Etang and Pieczka (1996) that some pejorative terms for public relations include spin, propaganda, demagoguery, and pseudo-event. Participants F02, F03, and F04 argued that communication management was more appropriate than public relations.

As mentioned in Chapter 2—Literature Review and Chapter 3—Results, the name “public relations” is so broad that scholars and professionals should provide a detailed context for understanding its nature. In the context of business, public relations can be understood as strategic communication. "The practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals" is the precise definition of strategic communication (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013, p. 284). It can include operations of information/social marketing campaigns, technical

communication, public relations, marketing, management, and political communication (Hallahan et al., 2007). Strategic communication also provides an integrative viewpoint on all goal-oriented communications of an organization, unlike public relations (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018). This terminology is frequently used to define communication functions in public sector organizations and government entities and describe public relations activities for non-corporate entities (Nielsen & Salomonsen, 2012; Valentini, 2013; Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016).

Although the definitions of public relations vary, the results indicate that the core function of public relations is persuasion. Persuasion is viewed as a type of social influence in the prevalent understanding of public relations (Miller, 1989). It is commonly understood as a specialized communication function that uses both communication and non-communication activities to establish, uphold, and preserve positive perceptions and courteous and productive relationships with stakeholders and the public. Social influence can be used at different levels and in different ways to accomplish these objectives. Public relations, like other communication disciplines, undoubtedly depends heavily on persuasion to change people's beliefs, actions, and attitudes, given the scope and reach of its work (Valentini, 2021). Changes can happen in the target audience or the persuaders themselves (Heath & Bryant, 2000). Persuaders can convince themselves when necessary to change to establish a common ground with the target audience (Valentini, 2021).

Although the role and functions of PR are shrinking, PR is still a solid foundation for brand health and is associated with solid trust for the audience. Hence, PR still plays an indispensable role in a business. Many participants (F05, F08, F09, F10, and M04) predict that in the future, PR will play a broader role and contribute to social influence by tying the relationship between businesses and the public as the concept of “persuasion as a form of social influence” in for good purposes (Miller, 1989; Valentini, 2021). Anecdotal evidence suggests that Vietnamese

PR practitioners have worked on building strong relationships with communities, especially when new economic sectors emerge, such as the ride-hailing industry. At the societal level, PR practitioners still contribute some positive impacts when handling jobs related to CSR, CSV, and ESG under the theme of national development.

Models of public relations practiced in Vietnam. The data from the in-depth interview for this thesis indicate that Vietnamese PR professionals practice both Grunig and Hunt's four models of public relations (1984) in a Western context and other models (personal influence model and cultural interpreter models) in an international context. The explanation can come from four models (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and a matrix of 87 contingent factors (Cameron, 1997). In four models, Grunig (1984) predicted four models used based on four types of organizations (Hage and Hull, 1981), including traditional (press agency), mechanical (public information), organic (two-way symmetrical), and a mix of mechanical/organic organizations (combined two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical models; Grunig & Kim, 2021). Similarly, contingency theory groups these types of organizations into organization characteristics (Pang et al., 2021). Two theories support the explanation of the PR practice of participant F12 when she employed the press agency model in internal communication for one Vietnamese corporation in an automotive manufacturer (a traditional organization as one variable in four models and a closed culture in contingency theory). In contrast, she employed a two-way symmetrical model in the same jobs in a banking international corporation (a mix of mechanical/organic organization as one variable in four models and the age of organization/ value placed on tradition in contingency theory). Participant F12 is also the only one who knows and understands the four public relations models since she holds a master's degree in public relations from the United Kingdom.

The other respondents shared that they did not know about the four models of public relations. The researcher changes the questions to three communication characteristics: the information-sharing approach, the application of research, and the journalist-in-resident role. For the information-sharing approach and the application of research, the data suggested that Vietnamese PR practitioners attempt to collect feedback from stakeholders to improve PR outcomes. However, due to the urgency, PR practitioners usually collect feedback in a small group or skip this step. Moreover, they usually employ secondary research or reports rather than primary research. These results reflect the excellence theory when PR practitioners can base their work on behavioral and social sciences to motivate and pursue the public rather than facilitating understanding and communication, especially in press agency and public information model (Grunig et al., 1995).

The participants' responses also reflect the linkage between the information-sharing approach, the application of research, and the journalist-in-resident role. Due to the heavy duties involved in PR content and messages, PR practitioners usually exchange information with journalists to check the feasibility of PR messages by collecting journalism insights and feedback. On the one hand, PR practitioners treat journalists as the data resource since journalists' feedback can reflect the taste of the newspaper's audience and the direction of the government. Van (2013) argued that Vietnamese PR practitioners practice the two-way symmetrical model of Grunig and Hunt (1984) by exchanging information with journalists before the article is published. In fact, from the responses in this thesis, the conversation between PR practitioners and reporters should be viewed from the perspective of the reporter playing the gatekeeper role. Reporters understand the topics readers are interested in and the newspaper's principles.

On the other hand, in some cases, such journalists are not interested in the topic of PR practitioners (participant F13 with the topic of clean energy); PR practitioners have to play the

role of journalist-in-resident to conduct everything related to the article publishing process. The characteristics of journalist-in-resident from the four models of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) help to explain the practice of public relations in Vietnam with an emphasis on media relations, and many corporations tend to hire public relations practitioners with a former journalist background.

Regarding the personal influence model, the participants in this thesis emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships, especially in media relations. This aligns with prior research findings, with some highlighted aspects such as faces and favors, faces and gifts, and quan hệ (relations) (Van, 2013). The reason for this importance is the popularity of Confucianism (Huyen, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2018). The alternative explanation is based on the roots of Vietnamese culture. According to Trần (1997), Vietnam was built on the foundation of an agricultural country, with communities established on large rivers, leading to the importance of irrigation and farming. Water management requires collective solidarity rather than individual solidarity. Consequently, Vietnamese is the result of collectivism, and interpersonal relationships are an essential factor in that society. In agricultural collectivist societies, mutual help and gratitude are also highly valued gestures. When asking others to do something, Vietnamese often repay the favor with a material gift (Trần, 1997). Initially, they were agricultural products or handicraft products; then, throughout the economic development, gifts of gratitude turned into money that the recipient could freely use. The subsidized economy, with its characteristic “ask and give mechanism,” also contributes to the creation of envelope culture (T. U. Nguyen, 2023) and is involved in public relations practice in Vietnam (Doan & Bilowol, 2014).

The participants in this thesis also raised concerns about the ethics of public relations practice and the independent relationship between journalists and PR practitioners, which are new findings compared to previous research by Doan and Bilowol (2014) and Van (2013).

Through data in this thesis, Vietnamese PR practitioners' mindsets change as participants believe that the personal influence model should be used appropriately. For example, interpersonal relationships should give PR practitioners the confidence to start conversations with reporters to update corporation information for editorials, and the decision should be based on information quality instead of relationships or “envelope culture.” Participants also raised ethical issues regarding when employing the personal influence model in daily practice. The explanation for these changes is the arrival of some PR practitioners from Western countries who are well-trained in public relations as participants F05 and F10. The open economy also allows PR practitioners to work with reporters from other countries in the region. Global corporations also invite Vietnamese journalists to participate in press conferences in other countries. These all make PR practitioners and journalists expand their experience and change their mindset.

5.1.2. RQ2: The perceived effects of environmental variables

Professionals in this thesis raise concerns about the generation gap and how young generations overuse social media, especially the prevalence of harmful content in cyberspace. This has also been recognized by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), which started an action plan to improve by "building a culture rich in national identity" (Doan, 2022). CPV believes this is the consequence of socio-cultural development that is not commensurate with economic growth (Doan, 2022). With this plan, the political system is again emphasized as a prominent factor, dominating other factors, and will continue to affect Vietnam's PR practice in the future.

Within the media environment, participants in the thesis raised concerns about the symbiotic and independent relationship between Vietnamese PR practitioners and journalists. For PR practitioners (most of them are in technician roles) who think they play a role as journalist-in-resident, the symbiotic relationship exists when two sides exchange information to

support the duties of each side. This relationship should be independent for PR practitioners in management roles. From there, the participants supported the shift from symbiotic relationships to independent relationships, and information quality played an essential role in this relationship. It is similar to the findings of Macnamara (2014) that deny the coexistence of the relationship between PR practitioners and reporters. Macnamara (2014) suggested that the lines between journalism, public relations, and advertising are becoming more hazy due to emerging media practices like sponsored media content, online corporate publishing, and organizations' use of social media. Functionalist approaches to public relations might interpret this as a chance to take advantage of the weakening of journalism and new outlets for subsidized media content (Macnamara, 2014). According to a socially conscious perspective, PR should prioritize ethics while considering organizational and societal interests (Macnamara, 2014). This process has already happened in Vietnam, fastened by the reform of journalism management led by the CPV.

5.1.3. Professionalism and education in public relations in Vietnam

Based on the participants' responses in this thesis, the results support the idea that public relations practice in Vietnam still cannot achieve professionalism because it lacks two essential factors: academic standards and a professional association. After one decade, the result is still the same as the previous research of Doan and Bilowol (2014) and Van (2013). However, some participants in this thesis are aware of the importance of theoretical knowledge. In contrast, a few participants emphasize practical knowledge with the argument that public relations theories cannot be applied in Vietnam because of environmental factors. The explanation is already mentioned in the section 4.3.2. Education in Vietnamese PR pedagogy in Vietnam is a vicious circle with a lack of theoretical knowledge and industry practices based only on predecessors' experiences. In the Southeast Asia region, this result also aligns with the findings of Dühning and

Zerfass (2015), which state that the body of theoretical knowledge is inconsistent, the widening gap between theory and practice, and the lack of interaction between academia and industry are also causing problems.

5.2. Implications

5.2.1. Theoretical implications

This exploratory thesis seeks to understand the public relations practices of business sectors in Vietnam. Findings from in-depth interviews contribute to the body of knowledge in international public relations in threefold: conceptualization and operationalization, environmental variables, and the combination of professionalism and education.

Conceptualization and operationalization. This thesis's evidence indicates that Western theories in public relations can explain the concepts and operations in Vietnam. How Vietnamese public relations practitioners define and implement their daily tasks is close to that of Western countries. However, the name of public relations can create a misunderstanding among ordinary, even practitioners. Hence, as discussed above, public relations in business sectors should be called strategic communication. The purposeful and planned communication an agent of communication uses in the public domain to accomplish predetermined objectives is known as strategic communication (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013, p. 284). It covers various topics, including public relations, technical communication, information/social marketing campaigns, marketing, management, and political communication (Hallahan et al., 2007). Unlike public relations, strategic communication provides an integrative perspective on goal-oriented communications (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018). It is frequently used to characterize public relations efforts for non-corporate entities and communication roles in government and public sector organizations (Nielsen & Salomonsen, 2012; Valentini, 2013; Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016).

The responses from Vietnamese practitioners also acknowledge that excellence theory and the four public relations models do exist outside the U.S. For instance, depending on each environment, the person in charge of PR practices different practices, such as the two continuums called “craft public relations” and “two-way asymmetrical to the two-way symmetrical model.” Grunig and Kim (2021) also suggest that practitioners typically possess theoretical knowledge in communication, social science, and management in addition to their technical communication skills, representing "professional" public relations. On the symmetrical end of the professional continuum, public relations is most likely to be practiced when senior management and the organization are adaptable and receptive to new ideas. On the asymmetrical end of the spectrum, public relations can nevertheless be professionally practiced under less-than-ideal circumstances. Hence, to persuade the public to agree with their organization's viewpoint, Vietnamese public relations practitioners usually employ secondary research to assess the efficacy of their persuasive efforts.

Responses from Vietnamese public relations practitioners imply their use of personal influence and cultural interpreter models, contributing to the models of public relations by J. Grunig et al. (1995) and Sriramesh et al. (1999). Regarding the personal influence model, the participants' evidence points to the importance of relationships as an indicator of successful public relations (Grunig & Huang, 2000) rather than in terms of transaction orientation. This reinforces the need for research into personal influence (Sriramesh & Jolene, 2021). Since most research is conducted in a few Asian countries, it is a misunderstanding to assume that the personal influence model does not apply to more rigid cultures where power and social class significantly influence decision-making (Sriramesh & Jolene, 2021). The ethics of personal influence is frequently questioned, primarily by Western critics who argue that personal influence is a type of corruption that mainly occurs in other societies, like those in Asia. However, a closer

look at the idea shows that corruption is transaction-oriented, while personal influence is relationship-oriented (Valentini, 2009; Vanhonacker, 2004). Sriramesh and Jolene (2021, p. 354) argued that even in business settings, individual relationships are valued and expected in many cultures, not just Eastern cultures. The focus on organizational relationships in public relations is often solely on relationships, even though these relationships are established and fostered by individual players, and bribery and corruption are transactions rather than the foundation of a relationship. Hence, the personal influence model should be considered as a basis for working style, especially in the context of one agricultural and collectivist country, Vietnam, which is explained in the discussion section.

With an open economy, Vietnamese public relations practices are diversified based on several factors and specific situations, extending the contingency theory's evidence. The in-depth interviews indicate some variables that affect the public relations practice, such as the existence or influence of a legal department, business exposure, corporate culture, type of past training: ex-journalists, and personal ethics.

The perceived effects of environmental variables on strategic communication practices. This thesis supports the conceptual framework suggested by Sriramesh (2004) to investigate the practice of public relations in one Asian country with a consideration of societal culture. This framework recommended the five social dimensions founded by Hofstede (1980, 2001), which offer a broad and compatible view to understand the societal Vietnamese culture for foreigners. However, the five dimensions of societal culture are updated to a 6-D model (Hofstede, 2001, 2010, 2011), and the participants in this thesis found it vague when debriefed. Hence, a consideration for the five dimensions of societal culture to be updated and for the questionnaire related to these dimensions.

Professionalism and education. data from this thesis align with the research line in the history of public relations. Vietnam is an exception to the factors affecting the expansion of public relations practices, known as springboards (Rodríguez-Salcedo & Watson, 2021; Watson, 2015). Based on the study of public relations histories of over 40 nations, Watson (2015) recognized the consequences of the expansion of public relations: “Governmental PR → Corporate communication → Formation of a Professional Associate → Education at university and colleges → Establishment of Agencies” (p. 12). Watson’s study also acknowledges the exception of the country focusing on nation-building and political communication in a post-colonial nation such as Vietnam. Also, defining public relations as a profession and strengthening its skill base required the education and training of practitioners (Rodríguez-Salcedo & Watson, 2021). In the case of Vietnam, despite the bloom of public relations education and training, the lack of theoretical knowledge, one professional association, and the academic standard curriculum is the restraint of public relations development, not because of political reasons.

It also aligns with the international public relations literature review as findings of Rodríguez-Salcedo and Watson (2021); generally, democratic settings with an open economy have seen the most significant growth in the practice of public relations. There are some exceptions, but they are primarily in instances where the ruling regime was starting to relax restrictions on the media and politics to boost the country's economy, as in the case of Spain in the 1960s. In this thesis, evidence in Vietnam can be seen as support for expanding public relations practice in a socialist-oriented market economy.

5.2.2. Practical implications

Based on the data collected from Ho Chi Minh City, a center of public relations practice in Vietnam, this thesis maintains several practical implications for VNGov, corporations (multinational corporations - MNCs, Vietnamese corporations, business coalitions), practitioners,

and educators. Like other developing nations in the Global South group, the Vietnamese government has seen rapid economic development. Still, it also faces numerous social challenges related to the environment, health, and education. Moreover, the Vietnamese government is short on finance to address these challenges, which calls for more initiatives, usually in the form of strategic partnerships between government and government as well as government and corporations, under the umbrella of national development (Sison & Sarabia-Panol, 2019; Truong & Tran, 2023; White House, 2023).

For the Vietnamese government, Vietnam should ensure stability in environmental variables such as politics, economics, and legal frameworks. Regarding politics, Vietnam should continue to ensure political stability, social order, and safety, as well as stabilize macro policies for secure long-term business operations in Vietnam, especially for foreign investors. Regarding the economy, Vietnam needs to ensure that the foreign-invested economic sector is always an essential component of the Vietnamese economy; respect, encourage, and be ready to create favorable conditions for this sector to develop long-term, cooperate, and compete healthily and equally with other economic regions. Regarding the legal framework, Vietnam must ensure foreign investors' legitimate and legal rights and interests. These are also Vietnam's commitments during working sessions with the US-ASEAN Business Council (USABC) and 60 leading investment funds and businesses in the US (Viet Nam News, 2024).

For the U.S. government, under the comprehensive strategic partnership between the U.S and Vietnam (White House, 2023), the U.S. government should maintain its commitment to investing in Vietnam in key sectors like science and technology, electronics, aviation, electric vehicles, energy, logistics, healthcare, finance, e-commerce, food, and tourism. This business commitment not only helps the U.S. corporations expand their business in Vietnam but also is the “soft pressure” for Vietnam to keep enhancing its legal system, expedite administrative

changes, particularly concerning labor permits, visas, and investment licensing, and offer incentives in specific priority areas. These are also recommendations from U.S. businesses (Viet Nam News, 2024).

For corporations, especially those that plan to expand their market in the Vietnamese market, the diversity in PR or strategic communication practice offers more opportunities than challenges. The Vietnamese political system is more open-minded and supportive of multinational corporations as the priority of economic development and the market economy, as mentioned); this creates more opportunities for corporations to practice their political public relations strategies to achieve business objectives. Regarding public relations with the government by attending business associations, foreign business coalitions should attend national business associations such as AmCham Vietnam, a non-governmental and non-political voluntary membership association of American businesses in Vietnam. This participation supports businesses in achieving business objectives and provides them with a better understanding of the Vietnamese market and information exchange with other U.S. businesses in Vietnam (Amcham, 2024). Additionally, Amcham's advocacy and CSR awards are well-recognized in Vietnam, helping lift the reputation of the Vietnamese government and journalism in general. Corporations can also consider participating in other associations as long as these associations are credentialed and fit with the business's operations.

Regarding public relations with the government by implementing strategic partnerships, corporations consider partnering with the government in their strategic communication strategies for long-term business development, as indicated in the prior study (Truong & Tran, 2023). This thesis highlights the importance of the political system in public relations practice in Vietnam. Corporations strategically move toward government cooperation in strategic public relations and communication activities through government partnerships to reap several benefits, including

improving government relations, increasing the scope of public relations initiatives, and enhancing their corporate reputation. This may also illustrate the early success of multinational corporations in the host market because the Vietnamese government has been heavily involved in assigning its politically reliable citizens to managerial roles in both the state sector and public administration (Edwards & Phan, 2013; Truong & Tran, 2023).

One case as an example of good public relations from corporations in Vietnam is Packaging Recycling Organization Vietnam (PRO Vietnam). This is a coalition of prominent foreign direct investment (FDI such as CocaCola, Pepsico, Nestlé, and Friesland Campina, etc) and Vietnamese companies (Saigon Coop, TH Milk, Thuan An paper, etc) with a strong reputation in the consumer goods, packaging, retail, and import industries, PRO Vietnam has 23 members and a shared mission to make Vietnam Green, Clean, and Beautiful by advancing a circular economy model through more sustainable and easily accessible packaging collection and recycling methods. Its strategic partners include the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (government) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (non-governmental organization), to name a few, which intensified efforts to create a circular economy and increase recycling accessibility and sustainability in Vietnam in recent years (PRO Vietnam, 2024).

In terms of human resources in public relations for the business sector in Vietnam can be a difficult challenge. Local practitioners usually deeply understand Vietnamese environmental variables (infrastructure, culture, and media environment) effectively and efficiently. In this case, the result in this thesis indicates the appropriate cultural interpreter model. Hence, corporations can employ public relations consultant firms (public relations agencies) for the beginning period. It is also noted that according to prior research (Doan & Bilowol, 2014) and this thesis, local agencies are still a better choice, thanks to their advancement in local understanding and practices. An ethical practice can be considered when employing these local agencies; based on

the evidence, this thesis recommends that it depends on the corporation's decision rather than the participant's decision, as the sharing of participants F08 and F11, the business can choose to apply or not to apply "envelope culture" regardless influencing on the effectiveness of public relations activities. A list of agencies can be found at Vietnam's Agency Network (Vietnam & Global Agency Network, n.d.). In long-term development, multinational corporations should also focus on academic sharing and training the body of public relations knowledge since Vietnamese practitioners are abundant in practical knowledge but lack academic training. Multinational corporations planning to bring human resources from overseas should consider not applying this plan to Vietnam. The evidence from participant F08 indicates that foreign practitioners do not work well in Vietnam, and participant M01 also shares that one large Thai banking corporation cannot implement its business expansion just because of not finding a Vietnamese public relations team.

For practitioners, this thesis aims to synthesize some updated theoretical knowledge from "the cradle" of public relations and the temporary practice in Vietnam. From there, practitioners should understand many critical facets of public relations and the emerging terminology of strategic communication to rebuild and rethink the concepts and practices in Vietnam. Also, Vietnamese PR practices are similar to those of other countries, such as the Asian region. The challenges come from the shortage of theoretical knowledge and the rise of social media, which can be addressed by self-learning and the advantages of globalization in education and training in the public relations industry. The other disadvantage can be the lack of a professional association to standardize and lift the value of public relations.

For educators, the most challenging issue is rooted in the lack of theoretical knowledge in public relations. As mentioned in detail in the discussion, this flaw in knowledge creates a vicious cycle for public relations development. The public relations industry will hardly progress if this

problem is not thoroughly resolved. From the data gathered worldwide, the thesis suggests that an academic association for strategic communication should be established. The birth of this organization will solve the problems that a professional association in Vietnam faces: legitimacy and theoretical knowledge. The political system in Vietnam prioritizes government association first, which is an advantage for public universities in charge of crucial responsibility for an academic association. An academic association should then be connected with developed countries to transfer and upgrade theoretical knowledge for educators, practitioners, and students. This organization can also employ practitioners to strengthen practical knowledge, creating soft skills courses for students as the expectation of practitioners. The academic association can also receive serious employer feedback to improve its curriculum.

5.3. Limitation and future research

Although this thesis provides in-depth insights into temporary public relations practices in the business sector in Vietnam, it has limitations. Firstly, despite the diversity in various businesses and working for in-house departments and agencies, the sample is only located in Ho Chi Minh City. The biggest city in Vietnam, in terms of economics and culture, is appropriate for investigating the diversity of how public relations is practiced. Hanoi is the Vietnamese capital and the center of the political system and the culture of the North; the northern participants may have other perspectives and richer data in future research, significantly the scope of work related to government relations and the practice of media relations. Another limitation is the result of 20 Southern participants can reflect a part of Vietnamese public relations practice and cannot be generalized for a more comprehensive public relations landscape in this country.

The future of research in public relations in Vietnam varies depending on the researcher's interest. Related to strategic communication, future researchers can employ quantitative methodology to gather generalizable data about the popularity of models of public relations

being used in business sectors or the technician's or manager's roles of practitioners or the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) needed for public relations practitioners. Researchers can investigate in-depth issues in Vietnamese public relations, such as the practice of brand journalism, the relationship between journalists and PR practitioners in Vietnam, the perceived influences of the media landscape on PR practice in Vietnam, and the query in the personal influence model in Vietnam. The other research line is the query of public relations practice from the business sector or government and non-government, non-profit organizations. Future researchers can also consider the topic surrounding the development of professional progress or public relations pedagogy, which still has potential, especially for a country where public relations is in the inception stage. Another topic is utilizing these data in this thesis to compare with other countries in Southeast Asian countries with familiar environmental variables.

Appendix A. Institutional Review Board Approval



TO: Hyojung Park
LSUAM | Sch of MCOM | Mass Communication | CC00235
FROM: Alex Cohen
Chairman, Institutional Review Board
DATE: 20-Feb-2024
RE: IRBAM-23-0561
TITLE: "Everything is not what it seems": Discover public relations in business sectors in Vietnam

New Protocol/Amendment/Continuation: Amendment (2020-2023 protocols)
1. Change the title of the study. The new one is "Everything is not what it seems": Discovering public relations in business sectors in Vietnam

Brief Amendment Description:
2. The sample size of participants: from 6 to 20
2. Change 4 questions related to professionalism and education with no harm to participants.

Review Type: Expedited Review
Risk Factor: Minimal
Review Date: 20-Feb-2024
Status: Approved
Approval Date: 20-Feb-2024
Approval Expiration Date: 14-Jun-2024
Re-review frequency: (annual unless otherwise stated)
Number of subjects approved: 20

By: Alex Cohen, Chairman

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc.**

* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/research>

Louisiana State University

O 225-578-5833

131 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803

F 225-578-5983
<http://www.lsu.edu/research>

Appendix B. Letter of Invitation

Louisiana State University (LSU)
Manship School of Mass Communication
May 24, 2023

Dear participant,

I am currently undertaking research on the public relations (PR) operation of the business sector in Vietnam as a pilot study for my master's thesis in mass communication at the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University.

My research, "Discovery of Public Relations in a socialist-oriented market economy," aims to examine PR practice in Vietnam's business sector. This pilot study will cover some key aspects of Vietnamese PR, including the definition of PR – Communication, functions within PR; model of PR applied in Vietnam; environmental factors influencing PR operation (e.g., political system, economic development, activism, legal systems, cultural factors, and media systems); and PR professionalism and education.

Dr. Hyojung Park, the major chair of my committee, has supervised this project.

Based on your working experiences, your response will be valuable for this study. Hence, I would like to invite you to participate in this project.

The interview, which will be conducted via Zoom at a time that is mutually suitable, will take about 45 to 90 minutes. The interview format is provided so that you can preview the questions that focus on public relations practice.

If you wish to withdraw from the research, you may do so at any stage. Individuals will not be identified; the information gathered through interviews will be published and shown in publications. To protect your identity, your name and data related to your personal details will not appear in both verbal and written materials. The interview will be voice-recorded temporarily on the iPhone. After that, the recording will be uploaded into LSU's cloud (MS One-Drive), protected by enterprise-level contracts. The transcripts and data from the interview will be kept securely in the LSU cloud (Microsoft, One-Drive) for 30 days after the final paper is published.

If you would like to receive a copy of my final report or summary of the research findings, I will send it to you through your contact details after completing my final thesis.

The LSU's Institutional Review Board has approved this project. For questions concerning participant rights, please get in touch with the IRB Chair, Alex Cohen, at 225-578-8692 or irb@lsu.edu.

If you have any further questions regarding this research, please get in touch with me at btruon5@lsu.edu, +84 909 251 524 (in Vietnam) or +1 225 577 9145 (in the U.S.); or contact my supervisor, Dr. Park, at hjpark6@lsu.edu, +1 225-578-2426.

Attached to this invitation is the consent form, which informs the participants of their rights. Before starting the interview process, you will sign the consent form to continue joining this interview.

Your participation will contribute to the meaningful key findings for the academic and empirical implications.

Thank you.

Best regards,

Ba-Anh-Tu, Truong

MMC student

Manship School of Mass Communication, Louisiana State University

Appendix C. List of interview questions

I. Foundation information:

The questions in this section aim to record the fundamental information of participants and create a suitable vibe for participants to feel comfortable with starting the in-depth interview.

A. *The working background of the participant*

1. How long have you been a PR practitioner in Vietnam?
2. Can you tell me briefly about your working history? (How many multinational corporations have you worked for? How many local companies have you worked for?)
3. Have you worked for Public Relations Agencies (Public Relations Consultant?), or have you worked for an in-house Public Relations team?)

B. *The educational background*

4. What is your highest education?
5. What is your major in your education?

II. Information related to the operation of PR in Vietnam

C. *The definition of public relations and communication management*

6. What is the official name of your department (in history and present)?
7. What do you prefer to call your working public relations or communication management?
8. How do you define public relations or communication management based on your work?

D. *Some of the disciplines/functions within PR*

9. What scope of work do you usually do as a PR practitioner?
10. Do you categorize your work into any sub-categories, such as corporate communication, media relations, crisis management, marketing communication, and PR campaigns? Brand journalism? Or not?

E. *What model of public relations is applied in Vietnam?*

11. **4 models of public relations:** Do you apply any model of public relations in your work? If participants do not know any model of public relations, ask them the following questions to know the details of their answers:
 - 11.1. Do you use one-way or two-way communication with your target audience?
 - 11.2. Do you play a role as a journalist in your work?

- 11.3. Do you apply any research to your work? What kind of research do you use?
- 11.4. Do you listen to the audience's feedback and conduct programs to respond to their expectation?
- 11.5. Do the participants' answers depend on the programs? Asking them for a description in detail.
 - 11.5.1. In what way will you apply research for your work?
 - 11.5.2. In what way will you listen to the audience's feedback and conduct a program to respond to their expectation?
- 12. **Personal influence model:** How do you think about applying your personal relations to influence journalists to receive favorable benefits for your work?
- 13. **Follow-up question:** If the participant's answer depends on the scope of work of PR or the PR content, ask them further questions such as?
 - 13.1. Which public relations content or public relations sub-cate (as question D. 10) will you apply personal influence?
 - 13.2. Which public relations content or sub-category (as in question D.10) can you not apply personal influence on?
 - 13.3. Which of these kinds of PR content can you not apply personal influence? What will you do to achieve your PR's objective?
 - 13.4. Can you describe this brand journalism (content partnerships) briefly?
- 14. **Public Relations and Marketing:** Based on your working experiences, does the public relations or communication department separate from the marketing department?
 - 14.1. If yes, does your work usually involve the marketing department or apply any marketing theory to your work? And Why?
 - 14.2. If not, how does your department operate? And Why?

III. *Environmental variables influence PR practice in Vietnam*

F. *Infrastructure factors*

- 15. How does the Vietnamese political system influence PR Operations in general?
- 16. How does the economic development in Vietnam affect PR practice in general?
- 17. How does the effect of activism in Vietnam influence PR practice?
- 18. How do legal systems influence Vietnam's PR practice?

G. Cultural factors

19. How does culture affect your work?
20. How is your corporate/ company culture?
21. Have you ever experienced the differences in culture when you localize a global campaign?
22. Stratification: What is the level of social stratification in a society? How does such stratification manifest itself in organizational activities and in public relations? What is the level of social mobility in a culture?
23. Uncertainty (low vs. high context): How tolerant is a culture to uncertainty and ambiguity? In organizational communication, are meanings explicit in messages, or are they based largely on the context of a situation?
24. Gender-based role identification: To what extent does gender play a role in assigning organizational roles in a country? How does this affect public relations practice?
25. Collectivism: In a culture, are the interests of the collectivity valued over that of the individual? How does this affect public relations activities?
26. Orientation to life: Is a culture oriented toward short-term or longer-term goals? How does such an orientation to life affect general organizational activities and public relations?
27. Interpersonal trust: What level of interpersonal trust does a culture allow within organizational settings?
28. Deference to authority: Does a culture encourage (expect) deference to superiors in social settings? If so, how does this manifest itself in organizational communication contexts?
29. What other cultural idiosyncrasies are specific to a country that influences public relations practice?

H. Media environment

30. How do media outreach, media access, and media control affect PR operations based on your working experiences?

IV. Public relations professionalism and education **PR professionalism related to questions B4 – B5**

31. What do you think about the professionalism of public relations in Vietnam?

32. What is your suggestion for improving the professionalism of public relations in Vietnam?
33. What do you think about education and training for public relations?
34. What is your suggestion to improve the quality of education and training in this field?

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Vita

Ba-Anh-Tu Truong holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and communication from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City. Before coming to Manship School of Mass Communication for a graduate assistantship and higher education, Tu worked as a public relations practitioner for almost eight years and as an instructor for Vietnam National University in HCMC for two years. Upon completing his master's degree, he will continue studying as a doctoral student at the Manship School of Mass Communication.