

Gift in Our Life: How Gift-giving Culture Affects Media Relations in Vietnam

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Abstract

This article examines gift-giving practice in Vietnamese media relations. Using the anthropological perspective on gift giving (Sherry, 1983), this study developed a theoretical framework for understanding gift-giving in public relations through: (1) the gift itself; (2) the consequences of gift-giving and gift taking actions (or consequences for gift-givers and recipients); and (3) the actors' own understanding of the gift, action structure, and motives (or the situational conditions). This exploratory study reported the results of 31 online surveys and 17 interviews with public relations practitioners in Vietnam about gift-giving practices in media relations to provide evidence of potential impacts of the gift-giving culture on editorial decisions. The findings revealed that viewing gift-giving practices as cultural norms and bribery are two major conflicting approaches to gift-giving among public relations practitioners in Vietnam. Although only one interviewee had mentioned the reason of gift-giving as being influenced by the limitation of freedom of speech, this is a significant finding. Also noticeable is that giving gifts for commercial purposes might sometimes be considered rude and offensive to some media practitioners who follow professional standards. This study suggested theoretical and practical implications of the findings and a theoretical framework of gift-giving practices in public relations that may explain differences in media relations between Western and some Asian countries that have different understandings of the gift-giving concept.

Keywords: media transparency, gift-giving practices, Vietnam, media relations

Introduction

Gift-giving refers to a gift exchange process between the giver and receiver that includes the gift-giver's time, activities, and ideas (Liu, Lu, Liang, & Wei, 2010). D'Souza

(2003) noted that a gift, either in the form of cash or non-monetary items, is a “gesture of goodwill or a token of appreciation or affection” (p. 27). Yet, the motivations and interpretations of gifts are quite different between Eastern and Western countries.

In some Asian countries, gift-giving is used as a means of gaining access, establishing connections, and securing a favorable consideration with important business associates and government officials (D’Souza, 2003). In that sense, gift-giving is used as a way to build long-term relationships. Meanwhile, many Westerners perceive the act of accepting a gift as a way to accept responsibility for near-future actions (in exchange for a specific result). Because Westerners do not like to be obligated (Fadiman, 1986), many seldom practice gift giving at the beginning of business relationships to avoid a feeling of debt and as a way to avoid a gift exchange that might be perceived as bribery, that is, a specific reciprocal exchange of monetary or non-monetary goods to achieve a certain result or decision (Smith, 1995). Gift-giving is a distinct cultural and interpersonal act in the East that carries specific moral characteristics (D’Souza, 2003). In management practices, for instance, while the West emphasizes written contracts and procedures, the East values building relationships first, before any pragmatic outcomes can be reached (Davis, Leung, Luk, & Wong, 1995). The puzzle is how to differentiate the blurry line between gifts as a tool of relationship-building and gifts as a form of bribery in media relations. If it is at all possible, an understanding of the nature of gift-giving practices may help to identify and explain this puzzle.

Three reasons led to the study of gift-giving practices Vietnamese media relations. First, although gift issues in business relationships have been studied for years, much research in relationship management was conducted in China. Yet, it would be beneficial for public relations practitioners and educators to understand the current practices in other Asian countries. This study chose Vietnam because the public relations industry is developing there, together with the emergence of the country’s economy. Although Vietnam is a Communist country and its media system is under control of the government, as it is in China, the differences in cultural factors and country context are worth examining. This study is also a part of media transparency research that has been conducted in different countries to enhance professionalism in public relations practices.

Media transparency is one of the central concepts for understanding the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011). It reflects how information subsidies are being produced, delivered, and used by media professionals (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011). Scholars and professionals have long studied media transparency in an effort to diminish unethical and illegal practices between public relations and media professionals (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2011; Li, 2013; Tsetsura, 2005; Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009; Yang, 2012). The following sections discuss the media transparency study and seek to uncover factors of gift types, occasions, the mechanics of reciprocity, and symbolic value of gifts in specific occasion that would serve as background for analyzing gift-giving practices in media relations and media transparency discipline in Vietnam.

Media Transparency Research

Media transparency can be defined as the complete disclosure of sources and of any influences on editorial decisions to give a clear indication in the finished product of the media about what services were provided to a journalist (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011). Tsetsura

and Klyueva (2012) noted that:

Media transparency implies that either (1) any news information conveyed in the media is free of any direct or indirect political, economic, or other influences, and its placement in the media is solely based on its newsworthiness, or (2) any political, economic, or other influence on the news is clearly disclosed in the media (for instance, a newspaper article about a tourist destination mentions that the journalist who wrote it received free accommodation from the destination in question (p. 282)

Objectivity is one of pillars of professional journalism. In digital age, a journalist embraces a new norm of transparency based on professional identity when reporting news and enhances personal interaction through social media use (Holton & Molyneux, 2015). Hence, journalists who follow codes of conduct can promote themselves and their content in a culture of openness on the Internet.

In contrast, media opacity relates to influential factors such as political and media environments, the effectiveness of anti-corruption laws, professional education of journalists, principles of ethics, a free press, and free flow of information (Kruckeberg, Tsetsura, & Ovaitt, 2005; Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2011). These factors affect the level of media credibility and media transparency in practices. Media non-transparency can be found in any form of payments or any influences on editorial decisions for news coverage that are not clearly stated in journalist's articles (Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009). Past studies have noted cash payment, placing advertising in exchange for news coverage, and giving gifts (e.g., free meals, free trips) to journalists and editors in media relations or in exchange for publication without disclosing sources of influence in many countries (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003; Harro-Loit & Saks, 2006; Tsetsura, 2015).

Some critics have argued for media transparency to be studied based on the universal perspective of global ethics in journalism and public relations, but taking into account of different cultural contexts (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011). Although it is challenging to create a universal codes of ethics (Roth, Hunt, Stavropoulos, & Babik, 1996), scholars have argued that common values exist that guide the professional practice of journalists and public relations practitioners (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2004), as well as universal media ethics such as truth, responsibility, and the drive for free expression (Cooper, 1990). However, it is noticeable that practicing non-transparency is a choice that professionals make (Baker, 2008).

A pioneering study on media transparency that was conducted by Kruckeberg and Tsetsura (2003) examined the likelihood that print journalists would accept cash for news coverage from government officials, businesses, or other news sources. The study investigated paid news in terms of direct and indirect payments. Direct payments are defined as cash or other monetary payments for news coverage, while indirect payments are a more complicated phenomenon because they often exist under the form of gifts or rewards (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003). Defining media bribery from a Western perspective, the study found that media bribery was least likely to occur in Finland, Denmark, New Zealand, Switzerland, Germany, Iceland, and the United Kingdom. Media bribery was most likely to occur in China, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Pakistan (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003).

Follow-up investigations of media non-transparency were conducted in Poland, Russia, China, Ukraine, and Romania (Tsetsura, 2005, 2015; Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009,

Tsetsura & Klyueva, 2011). Major findings include: (1) the presence of direct and indirect payments and influences; (2) different types of payment for media coverage; (3) different levels of relationships between public relations and media professionals: interpersonal, intra-organizational, and inter-organizational; and (4) greater non-transparency in local and regional media than in the national media because of financial and advertising pressures. Payments for news coverage from public relations sources to media practitioners presented self-interest of public relations to get news coverage. Also, the larger that business gifts values are, the more they may be viewed as bribery.

Gifts to journalists are viewed as “corrupting the channel of communication” (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012) and can affect the free flow of information in public relations practices (Kim & Ki, 2014). Kim and Ki (2014) found that countries in which it is more culturally reasonable to accept gift-giving tend to emphasize the importance of free flow of information in journalism as a reason to eliminate gift-giving practices; other countries in which the gifts are considered inappropriate practices focus on ethical principles to prevent gift issues. That is to say, this ethical aspect was a relativistic value (Kim & Ki, 2014) applicable to particular nations, cultures, or organizational code of ethics.

Exploring Gift-giving

Components of Gift-giving

In anthropology, studies of the concept of gifts have noted that the structural features of the gift-exchange situation are rather complex (L'Etang, 2012). Sherry (1983) discussed three components that control the expressive behavior of the interacting partners: (1) the gift itself; (2) the consequences of gift-giving and gift-taking actions (or consequences for donors and recipients); and (3) the actors' own understanding of the gift, action structure, and motives (or the situational conditions). These features should be examined within specific contextual variables, that is, situation, status, and gender differences, seen as social frameworks to undermine the meaning expression to the concept of gift.

The Gift Itself. Gifts, which are tangible (objects) or intangible (services and experiences) resources, occur through social relationships and giving occasions (Sherry, 1983). Sherry posited that, depending on the situation and the relationship between actors involved, a gift may be perceived solely as a gift or as inappropriate or even unethical practices. In any relationship-building, gift-giving should be practiced appropriately (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979), particularly a gift in the form of cash payments, which might be interpreted to be offensive. In other words, cash payments might not necessarily be equated with gifts in the sense of gift-giving acts to establishing relationships.

Consequences for Donors and Recipients. The actors involved in gift-giving may be individuals or corporate groups acting as a single unit in the gift-giving process (Sherry, 1983). To identify the implications of a gift, it is crucial to “gauge the motivation, intention, reaction, and status of each exchange actor relative to the other” (Sherry, p. 160). Gift-giving motivations of the giver may range from maximizing the pleasure of the recipient to maximizing the giver's satisfactions with power strategies and calculated transactions (Sherry).

Situational Conditions. Situational conditions of gift-giving vary, depending on physical surroundings, social surroundings, temporary perspective, task definition, and antecedent states (Belk, 1975). Of these factors, Belk (1975) posed that temporary,

antecedent, and consequent conditions may affect a situation that precipitates gift-giving. Belk also noted that many of these factors might include motivation, intention, status differential, a life cycle of relationship, interaction, and feedback in the relationship between givers and recipients. Therefore, both gift-giving and gift solicitation strategies must be explored because a gift may be rejected forthrightly or more subtly in its subsequent disposition.

The Meaning of Gift-giving

The meaning of gift-giving brings about social relationships, which, in their turn, are the cement of a common culture (Mauss, 1923/1990; Malinowski, 1922/1950). There are a variety of claims on the meaning of gift-giving. A gift could imply some meanings: recognition, affection, importance (Stafford, 1997); it can also encourage reciprocal relations by perhaps discharging a social obligation or expressing gratitude in some forms (Fadiman, 1986). Derrida (1992) argued, “There is no gift without the intention of giving. The gift can only have a meaning that is intentional – in the two senses of the world that refers to intention as well as to intentionality” (p. 123). Thus, the intentional nature of gift-giving is embedded in meaning, manifested through different conditions.

There is an old Vietnamese saying that sometimes the gift is not as important as the way you give it. In other words, motives and feelings of the giver determine the spirit and its impact on the recipient. Sometimes, it is not the economic value of the gift, but the symbolic value embodied in it that counts. Yet, psychological motivations involved in gift-giving are often unconscious.

Motivations for Gift-giving

Considering the interests of gift-givers, Wolfenbarger (1990) identified three general types of gift-giving motivations: (1) presentation with egoism (self-interested) or indebtedness engineering; (2) obeying social norms; and (3) altruistic giving or pro-social behavior. Wolfenbarger and Yale (1993) summed up three kinds of interpersonal motivation: experienced, compulsory, and practical motivation. People in gift-giving transactions may view the practice as an investment for potential profitable relationships. Although gift-giving has been defined as a voluntary and spontaneous act, some gifts are not allowed to be given freely, as is shown by laws in many countries (Komter, 2005).

Deciding the way of gift-giving is based on who gives what to whom in what occasions (Komter, 2005). Characteristic occasions could be defined as community events, for example a birth, initiation, marriage, spatial and social relocation, mark crucial points in people’s lives around which gift-giving is organized (Berking, 1999). Because gifts and feelings belong together, gift-giving is, in the ideal case, nothing other than practical confirmation of the emotional status of a relationship (Berking, 1999).

From a business perspective, scholars have categorized gift-giving practices into two broad classifications of creating an obligation as a long-term bond or of intending appreciation for short-term gratification (Shaw & Barry, 1998). The process may take place over time and goes through three phases, giving, receiving, and reciprocating (Joy, 2001). Reciprocity gains significant attention because it embeds the idea of potential favorable consideration from the receiver to the giver. That might pose an ethical violation of professions in business relationships.

Reciprocity

A gift without a reciprocal feature is a genuine gift. Deconstructing the meaning of a gift, Derrida (1992) suggested that a genuine gift must reside beyond any mere self-interest or calculative reasoning, destroying anything that proposes equivalence or the mechanics of reciprocity as well as the acknowledgement of its givers. Yet, these conditions sound impossible. In other words, it is impossible to give a true gift, because there is always something behind it. Even a “thank you” gift also requires an acknowledgment of the presence of a gift and embedded is the presumption of no longer being in debt to the giver or an equal disassociation from receiving and taking (Derrida, 1992).

The main idea in the paradox of a genuine gift is the anonymity of the giver (Derrida, 1992). The logic of a genuine gift requires no obligations or claims upon giver and receiver. In other words, a genuine gift should be given anonymously, but receiving an anonymous gift might cause more concerns about the unknown giver. Yet, this seems to render the actuality of any gift as impossibility because the anonymity of the gift-giver might cause the receiver the feelings of uncertainty and a motivation for reciprocity. There is no solution to giving a genuine gift. The concept of a genuine gift is forever elusive and giving can never actually be fulfilled (Derrida, 1992) because the reciprocal feature of gift-giving always exists.

Reciprocity creates a temporary balance between the degrees of debt and discharge from debt (Steidlmeier, 1999). The giver offers a gift that obliges its recipient to be grateful, either in a material sense or by doing a favor within his or her power, when the occasion arises. The gift-giver sacrifices part of his or her resources. The recipient cannot shake off a suspicion that he or she has placed his or her autonomy in peril. The uneven situational distribution of symbolic power is one, but not the only, reason why giving has a positive connotation in contemporary societies, while receiving appears to be seen with mixed feelings (Komter, 2005). When people are asked about their reason for giving gifts, they speak of love and friendship, care and solicitude, trust, respect, and appreciation (Cheal, 1988). When asked how they feel about receiving gifts, misgivings and suspicions are quite often mixed with an exaggerated degree with the ostensible pleasure (Steidlmeier, 1999).

Gift-giving is a cultural act, a means of communication, and a way to gain access and favorable consideration. Shaw and Barry (1998) categorized two broad classifications of gift-giving that can be viewed as a long-term bond or shorter-term gratification. Depending on the nature of relations and the motives of gift-giving, Westerners might perceive gift-giving as bribery or corruption, while citizens of Asian countries view it as a part of a national culture (Segon & Booth, 2010). As an act of reciprocity, gift-giving can enhance interactions between organizations. Cross-cultural business gift-giving, however, must be legal and ethical when practices cross national borders. Although a variety of reasons for business gift-giving exist, three broad categories can best describe these reasons (Arunthanes, Tansuhaj, & Lemak, 1994). First, gifts are commonly given in appreciation to someone’s help with business transactions. Second, sometimes gifts are offered in hope of creating a positive first impression to establish initial business relationship. Finally, gift giving may be perceived as returning of a favor or expecting a favor in return for something.

When gift-giving reciprocity is practiced in media relations between a giver (for example, when public relations practitioner seeks news coverage) and a journalist (gatekeeper, particular in traditional media outlets), the ethical issues might place media transparency and media credibility at risk if media professionals do not follow professional ethics.

Ethical Consideration of Gift-giving Practice

Gratitude is the foundation of social behavior and the “moral memory of mankind” (Simmel, 1908/1996, p. 45). Simmel (1908/1996) acknowledged that once one receives a gift, he or she is forever under a coercion to reciprocate. Yet, the reciprocity was never precisely equal since gratitude is irredeemable and generates power inequities between givers and receivers (Simmel, 1908/1996). Gratitude is both beautiful and dangerous (Osten, 2002). Gifts pose problems of freedom and autonomy, calculation and spontaneity, gratitude and generosity, risk and power (Osten, 2002). Business gift giving is viewed as either an imperative (i.e., a must) or as an adiaphorous (i.e., something one may or may not have to do) (Arunthanes, Tansuhaj, & Lemak, 1994). In cultures in which gift-giving is considered an appropriate behavior, it is beneficial to accept the practice (D’Souza, 2003). However, the level of accepting gift-giving practices depends on a variety of factors (e.g., the level of a person’s virtue, the amount of enduring risks in business when not giving gifts as do other people, the level of following professional ethics and protecting reputation of each person, and the economic value of a gift could be used to examine whether a gift is a cultural act or bribery).

Inference of Gift-giving Practice

Gift-giving could be considered as a cultural norm or as bribery. Western society misconstrues gift-giving as bribery without identifying the cultural implications of gift-giving. Scholars have defined bribery differently, although similarly in regarding it as a violation of duty and ignoring the emotional context of relationship building (D’Souza, 2003). Dunfee, Smith, and Ross (1999) defined bribery as “an occurrence when one person (briber) provides an inducement to another person (bribee) that is intended to be in exchange for doing, or not doing, something that would favor the briber and be contrary to the bribee’s positional duty” (p. 25). Again, this definition implies a reciprocal expectation based on the power and social position of the briber.

A bribe seems to be more implied as a condition to do or not to do (D’Souza, 2003). Bribery is an act that is performed without emotional bondage or sensitivity. Shaw and Barry (1998) defined a bribe as “a remuneration for the performance of an act that’s inconsistent with the work contract or the nature of the work one has been hired to perform” (p.354). The definition given by Shaw and Barry (1998) might be more appropriate for cross-cultural studies because it incorporates the idea that what is wrong is what is inconsistent with the social fabric within which the job and its actions are performed. In other words, the ethical viewpoints may be based upon the original country’s cultural perspective.

A number of considerations can help one determine the morality of giving and receiving gifts in any business situation (Shaw & Barry, 1998). First, the value of the gift includes two elements of nominal or substantial value, what is enough to influence a business decision and what is open to interpretation. A nominal gift given frequently could, at some stage, be construed as substantial. Second, identifying the intention of the gift is important. Is it customary for a business to conduct this practice of gift-giving and, lastly, what is the position and sensitivity to influence the recipient of the gift? In what way may the recipient’s opinion, influence, or decision result in preferential treatment for the donor? (Shaw & Barry, 1998). This means that the intent of gift-giving can be an exercise in upholding central cultural values so that the action is evaluated in terms of its moral intent, rather than as an economic exchange or an attempt to subvert appropriate behavior.

Studying gift-giving culture provides basic information when analyzing a country's culture and how gift-giving culture might, if at all, affect media relations practices. The following sections describing the gift-giving culture in some Asian countries, including Vietnam, that might help to explain the current activities in media and public relations industry in Vietnam.

Gift-giving Culture in Asia and Vietnam

The *guanxi* relationship in China is a classic example of gift-giving culture in Asia (Steidlmeier, 1999). *Guanxi* is defined as a network of relationships that a person builds through the exchange of gifts and favors to attain mutual benefits (Luo, 1997). Li and Wright (2000) identified two types of *guanxi*: interpersonal and firm-to-firm. While interpersonal *guanxi* stresses personal relationships, firm-to-firm *guanxi* is practiced in business relationships. *Guanxi* is based on Chinese cultural ethics of cooperation or mutual assistance as a resource coalition in business communities (Su, Mitchell, & Sirgy, 2006). The meaning of *guanxi* does not purely gift-giving and favor exchanges, it is more like efforts of building and maintaining long-term mutual benefits, friendships, and trust (Pearce & Robinson, 2000). Su, Sirgy and Littlefield (2003) argued that the confusion of "favor-seeking *guanxi* versus rent-seeking *guanxi*" (p. 310) may lead to perception of *guanxi* as an ethical issue in business relationships. In other words, bribery is hidden transactions, while *guanxi* is a relationship-based mechanism.

Gift-giving practice strongly ties to an interpersonal relational culture. In other parts of Asia, somewhat similar concepts exist, such as *wa* in Japan, or *inhwa* in South Korea. Alston (1989) posited that, once the personal relationships are established with common interests in two groups, the Japanese view contracts as personal agreements that should be changed when conditions change. *Guanxi*, in contrast, is the link between two persons, often of unequal rank in which the weaker partner in an exchange expects or can call for special favor for which he or she does not have to equally reciprocate. Although Japanese *wa* is defined harmony of equal status, the *inhwa* relationship stresses harmony with unequal in rank, prestige, and power (De Mente, 1988).

Studying cultural variables in public relations in India, Sriramesh (1992) proposed the personal influence model, which is when a public relations practitioner makes a conscious effort to establish a relationship (sometimes a friendship) with media, government officials, and relevant activist groups. According to Huang (2000), *guanxi* and *inhwa* in Korea are examples of the personal influence model. Jo and Kim (2004) found that establishing personal relationships with journalists is a critical task to avoid facing difficulties in media coverage (for example, a lack of coverage or unfavorable media coverage). Pratt (2009) also confirmed that practitioners in African countries also practice the personal influence model.

A homologous practice in gift-giving culture exists in Vietnam and China. Several similar cultural points can be identified (Guthrie, 1998). First, the historical roots in Confucian ethics emphasized interpersonal kinship and the clan system. Second, the element of human sentiment could be the instrument of manipulation in interpersonal relationships. Because of some cultural similarity, the practices of gift giving are somewhat similar in these two countries.

In Vietnam, gift-giving practice in public relations is similar to that of some Asian countries in which building and managing profitable relationships are an important part of doing business. However, ethical and social values affect business decisions and behavior in

relationship-building and gift-giving practice. The ethical consequences of relationship-building in international business have been subjected to increasing internal and external scrutiny. Many factors influence an organization's ethical culture and its business decisions, including the conditions in the external environment, competitive market characteristics, and individual leader attributes (Trevino, Butterfield & McCabe, 1995; Tsakilis & Fritzsche, 1989; Strong & Meyer, 1992; Longsdon & Yuthas, 1997).

As are other transitional economies, Vietnam emphasizes social customs and traditional values in which relationships are built on trust, respect, bonding, face-saving, and appreciation. Gillen (2012) considered financial compensation and gift exchange as arbitrators of power relations in Vietnam. In Vietnam, "money is attached to a variety of social relations rather than to individuals" (Zelizer, 1994, p. 25). The practices of financial compensation and gift giving are seen as appropriate in exchange for the subjects' time or efforts. The Vietnamese phrase "Tiền cà phê" (which can be translated as "coffee money") is an example of a gift in the form of cash payment to compensate for the time of subjects (Gillen, 2012). In some cases, gift-giving might be considered as a financial compensation, but, in some other cases, this compensation might be defined as bribery.

However, what makes a gift considered a bribe, or as a corruption made by a receiver, is opened to interpretation. Because gift-giving is a common practice in Vietnamese society, many gift-givers may not consider this as a serious case of a bribe. As discussed before, what Westerners perceive as a bribe might not shared by those in gift-giving practices in some Asian countries.

The question then becomes whether gift-giving culture is a factor in predicting the existence of media non-transparency. Although some critics advocate that non-transparent media practices are a part of the culture in some countries, no studies claim that culture influences the decision-making processes of journalists and public relations practitioners (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011). Tsetsura and Kruckeberg (2011) suggested that political, economic, historical, and social factors, the level of professional development, and the level of ethical practices are critical to determine whether media non-transparency is perceived as corruption. However, understanding the gift-giving culture, which might influence media non-transparency, could help to identify whether gift-giving practices are a result of cultural traditions, bribery, or any other factors. Thus, these research questions asked:

RQ1: How do public relations practitioners in Vietnam define gifts in the context of media relations?

RQ2: According to public relations practitioners in Vietnam, what are the perceived reasons that contribute to the practices of giving gifts in media relations in the country?

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative online survey and a series of qualitative in-depth interviews with public relations professionals who were working at public relations or integrated communication agencies located in Ho Chi Minh City. First, an online survey was distributed to potential participants who have work experience in media relations and public relations. Survey respondents who had at least three years' work experience were invited to participate in follow-up in-depth interviews. Within the semi-structured interview genres, this expert selective design of participants was most appropriate for the planned in-depth interviews (Lindlof, 1995). The survey was used to build the continuity in the studies of

media transparency throughout the world. The interview method was chosen because surveys are not effective in Asia, but interviews are (Hong & Ki, 2007; Stein, 2006). In this study, interview data served as principle material for data analysis, while survey responses provided supplemental data.

Data for this study were collected during a period of 105 days between December 2013 and early April 2014. Fifty professionals received an invitation to participate, and 31 participated in an online survey. Seventeen in-depth interviews were conducted during the same period as the online survey. Participants included 16 public relations professionals working at public relations or integrated communication agencies and one newly university lecturer with 14 years' work experience in the industry in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Most head offices and branches of media organizations and public relations agencies are located in this city. Therefore, it was anticipated that a comprehensive picture of media and public relations practices in Vietnam could be gained by focusing on people who work in Ho Chi Minh City. Companies are often faced with payment for news coverage, while national agencies also face the demand for paid media as they work with clients, particularly multinationals, who are not willing to practice paid news (Nguyen, 2010). A pilot study was conducted to polish research instruments.

To identify the study population, the researcher created a list of 30 public relations agencies in Vietnam from different sources, including Internet searches and personal references. Snowball sampling was used to invite participants from these 30 agencies to complete survey. Although non-probability snowball sampling is sometimes viewed as a biased technique for its convenient selection via an available social network (Browne, 2005), it yields effective access in some cases, especially in highly valued relationship culture countries, as McKinney (2007) noted when conducting survey research in Vietnam. In addition, the pilot study also proved the effectiveness of using snowball sampling to contact potential participants. For these reasons, snowball sampling was expected to be an effective method.

Demographics and Overview of Survey Results

The overall response rate for the survey was 62%. Twenty-eight participants worked in Ho Chi Minh City, while the other three worked in Ha Noi with frequent travel to manage the work in Ho Chi Minh City offices. The researcher identified these three participants as experts in the field, and their regular business trips to Ho Chi Minh City were appropriate for the geographic condition of the study sampling. To clearly cite opinions, reported data referred to survey participants as respondents and to interview participants as interviewees. The average age of respondents was 33 years old (n=24). The average year of experience in public relations/communication was eight (n=25).

Although all respondents were qualified to participate in follow-up interviews, out of 31 survey respondents, only 17 agreed to participate in an in-depth interview. Interviewees were women (n=9, 56.3%) and men (n=8, 43.7%). Six were from multinational agencies, and 11 from national Vietnamese agencies. The average work experience of interviewees was approximately 10 years. Interviewees were managing directors (n=6); directors or managers or consultants (n=8), supervisor and executive (n=2), and university lecturer (n=1). Four obtained Master's degrees, and 13 had bachelor's degrees. Majors of study included journalism, business, marketing, communication, and law. In this study, the positions of

interviewees were coded at top-level management (managing director, general director, and co-founder of agencies), middle-level management (head of division or department, including director and manager, and public relations consultant), and operational-level management (public relations supervisor and executive). The following sections reported findings in data analysis that helped to answer research questions.

Findings

The findings below showed how professionals defined gifts for media relations and the reasons for non-transparent envelope practices and revealed how gift-giving culture might influence media non-transparency.

How Professionals Defined Gifts or “Envelope” for Media

Research Question 1 asked how professionals in Vietnam defined gifts in the context of media relations. Findings showed that, depending on occasions and the aims of giving, gifts could be envelopes handed out at press conferences, travel, and others. Interviewees named the envelope practice in press conference differently, such as “media allowance,” “travel allowance,” “a thank-you gift,” – as a token of appreciate for media practitioners’ time. A top-level manager viewed this practice as a “thank you for attendance in the press conference, not the payments for media coverage.”

However, interviewees noticed that building media relationships by giving gifts (not in the form of cash) is more suitable than providing money. For some interviewees, a gift is not a bribe as long as a gift does not have a high value. A top-level manager gave an analogy of a romantic relationship to explain this:

In a romantic relationship, you often expect your boyfriend give you a gift rather than giving money for you to buy whatever you want. Similarly, media relations should be built on personal model or even friendship. A gift shows how you care about media practitioner in person, not purely a business relationship.

The definition on what makes an appropriate envelope or gift value varies depending on the situations. Two interviewees of the same agencies claimed no budget for giving gifts because giving products as gifts or not is the choice of clients. Others said it is hard to provide specific range of values. A middle-level manager explained:

It is hard to define a standard gift values. For example, a premium brand conducted a media tour, even in another country, to visit its factory. Then, stories were published without disclosure financial sources but in the writing style about an interesting experience.

Similarly, another middle-level manager recounted, “A media luncheon to promote a premium brand limited to some target media organizations. The event was organized in luxurious place, and, of course, media allowance was higher than usual.”

Findings also identified three types of resources of gifts for long-term media relations. First, agencies assign an annual budget for business relations. Depending on agencies, payments for media relations can include activities such as press lunches and gifts during some national holidays for some journalists or media outlets. Second, agencies suggest that brands could give gifts or provide their products as gifts, whereas agencies, themselves, assigned a small amount of their budget to maintain media relations. Finally, two interviewees working at multinational agencies claimed no budget for gift-giving to media

practitioners. However, they both agreed that brands could choose to provide gifts. One stated, “We do not provide media allowance or gifts at press conferences. It is ok, for example, if a brand aims to introduce new product, they can offer gifts or samples for journalists.”

Reasons for Gift-giving Practices in the Context of Media Relations

Research question 2 asked about the perceived reasons for gift-giving in the context of media relations in Vietnam. Survey responses found a cultural factor ($n=26$, $M=3.69$, $SD=.970$) or a common practice were popular reasons for paid news practices ($n=26$, $M=3.54$, $SD=.611$), the desire to gain positive coverage ($n=24$, $M=3.63$, $SD=.770$), and the desire to increase the likelihood to gain media coverage ($N=25$, $M=3.64$, $SD=.860$). The reasons interviewees gave regarding why gift-giving practices occur varied. These reasons fall into four categories: cultural factor, personal financial pressure, bribery, and limited freedom of speech.

Cultural factor. First, 11 interviewees pointed to cultural factors as a reason. These participants argued that envelope practices are popular in Vietnamese society. A top-level manager argued, “The nature of this problem is *asking for a favor* when brands use money to pay for media coverage. Brands tend to prefer easy jobs, and they spoiled media.” Another middle-level manager also pointed to difference between Western and Eastern cultures:

In the Western media systems, worthy news gets coverage. In Vietnam, the popular perception is that journalists cover news and public relations practitioners “receive” media coverage. It seems that public relations practitioners ask journalists for a favor to get coverage.

According to the interviewees, gift-giving occurs as a common practice that dates back years. Eight interviewees explained that envelope and gift-giving are simply entrenched in the way business is done. Two practitioners explained that the practice dates back to the period prior to when Vietnam underwent economic liberalization. During this period, many people lived on relatively low incomes. Hence, envelopes of cash and other gifts were a way people made ends meet in a restricted economy. Even as Vietnam has prospered after economic reforms, these old practices remain. At press conferences, some journalists expect to receive envelopes and might complain if they do not. Failure to adhere to these demands can result in media relations efforts not succeeding. A top-level manager recounted:

Journalists expected to have envelope or gifts at press conferences [...] However, there are journalists who rejected the money or gifts because the news is not good enough.

Personal financial pressure. A second reason gift-giving occurs, according to the interviewees, is personal financial pressure of media practitioners. Interviewees placed the blame on Vietnam’s economy. Despite economic reforms, salaries in the media sector remain low when compared to other sectors, particularly small media outlets. As long as salaries remain low, the gift-giving practice will endure. Seven interviewees blamed the envelope culture on low salaries. In fact, some interviewees argued that, if journalists were paid more, the practices would become less prevalent. These interviewees pointed to well-paid, established journalists who avoid pay for coverage practices. A top-level manager stated, “If one has a well-paid job, a journalist would not want to accept the envelope practice. Instead, the journalist could dedicate himself or herself to the profession.”

Bribery. The third reason gift-giving occurs, according to some of the interviewees, is acceptance of bribery. Six interviewees stated that giving gifts or envelope exists because media people are comfortable with accepting bribes and organization representatives accept giving bribes. Interviewees blamed bribery on the fact that some companies in Vietnam are unwilling to spend time and effort to produce compelling stories that build strong brands. Professionals who have materials that are not interesting or newsworthy engage in bribery as a shortcut to gain media coverage. A top-level manager at a multinational agency argued, “Gift-giving by nature is bribery. Unfortunately, this type of bribery has become a cultural issue.”

There were also those who disagreed with this perspective and did not agree that gift-giving was a form of bribery. These individuals argued that gift-giving, as practiced in the media sector, is not sufficiently serious to be categorized as bribery. These individuals stated that the gifts were mostly of limited value and that, in Vietnam’s culture, this is not considered bribery. A top-level manager with Western-based education argued that “Depending on how you treat it. An inexpensive pen as a gift is not considered to be a bribe.”

In addition, individuals noted that many media professionals publish worthy news without accepting bribes. A top-level manager at a national agency explained:

This phenomenon is a part of culture as the amount of money is not too much. It will be considered a bribe if, without providing envelope, news could not get published.

This is not the case as without money with worthy news, journalists still attend press conferences and cover positive news.

Being influenced by limitation of freedom of speech. A fourth reason paid news occurs, according to one interviewee, is because of the limitation on speech that exists in Vietnam. An interviewee who has many years work experience in news media and public relations argued that:

In an environment in which speech is limited, journalistic code of conduct are hard to maintain because journalists are expected to skew stories and not be objective. This flawed way of doing journalism is a root cause of the culture of gift giving that public relations practitioners have to contend with.

In general, the cultural factor was blamed the most as the reason for gift-giving practice in the survey ($n=26$, $M=3.69$, $SD=.970$) and by more than half of the interviewees. Personal financial pressure was the second significant reason. The negative perception of payments for news coverage was the third reason, but revealed the most controversial opinions. Finally, although the reason of limitation of freedom of speech was blamed by only one interviewee, it is perhaps a noticeable reason to count in a Communist country such as Vietnam.

Potential Impacts of Gift-giving Toward Media Decision-making Process

The potential impacts of gift-giving on editorial decision-making are mostly based on the concept of reciprocity and could be understood in two ways. One, the impact could affect editorial decisions to publish public relations news. Two, public relations materials are published without revealing the payment for news coverage. However, one thing that should be noticed is that cash for news coverage does not always affect editorial decisions because some media practitioners would accept gifts even when they do not need to sacrifice their news principles for it.

First, the impact on editorial decision-making could be in providing priorities or in advising public relations practitioners, which could increase the likelihood of gaining media coverage.

Providing priorities. Gift-giving, according to the interviewees, is considered as an investment in long-term relationships. Giving money or gifts to media practitioners does not mean that the gift givers will obtain coverage, because many media practitioners are worried about newsworthiness. However, for the sake of maintaining relations, even non-worthy news still gains coverage. A top-level manager noticed that:

Some journalists move from this press conference to the others in one day to collect media tips. It implies a little pressure. For example, although it is not compulsory, after attending two press conferences of the same brands or agencies that provide envelope or gifts, a journalist will cover at least one news item to maintain relations.

Providing advice. A gift reminds media practitioners to think about a public relations practitioner; for example, those who receive gifts may take extra time to tutor a public relations practitioner on how to make news more newsworthy so that it obtains coverage. A middle-level manager at a multinational agency said:

Giving envelope or other types of gifts (i.e., vouchers) is an appreciation or payments for a journalist's work. Gifts help to remind a journalist about you for a better relationship. The journalist may give you some comments to pitch your stories to gain media coverage. It also implied that the envelope could help you to get cover once, but not always. If always paid, its not public relations, it's advertising. That's a wrong perception that some people in Vietnam have.

This explanation is consistent with the findings in survey responses in which one of reasons of practicing paid news is to increase the likelihood to gain media coverage ($n=24$, $M=3.63$, $SD=.770$). Payments for news coverage, including the envelope practice, may influence the gift receiver. When media practitioners provide some feedback or hints for public relations practitioners to improve the quality of their news or stories, the chances are increased for the news or stories to get published.

Second, public relations materials can be published without disclosure of payments for news coverage. Interview data revealed controversial opinions on influences of gift-giving practices or any benefits they may have on the editorial decision-making process. A middle-level manager with more than 10 years' work experience noted:

Media coverage depends on two factors including news values and benefits that media practitioners may have. Sometimes, forming long-term media relations could help your news or articles to get published without heavily depending on news value. It depends on how good the personal relationship with that media practitioner is.

The personal relationships and benefits might affect the objectivity of journalists. A top-level manager at an agency also stated, "Gift giving sometimes could generate positive media coverage." The opinion is consistent with what was found about the possibility of gaining positive stories ($n=25$, $M=3.64$, $SD=.860$). As the direct and indirect payments for news coverage exist, journalists tend not to reveal this as a kind of benefit they receive. Although a top-level manager at a national agency did not advocate envelope practice, he understood that there is "No secret to envelope practice when journalists attend press conferences. Without giving envelopes or gifts, it is hard to get results that the clients require."

Discussion

This study advanced the knowledge about media transparency in countries in which the media system is mostly state-owned or under governmental control. Findings in this study provided empirical data to suggest gift-giving might be a useful framework to understand media relations in Vietnam, as well as in other countries in the region with strong gift-giving practices, because the presented reasons matched those in previous studies in China (Li, 2013; Steidlmeier, 1999; Tsetsura, 2015).

Gift-giving Practices as a Framework

The researchers acknowledge that people in every society exchange gifts and make payments to one another. Yet, it does not mean that all media professionals accept direct (money) and indirect (that is, gift) payments, because it depends on the ethical choice of each media practitioner. Although gift-giving practices are a normal phenomenon in Vietnam, gifts for commercial purpose might sometimes be considered rude and offensive to some people. Thus, interpersonal connections are built on emotional and ethical implications when practicing gift-giving. Identifying the typology components of gift-giving and the meanings and motivations of gift-giving in media relations could help to uncover the potential emotional and ethical impact of gift-giving in media relations practices in Vietnam.

Typology of Gift Giving in Media Relations

Findings in this study helped to create a typology of gift-giving in media relations, based on a previous study by Sherry (1983), as discussed below.

The Gift Itself. Gifts in media relations can be tangible (e.g., cash, products) or intangible (services, experiences in a media tour) resources. As discussed before, depending on the values, situation, and relationships, the perception of a gift could be purely as a gift or a bribe (Sherry, 1983). This explains why some interviewees claimed that providing envelopes at press conferences is a bribe, but providing products as gifts by brands (for example, at new product promotion events) is acceptable. It might be because the gift value is not that high or because brands want to introduce new products or to build relationships. Envelopes, or cash payments, imply a business relationship or represent a materialistic feature, which might be unsuitable in personal models of relations and also may become problematic in relations between organizations.

Consequences for donors and recipients. Gift-givers are public relations practitioners who try to build personal relationships, although sometimes the line between a business relationship and friendship is hard to distinguish. Brands and agencies could also be givers if they choose to provide envelopes or gifts for short-term or long-term media relationships. Recipients are media practitioners. To understand the implications of a gift, motivations of the act should be examined in terms of maximizing media practitioners' pleasure or givers' satisfaction, perhaps to thank journalists for their time and work or to build strategic media alliance. Findings of gift-giving practices are consistent with gift-giving research (Wolfenbarger, 1990; Wolfenbarger & Yale, 1993), in which gifts could help givers express gratitude, create good impression, or expect reciprocity. To recipients, receiving gifts could be viewed as a compensation for their time and work, or merely a friendship. As noted earlier, giving gifts shows how givers care about recipients and can even imply the level of relationships.

Situational conditions. Situations of giving gifts to media practitioners vary. Overall, they could be categorized as short-term or long-term media relations. Findings of this study revealed that providing gifts or envelopes at press conferences are often for short-term relations, while providing gifts to media practitioners or media organizations during special occasions are often for long-term relations.

To sum up, to understand the perception of gift-giving practices in media relations in Vietnam as a gift, a token of appreciation, a bribe, or as a tactic to build short-term or to maintain long-term relationships requires an analysis of who gives what to whom and under which circumstances. In other words, the materialistic and emotional values of the gifts, the motives of giving gifts, and the situational conditions determine the meaning of the gifts.

Inference of Potential Impacts of Gift Giving on Media Non-transparency

The mechanism of reciprocity could help to identify potential impacts of gift-giving on media transparency that could be interpreted in two ways. One, the impact could be on the editorial decision to publish public relations news. Two, public relations materials are published without revealing the payment for news coverage. However, one thing should be noticed, that is, cash for news coverage does not always affect editorial decisions. Some media practitioners would accept gifts if they do not need to sacrifice their news principles for it. Media practitioners seek newsworthy stories that could help to gain an audience's attention. Besides, the meaning of giving cash and giving gifts is different. Cash implies a short-term relationship to gain favorable attention or to seek news publishing. On the other hand, giving gifts is for long-term relationships. Some people may perceive the gift as more important, because the gift reflects the nature of a long-term relationship.

As discussed earlier, media transparency in communist countries such as Vietnam, is often assumed to be non-existence due to the nature of the media system. Yet, findings in this study revealed ways that media practitioners try to improve the level of media transparency. By citing or having some signals to announce to audiences the financial sources behind the stories, some media outlets have differentiated paid news as official payments for news coverage. However, findings in this study found that widespread use of advertorials that are published to look like regular articles reflect the current level of public relations professionalism and even cause misperception of public relations activities as advertising.

Additionally, because conflict of interest still exist in cases in which media practitioners are working or for which they receive benefits from news sources, it could more or less affect news principles. In business culture that values personal relationships such as in Vietnam, the mechanism of reciprocity of gift-giving could affect the ways in which people interact in business environment. Many Westerners avoid the feeling of debt that often comes after a gift exchange in business relationships (Fadiman, 1986), while some countries in Asia perceived the practice as a part of their cultures. The difference in perception of giving gifts explains why gift-giving is widespread in media relations and makes it a controversial issue in public relations practitioners' eyes about media transparency. As Kim & Ki (2014) argued, the ethical aspect of gift issues is a relativistic value of different cultures and organizational codes of ethics.

Conclusion

This study reported interviews with public relations practitioners in Vietnam to better understand their motivations and reasons for non-transparent media practices. The study

added to the field of media transparency research in Southeast Asia, specifically by examining the media relations practices in Vietnam. Findings also broadened the notion of media transparency by adding the gift-giving practice framework to the types of media transparency. This article offered a typology of gift-giving that might be useful for public relations practitioners and scholars who ponder the question of gift-giving in media relations practices. This framework now allows future comparative international public relations research in countries having similar political, cultural, or media systems. Studying the influence of gift-giving culture in the context of media transparency is crucial for understanding contemporary media relations practices in several Asian countries, in which gift-giving practices are at the center of any relationship-building. This study offered an examination of the concept of gift-giving from various perspectives and created a platform for future studies in countries in which gift-giving practices are central to relationship-building.

The current study has several limitations. First, the study was limited and was not generalizable because the non-probability sampling cannot be representative of the entire study population. Second, the study had a limited number of participants. Not all potential participants could be reached via telephone due to unknown contact details. Consequently, the study emails could have been treated as many news releases, which means that these emails were deleted without being read (Tsetsura & Klyueva, 2011).

Additionally, scarce survey data can be attributed to the study's sensitive topic. Two potential participants refused to participate because they viewed this as a sensitive topic. However, the interview data gained some valuable in-depth opinions. All interviewees were open to discuss the phenomenon of paid news and gift-giving practices as they went further with interview questions. Thus, the good rapport that was established with all interviewees yielded thick, detailed descriptions of media non-transparent practices in Vietnam and participants' candid perception of these practices.

Finally, the study did not investigate factors that might influence public relations professionals' perceptions, particularly Western-based or Asian-based education as well as the commitments to company policy, if any. As discussed before, Westerners might view gift-giving in business relationships as bribery, which might not be the case to many Asian countries. These factors should be investigated in future studies.

Studying the influence of gift-giving culture on media transparency is crucial for understanding contemporary media relations practices in several Asian countries, in which gift-giving practices are at the center of any relationship-building. This study offered an examination of the concept of gift-giving from various perspectives and has created a platform for future studies in countries in which gift-giving practices are central to relationship-building. Future empirical studies should explore how gift-giving occurs in the everyday context of information exchanges to reveal categories of gift exchange and to describe and analyze whether the process of gift-giving becomes a part of relationship-building or transactional exchange for information coverage. Certainly, questions of ethical and professional behaviors in relation to gift giving should be at the center of these investigations.

Future studies should also investigate how media practitioners (journalists and editors) in a country perceive gift-giving as practiced by public relations practitioners. A comparison of gift issues perceptions between public relations and media practitioners would

provide a comprehensive understanding of media non-transparent and gift-giving practices in the country.

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