Social Media Practices of Vietnam-Based Public Relations Professionals

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores the perceptions, attitudes and challenges faced by Vietnam-based public relations practitioners, and considers the influence of social media on their professional practices.

Design/Method/Approach: This paper first explores the literature relating to public relations and social media in Vietnam. Next, the paper analyses the findings from semi-structured interviews (six face-to-face and four via email) with 10 Vietnam-based public relations professionals regarding their current social media practices.

Findings: Participants highlighted that social media has overtaken traditional media as the core method of communication used in campaigns, and that governmental controls and unpredictable audiences posed their greatest challenges. Interviewees identified Facebook as Vietnam’s most popular social media platform and Instagram as cash-on-delivery shopping service. While the Vietnamese market was defined as immature, participants emphasised the need to produce impactful social media content and undertake social media monitoring to evaluate appropriate audience engagement strategies. Overall, interviewees were uncertain about the future of social media in Vietnam due to the sporadic shut down of Facebook by the Vietnamese government.

Originality/Value: Social media is a pervasive part of everyday life in many countries and an important communication tool in public relations practice. However, little research has been conducted to better understand how social media has impacted public relations in developing countries such as Vietnam. This paper provides a new insight into how social media has influenced the professional practice of public relations practitioners in Vietnam.

Key words: social media, public relations, communication, Vietnam, Asia.
Introduction

Social media has become a pervasive part of everyday life in many countries in line with the widespread adoption of smartphone technology. With a reported 2.35 billion social media users and 2.1 billion smartphone owners worldwide (Statista, 2017a, 2017b) there has been much discussion concerning the impact of social media on public relations practices (Charest, Bouffard, & Zajmovic, 2016; Luo & Kulemeka, 2016; DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2012; Paek, Hove, Jung, & Cole, 2013; Valentini, 2015; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Grunig, 2009). Research has largely focused on social media’s influence on public relations in the United States, Europe, the Middle East, Australia and parts of Asia (Robson & Sutherland, 2012). Studies have highlighted that social media is still predominantly being used by organisations for one-way (or broadcast) communication instead of leveraging its two-way and dialogic features to facilitate participatory interactions with publics and stakeholders (Taylor & Kent, 2014; Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012; Rybako & Seltzer, 2010). A further related theme is the perception of a loss of control over information due to the two-way communication and prosumer enabling characteristics of social media technology (Grunig, 2009; DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011; Macnamara 2010; Robson & James, 2011; Veroeven, et al., 2012; Robson & Sutherland, 2012).

However, while social media research in Asia has included China, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand (Chua & Wellman, 2015; Macnamara, 2010; Fitch, 2009a, 2009b), few studies have been undertaken in Vietnam (Macnamara, Lwin, Adi & Zerfass, 2016). With a population of 92 million people (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2017), 24 million smartphone users (APDOTA, 2016) and 35 million active social media users (We Are Social, 2017), Vietnam remains largely unexplored in terms of how these technologies have impacted its public relations industry. This study addresses this gap in the research by examining the perceptions, attitudes and challenges faced by Vietnam-based public relations practitioners in the context of the influence of social media on their professional practice.

Literature Review

Public Relations Practice in Vietnam

A scarcity of research exists in relation to the public relations profession throughout Asia in general and Vietnam in particular (Sriramesh, 2004; Doan & Bilowol, 2014; Domm, 2016). A recent quantitative study conducted by Macnamara et al. (2016) included public relations and strategic communication professionals from Vietnam among 22 other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, and had an overall sample size of 1200 participants. The Macnamara et al. (2016) study found that Vietnam-based public relations professionals reported an overall job satisfaction rate of 3.65/5 and that their top three professional concerns were i) linking business strategy and communication, ii) coping with the digital evolution and the social web, and iii) building and maintaining trust (p. 49-64). One of the few qualitative studies conducted in Vietnam involved semi-structured interviews with seven Vietnam-based public relations practitioners as part of a larger sample that included participants from Singapore, Indonesia, The Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand (Domm, 2016). The Domm (2016, p. 646) study found that practitioners, particularly in Vietnam, felt underprepared when dealing with client conflict and what appeared to be corrupt journalists who expected to be paid for positive media coverage. Furthermore, participants stated that they were careful to avoid producing content that questioned the legitimacy of the Vietnamese one-party government. A study conducted by Doan and Bilowol (2014) also involved semi-structured interviews with 12 public relations practitioners based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. They reported that, despite the general population and client confusion about what public relations actually is and who it serves, practitioners perceived the profession to be strongly focused on relationship cultivation and management, product promotion and media relations. The existence of what is known as an “envelope culture” (the Chinese custom of offering money as a gift in a red envelope) was also highlighted by participants (Mack, 2017). In a public relations context, advertorials (or payment for positive media coverage) was a common public relations practice (Doan & Bilowol, 2014). Governmental controls, and confusion between advertising and public relations, were themes also emphasised by McKinney (2006) who provided a six-year perspective of public relations in Vietnam. McKinney (2006) also ranked the most
important public relations activities/skills at the time as: (i) holding press conferences/briefings; (ii) developing news releases; (iii) having company members participate in activities that will create a favourable view of your company; (iv) written communication skills; and (v) oral communication skills. While the Domm (2016), Doan and Bilowol (2014) and McKinney (2006) studies have provided some insights into public relations in Vietnam, this paper makes a contribution to this limited body of knowledge by investigating the social media practices of Vietnam-based public relations professionals.

Public Relations and Social Media in Vietnam

There is limited research that specifically addresses the use of social media in public relations in Vietnam. Instead, previous studies have mostly included Vietnam as part of a larger group of Southeast Asian (Abbott, 2012, 2011; Lee & Park, 2014; Skoric, Zhu & Pang, 2016; Van-Tien Dao et al., 2014) or Asia-Pacific nations (Macnamara, et al., 2016). As part of their survey of Asia-Pacific public relations and strategic communication professionals Macnamara, et al. (2016, p. 27-39) found that Vietnam-based public professionals ranked social media as the most important communication channel to reach publics and stakeholders and rated their professional social media capabilities to be 3.33 out of 5. Quantitative data was not included in the Macnamara et al. (2016) study which limited the depth of analysis that could be conducted. Other social media studies to date that have included Vietnam in a larger sample have investigated social media in the context of the political environment and its controls (Abbott, 2012; Lee & Park, 2014; Skoric, Zhu & Pang, 2016), activism (Abbott, 2011), and advertising (Van-Tien Dao et al., 2014).

The few social media research studies that have included a Vietnam-only sample have examined technology in relation to activism (Kurfürst, 2015) and its influence on politics (Bui, 2016). The only study that has been conducted in Vietnam (Bilowol & Doan, 2015) examined social media in relation to public relations and involved a content analysis of the coffee company Starbucks’ website and Facebook page. This allowed an analysis of the corporation’s role in developing the country’s public relations industry through the use of corporate social responsibility concluded that Starbucks’ use of social media as a method to demonstrate their corporate social responsibility was non-strategic, unplanned and unsophisticated.

This study addresses the lack of qualitative research that informs the specific social media practices of Vietnam-based public relations professionals. Studies have been conducted that have involved other Asian countries. For example, Macnamara (2011) conducted in-depth interviews with 14 social media specialists that included one practitioner from Singapore and two from Hong Kong (the rest were from Australia and other unspecified regional locations); the interviews were undertaken in addition to an online survey. The present study has been modelled on the work of Fitch (2009a, 2009b) that involved semi-structured interviews with ten Malaysian and Singaporean public relations practitioners in relation to their perceptions of new media, including social media. Fitch (2009a) found that social media practice within Malaysia and Singapore often blurred the lines between marketing and public relations. There was confusion with regard to how to apply social media to public relations practice, significant over-reliance on personal relationships and social media influencers to disseminate information and a strong focus on producing engaging content. This research takes a similar approach to that of Fitch (2009a, 2009b) but specifically focuses on the Vietnamese market.

The lack of current qualitative research exploring the impact of social media on Vietnam-based public relations practice provided the author with five research questions (RQ).

RQ1. How has social media changed public relations practice in Vietnam?
RQ2. What are the most challenging aspects of using social media for public relations in Vietnam?
RQ3. What social media platforms are most appropriate in the Vietnamese market?
RQ4. What social media engagement strategies are most appropriate for the Vietnamese market?
RQ5. What predictions can be made about how social media will affect public relations in the future?
Method

The aim of this research was to explore Vietnam-based public relations professionals ‘perceptions and attitudes regarding the impact of social media on professional practice. The study investigates how social media has impacted public relations practices within the country, the challenges practitioners face and common practices. The research also assesses how social media will influence the future of public relations.

Semi-structured interviews (face-to-face and email) were chosen as the research method for this study because they can generate detail-rich knowledge and provided the researcher with the opportunity to gain an extensive understanding of participant perceptions and attitudes surrounding social media in public relations practice in Vietnam (Daymon & Holloway, 2011; Denscombe, 2007; Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008; Stacks, 2011; Weerakkody, 2015). Flexibility has also been identified as another advantage in using interviews as a research method because they can be adapted for most topics and interviewees (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were considered as an appropriate research method as they were used in comparable studies by Fitch (2009a, 2009b) in which public relations practitioners in Singapore and Malaysia were interviewed about their perceptions of using social media. The sample in this study cannot represent the views of all of the members of the Vietnamese public relations industry. Instead it applies an approach used by Fitch (2009a, 2009b) and defined by LÊtang (2008) as “multiple truths, alternative visions and critical perspectives,” (p. 25). This study was carried out with the intention of identifying areas for further more detailed research.

This study was conducted in 2016 and involved semi-structured face-to-face interviews with six public relations professionals at their places of employment in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and email interviews with four Vietnam-based public relations practitioners after the author had returned to Australia. Interviewees were identified and recruited as part of a social media study tour jointly funded by the Australian Federal Government New Colombo Plan (2017) and the researcher’s home institution. The researcher accompanied six undergraduate students on visits to six of the participants’ workplaces. The participants of the four email interviews were recruited through referrals (or snowballing) undertaken by three of the participants of the face-to-face interviews.

Names of participants and organisations have been removed to ensure anonymity and adherence to the ethical requirements set by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the researcher’s home institution. The sample consisted of two senior public relations professionals (an agency owner and director, and the Head of Public Relations for a FMCG company) and eight public relations professionals with a range of experience between them. There were six females and four males. Three of the companies were solely based in Vietnam, while the other five were multinational organisations with offices throughout Asia, the USA and Australia. The interview audio was recorded and the transcribed and email interviews were analysed using open, axial and selective coding via NVivo (QSR International Ltd. 2017; Saldaña, 2015). The research questions were used as a code in the first instance. However, codes of greater specificity emerged throughout the coding process (Saldaña, 2015). The research undertaken aims to understand the subject area from each practitioner’s point-of-view and within the context of Vietnamese culture (Fitch, 2009a; Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

Results

RQ1. How has social media changed public relations practice in Vietnam?

The interviewees suggested social media has changed public relations within the Vietnamese market in two main ways by: (i) replacing traditional media as a communication channel; and (ii) changing the emphasis placed on cultivating relationships with the mainstream media.
i) Replacing traditional media as a communication channel

The interview participants all mentioned that until 2013 traditional media in the form of television and print were the communication channels used most prominently in campaigns. At that time, social media was largely viewed as a supplementary channel, and not as essential as positive mainstream media coverage for the successful implementation of a public relations campaign.

“It used to be that all of the big campaigns used TV, but I can see in the next two years TV will be dropped. They (clients) don’t have money for TV. TV costs a lot of money so our clients focus on digital.”

(Interviewee 3)

However, with the rapid adoption of social media in Vietnam, its inclusion in campaigns has become essential to reach social media users who are now paying less attention to traditional media channels.

“Definitely it’s starting to become more of a centerpiece, so marketing teams in brands are starting to think of social as being the core and then everything else supporting it. Not necessarily just as a tool to publish their discounts or promotions. Rather than kind of adding it on, it’s becoming a central part and then everything feeds off it.”

(Interviewee 4)

“Well within the last three years, many brands have received the budget that was usually allocated to traditional marketing transferred to fund digital and social media activities. They see the conversion rate of people who buy their product.”

(Interviewee 2)

“About three years ago, I started saying that we had reached the point at which social media had to be a part of every proposal, even if your social media strategy was, we’re not using social media. We’ve utterly transcended that point. It is now at the point where I don’t think I’ve written a proposal anywhere that doesn’t include some form of social media engagement.”

(Interviewee 1)

“People in Vietnam are more addicted to social media and all ways of buying are performed online. It’s convenient and easy for both consumers and marketers.”

(Interviewee 7)

ii.) Changing the emphasis placed on cultivating relationships with the mainstream media

According to the interviewees, up until 2013, public relations practitioners in Vietnam were required to maintain strong relationships with newspaper and magazine journalists, editors and reporters that sometimes included providing monetary incentives in exchange for positive media coverage.

“You’ll often get publications come to you and say hey, we’re doing a special issue on red t-shirts and your client is the number one manufacturer of red t-shirts in Vietnam and we would like to do an interview about why red is the new black only to then have the journalist turn around and present you with her price list for the publishing of this interview. I will flatly say no to being ransomed.”

(Interviewee 1)

However, with the increased use of social media, there is must less reliance on the mainstream media as the source of communication. Instead, the focus has shifted to audience engagement through social media channels; Facebook is the most common method of communication.
“Right now the power has changed. It goes back to us and goes to the audience themselves. What we can do is we work less on media relations and we work more on the audience side. We want to know the audience inside, what they want, how they want it, how fast they want it so we can give more information on our own media which is Facebook and our own website.”

(Interviewee 4)

Furthermore, as the relationship with the mainstream media declines in importance for public relations professionals working in Vietnam, building positive relationships with social media influencers becomes a priority for public relations professionals, marketers and journalists. It is apparent that these new relationships still involve monetary incentives for positive promotion.

“I can see that a lot of journalists, they are following online influencers which they had never done before. Online influence source they are not celebrities they are just people with their own opinions and a lot of people listen to them and journalists just follow their page for news.”

(Interviewee 6)

“We need to go beyond the traditional PR. Media and journalists are not your only targets anymore. I mean PR is more than writing and relationships now. I think simply everyone has to go social now. An expanded list of influencers and consumer digital profiling have become essential.”

(Interviewee 10)

“Right now, everybody's all about influencers. It's so en vogue to throw money at influencers. The going rate for my favourite influencer is $1,500 US to attend any event. She will not take any photos or post them herself. That's just for her to be there. She is charging $600 US for every post that she makes that involves your name.”

(Interviewee 1)

RQ2. What are the most challenging aspects of using social media for public relations in Vietnam?

The interviewees identified five major challenges that impact the use of social media in their public relations practice.

(i) Governmental Control

The Vietnamese Government’s practice of shutting down social media, more specifically Facebook, to prevent it being used by citizens to organise political rallies and protests, was described by interviewees as a major challenge.

“There were protest marches in the city, big ones organized on Facebook every Sunday for a month, month and a half, every Sunday. What did the government do? I would be sitting there, halfway through uploading a picture on Facebook, and the upload fails. Facebook has been turned off. That was to stop people coming here to rally. Then people started using Instagram, and the government turned Instagram off too.”

(Interviewee 1)

Interviewee Three identified the negative impact that shutting down Facebook can have on their clients’ ability to generate revenue.

“We suffer when Facebook goes down because so too does traffic to our sites. We generate a lot of revenue from Facebook. It drives people to our website where we sell to them. If the traffic is down, we don't make money. We rely heavily on Facebook right now.”

(Interviewee 3)
ii.) The Unpredictability of Audiences

Interviewees Two and Five highlighted that social media provides the audience with the ability to respond negatively to engagement strategies and unsatisfactory experiences which emphasises the need for organisations to monitor social media in order to protect their organisational reputation.

“The fans in Vietnam, we cannot really know what they’re going to like. Sometimes we survey people in the office about social media content and they have a good reaction, but when it runs, it fails. It’s very hard in Vietnam to predict the behavior of the fans. That’s why we are really focused on the analyzing now. Very important.”

(Interviewee 2)

“All these online mediums shorten a campaign’s life span. People get bored so quickly since there’s always something new and more interesting popping up.”

(Interviewee 9)

“On social media they (the audience) have more freedom. They can say whatever they want to say at whatever time and we cannot control it. Sometimes if they give a bad review and if that becomes viral then it would be bad for the business. That is why we want to do daily monitoring, constantly monitoring what is going on. We want to have as quick as possible response to those reviews.”

(Interviewee 5)

“The most challenging aspect is social crisis management. Social media can help a brand win an audience, but can also pull a brand down in one hour. One negative review/unexpected situation can be shared on Facebook and easily get thousands of shares and comments within an hour.”

(Interviewee 8)

iii.) Lack of Understanding of Social Media’s True Value

Interviewee Four identified that the company’s greatest challenge was not being able to accurately measure the value of the intangible results of social media activities especially in the context of brand loyalty, fan engagement, and brand equity.

“I think here the most challenging part would probably be understanding the real value of it (social media), and how it drives business results. Again, because the market is immature, it’s very short-term thinking so they expect short-term results and not necessarily long-term loyalty or brand engagement or driving equity to the brand. Now the challenge is how can content and social engagement drive loyalty? What’s the value of that fan or engagement going to be for a company?”

(Interviewee 4)

Interviewees Eight and 10 suggested that despite this challenge, becoming familiar with social media data and analytics is now an essential part of their role.

“A lot of brands now still under-estimate the value of using social listening tools and a social dashboard to help them to find out new trends or have a quick action to a potential crisis before it is booming.”

(Interviewee 8)

“You have to learn about data and media habits become more complex too - you have to get used to digital and data knowledge.”

(Interviewee 10)

However, Interviewee Seven highlighted that converting a social media audience into real sales, and tracking that conversion was one of their greatest challenges.
“How do you turn your audience into real sales conversion and accurately track when that actually happens? That can be quite a challenging part of social media.”

(Interviewee 7)

iv.) Failing to Understand the Timeliness of Social Media

Interviewee One identified that one of their key challenges was that the speed of approval processes by organisational decision-makers were incompatible with the rapid pace of social media communication.

“One of the biggest challenges you have in social media when you let a crisis go is that companies move slowly but social media moves quickly. What the hell do you do?”

(Interviewee 1)

RQ3. What social media platforms are most appropriate in the Vietnamese market?

Interviewees all identified Facebook as the leading social media platform used in Vietnam after it was unblocked by the government in 2012. Local social media platforms such as Zing Me and Zalo were also identified as popular. Twitter was considered as a social media platform to avoid.

“I’ve been in Vietnam for about three and a half years, and in that time the social usage has changed a tiny bit. When I first arrived, Facebook had just become accessible. At the time, the biggest platform was a platform called Zing Me which is a local Vietnamese-made platform, similar to Weibo in China, so they decided to make their own. Now with the opening up of Facebook and the connection with other apps like Instagram onto Facebook and things like that, Facebook has become the dominant platform for most users. Most active users and the most number of users, and really driven mostly through mobile device access in that as well.”

(Interviewee 4)

“It depends which target audience but if you want to reach the younger generations like 30 and below, Facebook would be the most obvious one and it is the one we use the most in all our campaigns here in Vietnam. It’s this number one social media platform here and if you want to reach the rural target audience like people in small cities rural area, we can also use Zalo. It is a local social media platform.”

(Interviewee 6)

“Facebook, Facebook, Facebook, Facebook, Facebook. There is no other social media of note here. There is no Twitter or Twitter equivalent. It just never caught on.”

(Interviewee 1)

Blogging was highlighted as popular before governmental controls intervened and Instagram was identified as a cash-on-delivery shopping service.

“Vietnam used to have one of the most active blogospheres anywhere, and it was all hosted on a platform called Yahoo 360. Instagram is an interesting one, because of the way people use it. Aside from the sharing of my breakfast, people don’t use Instagram as a social platform. They use Instagram as a storefront, and it’s fascinating. The way people want to use it is this little shop over here that sells weird dresses will stick them on there so they don’t have to pay rent, and they’ll send a motorbike guy out here and you give him 700,000 dong you got yourself a new dress.”

(Interviewee 1)
RQ4. What social media engagement strategies are most appropriate for the Vietnamese market?

Engagement strategies centred on Facebook. Although the Vietnamese market was identified as immature by a number of the interviewees, it was described as evolving rapidly to become more strategic and content driven.

“Engagement strategies tend to be a little bit immature in this market, because it is still new and a lot of companies and small businesses are trying to find their way how to use it. Everything’s very tactical, promotional driven. Not necessarily strategic or content-driven, as such, but that’s changing as well with people understanding more and more that content’s becoming a very important part of how you engage with users, and long-term thinking as well.”

(Interviewee 4)

Interviewee Five adopted a proactive approach to audience engagement and closely monitored user activity as an issues management strategy and to inform content development.

“For Facebook it is mostly real time, real time reply, real time response from our target audience. We monitor all the reviews and feedback from our fans daily, so we can have a proactive plan. For the daily monitoring we do weekly and monthly reports to our clients and tell them if there is any potential problems going on. We need to know what we should we do with them and also for our content management and Facebook management, we have to constantly update ourselves with the target audience from all the replies and from the knowledge of the industry. So we have to base ourselves to be able to put the best content for our audience.”

(Interviewee 5)

Interviewee Nine placed a strong emphasis on Facebook content marketing to engage with target publics and stakeholders.

“Facebook content series, featuring videos with humorous or teen interest topics (talk shows, videos and music) work best for our target audiences.”

(Interviewee 9)

RQ5. What predictions can be made about how social media will affect public relations in Vietnam in the future?

The interviewees had varying opinions regarding the way that social media will affect the future of public relations practice in Vietnam.

Interviewee Four suggested that digital companies working more closely with public relations agencies was where the direction in which future of social media practice was headed.

“We have to make sure that our strategies are integrated so that we can develop a bit more of a rounded 360 effect when we create content.”

(Interviewee 4)

Interviewee Two predicted that the strong reliance on Facebook (and the government’s tendency to shut it down) may result in the necessity to “…find new platforms.” Interviewee One also highlighted that governmental control would greatly impact the future of social media in Vietnam.

“I think the beginning of that conversation is, will social media survive? And will it survive depends on legislature. At the moment, I’m feeling pretty good about that. I feel better about throwing $100,000 on a social media campaign now than I did in February. I was saying six years ago when people were asking me these questions, I would become a believer again if they don’t turn it off for a whole year. They hadn’t
**Discussion**

The results from this study and previous research indicate that some of the many impacts of social media on public relations practice may be universal. However, this research has also identified some challenges that may be specific to Vietnam and other Asian countries. The results support Macnamara et al.'s. (2016) finding that social media has become the primary communication channel used by public relations professionals within the Vietnamese market: a phenomenon also predicted (Fitch 2009a, 2009b) in Malaysia and Singapore. This change in focus away from traditional media has also resulted in major shifts in the relationship dynamics between public relations professionals, media outlets, publics, stakeholders and social media influencers. However, this change is not unique to Vietnam, and has been highlighted in the public relations literature (Grunig, 2009; Robson & Sutherland, 2012). Furthermore, this study identified that the two-way, dialogical characteristics of social media were also a challenge because the behaviour of publics and stakeholders could not be predicted. These uncertainties increase the potential for reputational damage to be caused through negative comments and/or customer complaints. The fear of a loss of control mentioned by the interviewees has been discussed by Fitch (2009b) and Grunig (2009) who suggested that public relations practitioners possessed the “illusion of control” and that social media has only provided a channel to amplify the conversations that were already taking place. The desire to control information is represented by the existence of an “envelope culture” that was identified by Domm (2016) and Doan and Bilowol (2013, p. 487). However, this study revealed that the practice of paying for positive media coverage in relation to traditional media journalists still exists and now also incorporates social media influencers as a consequence of social media’s dominance in the Vietnamese market.

The social media practices explored in this research displayed greater strategic characteristics than those analysed in by Bilowol and Doan (2016) that described Starbucks’ online presence in Vietnam as unsophisticated and *ad hoc*. Similarly, in the Fitch (2009a, 2009b) studies the interviewees expressed fearfulness and confusion about using social (and new) media due to a lack of strategic knowledge and expertise in measuring its impact on their business. In contrast, the public relations professionals in this study were audience-focused and prioritised the production of quality content and the monitoring and measurement of audience response. This indicates that, while social media is a relatively new phenomenon in Vietnam (Facebook became accessible in 2013) (Liebelson, 2014), the public relations professionals interviewed approached social media technology in more strategic ways than previously described in the literature.

Facebook was identified as the most popular social media platform in Vietnam - as it is worldwide (Statista, 2017). However, the Vietnamese government’s decision to suspend its accessibility in an attempt to prevent it from being used as a tool of dissent and to organise mass mobilisation and demonstrations, places public relations professionals in a precarious position. The results indicate that social media engagement strategies are predominantly centred on Facebook. It is a common public relations practice to target publics and stakeholders using the media channel that they most frequently use (Wilcox, Cameron & Reber, 2015). However, as mentioned by Interviewee Three, there are considerable risks involved with devoting the majority of campaign spend and resources to a single social network such as Facebook, particularly when it can be shut down without notice. The issue of governmental control over new media was also highlighted by Fitch (2009a, 2009b) and the ban on Facebook in China has been highly publicised (Al Jazeera News, 2016). This contrasts with the absence of governmental control over social media in Western countries. Communication specialists in Vietnam have a dilemma. With publics and stakeholders increasingly favouring social media as a tool for engagement, dialogic communication and relationship building, Facebook has been identified as extremely effective. However, this is only the case if the platform is consistently accessible and uncensored. While local social media platforms were mentioned, these were described as rapidly...
diminishing in popularity since the arrival and wide-spread adoption of Facebook. Instagram was used to facilitate cash-on-delivery shopping rather than an appropriate communication channel for inclusion in public relations campaigns.

However, when Facebook is switched off by the Vietnamese government without prior warning, public relations professionals are put at risk of losing campaign funds, advertising momentum, exposure to the target public, and a carefully built positive reputation. It is advisable that Vietnam-based public relations practitioners develop and implement a contingency plan to address the governmental closures of Facebook. None of the interviewees mentioned the existence of such a strategy. As the results in this study indicate, there is a reluctance to use traditional media channels in communication campaigns due to their high cost and shrinking audiences. A possible solution to the dilemma inherent in the use of Facebook and involving social media may exist. While interviewees correctly identified local social media platforms as less popular than Facebook, some statistics indicate that there is not a large difference (We Are Social, 2016). For example, while Facebook has 29% of the market share of social media users in Vietnam, the second most popular local platform, Zalo, has 25% (We Are Social, 2016). The next most popular (and non-Facebook related) social media platform is Google+ with 20% of Vietnam’s social media market share (We Are Social, 2016). Therefore, there are two other social media platforms available to public relations professionals in Vietnam other than Facebook and it is recommended multiple platforms are included in campaign strategies in order to counteract possible government intervention. Furthermore, with 24 million smartphone users (APPOTA, 2017) in Vietnam, using other communication methods, such as SMS and email campaigns, may also help to avoid the disruption to public communication and engagement if Facebook becomes unavailable.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the perceptions, the challenges faced by Vietnam-based public relations practitioners relating to social media’s influence on their professional practice. This research identified key areas for further enquiry. Overall, this research indicates that, while some of the impacts of social media on public relations practice may be universal, there are other challenges that are specific to the Vietnamese market. Despite the public relations professionals in this study demonstrating an informed and strategic approach to using social media as a core communication channel, the results show that practitioners are being restricted by external environmental constraints. Social media adoption and smartphone ownership is growing rapidly in Vietnam but it is a challenge for the public relations industry to develop at the same rate due to the immaturity of the market and the sporadic enforcement of governmental controls. Vietnam-based public relations professionals are encouraged to develop contingency strategies to counteract the government’s tendency to temporarily block Facebook without warning. These strategies include incorporating multiple social media platforms, SMS and email campaigns to exploit the increasing popularity of smartphones in Vietnamese society.

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