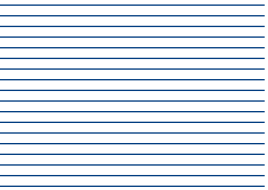


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## Corporate Communications and Public Relations in Asia

Context, Status quo, and Future Challenges



Research reports on  
corporate communications No. 7



ACADEMIC SOCIETY FOR  
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## Management Summary

This research paper offers insights into the status quo of corporate communications and public relations in Asia and analyzes the political, economic and cultural context in which practitioners operate. As a result of the economic upswing and political opening of Asian nations in the last decade, the fields of corporate communications and PR have experienced an expansion and professionalization. However, these developments differ from those in Western countries. Political and cultural particularities have led to specific characteristics of Asian corporate communications/PR like the importance of personal relationships and hierarchy. As Asian markets become increasingly important in terms of production and sales and with growing numbers of international companies establishing parts of their HQs and communication units in Asia, a deeper understanding of the communicative environment for German communication managers is/becomes essential. The paper discusses current topics, challenges and findings of recent empirical studies and outlines fields for future research that are of importance to corporate practice.

Der vorliegende Forschungsbericht gibt einen Überblick über den Status Quo von Unternehmenskommunikation und Public Relations im asiatischen Raum und geht auf politische, wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Besonderheiten ein. Im Zuge des wirtschaftlichen Aufschwungs und der politischen Öffnung der asiatischen Nationen hat auch das Kommunikationsmanagement eine Expansion und Professionalisierung erfahren, die sich jedoch von den entsprechenden Entwicklungen in westlichen Nationen unterscheidet. Politische sowie kulturelle Einflüsse führen zu spezifischen Ausprägungen in der Kommunikationsarbeit. Kenntnisse hierüber sind für deutsche Kommunikationsmanager essentiell, da Asien nicht nur als Produktions- und Absatzmarkt, sondern auch als Unternehmensstandort immer wichtiger wird. Zahlreiche internationale Firmen haben in den vergangenen Jahren Teile ihrer Unternehmenszentralen sowie ihrer Kommunikationsabteilungen nach Asien verlagert. Der Bericht diskutiert heutige Herausforderungen und Themen und skizziert Ergebnisse aktueller empirischer Studien. Es werden zudem Fragestellungen für künftige Forschung aufgezeigt, die für die Unternehmenspraxis von Interesse sind.

## Content

1.	Introduction.....	3
2.	Context of Corporate Communication in Asia.....	5
2.1	Historical, economic and political context .....	7
2.2	Cultural Context .....	10
2.2.1	The Importance of Personal Relationships and Hierarchy.....	11
2.2.2	Face and Favor .....	13
3.	Key Topics and Empirical Insights.....	15
3.1	Corporate Social Responsibility .....	15
3.2	Digital Communication and Social Media .....	17
3.3	Professionalization and Education .....	22
3.3.1	Professionalization .....	23
3.3.2	Education and Academia .....	26
4.	Conclusions and Perspectives for Future Research.....	29
	References .....	33
	The Authors .....	37

## 1. Introduction

Over the last ten years, a steadily increasing amount of literature about international corporate communication and public relations (PR) practice has been emerging which highlights the extent to which attitudes and practices may differ from the well-documented regions of North America and Western Europe. Awareness has risen to consider the impact of cultural differences and other variables on the way corporate communication practice typically operates in different locations, particularly when considered in relation to the accepted models and theories developed in western nations (e.g. see Grunig, 1992; Verčič, 2000; Sriramesh, 2004).

Corporate communications and PR used to be considered a largely Western phenomenon that developed alongside and in support of capitalism. With the global surge of market capitalism since the late 1980s, and given the Western-centric roots of the communication industry, Western-style PR was quickly adopted in other parts of the world (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011b: 6). Thus, historically, trade and academic publications tended to focus on the overseas growth of primarily US-based agencies, the formation of agency networks, and best practices for multinational companies. Most recently, authors including Hodges (2006), Pal and Dutta (2008) and Bardhan (2011) have broadened the theoretical perspectives on PR practice to give more recognition to local social contexts. A new line of research highlights the importance of different cultural and political settings, differences in historical developments, and the global diversity of the profession (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009a; Bardhan & Weaver, 2011a). The implicit assumption that Western-style corporate communications set the norm for excellence which other cultures are measured against is challenged. Scholars argue that local meanings, realities, and concepts that operate with different cultural imperatives and expectations should be taken into account.

At the same time, international management theory has acknowledged that management theories are not universal and that they are influenced by national cultures. Successful management depends heavily on how managers adapt to the local culture and work situation. Thus, knowledge of national culture is important, particularly in the organizational communication setting, as it gives a clear picture of how overall organizational communicative behavior might be effective (Hofstede, 2003; House et al., 2004).

Today, international or global corporate communications is a significant domain of interest for corporate communication professionals and educators. The ever-shrinking 'global village' means that increasing numbers of communication professionals manage vital relationships with publics of different nationalities and cultures. Communication professionals are called

upon to operate in an international context and, as a result, face the challenges of communicating with multicultural audiences effectively. However, not much empirical evidence is currently available about the nature of corporate communication in different regions of the world.

Asia is due to its growing economic and political impact of particular interest to both theory and practice (e.g. Watson, 2014a; Halff & Gregory, 2014). Asian nations are of increasing importance as political and economic leaders. A study by McKinsey predicts that by 2025 companies headquartered in emerging markets will make up more than 45 per cent of the Fortune 500. The global business landscape is shifting increasingly towards Asia (McKinsey Global Institute, 2013). Asian companies have become successful global players and Asian markets have also become important sites of production, innovation, development, and sales for multinational as well as small and middle-sized companies. Asian consumers are especially tech-savvy and have an accumulated demand for luxury goods. The core markets of some Western companies and industries are shifting or have already shifted towards Asia. Thus, it is only logical that companies start to relocate parts of their headquarters eastwards, sometimes including their corporate communications units. However, half of all cross-border business ventures fail, largely because organizations routinely sacrifice cultural sensitivity and communication for adherence to business strategy and financial gain. Multinationals with a young history in Asia often have difficulties in understanding local specifics. By interpreting the local environment and advising a more holistic approach to multinational PR, practitioners might act as intercultural boundary spanners and be able to bridge this gap to a certain extent.

Therefore, a deeper understanding of the political, economic, and cultural context for communication activities in Asia is essential. Despite its growing economic success, Asia is still a region in transition with many postcolonial nations moving from (semi)socialist to market style economies where the democratic traditions and foundations of Western countries are often absent. Distinctive worldviews as well as distinctive local and regional cultures play a significant role in understanding the ways that communication strategies are developed and applied in different geographical locations. Additionally, local practitioners have to adapt to specific environmental variables including, for example, differences in infrastructure and the composition of local languages, and therefore should be subject to further research by international communication executives and scholars.

It is obvious that there is not one single 'Asian model' of corporate communication. However, there are shared cultural influences, and in some regions a similar economic development can be observed. Although the number of publications on corporate communication/PR in Asian countries has risen significantly over the past 10 years, there is still no consistent body of knowledge. The rising number of national studies and overviews reveal as much similarities as differences.

This research report attempts to bridge these national studies and to give some insights into the overall context of corporate communication and PR in Asia. This includes insights into the local media markets, changing modes of media consumption, the politically sanctioned and controlled media landscape and new stakeholder groups. At places where it seemed appropriate, generalizations across national borders are made. There is, however, no denying the strong economic, political, and cultural differences among Asian countries. Moreover, the rather sharp divide between rural and metropolitan areas in many regions forbids generalization even within one country. However, the paper attempts to address the most relevant topics in theory and practice at the moment and summarizes empirical insight on current developments. Special attention is placed on education and professionalization of the field due to the fact that recruiting and retaining high talent in corporate communications and PR is one of the crucial challenges faced in many Asian countries.

## **2. Context of Corporate Communication in Asia**

Asia is a highly heterogeneous region with many different ethnic groups not only between the countries but also within them. It has a strong rural-metropolitan divide, and large differences in levels of infrastructure, education, and economic success. In Asia each ethnic group maintains its own strong ethnic identity, with its own cultural customs, practices, languages, values, and beliefs. However, unlike heterogeneous Western societies, where liberal values are applied to regulate cultural and workplace ethics (e.g. equal opportunity laws, discourses on workplace diversity, rules on hiring a diverse workforce), many Asian societies are still ingrained with traditional values and historical practices.

In order to structure and define the heterogeneity of 'Asia', we adopted the clusters developed by the GLOBE studies<sup>1</sup> (House et al., 2004; Gupta, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002). Of particular interest is the 'Confucian Asia' cluster which encompasses Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, South Korea and Japan, and the 'Southern Asia' cluster which encompasses the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Thailand, and Iran. With the exception of Iran, these are the countries dealt with in this report and generalizations are sometimes drawn within these clusters.

When it comes to cultural differences, the 'Confucian Asia' cluster is characterized by high scores in performance orientation, institutional collectivism, and in-group collectivism. These

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<sup>1</sup> The overall purpose of the GLOBE project was to determine how people from different cultures viewed leadership. In addition, researchers wanted to determine the ways in which cultural characteristics are related to culturally endorsed leadership behaviors. The researchers grouped 62 countries into 10 distinct clusters on account of common language, geography, religion, and history.

countries are results driven and favor the group working together over individual goals. People in these countries are devoted and loyal to their families. Countries in the 'Southern Asia' cluster exhibit high scores on group collectivism, power distance, and humane orientation and low scores on gender egalitarianism. This cluster is distinguished as being highly group oriented, humane, male dominated, and hierarchical. South Asians demonstrate strong family loyalty and deep concern for community (Gupta, Surie, Javian, & Chhokar, 2002).

In some ways, similarities in cultural and religious factors of influence can be observed between the countries. In many other ways, Asian countries are highly different in their stages of economic development. There are, for instance, differences in communication infrastructure and development. In particular computer and Internet access and mobile telephone networks vary considerably both between the countries as well as within one country. The majority of the Asian communication industry and communication professionals are located in either Hong Kong or Singapore. With the majority of global financial institutions managing Asian hubs from Hong Kong, the city has reigned supreme in the Asia-Pacific region for some time. Singapore, however, is the location of choice for western multinationals setting up operations in Asia's emerging economies. At the moment, the Fast Moving Goods and Technology industries tend to dominate in Singapore, whilst Hong Kong still has the market share of financial organizations and is still the central hub for communication activities. Apart from these hubs, countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand will be important locations for communication teams in the future (VMA Group, 2013: 1).

Beyond the question of communication infrastructure, the matter of local communication habits is also of importance. One distinctive characteristics of the Asian technology scene seems to be the high usage of mobile phones. In Indonesia, for instance, only 14 per cent of the total population of around 250 million has stationary Internet access, whilst 67 per cent have access to mobile phones (Domm, 2014: 363). The rapid growth of the smartphone market has meant there has also been a major growth in internet usage coming from people using hand-held devices rather than sitting at desks. This has many practical implications for communication practitioners planning outreach activities, including those around content design and screen display issues. Also short messaging or chatting is very popular in all Asian nations as it seems to go hand in hand with cultural norms and lifestyle issues. Cyber-contact might be helping to simulate a kind of contact traditionally valued in many Asian societies, which is now under strain given the growing pressures of the modern urban environment (ibid.). There are also other, less obvious dimensions of infrastructure. In Domm's study for instance, one corporate communication specialist found it easy to achieve journalist attendance at major media events staged in Singapore, but sometimes has much less success staging identical events in India, even when the subject matter appeared equally appealing in each location. Local transport conditions, including traffic congestion, distances to travel and limitations in public transport proved to be



critical variables. This is something organizations have to take into account when planning local promotions, or when evaluating outcomes of communication activities in different places (ibid.). The following chapters will give a short overview of the main dimensions in which corporate communication professionals in Asian countries work.

## **2.1 Historical, economic and political context**

There is no doubt that PR is different in a country where public opinion is not incorporated into the political fabric, where consumer activism is not a popular or viable concept, where mass media are mostly or completely government controlled, and where in some places the word 'public' does not even exist in the language (Kent & Taylor, 1999; Bardhan, 2003). When the former – or still – developing countries opened their borders and political systems up to the global sweep of capitalism, privatization, and democratization there, too, was a natural leaning toward the Western, capitalist conceptualization of PR. However, such complex systemic transitions do not happen overnight, and many Asian nations are still not in a position to dismiss the dynamics of PR practice within a development context. Widespread poverty, overpopulation, unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy, political instability, and various other issues related to human, political, and social development remain stark realities. Hence, assuming that Western, democratic concepts of corporate communications and PR can be uncritically applied as a frame of reference is inappropriate (Bardhan, 2003: 228).

Asian PR has its origins in nation-building – either when hitherto separate ethnic groups needed to be unified or when new nations gained independence from a larger prior entity (Halff & Gregory, 2014: 401). In many newly formed nations, such as India, Vietnam, Singapore, or Thailand, the government became the first – and for a long time only – operator of PR often replacing the former colonial bureaucracy. In all Asian countries, industry and economy are traditionally strongly influenced by, if not part of, the government and administration (ibid.: 402). Consequently, the growth and direction of PR has been strongly determined by politics and has had many propagandistic elements (e.g. Inoue, 2009). In Japan, for instance, the Japanese government and military authorities established an Information Committee in 1932 with the clear intention to manipulate national and international public opinion (ibid.: 124).

Historically, public relations in most Asian countries are government relations (Kent & Taylor, 1999) and PR is still often narrowed down to this in many in-house departments (Hou & Zhu, 2012: 922). In most countries, governments and public administrations have either been the main agents of PR or have created the structures in which PR operates (Curtin & Gaither, 2012). Also, in comparison to Western nations, the nature of media control, diffusion and access is distinct to Asian societies (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009b; Bardhan & Sriramesh, 2006). Traditional

media is often owned or censored and regulated by government and hence often an integral part of public information activities. Governments employed PR as a tool of social engineering to raise the general morale and productivity, to preserve harmony and peace in times of social unrest, and to unify the various ethnic groups. A study conducted by Domm (2014) among corporate communication practitioners in six South East Asian countries confirmed this picture. Politics featured strongly in the accounts of local practitioners. More than 62 per cent of survey respondents reported political sensitivities to be sometimes a major consideration for them in making decisions about their work, with 17 per cent saying it was a frequent consideration. "Fear of offending authorities" was the most frequently expressed reason for such concern (by 54 per cent) (Domm, 2014: 366-367).

Given the difficult, often colonial historical background, anti-multinational company sentiments remained quite high in Asia for a long time (Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2004) and the Western PR industry barely had any connection with the local industry. The profession was – and is – often conflated with advertising and marketing, and the industry had a weak infrastructure as well as reputation (Bardhan, 2003). After World War II many Asian countries experienced rapid economic growth and opened their markets to Western companies who introduced US concepts of marketing and mass sales techniques. The mass media grew alongside the economy and publicity caught attention as marketing tool because it was able to supplement advertising. PR meant information dissemination about beneficial features of goods and services and was often used synonymous with marketing (Yamamura et al., 2013: 150). In the 1980s and 1990s the Asia-Pacific nations opened their markets to Western corporations who in turn brought their PR departments, agencies and concepts with them (Halff & Gregory, 2014; Patwardhan & Bardhan, 2014). Deregulation and liberalization policies accelerated development on many fronts. In particular, economic hubs such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai were the first to embrace Western PR firms and corporate PR practices (Halff & Gregory, 2014: 403). The private sector boomed and so did the demand for PR. Multinational companies and global agencies set up partnerships with local companies and agencies. The print media exploded and radio and television experienced high levels of privatization. The notion of publics also began to shift. With the changing economic climate of the 1990s, there was a greater move toward incorporating consumer and shareholder opinions into policies and planning. Identifying significant publics that directly or indirectly affected the client/organization was becoming a more sophisticated practice (Bardhan, 2003: 239).

However, demand for PR is still mostly driven by multinational corporations promoting products through media relations. Media relations is the most mature function in Asia and its role is usually understood and valued at board level (VMA Group, 2013: 1). When it comes to other communication disciplines such as internal communications, however, many companies are unsure about investing in them due to a limited understanding of what it is. The whole area of corporate

communications and PR is sometimes misperceived as event management (“the business of entertaining officials”) or advertorial placement due to a widely entrenched ‘envelopment culture’ (Doan & Bilowol, 2014). Communication activities in Asia are mostly product and brand driven and are focused on consumer relations. In a comparative study in India, Japan, and South Korea, Sriramesh, Kim, and Takasaki found that in all three cultures the press agency/publicity model by Grunig and Hunt (1984) was the most frequently practiced model (Sriramesh et al., 1999: 280).<sup>2</sup> These results have been confirmed in later studies. For South Korea Shin states that in line with an inordinate emphasis on media relations, PR practitioners have tended to enact technical PR (press agency and public information) more frequently than managerial models. Accounts that communication practice is moving in the direction of a strategic managerial function, especially in multinational corporations and PR agencies, are the exception (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2014: 141).

Even in Singapore, one of the main economic and financial hubs in Asia, the PR industry remains in a phase of transition towards a more professionalized status. Lwin and Pang suggest three systemic problems for PR practitioners in Singapore which are typical for most Asian countries:

- *Public perception of PR:* PR suffers from a negative image. Even for the more educated public, PR is often associated with ‘spin doctors’ merely interested in getting positive stories into the media in order to make their organization look good. Its identity is made further ambiguous by the fact that anyone, regardless of academic background, qualifications, experience or training, can practice PR.
- *Difficulty in quantifying public relations work:* Many organizations do not appear to fully appreciate the value of PR. They consider it a peripheral function within management’s overall operations. Many subscribe to the belief that PR brings few quantifiable benefits.
- *Accentuation on traditional competencies:* Despite efforts to position the profession beyond technical roles as a strategic function, traditional PR competencies in tactical roles remain a double-edged sword. Over the years practitioners have performed these tasks competently – in media relations, writing, and editing corporate literature, producing publications and promotional materials, and organizing events. Thus management executives continue to regard practitioners as only being competent in these roles and fail to recognize that they can undertake more strategic work (Lwin & Pang, 2014: 109).

Growth and change pose their own challenges, particularly in a transforming environment. Due to the acceleration of market globalization in the 1990s, and despite enthusiastic projections for the growth of the industry, many Asian countries are still newcomers to the global industry.

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<sup>2</sup> The model encompasses the use of one-way communication focusing only on positive publicity while hiding information from audiences which is negative for the organization. The primary intent of practitioners within this model is persuading publics to behave the way they want them to behave (Sriramesh et al., 1999: 277).

Practice and thinking are still a blend of the old and the new and as a result a mix of diverse activities and styles prevail. The public sector drives more traditional approaches which co-exist uneasily with the market globalization philosophy (Bardhan & Sriramesh, 2006; Patwardhan & Bardhan, 2014). Practitioners continue to face resistance from a system and cultural psyche that is still mentally and physically adjusting to the new realities of open-market dynamics. They are also faced with the realization that, despite increased demand for professional services, there is still a lot of work to be done. Gaps are being created in how PR is ideally conceptualized and actually practiced.

While some authors described the current state of PR in Asia-Pacific countries as trying to catch up with the West, Halff and Gregory consider it more of a duality of two institutional logics: First, PR is still strongly embedded in the national government focused system which characterizes most parts of society. Second, PR is part of the global corporate system which increasingly influences Asian nation states. Both the local governance expert system and the global corporate expert system follow different logics. In the governance expert system the main agents of PR are the government and administration, its structure is the national polity, its institutional logic is power and its material practice is public information. Vice versa, the main agents of PR in the corporate expert system are business enterprises, its structure is the transnational economy, its institutional logic is profitability and its material practice is situational dialogue (Halff & Gregory, 2014: 404). The authors conclude that “analysis of PR in Asian countries should conceptualize the role that PR plays in dynamically connecting these expert systems and enabling them to adapt to each other and to avoid the many possible conflicts (both material as well as symbolic) caused by the mutual disembedding of their institutional logics in globalized Asian societies” (Halff & Gregory, 2014: 404). On the one hand, the traditional powers and structures of the state are reproduced in business. On the other hand, and at the behest of government, foreign corporations are reproducing their own institutional logic in Asian societies. They are subject to restraints imposed by the governance expert system, which is in turn restrained by a global corporatist logic (ibid.).

## **2.2 Cultural Context**

Culture is central to corporate communications. Communication practitioners communicate with publics that belong to specific cultural groups, especially in multicultural societies and transnational settings. They are involved in the production of culture as cultural intermediaries who mediate between producers of culturally coded messages and consumers who make cultural sense of those messages. The organizations of clients that practitioners represent have cultural identities that espouse certain values that are usually reflective of the larger societies and ide-

ologies they are embedded in. Practitioners have their own cultural identities; and the profession itself has developed certain dominant cultural values over time (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011b: 8). Although culture and territory cannot be conceptualized as synonymous anymore and culture cannot be considered something static, predictive, a causal variable, there is no denying that there are certain cultural features distinct to a certain territory. Many studies, also in PR, have focused on the cultural differences between Western, European, and Anglo-American and Asian cultures. A number of significant cultural factors have been identified that are highly influential to corporate communication and deeply affect the daily work of practitioners, especially the philosophy of Confucianism which still penetrates many aspects of social and business life in many Asian countries. In the following chapter the paper will discuss the importance of personal relationships, hierarchy, and favors in corporate communication in Asian countries.

### 2.2.1 The Importance of Personal Relationships and Hierarchy

Personal relationships and networks, referred to as *guanxi* in China and *quan hê* in Vietnam, are essential to all business processes in most Asian countries and an important characteristic of Asian PR. *Guanxi* for instance leads to collaborations between journalists and PR practitioners in ways not found in the West. In countries which have close relations with China, the influence of Confucianism and related philosophies has shaped PR practice. This has resulted in PR being conceptualized as a two-way communication activity, a notion which differs from the Western concept of 'two-way symmetrical communication' (Watson, 2014b: 2). Personal meetings during and outside official working hours form an integral part of effective PR practice. Huang (2000) identified the cultural assumption of *gao guanxi* (manipulating relationships) and proposed a personal influence model. This model shows that Chinese PR practitioners tend to build personal relationships with key individuals, such as government regulators or media persons by performing a favor or service. Zhang, Shen, and Jiang (2009) also argued that Chinese *guanxi* treats 'connections' as 'ends' rather than 'means to an end' (ibid.: 230).

As one PR professional interviewed in Hou's and Zhu's study argued, "China is a *guanxi*-rooted society. It entails acquaintance with one another by means of banquets, giving gifts or networking" (Hou & Zhu, 2012: 920). *Guanxi* cannot be cultivated in a short time. Rather, it is a gradual, dedicated and long-term process that requires enduring and accumulative efforts. It is also closely related to hierarchy and equivalence.

*Guanxi* as a social phenomenon can be understood within a specific social, cultural and institutional context. In particular its modus operandi is highly influenced by the Confucian legacy, with its high regard for harmony and hierarchy. In Confucianism, people view themselves as being closely interdependent of each other, and strongly embedded in the surrounding social

context. As a result, interpersonal and inter-organizational harmonious interactions are valued and sought after. Confucian ethics also exhort individuals to respect patriarchs and elders and such respect is extended to authority of all kinds (Dunning & Kim, 2007: 331-332). According to Confucius, everyone has a fixed position in society and, provided each person behaves according to rank, social harmony is achieved. This philosophy deeply penetrates business culture in Confucian countries. It is important to identify and respect the person highest in rank in every group. The sense of hierarchy has several manifestations in business management. It is often detrimental to the sense of participation which plays an essential role in the progress of a business deal. Since everybody is supposed to behave according to rank, people are reluctant to present ideas that may lead to the improvement of the business. This explains much of the inertia in Chinese businesses, particularly in state-owned enterprises. This lack of worker initiative is a principal factor in contributing to low business efficiency in China (Jacobs, Guopei, & Herbig, 1995: 29-30). In such a social hierarchy, *guanxi* links two people, often of unequal ranks, in a way that the weaker partner is able to call on special favors which do not have to be reciprocated equally. Those in positions of power and authority are expected to assist those who are disadvantaged. In return, the former gains face and a good reputation (Dunning & Kim, 2007: 333).

This results in two types of *guanxi* practice: upwards-oriented and stratified interpersonal communication. Upward-oriented *guanxi* involves building relationships with those who have higher level positions to oneself and thus be able to command help from them in a crisis. As one inhouse PR manager from a study clarified, "It does not matter how many people you know. What matters is what level of people you know. It is wise to cater to key individuals' needs and please them. They have value for you" (Hou & Zhu, 2012: 920). On the other hand, *guanxi* signifies that the two parties involved in a dialogue or negotiation need to have equivalent status. This kind of equivalence entails stratified interpersonal communication in order to embody mutual respect.

It takes time, effort and sensitivity to build and develop these relationships. In Vietnam, PR practitioners create databases about journalists, which include personal details of journalists and their families. They use this information to approach and build trust with them. Journalists tend not to cross-check information provided by PR practitioners if they have good relationships or belong to the same network (Van, 2014: 150). Trust in relationships between corporate communication practitioners and journalists in Vietnam differs from concepts of trust in the Western PR tradition. Here trust is about managing two-way relationships, providing correct information and transparency. In Vietnam, PR practitioners build trust in order to get what they want such as influencing media agendas. Trust is a mean to an end, not a merit per se (Van, 2014: 151).

In South Korea PR is primarily enacted through the 'personal influence model' in which PR practitioners mobilize various interpersonal relationships with key individuals in government, media, political entities, and activist groups in order to affect their organizational interests. Informal relations enacted through unofficial calls, private meetings, regional/alumni/blood ties, press tours, bargaining advertising, and perks such as golf and hiking affect news coverage at least moderately (Shin et al., 2014: 173). When faced with non-routine crisis or conflict situations, South Korean PR practitioners place high value on 'enactment competency', that is, balancing multiple interests, protecting valuable resources, balancing pragmatism and idealism, and maintaining flexibility (ibid).

A comparative study by Sriramesh, Kim, and Takasaki (1999) found that in India, Japan, and South Korea personal relationships are also very important. Professionals in these three countries used the personal influence model<sup>3</sup> to conduct most of their PR activities. Government regulators frequently bent the rules to help their favorite organizations. Similarly, even without writing a press release, many PR practitioners were able to pick up the phone and place stories in the media by using the influence they wield with a friendly journalist or editor. The professionals of all three cultures reported that they entertained key publics by providing them with food or drinks and by giving gifts. The Indian data revealed that in every sample organization the PR department actively used the personal influence model. Even in public sector enterprises indirectly controlled by the government, resources were used to entertain other influential government bureaucrats. The interviewed PR professionals consider personal contacts to be the most significant contributor to their success. The Japanese sample also yielded very strong results about the presence of the personal influence model in that country. Nearly every Japanese interviewee considered socializing with mass media representatives every evening as a primary media relations strategy. Japanese PR professionals even have the special term *nomunication* for these types of activities, combining the Japanese word for 'drink' (*nomu*) with 'communication'. Every Japanese journalist and PR professional understands the intricacies of *nomunication* (Sriramesh, Kim, & Takasaki, 1999).

### 2.2.2 Face and Favor

Face is a characteristic of the Confucian culture which prevails in many Asian countries. People in these cultures tend to protect their personal image, appearance, and prestige. They focus on face-saving in their social relations or personal relationships because they want other people

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<sup>3</sup> At its core, the personal influence model is a quid pro quo relationship between the public relations practitioner and strategically placed individuals, such as government regulators, media persons, and tax officials. Public relations practitioners build personal influence with these key individuals by doing favors for them so that they can solicit favors in return when needed.

in their network to respect and value them (Hwang, 1987). Face is important in the relationships between PR practitioners and journalists. Saving a journalists' face is also a way to maintain good *guanxi* or *quan hê*. Journalists will withdraw from their network without saying anything if they feel they are losing face (Van, 2014: 152).

Favor is a way in which individuals in Asian Confucian cultures use their personal network. An individual tends to use a resource such as information as a gift to express his or her sympathy or build a good relationship with another individual in the same personal network (Hwang, 1987). According to a study by Sison and Sarabia-Panol, PR practitioners use tips, gifts, greetings, sympathies and visitations as favors with target publics, such as media contacts. Especially in less-developed countries such as Vietnam, South Korea, the Philippines, or China, a controversial 'envelope culture' exists where PR practitioners pay journalists to attend their press conferences and publish press releases and regularly send gifts to government officials and members of the media. Government and business elites exploit the low wages of journalists and media practitioners through the practice of 'envelopmental journalism'. Journalists are given envelopes with cash to either kill a story or ensure its coverage regardless of its newsworthiness. PR practitioners are often asked to hand over envelopes on behalf of their clients (Sison & Sarabia-Panol, 2014: 99). Given this political and media environment, PR often did not progress beyond publicity, marketing support, and quasi-advertising. Also in South Korea, PR professionals regularly send gifts and *Ddukgab* (money for buying Korean cakes) to key government officials and members of the media. Giving *Ddukgab* is a culturally acceptable tradition, which conveniently circumvents laws against giving bribes.

International practitioners from Western countries often find it ethically incorrect to use favor in PR. Van found that international professionals face difficulties because they use ethical principles and codes of practice from their own cultural background in the Asian setting (Van, 2014).

In addition, the two-way symmetrical communication model is interpreted differently in some Asian countries. In Vietnam, for instance, PR practitioners not only communicate with and influence their target public such as journalists, but journalists also inform and consult PR practitioners about PR activities. Van found that journalists are willing to use favor to inform PR people about PR articles appearing in a newspaper, and it is expected by both parties that this sharing takes place. PR practitioners exchange views with journalists on PR instruments and campaigns before and after the launch in order to improve their strategies. Afterwards, journalists will inform them about the effectiveness and impact of their measures (Van, 2014).



### **3. Key Topics and Empirical Insights**

#### **3.1 Corporate Social Responsibility**

In Asia, corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a topic for corporate communication emerged in the 1970s. Several observers have noted that Asian firms often lag behind their Western counterparts in many aspects of CSR. However, one cannot draw generalizations about the region as a whole, as Asian countries differ substantially in their levels of economic development, political/legal systems and cultural norms (Baughn et al., 2007). As a natural consequence of the rapid economic growth, Asia got polluted with by-products of mass production. Corporations, the source of industrial pollution, faced severe social criticism as the root cause of the destruction of the environment and people's health. Exaggerated advertisement and false labeling were also brought into question. People realized that economic growth alone could not bring about personal prosperity. People came to think that they needed to monitor corporate activities and protest against companies that did not fulfill social responsibilities. As a result, consumerism in Asia slowly gained momentum and was also fueled by similar movements in Europe and the US. In the 1970s, there was a rapid growth in the number of companies setting up a section responsible for dealing with consumers. Many of these sections were placed under the umbrella of PR and handled complaints and inquiries from consumers (Yamamura et al., 2013: 151). As global corporations have become more firmly established in Asia, the ethical and social dimensions of their business practices have become a center of debate and controversy. Many global companies lower their environmental, labor, and ethical standards when operating in Asia, taking advantage of the lack of regulations and sanctions. At the same time, as Asian companies expand their operations overseas, their labor and environmental practices in other parts of the world have come under scrutiny from both domestic and global stakeholders and they are increasingly becoming subject to international business standards. As in Western countries, Asian companies' conceptualizations, practices, and communication of CSR are determined by the complicated interactions among companies, governments, NGOs, other stakeholders, and the institutional pressure from both the domestic and the global communities (Baughn et al., 2007).

The mass media in Asia have been increasingly highlighting CSR issues such as the environment and working conditions over the last decade. Support of CSR has improved considerably in Asia despite being a new concept. As it was introduced initially by foreign enterprises, the involvement of the media, the state and the general public was low. Around the beginning of the twenty-first century, several government departments started to attach more importance to CSR, particularly because there was a fear that CSR would be linked to trade activities. Since 2004, CSR has been actively promoted by many governments among both state run and private

enterprises as a means of promoting competitiveness. In addition, rapid economic growth as a direct result of reform policies has resulted in a larger middle class population with increasing purchasing power. The growth in the purchasing budget can result in a more socially responsible consumption as consumers are able to make choices from various sellers (Ramasamy & Yeung, 2009: 128).

However, among the different dimensions of CSR (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic), economic responsibilities are considered to be the most important ones (ibid.: 129). The fact that companies create jobs and, in some cases, provide housing and meals to their employees, could explain the level of importance that consumers place on economic responsibilities. Also the level of economic development influences the extent of CSR awareness and the degree to which consumers expect CSR from firms. In developing countries where the average income is low, consumers may underestimate their role in the market. The lack of a social welfare system in many Asian countries means that workers depend on their salaries as the sole source of income leading them to accept a substandard working environment and environmental degradation as 'fate'. In such situations, consumers may tend to emphasize the economic responsibility of businesses as this will secure jobs and income. Thus, in developing countries, there is a tendency to rely on government to exert pressures on businesses to be socially responsible rather than by using the consumption dollar. Other important topics in CSR communication are the destruction of the environment and socially responsible production processes (Chapple & Moon, 2005: 428-430).

In many international studies, CSR policies and practices in Asia have been compared unfavorably with those in the US, Europe, and Australia. It is, however, important to note that whilst many companies in the region do not understand 'CSR', philanthropy and community development are widely known and ingrained in religious ideology and such activities may be known by a variety of names (Baughn et al., 2007). The rich are expected to share their wealth with the needy in order to obtain 'inner peace'. It is important to understand that from a cultural perspective - what we call CSR today has long been an organic part of the culture of many Asian organizations and businesses, particularly when historically linked to social development. The sense of collective responsibility of the organization is very high without calling it CSR. The consequence is that empirically, for instance, Indian PR practitioners consider CSR to be less important than their global colleagues despite the fact that some studies found a high degree of CSR penetration in India compared to more developed countries such as Japan and Singapore (Chapple and Moon, 2005). Patwardhan and Bardhan (2014: 415) offer two possible explanations, one structural and one cultural. Although CSR programs in many companies are led by their PR departments, in many top corporations they are led by senior management or specialists outside the PR function. PR practitioners are less likely to be involved in the management of CSR activities (Vil'Anilam, 2014: 42). Dhanesh (2012) has found that in more than two-thirds

of Indian companies, CSR was not led by PR but different departments with sole responsibility for CSR or the human resource function (Dhanesh, 2012: 142). The foci of CSR and PR are seen as distinctly different, though PR plays a supportive role. And due to the long history of social engagement and philanthropy, CSR is not acknowledged as a special task but something that is deeply ingrained in doing business.

However, with the emergence of a large middle class and the expansion policy of Asian firms, the demands of consumers, media, and government for elaborated CSR programs increased. When many firms began exporting their products to Europe and the US in the 1980s, they were confronted with new demands from international consumers. The expansion of business domains and changes in consumer behavior led corporations to rethink their corporate identity and adopt the concepts of corporate citizenship and corporate philanthropy (Yamamura et al. 2014: 70). Also NGOs, especially international ones, are becoming increasingly prominent players in Asia, tackling problems that traditional governmental institutions have failed to deal with and have significant influence on corporate strategies and communication (Tang & Li, 2009: 202). While local NGOs often have little opportunity to influence policies (as political decisions are made in the government with very little public input and are tightly monitored and controlled), international NGOs have more freedom and resources and often collaborate with international companies on CSR projects (ibid.: 202-203). In addition, consumers from some Asian countries have also understood that they can penalize businesses through market actions. Another aspect is that in poor countries such as India or the Philippines, where the scale of poverty is too high for governments to manage, companies are expected to step in and invest in philanthropy. However, these activities are usually not managed strategically, but done for publicity purposes and are event and media driven (Danesh, 2012; Sison & Sarabia-Panol, 2014: 100; Patwardhan & Bardhan, 2014).

### **3.2 Digital Communication and Social Media**

The Internet's explosive growth during the last decade is nowhere more visible than in Asia. Fueled by an expanding middle class, hundreds of thousands of people connect to the Internet for the first time every day. Many Asian countries consider information technology as playing an integral role in the process of modernization. Social media in particular is a very important factor of influence on the current status of corporate communications in the entire Asian region (Wu & Lai, 2014; Lwin & Pang, 2014; Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2014). The Edelman Trust Barometer showed that nations like China and India have a far higher trust in business innovations such as electronic and mobile payments and other forms of digital innovations than Western countries (Edelman, 2015: 28).

Social media is considered a tool that grants people direct access to political information and conversation. Although political participation is not the primary reason that people go online, the Internet has become a key player in Asian politics. Political parties and companies throughout Asia have created websites and other online applications that allow citizens to access information directly. Online forums and blogs have become important alternative (political) information sources in countries that lack a free press. In addition, the spread of microblogs such as Twitter has led to a large amount of user-generated content which threatens the control over political information that many Asian governments have taken for granted. Access to digital media in nations such as China, Singapore, or Malaysia might have a profound effect on their citizens' political and social engagement. Given the lack of critical and uncensored political information in many Asian mainstream media, access to free and diverse online media should motivate and engage many citizens. However, Internet penetration varies greatly throughout Asia, from about one per cent in Myanmar and Timor-Leste to between 80 and 90 per cent in Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea (Internet World Stats, 2014). With an estimated 618 million Internet users, China now has the world's largest online population, yet only about 45 per cent of the population has Internet access (CNNIC, 2014). In India, which represents Asia's second-largest Internet population with 137 million users, the digital divide is even larger, where only about 1 in 5 citizens have Internet access (Internet World Stats, 2014). In short, due to the fact that only a minority of citizens in many Asian nations can go online, the Internet's role in political and social democratization has only just begun to emerge (Willnat & Aw, 2014: 1-2).

As the Internet continues to expand, researchers shifted their attention from questions of access to the range and quality of online usage. In China, for instance, current survey data showed that Chinese Internet users, like their Western counterparts, use this medium for a variety of purposes. The most frequent Internet activities are instant messaging, search engines, music, blogs, online video, online games, microblogs, email, social networking, and shopping (CNNIC, 2013). Mobile phones are the main driving force for the growth of Internet users in the majority of countries in Asia. In China, for instance, the mobile phone market has an annual growth rate of 19.1 per cent. Of the new Internet users in 2013, up to 73.3% surfed the Internet with mobile phones, a percentage far higher than that of the Internet users using other devices (CNNIC, 2014: 6). As in many Western nations, instant messaging is the main growth factor when it comes to online applications. In 2013, Internet applications such as microblogging, social networking sites, and forums had a lower utilization ratio, whilst platform applications related to instant messaging based on social contact elements developed steadily. Mobile instant messaging has developed rapidly due to the fact that on the one hand instant messaging is well integrated with mobile communication. On the other hand, applications such as information sharing, communication, payment and finance have been added based on social contact elements, which has greatly increased user stickiness (CNNIC, 2014: 7).

A variety of social media platforms now dominate Internet use, with Facebook dominating online time in Australasia, Hong Kong and across Southeast and South Asia, whilst domestic players such as Tencent, Naver, FC2 and Wretch are hugely popular across North Asia (Burson-Marsteller, 2011: 6). Asia is shaping the Internet and social media in terms of technology and behavior. Sina Weibo's micro blogging platform is considerably more technically sophisticated than Twitter. Asian-based social networks and online gaming platforms introduced virtual currencies and online transactions long before their Western counterparts (ibid.).

It is obvious that the specific political context puts some restraint on the usage and impact of social media communication. In China, for instance, the manner and speed with which people can organize into active political groups through social media have drawn special attention from the Chinese government. Officials are worried about the fundamentally interactive character of social media that enables citizens to discuss political affairs issues with very limited opportunities for the state to control what is being said and who is participating in the discussion. Therefore, social media are subject to government control in China. Access to foreign social networking sites, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter has been blocked fairly consistently since 2009. To counteract the demand for such foreign services, the Chinese government has supported the development of a wide range of alternative, Chinese-language services that are run on domestic servers and therefore under the control of the government, e.g. Qzone, 51.com, and Renren (Wei, 2014: 38). These platforms are a place for discussion, information, dissemination, and mobilization in ways that are both sanctioned and discouraged by the government (Wallis, 2011). Chinese social media services are subjected to the same content controls as other websites registered in the country. Automated keyword filters, government reminders of self-censorship consideration, and direct control of content by government agents are commonly used to monitor social media in China (Wei, 2014: 39).

A study by Domm (2014) confirmed that a growing taste for instant two-way dialogue is as apparent in South East Asia as elsewhere in the world, with many populations rapidly leap-frogging over stages of technological development experienced over a much longer period in western countries. Some practitioners especially noted the recent phenomenon of vast numbers of local citizens, in many cases with limited formal education and no previous ownership of any land-based telephone or desktop computer, moving directly into the purchase of internet-enabled smartphones, and suddenly being able to access and respond to multiple sources of information in ways not previously experienced. The so-called post-80s or post-90s are considered the new generation in China inasmuch as they grew up in a more affluent society and their behaviors, either purchasing product or commenting on issues, are a lot different from their seniors' or their parents' generation. Their relatively more outspoken behaviors have influenced how organizations communicate. The implications of such social and technological change for

communication practitioners, governments and others conducting communication programs are only just beginning to be considered (Domm, 2014: 363-364).

Accordingly, Asian companies are placing increased emphasis on using social media channels for corporate marketing and communications. A study on digital corporate communications found that 81 per cent of Asia's 120 leading companies use one or more social media channels (Burson-Marsteller, 2011). South Korean and Chinese companies are the most active in their use of social media especially for domestic audiences. However, many companies also use social media as a means of building awareness amongst international stakeholders. However, many firms are also taking advantage of the ever greater array of channels and platforms, yet over half of the branded accounts are 'inactive'. The vast majority of social media channels are used primarily for product marketing campaigns, which are rarely updated after the campaign has ended. Few Asian firms have set up channels specifically for corporate marketing or communication purposes, with most opting for consumer channels. Most firms fail to promote their social profiles through their websites, which perhaps implies that they continue to regard their efforts as pilots and remain wary of negative discussions 'over-spilling' on to their core owned assets. Most firms make little effort to engage audiences in corporate-related discussions, preferring instead to push content at users in a manner consistent with 'traditional' PR and marketing. The most popular use of social media across Asia is to reinforce and extend ongoing media and influence outreach. Engaging core stakeholders in discussions on 'softer' topics such as CSR or though leadership as a means of stimulating questions or feedback takes a back seat.

Communication professionals recognize and are expected to take advantage of the many capabilities of social media through which communication often becomes two-way or multi-way, fast, widely dispersed, and participative. Social media aid the sharing and exchange of information and interests rapidly and widely. Thus, social media have come to represent potentially useful and effective tools for practitioners and organizations to influence the public's opinions, views, attitudes, behaviors, and participation. Digital communication has become an important specialist area in the communication practices of public and private organizations. The prevalence of Weibo, WeChat, Line, QR codes and other mobile apps have provided a convenient communication environment for young people. The widespread usage of social and mobile media also presents a challenge in recruiting qualified professionals to manage related PR functions. However, it is interesting to note that most digital communications specialists or teams sit within the marketing function (77% vs. 23% in the communications team). A possible explanation for this is that most activities are currently externally focused (VMA Group, 2014).

At the moment, digital communications still lack the professionalism of more established areas such as media relations. A study revealed that digital communications expertise tends to be largely concentrated at the executive and manager level in Asia, with no respondent holding a

senior position. Two thirds of the respondents (66%), when asked how their function is perceived by the senior management in their organization responded that they were “understanding” as opposed to “key advocates” or even “supportive” (VMA Group, 2013: 23). Barriers to the professionalization of digital communications are the lack of understanding and education, the lack of budget resources, and the fear of sharing inappropriate information (ibid.: 24). Digital communications is still seen as being in its infancy so the roles specialists are currently being asked to fill are relatively junior. As organizations start to ramp up their internal and external media activities and as more communication professionals add this specialism to their CVs, it will gradually start to drive up both the level of seniority of recruits and the perception of their value in the eyes of senior leaders (ibid.: 23).

Participants from Chinese speaking countries interviewed for the Global Study on Leadership in Public Relations and Communication Management (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2014: 144) highlighted several aspects of the current status of social/mobile media practice that need particular attention:

- *Using social media strategies in campaigns:* Most of the interviewees shared their experiences on using social media strategies in their campaigns; specifically Weibo has become a widely used social media platform for many campaigns in the Chinese market. Consequently, the term EPR (electronic public relations) has become commonly known among PR practices and has been a dominating method in practice. However, the effectiveness of such practice is still under debate due to the lack of reliable forms of measurement.
- *Increasing stakeholder engagement:* Corporations and consultancies have been using social media to engage internal and external stakeholders. For example, Facebook, whilst blocked in China, remains a pervasive social media channel that is widely used in other Asian countries. Study participants mentioned that they use Facebook to create fan pages and provide content for key stakeholders to share. They acknowledge it is effective to increase stakeholder engagement and facilitate community building.
- *Reaching young audiences:* Participants also mentioned the salient information consumption habit of young audiences. The Internet has become the major or the only source of information for the younger generation. Young people go to social networks to access information on companies or to read and respond to comments. Hence, organizations have to react quickly, both in speed of response and in depth of the content, in order to meet the expectations of the younger generation.

In South Korea, social media is also the most important issue for communication practitioners (Shin et al., 2014: 176-177). Practitioners are primarily concerned with understanding and utilizing social media and with tailoring messages or issues to target audiences (ibid.). They recognize, and are expected to take advantage of, many capabilities of social media through which

communication often becomes two-way or multi-way, fast, widely dispersed, and participative. Social media has become both a challenge and a potentially useful and effective tool to influence the public's opinions, views, attitudes, and behaviors. Practitioners must adapt to this new media environment and serve the clients' wishes and expectations. They are expected to acquire new skills and knowledge such as social media research, content management, and accessibility. Within organizations and communication teams, the growing importance of social media has led to a restructuring of communication units with increased resources and new personnel forming new task forces or special project teams. The use of social media has also become a measure of performance evaluation of the unit. Practitioners try to measure the amount social media contributes to external business transactions as well as to greater direct and indirect revenue generation. Accordingly, social media has not only elevated the communication unit's status in the company but also has generated more interest in and greater recognition for the role of communication management, especially among top management (ibid.). One South Korean practitioner commented that "the importance of SNSs (social network sites) in public relations grows as time goes by, and social media will be the primary vehicle through which we practice public relations in a few years" (Shin et al., 2014: 178). Many practitioners felt that they would work on issues relating to social media content value and policy, strategic/tactical use, appropriateness in a crisis, right mix of messages, and the generation gap in terms of usage (ibid.).

### **3.3 Professionalization and Education**

The professionalization of corporate communication and PR is one of the main challenges faced by Asian practitioners, professional associations, and academia and is closely linked to education and vocational training in these fields (Patwardhan & Bardhan, 2014; Doan & Bilowol, 2014; Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2014; Domm, 2014). A general problem in many Asian nations is the need to establish professional associations and better programs of PR education at college or university level. In many corporations and agencies, communication practitioners come from other sections of the company without proper PR training. Finding, developing, and retaining communication professionals are major issues. The rapid development of the communication profession in this region has resulted in a great demand for talent. The majority of practitioners have learned on-the-job from their seniors rather than undertaking formal PR education and many still advocate this model (Doan & Bilowol, 2014: 484-485).



### 3.3.1 Professionalization

In Chinese-speaking countries, like elsewhere, recruiting, training and retaining talent is a top leadership challenge for communication professionals<sup>4</sup> (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2014: 143). Senior executives expressed concerns over the growing urgency to find experienced and qualified talent who have the necessary skill set to deal with the multifaceted challenges faced in today's communication environment (ibid.: 143). Some companies have established specially tailored training courses to prepare professionals to become future executives. Others complained about the high turnover rate in the profession which discourages some employers from offering advanced training courses. Professionalization is also a big issue (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2014: 149-150). One participant in the study addressed the importance of having more visionary leaders for the profession in the future:

“We know for sure that PR firms will continue to get much bigger in the future because of social media, but what we do not have is a large number of executives who are PR people who have run large scale enterprises. There is a lack of commercial sensibility. In the future, we are going to have far more PR leaders who really know the business and could run large scale businesses.” (ibid.: 150)

However, in reaching that status, participants raised the concern that many PR leaders still lack ‘professional confidence’. Executives from other departments usually consider PR to be ‘window dressing’ or ‘spin doctoring’. Therefore, participants highlighted the importance of improving the professional image.

Many professionals leave their previous jobs due to the lack of professional development. A study among communication professionals in Asia asked why participants had left their previous role. 60 per cent said they moved for better future career development and new challenges or because of the lack of training in their previous position. Communication professionals expect their employers to invest the time and money in providing them with the right career advancement and professional development opportunities. Individuals want a clearer career path mapped out for them with clearly defined roles and positions to work towards. Without these aspirations, talent is often lost with people moving into other industries with a more clearly defined career trajectory (VMA Group, 2013: 1).

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<sup>4</sup> Hung-Baesecke et al. conducted 22 in-depth interviews with communication leaders in mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, about their views on the important issues in their daily practices, the strategies they adopt to deal with these issues, and their visions for developing future leaders of corporate communication (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2014).

So far, a number of professional associations such as the China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA) and the Public Relations Society of India (PRSI) have taken a lead in advancing the professionalization of the field. Professional associations all across Asia, often as national chapters of international associations, e.g. the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), organize conferences to bring together academics and practitioners and exchange best practices, offering diverse seminar and training programs for practitioners, or devising codes of conduct to enable practitioners to enhance the trust and legitimacy of the profession. The recently founded Asia-Pacific Association of Communication Directors (APACD) provides a peer network for mid to senior-level communication professionals from all fields and industries across the Asia-Pacific region to discuss and formulate solutions to current communication challenges. The association wants to build a network that provides a solid platform for an exchange of knowledge among in-house communications professionals. It strives to advance the profession by establishing common quality standards and supporting professional qualification within the field, by organizing conferences and meetings, and by providing services, analysis, and informative media. Local country networks host debates, meetings, and discussions looking at the latest trends from a local and region-specific angle.

Local PR associations also collaborate with corporations and universities in developing training programs. For instance, the Council for Public Relations Firms Hong Kong annually organizes a university student and young professional talent competition to encourage talent development. Some PR firms in mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong have developed systematic internship programs for university students with assigned mentors to assist the students' career orientation.

Public Relations leaders in India also identify 'finding, developing, and retaining talent', and 'improving the image of the PR/communication management' as being crucial to the communication discipline and practice in India (Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2014: 159). The lack of skilled professional talent and the high turnover rate is a problem, particularly in agencies. PR training in India is a bit of a hit-or-miss affair, with both educational institutions and the industry itself contributing to the problem. The industry has grown too fast and education has not kept pace. As a result, demand seems to have outstripped supply. PR programs at academic institutions are not very well structured, they tend to be overly theory-based and driven mainly by non-Indian (mostly US) textbooks and concepts that do not translate well in the Indian context. An alternate solution offered by several agencies is some on-the-job training. However, beyond occasional workshops or guest lecturing, the lack of collaborative academia-industry partnerships contributes to the problem from a long term perspective. As a result, PR education in India does not generate a sustainable entry-level talent pool or provide systematic training for leadership roles. Newly hired employees may or may not have an educational background in communication and may mostly learn on-the-job or through in-house training (Bardhan, 2003; Bardhan &

Sriramesh, 2006; Patwardhan & Bardhan, 2014: 413). The PR industry still lacks an overall strong, cohesive structure despite the existence of national level associations such as the PRSI and private-sector bodies such as the PRCAI. Thus, venues for information sharing among leaders about how to navigate the changing landscape and other issues of professional importance are somewhat limited. Although conferences, seminars and workshops are held frequently, they often do not address the pressing issues of the practitioners. The lack of a cohesive professional industry structure also limits formal apparatus for training and professional development at industry level. Most leaders currently in the job were trained by good mentors and are successful because of their personal efforts and hard work. The lack of strong role models also adds to the difficulty of cultivating and setting leadership standards at an overall level. Literature on leadership in India and the interviews for the Global Leadership Study revealed a collectivist tendency among PR leaders to focus more on internal rather than external relationship building. Networking and building relations with colleagues across industry in various settings and organizations (agency, inhouse, private sector, public sector and non-profit) is uncommon. Furthermore, the industry has grown rapidly but in an ad hoc manner. This growth now needs to be channeled in a more focused manner. Finally, the schism between the private and the public sector subcultures needs to be bridged through dialogue and cooperation (Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2014: 167).

In many other Asian countries, there have also been attempts to professionalize the industry. In Vietnam professionals have been calling for a professional body of PR to help set standards, encourage future development, and raise the understanding of PR and help to address misconceptions of the industry (Doan & Bilowol, 2014). In Japan the recognition of the need to conduct PR research led to the establishment of the Japan Society for Corporate Communication Studies in 1995, which today has 653 individual members (Yamamuru et al., 2014: 73). In South Korea communication practitioners complain about frequent misconceptions of the profession and unsuccessful role enactment (Shin et al., 2014: 179-180). Above all, misunderstanding and/or indifference toward communication from the top management and employees were seen to be harming the practice. For instance, some senior employees cited management's misinterpretation of PR as being merely a 'luxury' or 'vanity' and complained of management's failure to recognize the important effect PR has on an organization's brand and image. Another factor was unsuccessful role enactment by the professionals themselves. Practitioners often only fulfilled supportive (technical) rather than managerial roles, lacked excellent leadership, or were ineffective in harmonizing different interests in policy formation and implementation (ibid.: 180).

### 3.3.2 Education and Academia

PR education in Asian countries is highly heterogeneous. Until the early 1990s, PR diplomas were mostly offered at postgraduate level by a handful of institutions and universities in each country. PR was often lumped together with journalism and advertising or subsumed under the umbrella of communication studies. Due to rising demand in the 1990s, many universities started offering undergraduate and graduate curriculum in which PR was a subdiscipline, but until today only a small number of universities in each country have genuine PR departments. Most offer graduate programs not exclusive to PR but in cooperation with journalism or advertising. Even fewer offer PhD programs. However, the problem of the sharp rise in demand is that private PR education 'shops' mushroomed everywhere, which are led by staff with little or no expertise in or understanding of PR pedagogy and theory (Bardhan, 2003: 242). Historically, most PR educators, also at universities, have taught from experience and have little academic training themselves. They base their pedagogy and theory on the own personal practical experience. Although this type of pedagogy is very valuable from a local knowledge viewpoint, it lacks theoretical grounding. The vocational background usually overrides theory based learning and, as a result, practitioners enter the profession without a firm grounding in communication and social science theory. Thus, the field struggles to gain legitimacy as an academic discipline.

In addition, many established communication professionals believe that university education in communication management/PR does not sufficiently prepare a person for business practice. Domm found that few practitioners have a strong knowledge of academic theory related to their profession, and even amongst those who do, there is little enthusiasm for its claims to relevance and currency in their world (Domm, 2014: 365). PR education seldom connects with PR industry. Many practitioners note a widening gap between theory and practice, evident in the lack of interaction between academia and industry, and think that industry is at least ten years ahead of academia (Zhang et al., 2011: 518). This can also be traced back to the strong technical focus of most curricula and the lack of management and strategic aspects in PR education.

In terms of curriculum development at universities, different views of PR exist, and the emphases of curricula vary at the universities. Most still have marketing elements in their curriculum, due to the strong market orientation. Also the perception of whether or not PR is a technical or managerial role is reflected differently. Those universities considering PR as a technical profession usually offer more skills courses. Universities which hold the view that PR should be part of the dominant coalition and should be a part of the strategic decision-making process usually incorporate elements of management into their curricula (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2014: 152-153).

A general problem is the strong US bias in Asian curricula. Asian university courses often lack a reasonable representation of Asian experiences and do not consider the complexities of societal factors such as culture, political systems, and media systems. Asian experiences have not been adequately chronicled or integrated into building a multicultural body of knowledge that would contribute to holistic multicultural PR education and practice. There are very few textbooks or anthologies that include chapters on PR practices in Asia. Although many refereed journals do publish articles on PR in different parts of the world, there is no consistent body of knowledge on communication management and PR in Asia. Asian PR programs mostly use books written by authors from the US, presumably for students in the US and based on experiences of professionals in the US. These do not address the local cultural, political, and economic specifics of the respective country. In a few instances, these books are translated verbatim into local languages such as Mandarin, without any attempt to align the contents with local environmental contexts (Sriramesh, 2002: 54-56; Zhang et al., 2011: 519). Academic personnel are most often trained in the USA and after obtaining their PhDs from a US or other international university come back to Asia to teach the models and concepts they worked with during their studies. A study by Zhang et al. confirmed the strong influence of US scholars such as Scott M. Cutlip and James Grunig on Asian academics. The Excellence Study by Grunig and colleagues has become the cutting-edge theory and the frontier of knowledge that Chinese PR educators advocate (Zhang et al., 2011), while most of them ignore critical and cultural approaches (Hou et al., 2013). Most Asian universities look up to the US education system as the model and frequently invite American professors as visiting fellows to help set up their PR programs. Whereas this practice has many benefits, unless PR education in the US itself becomes more holistic and multicultural, ethnocentricity in the curriculum will merely extend to other continents as well, thus inhibiting the holistic growth of PR education worldwide (ibid.: 66).

In recent years, a number of researchers and universities started initiatives to organize conferences for presenting academic research and bridging the gap between academia and industry. Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore and the Academic Society for Corporate Management and Leadership initiated the first *Strategic Communications Summit in Singapore* in 2014, which offered communication leaders a chance to meet international scholars and discuss topics for future research. Two editions of the *International Public Relations Summit (IPRS)* have been held in Indonesia since 2012. This conference is aimed at both academics and business executives and presents trends and challenges in regional business and non-business practice dealing with communication management. The *International Corporate and Marketing Communication in Asia Conference (ICMCAC)* was initiated in 2014 as an academic convention, organized by Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, and Bournemouth University, UK. The conference attracted scholars from advertising, corporate communication, marketing communications, mass communication, media and PR researchers mainly from Asia and Australasia and

aimed to provide a platform for research into Asian perspectives of corporate and marketing communication.

A number of academic journals are specifically dedicated to research in the Asia-Pacific region. These journals publish primarily, but not exclusively, research from scholars based at universities in Asia, Australia or New Zealand, or by scholars who study professional developments in the region.

Launched in 1990, the *Asian Journal of Communication* (AJC) is a refereed international publication that provides a venue for communication scholarship with Asian focuses and perspectives. The journal aims to bring research on the systems and processes of communication in the Asia-Pacific region and among Asian communities around the world to an international audience. It publishes articles that report empirical studies, develop communication theory, and enhance research methodology (<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rajc20>).

The *Chinese Journal of Communication* (CJoC) is a scholarly publication aimed at elevating Chinese communication studies along theoretical, empirical, and methodological dimensions, whilst contributing to the understanding of media, information, and communication phenomena around the world. This fully refereed journal is an international platform for students and scholars in Chinese communication studies to exchange ideas and research results, both with each other and globally. Interdisciplinary in scope, it examines subjects in all Chinese societies in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, Singapore, and the global Chinese diaspora (<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcjc20>).

The *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal* was launched in 1999 by the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) and publishes original papers on PR and related areas. The Journal encourages papers in research, theory, professional practice, comment, case studies, and book reviews (<http://www.pria.com.au/journal>).

*PRism* is an open-access, online, refereed PR and communication research journal published by PRaxis – The Public Relations resource center based at and supported by the School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing at Massey University in New Zealand. A general omnibus issue has been published annually since 2003 as well as some additional special issues from time to time. PRism includes refereed scholarly articles, book and conference reviews, and commentary pieces (<http://www.prismjournal.org>).

Apart from these international oriented journals in English, there are very few academic journals in national languages in the region. A problem that scholars in Asia face is that in many countries PR/communication management is still not recognized as a major in university

courses and researchers have difficulties in finding appropriate publication outlets. Often, educators are not able to use publications in PR journals to fulfil tenure requirements at their universities. As a result, many PR scholars keep PR as a secondary research interest and focus their research on more acknowledged fields such as mass communication and journalism. At the same time, most of the book publications in PR in Asia (to a lesser extent in Australia and New Zealand) still focus on the technical level.

Many scholars seek alternatives and publish in some communication journals, but this means that research should not be too PR-focused. To overcome the problem, many researchers try to publish their works in overseas PR journals such as *Public Relations Review*, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *Journal of Communication Management*, or the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*. However, doing so is not without problems. Not all Asian scholars are going to read these publications and many international journals have been increasing their prices to such an extent that some Asian universities cannot afford them anymore (Zhang, 2010: 123-125).

#### **4. Conclusions and Perspectives for Future Research**

Due to the heterogeneity of Asian countries there is not a unanimous conclusion to be drawn from the status quo of corporate communication/PR in Asia. In many places, it still is a nascent field on its way towards professionalization. Communication professionals are trying to catch up with the West, whilst at the same time working to develop their own specific identity and localize the imported knowledge to fit into the Asian economic, social, and cultural context. Many Asian communication managers still lack top management involvement in terms of support, engagement, interest, value, knowledge, and understanding of communication management.

Although much has changed over the last few decades, there is also a lot that has not changed, especially in less developed countries. As has been said above, in many Asian countries, PR grew out of colonialism and went into semisocialism or communism, and business was not the primary client for many decades. Business started competing for that position only in the late 1980s and early 1990s. So, in many countries the government, the public sector, and a few private sector elites are still the main clients of the profession. Nation building was and still is a primary objective of PR in this context.

However, a new thrust toward professionalization of communication practices is visible everywhere. It is obvious that previous norms of practice are not professionally adequate for a global context. The growth of the pro-market style of PR has provided the profession with a boost in

status and reputation. The growing mass communication infrastructure, and especially social media applications, is diversifying the communicative environment. As the new generation of practitioners challenge older styles, there is a simultaneous resistance as well as growing acceptance on the part of the older practitioners that change is needed to survive as well as to compete successfully in the newly reconfigured environment. Asian nations have been plunged together with all their traditional moorings into a global system that took developed nations several decades to cultivate. Cognitive dissonance and conflict is natural in such a situation and the various styles of PR are rubbing off on each other (Bardhan, 2003: 244). Overall, the socio-economic and media landscape in Asia is dynamic and current and future communication leaders need to skillfully navigate this landscape, balance human and technological communication, and educate clients/management about the full strategic potential of communication. Professional training, lack of sufficient talent along with a high turnover rate, issues with measurement of communication effectiveness, and education are common weaknesses that are having an impact on the profession and the industry (Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2014: 158-159; Hung-Baesecke et al., 2014).

It is important to realize that specific political and sociocultural variables influence all forms of communication in Asia to a far higher degree than in Western countries. Thus, a deep understanding of local and regional circumstances is critical to achieve truly effective professional communication practice in the Asian region. Many 'dimensions of difference' exist which go beyond the more commonly discussed matters of cultural values and attitudes. The complex, divergent and sometimes contradictory operating environments resist neat categorization into existing theoretical constructs developed in the west. So, academia and industry must find ways to work together to develop context-specific curricula and devise an appropriate balance between theory and practice. Educators should engage in more research to develop content and case studies to teach to their students. Industry should help by providing structured internships and shadowing opportunities. Professionals and leaders should also invest more time in giving guest lectures at educational institutions. National and international communication practitioners and professional bodies should join together to build a more cohesive professional industry structure. This would provide future focus and serve as a platform for systematic training and professional development for practitioners at all levels, including leaders. It would also lead to better information sharing across industry and provide a united front for diverse forms of communication practice.

From an international perspective, there are a number of aspects that are particularly worthy of further exploration:

- Local, national and comparative *case studies* are needed to explore the specifics of practicing corporate communications in Asian settings and in comparison to Western con-



texts. The case studies should describe the relationship between the complex sociocultural environments of Asia and corporate communications practice and help specify appropriate communication strategies and techniques for operating in the complex Asian environment. Students and practitioners would be able to discern the political, economic, social and cultural complexities of Asian countries and use appropriate strategies to better relate to their publics in these countries. The need for this contextual sensitivity grows with the increasing numbers of foreign organizations entering the Asian markets.

- In order to enhance the understanding of the status quo and trends of strategic communication in Asia, *cross-national quantitative studies* are needed, identifying cross-country differences and longitudinal developments. Up to now, we only have singular national studies or those conducted by agencies with a commercial interest and no scientific rigor. Large-scale research projects such as the European Communication Monitor (ECM) by Zerfass et al. ([www.communicationmonitor.eu](http://www.communicationmonitor.eu)), the Latin America Communication Monitor ([www. http://www.latinamericancommunication.com](http://www.latinamericancommunication.com)) or the General Accepted Practices (GAP) studies in the USA are also needed in Asia.
- Additionally, *in-depth qualitative studies* can be useful to explore specific aspects in one country such as strategy building or leadership in strategic communication in Asian business cultures. Today, the Global Leadership Study by Berger and Meng (2014) is the only example of this form of international research.
- Given the dire need for highly qualified employees and future talent, studies exploring *skills and competencies* for communication in Asia will be of future importance for companies and agencies operating in Asian markets. Further research is required to bridge the gap between what is needed by corporations and what is provided by universities and further education. International career tracks are also becoming more and more common. Thus, Asian as well as international companies should discuss sets of international skills and competencies that will help to find and develop future leaders in strategic communication.
- With more and more companies establishing parts of their headquarters and communication units in Asia, studies researching the strategic and organizational *interface* between corporate communication headquarters either based in Western or Asian countries and regional communication units deployed in Asia or Western countries are needed. Deeper scientific and practical understanding of the modes of interaction and workflows, strategy building and adaptation, knowledge transfer etc. would help to improve the global and national communication strategies of these companies.

In order to accomplish these projects, the collaboration of Western and Asian research universities and international and national corporations or professional associations is vital. Common research projects and platforms will help to establish and foster an internationally visible scientific research community and discourse that takes into consideration Asian perspectives on strategic communication. A formal body of research literature and deeper scientific insights will help to advance knowledge and improve formal educational and professionalization in the field.

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