

Public Relations in Mongolia: The Missing Part on the Global Public Relations Map

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This phenomenological research of public relations (PR) in Mongolia reviews 13 in-depth e-mail interviews of Mongolian PR specialists in business, public, and nongovernmental organizations. Our study shows that PR is influenced more by politics than by business. Finance, mining, telecommunications, entertainment, and politics actively use PR whereas transportation, the food industry, tourism, and higher education are only gradually implementing PR. The media landscape, with social media taking the lead, is oversaturated with PR. However, politics and their corporate circles negatively impact the state of the media respectively of PR too. Honesty, respect for traditions, positive public image, and implicit communication are vital cultural features of Mongolian PR. Due to the intense rural-urban migration, the decreasing sense of community, and public message skepticism demand community relations.

Keywords: public relations in Mongolia, Mongolian public relations, global public relations framework, transitional public relations

What is the state of development of the local Mongolia's public relations (PR) industry? Although globalization has pushed international PR scholarship, there are still uncharted global PR territories, such as Mongolia. In existing PR literature, Mongolia is referred to as "the nation, part of North Asia, which was not part of the former Soviet Union and most Mongolians were followers of Lamaism" (Haque, 2004, p. 349). Freitag and Stokes (2009) directly called for exploring PR in Mongolia.

Therefore, this research aimed to study the state of development of the local PR industry in Mongolia. It is grounded in the transitional PR model for emergent democracies and transforming economies where PR "has facilitated and accelerated the political and economic transition of the country" (Lawniczak, Kyzdak, & Trebecki, 2003, p. 259). This model allows for capturing "a specific turbulent phase in the evolution toward a polycontext-regulated democracy" (Holmström, 2003, p. 4). Transitional PR overcomes the limits of the ideal of PR in well-established democracies with developed economies. It allows the observation of the transformations and the changes professionals and organizations make "in their

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worldview in order to survive in the new circumstances and to find a new meaning for their existence” (Tampere, 2006, p. 7).

This article first details Mongolia’s political, economic, and media developments. Second, it summarizes the global PR framework (GPRF). Third, it examines current scholarship on PR in Mongolia. Finally, this article presents the results of in-depth e-mail interviews on the development of PR in Mongolia as viewed through the GPRF.

Mongolia

Mongolia is an East Asian semipresidential democratic republic, landlocked between Russia and China. Its population in 2021 was 3.31 million, and half of the population is concentrated in the capital, Ulaanbaatar. It makes Mongolia the world’s least densely populated country, with a total land area of 1,564,116 square kilometers.

Mongolia has a market-based economy (Bayaraa, 2019), with major economic sectors such as services (51%), industry (36%, with mining taking the lead), and agriculture (13%; Lum & Dolven, 2018). Since 2004, “Mongolia’s economy has grown at an average rate of 7.2% per year, making it one of the fastest-growing economies in the world” (The World Bank, 2020, para. 3). The country is the second-largest cashmere exporter after China (Ansari-Renani, 2015). However, the mining industry accounts for nearly a quarter of the country’s GDP (Lehmann & Lee, 2022), with 73% of the foreign direct investment in 2019 concentrated in that sector. The export industry is also directly related to mining, with mineral exports accounting for 90% of the total exports (Feller, 2022).

The media in Mongolia are abundant with almost 500 media outlets. However, the media founders or owners have strong political affiliations, which limit the outlets’ ability to act as a civil watchdog. This, together with the legal pressure for disinformation and liability, forces journalists to self-censor (Boldkhuyag, Nyamkhuu, & Ganbold, 2020). However, according to Freedom House (2022), Mongolians enjoy high political rights and civil liberties, which positions the country among free nations.

Unfortunately, Mongolian activism is still nationally disorganized and divided between urban and rural communities. Wu (2022) stated that “transnational networks have had unintended consequences that may further fragment Mongolian society and politics due to the ideological gaps between the local communities and the international NGOs” (p. 88). Activism is a crucial factor that requires the participation of PR in the strategic management of communication, both externally and internally, and increases the demands on organizations as corporate citizens (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2020). Undarya (2013) claimed that Mongolia has “a structurally rather weak civil society, operating in a largely disabling environment, with moderate impact but driven by its commitment to positive values” (p. 53). Defenders of human rights and environmentalists face intimidation, harassment, and more subtle forms of social or economic threats to themselves or their families (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Global PR Framework

To explore the aspects affecting the state of development of the PR industry in Mongolia, this research uses the GPRF (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009). GPRF theorizes that PR universally apply generic principles with local dimensions and specifics (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2020). Grunig (2009) stated that "public relations will be most effective throughout most parts of the world when it follows the generic principles and applies them with appropriate variations for local cultural, political, social, and economic conditions" (p. 2). Therefore, GPRF builds on the competing internal and external influences of national social, economic, and political contexts that affect PR practices and values (Yang & Taylor, 2014). It applies five organizational variables: (1) political ideology, (2) economic system and level of development, (3) legal system, (4) media system, and (5) culture. These are grouped into three categories in a country: Infrastructure, media environment, and societal culture.

The political system directly influences the social structure and economic development. The social structure reflects the level of democratization and the value of public opinion. Therefore, the political context presents opportunities and challenges for PR within a society. The political system strongly impacts economic development, particularly in post-Soviet countries such as Mongolia. The more pluralistic a political system is, the more significant economic freedom and entrepreneurship.

Similarly, the media system depends on the political and business contexts. In developing countries, media are under pressure from politics and businesses. Too often, media ownership and control, defamation laws, disinformation, and liability limit journalists' ability to keep politics and businesses in check. Journalists in postcommunist countries perceive "the traditional Western watchdog role of journalism as the least important" (Kurambayev & Freedman, 2019, p. 11).

Media diffusion and media access are two other crucial factors for PR. Media diffusion is strongly influenced by illiteracy and poverty, and the media reach is "a fairly homogeneous, relatively small segment of the total population" (Sriramesh, 2003, p. 13). Media diffusion is media access, a public forum of competing public agendas and ideologies.

Culture is a factor that influences and is influenced by PR. GPRF defines two levels of culture, social culture and corporate culture. Social culture manifests through Hofstede's (2013) five dimensions of power distance, social mobility, collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. Corporate culture expresses companies' distinctive personalities in the same social culture. It also allows stakeholders to evaluate organizational performance and behavior.

This phenomenological research aims to explore the state of development of the PR industry in Mongolia. The scientific interest in it is motivated by the democratic and free-market development of Mongolia since the 19th century (Dear, 2014). Bumochir (2018) claimed that "socialism and capitalism were inevitable costs that Mongolia had to bear to achieve de facto independence and to prevent the domination of Russia and China" (p. 359).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mongolia moved from socialism to democracy and a free capitalist market. However, it was another strategic political decision to eliminate post-Soviet control and consolidate its independence (Bumochir, 2018) as the first decision had been to embrace socialism to avoid China's dominance. To stabilize its economy and attract Western investors, Mongolia created the Gold Programme in 1992. Thus, the mining industry has become a critical attraction for them. Both political decisions required proactive and strategic communication, which are vital characteristics of PR. Additionally, PR is endorsed as a democracy developer through its collaborative nature, which stimulates social capital and civic engagement (Hassan, Khan, & Meer, 2020; Zhang & Abitbol, 2016).

Literature Review

The existing scholarship studies PR in East Asia (China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea). However, Mongolian PR has remained unexplored. Existing scholarship on the PR industry focuses on changes in the global communication landscape, blending research-based theory with practice (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009). Curtin and Gaither (2007) provided a cultural-economic theoretical model of PR and a practice matrix of PR strategies and tactics employed in various political and cultural contexts. Russ and Falls (2005) studied successful PR techniques in significant markets worldwide. Tilson and Alozie (2004) researched PR in emerging democracies. Watson (2014) provided insight into the state and practices of countries in Asia. However, Mongolia is not present in any of those studies. Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and the top 11 Scopus and Web of Science indexed communication and PR journals produced limited results when searched for the following key phrases: Public relations in Mongolia, public relations AND Mongolia, and Mongolian PR.

Kolesnichenko (2022) was the first to sketch Mongolian PR. She stated that the competition between Mongolian political parties at the beginning of the 21st century motivated the emergence of PR. As a result, banks and mining, pharmaceutical, and telecommunication companies started using PR in the mid-2000s. The result is a saturated PR market with more than 50 communication agencies that offer a mix of marketing and advertising, PR and events management, social media marketing, copywriting, and media buying. Depending on the size of the organization, the average salary of a PR manager can range "from \$225 to \$761. In large businesses, one could make from \$2000 to \$2500" (Kolesnichenko, 2022, p. 32).

The Mongolian PR market is characterized as one in which everyone knows each other, and referrals play a vital role. Therefore, personal and professional connections provide undeniable advantages for PR success. Kolesnichenko (2022) outlined a distinctive feature of PR in Mongolia wherein an employee continues working on a project for their former employer even after they leave and develop themselves as bloggers or influencers. The Mongolian national mentality perceives partnership and collaborative work as more efficient than working under authority. Otgonzul Baradii, the general director of DASM Mongolia LLC, explained it as "the national trait of nomads: we don't like to obey each other. That is why it is possible to partner and collaborate effectively even when the person is not on the staff. And everyone agrees with it" (Kolesnichenko, 2022, p. 32).

Media in Mongolia

Mongolia is “having notable issues around press freedom” (Boldkhuyag et al., 2020, p. 7), such as media ownership, political influence, and a limited and dispersed traditional media market. For example, Nielsen (2009) concluded that the media in Mongolia is a hostage of the country’s political and business establishment and is prone to flexible ethics. As Nielsen (2009) stated, “the Mongolian media have neither lived up to the ideals of liberal media theory nor been driving forces in the ongoing democratization process” (p. 19). However, social media have become an effective means of reaching sparsely populated countries. Social media penetration in Mongolia is 68% (Kemp, 2021). Baasanjav (2020), for example, concluded that social media are affordable and have helped promote and achieve nongovernmental organizations’ (NGOs) communication, educational, and organizational goals. However, the pitfalls are sensationalism and information virality, which oversimplify severe social issues and raise barriers to generating a critical mass of supporters of change. Additionally, “profit-seeking enterprises on Facebook . . . are spreading misinformation and exploiting younger audiences” (Baasanjav, 2020, p. 236).

Social Media Marketing in Mongolia

Park and Kim (2018) stated that social media have played a vital role in organizational communication and decision-making in Mongolia. They have enabled the growth of relationships between organizations and their stakeholders. Social networking sites (SNSs) have allowed horizontal communication, which Mongolians find highly satisfactory. Consequently, the more frequently SNSs are used, the more they increase overall communication speed and effectiveness. Mongolia’s social media usage is above the global average. Of the active social media users in the country, 90% engage on Facebook, and only 2.2% use Twitter. Instagram is used by 18% of young Mongolians (Erdenebold, Kim, Rho, & Hwang, 2020). For example, Borker (2014) claimed that Facebook was the preferred SNS for Mongolian travel agencies, financial institutions, and trade companies. Service, travel, and industry organizations used Twitter most frequently to target foreign investors, tourists, and expats. Bakeries, producers, distributors, and beverage companies preferred YouTube for direct social media marketing (SMM) purposes and mining companies for indirect ones.

Gantulga, Sampil, and Davaatseren (2021) stated that e-commerce is key to economic survival, with heavy reliance on mineral export and weak diversification in a recession due to the COVID pandemic. Thus, “86% of businesses in the manufacturing and 76% of businesses in the trade and service sector experienced income losses since January 2022” (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022, p. 18). Additionally, Mongolians perceived online shopping as more convenient and beneficial than traditional shopping (Hsu & Bayarsaikhan, 2012). The mix of force majeure conditions, weak economic diversification, a switch to virtual environments, and customers’ preferences for online shopping has intensified market competition among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Mongolia.

Wu, Wu, Kan, and Bayarjargal (2017) stated that the content of video and picture ads highly motivates clicks as part of businesses’ SMM activities. Likewise, Moslehpour, Tumurbaatar, and Amri (2016) concluded that male and female Mongolian Facebook users are influenced differently by informativeness, entertainment, and credibility. Credibility is of greater importance to female Facebook users.

Advertising in Mongolia

Chen, Su, and Yen (2004) studied location-based advertising (LBA) in Mongolia. They investigated how the format of advertisement (static vs. animated), type of product (high vs. low involvement), privacy (low vs. high identity), and brand credibility (foreign vs. domestic brand) influence Mongolian mobile phone users' attitudes toward LBA. They also explored the connection between customers' attitudes toward LBA and their brand attitudes. The results showed that customers had positive attitudes toward LBA and the brands (local and foreign) that offered local service. However, foreign brands were held in higher esteem.

Kelly and associates (2014) investigated the volume and type of food-and-beverage advertising near schools in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, and Manila, The Philippines. The results showed that "the density of food advertising was twice as high in the area closest to schools compared with the area further from schools. Almost all food advertisements were for non-core/unhealthy foods/drinks" (Kelly et al., 2014, p. 280). The researchers concluded that clear policies were needed to limit the communication pressure on children about unhealthy foods and drinks.

Culture and Communication in Mongolia

Mongolia has unique cultural characteristics. Although Mongolian culture is masculine and individualistic, with uneven distribution of power, it demonstrates low uncertainty avoidance and is focused on the present (Purevdorj, Bolormaa, & Khashkhuu, 2020); it does not prevent free speech or the expression of opinions in the workplace and at home (Rarick et al., 2014). Stimulation and hedonism are vital cultural characteristics of Mongolians, as they "are more interested in enjoying their time and being free in their decisions" (Byambaa, 2015, p. 43). Loose social networks built on "kinship, classmates and co-alumni, co-workers, and *neg nutgiinhan*" (Manalsuren, Michalski, & Śliwa, 2018, p. 79) define Mongolians' supportive mindset and hospitality. *Neg nutgiinhan* (people from the same homeland) is a vital network of social ties that consists of people from the same birthplace, parents' place of origin, fellow students, or former colleagues (Mende, 2012).

However, in business, there is tension between old styles of management and new leadership styles on an organizational level. The former adheres to a socialist mindset, with strict rules and hierarchical bonding, creating a centralized rule culture. The value system of the hierarchical culture is "embedded in rules and objectives, structure, procedure, and in work culture, as well as in behavioral strategies" (Badarch, 2014, p. 209). On the other hand, the latter stimulates participation in decision-making and symmetrical communication.

Methodology

This phenomenological research explored the state of development of PR in Mongolia through the shared experiences of Mongolian PR experts. It approached them from a pragmatist worldview as this provided the flexibility required to study Mongolian PR (Frey, 2018). The study used inductive reasoning to interpret interviewees' experiences, which allowed the study of the phenomenon through codes, categories, and dominant themes, which naturally condensed from raw data (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005).

The research used an in-depth e-mail interview to collect data. Two reasons justified the choice of in-depth e-mail interviews. First, the Mongolian language was a challenge because the researchers lacked knowledge of it. The Russian language was an option. However, Kolesnichenko (2022) claimed that some 40+-year-old people would speak the Russian language but it was not their preference. Additionally, Russian is declining in importance in Mongolia (Goble, 2019). This determined the selection of English as the language of the interviews.

The second reason for e-mail interviews was the comfort of the interviewees in time, reflection on the answers, and language use. Therefore, an e-mail interview provided informants with time “to reflect over the questions asked and give them a better chance of owning their narratives” (Dahlin, 2021, p. 2). It also relieved them from speaking English face-to-face, knowing that they were recorded (Wilang & Singhasiri, 2017).

Interviewees

This research used a purposive sampling of PR experts employed in Mongolia’s private or public organizations or NGOs. Participants were filtered, selected, and approached via LinkedIn Premium. Selection criteria included: (1) Mongolian nationality, (2) current employment as a PR specialist in Mongolia, and (3) English-language proficiency. In total, 218 Mongolians working as PR specialists were located. However, only 132 indicated English-language skills in their LinkedIn profiles.

A deeper analysis of the level of English in posts further reduced the number of eligible Mongolian PR professionals to 84. All were approached, but only 25 expressed interest in participating in the study. Only 15 interviews were returned, of which 13 provided meaningful data. Two interviewees were removed because they answered less than 30% of the questions in one or two words. The Guest, Namey, and Chen (2020) approach was used to achieve thematic saturation to assess the base size, duration, and new information threshold. The base size was four interviews, and the run length was two. The new information threshold was 5% or lesser. As a result, the research reached thematic saturation with 13 interviews.

Table 1. Data Saturation.

Interview #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Total
New themes per interview	14	12	10	8	6	7	5	2	2	3	1	1	1	0	0	69
# Base themes	51					29%	14%	10%			4%		2%			

Profile of the Interviewees

Of the 13 interviewees, eight worked for private companies (one financial institution, one telecommunication company, three marketing/PR agencies, one mining company, one hotel, and one food-and-beverage company), two were employed by public organizations (local governments), and three worked for NGOs (two international NGOs—one large and one medium-sized) and one small environmental (a Mongolian NGO). Eight of the participants were women, and five were men. There was an equal distribution of early-career PR specialists (n = 6) with one to four years of work experience and mid-career (n = 6) PR experts with five to 10 years of work experience. One expert was highly experienced, with more than 11 years of experience. The

majority of the interviewees had completed their undergraduate studies in Mongolia. However, all had earned their master's degrees from Western universities (six in the United States, four in the United Kingdom, two in Canada, and one in Australia). The majority of the job responsibilities of the interviewees were media relations (n = 11), public affairs (n = 9), and reputation management (n = 8). Other responsibilities included issue management and employee relations. An interviewee's most common combination of responsibilities was reputation management, public affairs, and media relations. The participants' diverse job responsibilities provide a better understanding of PR in Mongolia than categories such as public affairs, media relations, and others. Moreover, PR specialists in transition countries are expected to do more than their job classification specifies (Meganck, Smith, & Guidry, 2020).

Instruments and Procedures

The researchers designed the interview in Google Forms and the interview questions together. The questions were reviewed by two Mongolian students with an upper-intermediate English-language level, who were studying at KIMEP University, and two Kazakh PR experts with a functional level of English. Three questions were difficult to understand and were edited. The interview consisted of 13 closed-ended questions and 16 open-ended ones. Ten of the open-ended questions functioned as control questions for 10 closed-ended ones. Three open-ended questions were independent. In addition, the researchers e-mailed six of the participants to clarify the interview questions.

The interview questions focused on the influence of politics, economy, media, and culture of the GPRF on the state of development of PR in Mongolia. The questions were grouped into the following categories:

- PR expertise, competencies for improvement, and level of professionalism;
- Comparison of the level of development of PR and advertising markets and the priority given to PR by the top management in an organization;
- Economic sectors using PR the most;
- Media relations and working patterns between PR experts and journalists;
- Mongolia-specific cultural values that are vital for successful PR practice.
- Politics' influence on PR practice;

The legal and activist aspects were not the focus of the study.

Once the responses to the interviews were collected, each researcher coded them and defined the themes separately. After that, both researchers met, compared, discussed, and unified their codes and themes.

Findings

Theme 1. PR in Mongolia—Developing, Demanded, and Dynamic

The most critical theme among interviewees was that the PR industry in Mongolia is rapidly developing. They saw the development as an outcome of governmental efforts to diversify the country's economy to ease over-reliance on nonrenewable natural resources. Furthermore, most interviewees

suggested that adequate policies communicated effectively would help Mongolia establish stronger control over the Dutch disease (migration of skilled professionals from other sectors into mining). The interviewees' views resonated with opinions that such control would allow economic diversification with the development of export-oriented industries (agriculture and manufacturing), services sectors (tourism and fintech; Locatelli, 2019), especially in SMEs in Mongolia (Doojav et al., 2020).

Therefore, most of the interviewees believed that PR play a crucial role in resolving complex interrelated political, economic, environmental, and social issues in Mongolia. These realities intensify the expectations of PR practice at a professional level. In addition, the interviewees saw the need for PR professionalism in the struggling major urban industrial centers such as Ulaanbaatar (the capital city) and Erdenet and Darkhan (cities that grew around large mines), which see internal migration from less-developed regions. All the interviewees indicated a tremendous gap regarding knowledge, skill, and culture between migrants from rural and urban communities. "There is a huge black mass in Mongolia. We need to educate them; therefore, we need to operate PR in a targeted way" (Interviewee 2). The black mass was described as the people living in *ger*-districts on the city's outskirts, some of which are far from downtown Ulaanbaatar. Most of these people are herders who face the inability to adapt to city life, where their lifeworld of freedom to control their lives collapses. As Fraser (2021) described:

The skills of herding life are fundamentally tied to people's notions of personhood and thus their ability to generate meaning . . . migrating to Ulaanbaatar is not simply a movement across space, a shift between two lifeworlds. Here it is the inapplicability—and perceived devaluation of [. . .] pre-existing skills which problematize [one's] ability to adapt. (p. 22)

The interviewees related this inapplicability to the differences in the quality and quantity of education and skilled work in rural areas. As a result, the need for more effective and proactive communication by the government and the business and civil sectors intensifies. For example, the labor market faces challenges with young people's practical and soft skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, and communication skills necessary for workplace success.

Therefore, the interviewees viewed PR as a responsible system to improve the quality of communication and understanding between diverse socioeconomic and political actors. Interviewees indicated that general and specialized PR training is needed to upgrade Mongolian PR practices to satisfy the communication needs of society. Such upgrades happen with good practices of Western and Russian PR professionals, especially on social media. Those professionals get involved directly or indirectly through advising. Interviewees shared that PR in Mongolia began to rely heavily on sociological research when planning and implementing communication campaigns. They said that Mongolian universities had started offering PR courses, and viewed this as a positive trend to help increase the number of young PR professionals.

Interviewees specified the areas of PR in which they needed to upgrade their professional skills, such as community relations (n = 8), education (n = 6), crisis communication (n = 5), government relations (n = 5), and managerial skills (n = 4). Corporate communications (n = 3) and SMM skills (n = 2) were the skills that needed the least improvement. The interviewees explained community relations' importance with

the decline in the Mongolian sense of community and increased skepticism toward public messages. Such mistrust was seen as creating a crisis-prone context, which affected PR specialists' ability to identify the most effective ways to build a functional collectivity united by common or compatible goals.

Due to the migration of rural residents to the urban area, the sense of community gradually declined. It has become quite difficult to accurately identify the target audience in a particular city area. The increase in herders and residents in urban areas, especially in Ulaanbaatar, caused an unprecedented need to increase the number of schools and kindergartens. Accessibility to basic education became a problem at a community level. This problem results in skepticism when a message is delivered to the target audience. (Interviewee 8)

Therefore, community relations skills and competencies are imperative for PR in Mongolia. Hallahan (2004) noted that a community is "the conceptual centerpiece for examining and practicing public relations" (p. 221).

The interviewees commented that, as a result, big business realized the potential of PR to humanize communication and build relationships based on a mutual understanding of needs and goals. As a result, "PR campaigns are more effective than advertising campaigns" (Interviewee 4). Hence, the demand for PR experts has changed people's perception and understanding of PR in Mongolia, increasing interest in the profession. Furthermore, "bigger companies have opened job positions for PR, or they have paid attention to PR activities" (Interviewee 13). This opening to the PR profession was due to the deep penetration of social media into the Mongolian social, political, and economic discourse. Markedly, social media in Mongolia have made both politics and business more active on SNSs.

The interviewees commented that communication on SNSs has brought together organizations and their stakeholders in a nearly nonstop dialogue overcoming temporal and physical boundaries. Thus, the connection between them strengthens and deepens. Mongolians' social connectedness is a vital cultural trait (Fraser, 2021). Thus, SNSs have also enabled communication among members of the broader public on public issues. "Mongolia had about 2.24M Facebook users [70% of the population] in 2019, when the total population was estimated at 3.2M people" (Interviewee 12). This new communication context has prompted public officials, in particular, to be more careful in their actions. "With access to all kinds of media, the Internet, TV, newspapers, and chats, public sentiment plays a better role in the decision-making process of politicians. In return, government officials are becoming more cautious in their acts" (Interviewee 8).

During the interviews, the participants shared that PR in Mongolia is closely related to working extensively with the media (including social networks) by creating content (news, articles, and interviews) that helps explain sustainable development policies and their impact on business and society. However, some interviewees expressed disappointment with the level of PR professionalism. "Unfortunately, PR specialists have taken a fundamentally flawed approach to PR practice. Paid news is common, and our media have a very narrow definition of what is news" (Interviewee 3). It adds to the misunderstanding of the PR profession as a cash-for-comment practice (Centre for Media Transition, 2020) and as producer of positive stories with a brand name, similar to advertising.

According to most interviewees, a downside of Mongolian PR was the unethical professional conduct of many PR specialists in the country. They attached this aspect to the current PR services market, which most interviewees described as a gray sector with under- or unqualified experts offering PR services. The professional PR standards that most interviewees mentioned as being followed in their daily work were integrity, precision, confidentiality, and the rule of law.

Various insights were provided into the interviewees' ethical behavior. An interviewee said that betrayal is blaming others for their own actions and not taking responsibility. Another interviewee explained practicing detachment from the company by "just following the company instructions. Not doing many things by myself. If I did more PR by myself, it would be my campaign" (Interviewee 5). A third interviewee reported that they were not used to following ethical rules, but "independence and honesty. Because of this, I used to fight with the boss" (Interviewee 9). Finally, only one interviewee mentioned they "followed the codes of conduct of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)" (Interviewee 3).

The working culture in the Mongolian PR sector reflects socially coherent professionals who operate according to well-understood rules, regulations, and procedures. Their tasks are highly regulated, and PR professionals complete them in relative isolation. However, the organizational environment is relatively stimulating, less competitive internally, and provides equal opportunities for participation.

Theme 2. Influencers in Mongolia's PR

The interviewees indicated the four GPRF systems that have the most influence on PR in Mongolia: (1) politics, (2) economics, (3) the media, and (4) culture.

Politics and PR in Mongolia

Politics, compared with economics, influences the development of PR in Mongolia more strongly. Seven of the 13 interviewees shared that the influence of politics on PR in Mongolia is powerful. On a scale from "1 to 10 points, I would say 7. The influence is great" (Interviewee 2). They said this influence manifests in the penetration of political power in big business and media. Filipov (2021) described it as circles of symbiotic relations between politics and dependent big business. It is even more difficult for the media because "behind every media company, such as TV, there is at least one politician who invests in them" (Interviewee 7). The dominant opinion of the interviewees was that such symbiosis and dependence have negative moral implications on the PR profession. Such dependencies are established through direct control by the owner or shareholder, public procurement, and donations. For example, an interviewee shared that tenders tend to be "won" by well-connected communication agencies, which affects the fair play and competitiveness of the PR market in Mongolia.

Economics and PR in Mongolia

Economic dynamics and the business environment in Mongolia influence the development of PR. Six interviewees hold this opinion. "Yes, it is one of the main influencing factors for developing PR"

(Interviewee 6). The main reason they provided was the intensified competition among SMEs, which according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020), constitute “97% of registered businesses in Mongolia . . . which are by far the dominant type of enterprise in non-mining sectors” (p. 15). They also coupled it with the lack of access to financial resources and Mongolian banks’ high-interest rates on loans. Thus, traditional advertising is a serious challenge for SMEs and PR, and social media provide affordable communication and marketing solutions.

The more experienced interviewees indicated that e-commerce was another key factor for expanding PR in Mongolia. They said that the COVID pandemic had pushed businesses to find an alternative selling environment to keep the business afloat, which led to a recent e-commerce boom in Mongolia (Gantulga et al., 2021). It happened despite the limited regulation of e-commerce in the country (Delger, Tseveenbayar, Namsrai, & Tsendsuren, 2020), and trust was at the heart of success in the emerging e-commerce of Mongolia. Therefore, PR interviewees saw trust as the building block of e-commerce from PR’s relationship- and reputation-building functions.

In contrast, five other interviewees commented that downturns in the national economy hardly negatively impacted the PR of larger companies. “Bigger companies can spend adequate budget for their PR activities” (Interviewee 13). Moreover, one interviewee explained the slight effects of economic downturns with the interconnectedness between politics and business by claiming that “in Mongolia, politics is business, and business is politics”(Interviewee 8). Therefore, as the interviewees explained, such businesses are publicly traded companies primarily in the mining, finance, telecommunications, trade, and construction sectors.

Most interviewees (n = 11) pointed out that the Mongolian financial sector uses PR most actively. The justifications those interviewees provided were connected to the high competition among the 12 private commercial banks for a few large depositors. Additionally, there is competition between nonbank financial institutions and commercial banks within the nonfinancial sector. This sector consists of “532 nonbank financial institutions, 249 savings and credit cooperatives” (Bank of Mongolia, 2020, p. 20). The second sector interviewees revealed to be an active source of PR users was the mining industry (n = 9). It faced internal and external challenges related to local community capacity building, environmental damage, and labor force migration from other industries. Telecommunications (n = 7), entertainment (n = 6), and the public sector (n = 5; local and national government) were also identified as industries where PR is actively used. PR is a new communication technology for transportation, the food industry, tourism, and higher education, which they are slowly implementing in their organizational (marketing-based) communication.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that the PR market in Mongolia is smaller than that of advertising. An interviewee compared it with a cottage industry—unprofessional and underdeveloped. Interviewees said there is a lack of understanding of PR on an organizational level. Big players, particularly private ones, see PR as a selling communication instrument. “The lack of knowledge of the PR profession, its understanding in organizations is low” (Interviewee 1). Seven interviewees commented on the limited priority that top management gives to PR compared with advertising or sales. However, for the remaining six interviewees, the top management considered PR as necessary for the company’s communication. Second, PR professionals are rare in Mongolia. Those working in the field have other educational backgrounds, which

interviewees find to lower the quality of PR work. "Professional PRs are rare in Mongolia. There is no high-quality program in our universities. For example, my major is business administration" (Interviewee 9).

Media and PR in Mongolia

The media landscape in Mongolia is highly saturated for a country with a 3.2 million population, with more than 130 active television stations, 100 newspapers, 98 news portals, 86 magazines, and 69 radio stations (Media Ownership Monitor, 2016). One interviewee said oversaturation is "good competition which brings broader experiences for the market participants as there are many competitors in the media market for producing media products" (Interviewee 1). However, most interviewees hardly saw any direct influence of media on PR development in Mongolia. One interviewee explained that the media became a new valuable asset "with the privatization of the economy, a gold rush started, also in the media market" (Interviewee 2). Experienced interviewees explicated it with the strong bond between Mongolian politicians and the media. "Parliament members tend to own a media company that promotes their political activities and legislation" (Interviewee 8). Although politics is the main driver of the development of PR in Mongolia, the media remain a vital enabler for PR activities. For example, an interviewee explained that Mongolian PR uses TV and talk shows to increase awareness of and develop the (public) image and reputation of a company or an individual.

Two interviewees revealed a growing discontent of PR specialists with the mainstream media. Most of the interviewees justified it with the prevailing perception that journalists have a narrow understanding of the news. In consequence, they confirmed, media relations are an essential strategy in the arsenal of PR in Mongolia influenced by social media despite limited budgets for media relations and high costs of media services coupled with unfair competition and economic instability.

Media relations, as a separate function of PR, divided the interviewees. Five saw media relations as necessary. "It is a crucial part of PR in our organization" (Interviewee 7). Media relations with mainstream media are essential when reaching out to Mongolians older than 35 years. Five other interviewees claimed that media relations are losing their importance. "Traditional media relations are becoming less important" (Interviewee 9). The diminishing importance of traditional media relations results from the deep penetration of social media and its higher value for communicators than mainstream media in Mongolia, interviewees explained. Social media are more valuable than traditional media relations because of their publicness. For example, "For generation Z, it is all about social media. Conventional media relations are for people aged 35+" (Interviewee 8). Therefore, most interviewees perceived social media to be more effective for business purposes. Although this may be true, an issue with social media was the erosion of trust. It is "increasingly important, but people trust social media less these days" (Interviewee 3).

Globally, effective and efficient media relations depend on the relationships PR experts establish and develop with editors and journalists (Iturregui-Mardaras, Gutiérrez-Cuesta, & Cantalapiedra-González, 2020; Lloyd & Toogood, 2015). For Mongolia, some interviewees perceived PR and journalism as the two sides of the same coin, with "PR being more sophisticated and complex than journalism" (Interviewee 4). Additionally, the more experienced PR specialists disliked some journalists' lack of professionalism with communications experts.

However, most interviewees described the professional relationships between Mongolian PR specialists and journalists as exclusively providing valuable information related to news. "We have a lot warmer relationships with journalists than our Western counterparts" (Interviewee 3). However, more experienced interviewees stated that PR-media relationships are a hybrid of valuable news information and personal connections, with the latter prevailing. Only one interviewee believed that professional relations between PR and the media in Mongolia were built exclusively on a personal level with gifts, lunches, free access to special events, and suchlike, with the expectation of positive or neutral coverage in return. The interviewee explained it as the "silver-lining between paid journalism and PR" (Interviewee 8), which raised issues regarding journalists' integrity and editorial independence. This was a common reason some interviewees provided for well-connected journalists or editors to migrate to PR and become PR managers.

Culture and PR in Mongolia

According to most interviewees, Mongolian culture plays an essential role in PR activities. Values such as honesty, respect for traditions, and positive public image are crucial to PR in Mongolia. Further, the Mongolian PR practice highly values competence, success, creativity, broad-mindedness, and responsibility. All of these strongly affect the connectedness between a communication campaign and its publics. For example, pride in the national identity can make or break a campaign. "If symbols of pride such as the flag, religion, family traditions, or Mongolian identity are presented negatively, the PR campaign will fail in Mongolia" (Interviewee 9).

Another feature of Mongolian culture is the implicit style of communication, which most interviewees described as expressing an opinion in an indirect manner where facial expressions and body language play a vital role in meaning-making. They summed it as comprehending the whole context of a situation to understand the meaning of a message. It aligns with Hall's (1976) description of communication within high-context cultures shared through indirect and simple but deeply meaningful messages.

Discussion

This research explored the state of local PR in Mongolia in the GPRF. The study is the first effort to explore Mongolian PR and provides valuable insight into the profession, which could be used as a stepping stone for further inquiries. First, PR in Mongolia are primarily influenced by politics and their interconnectedness with big business, which is in line with Nielsen's (2009) observation that "economic and political elites are, if not the same, then certainly operating in close cooperation with each other for mutual benefit" (p. 22).

PR was considered as an election technology or agitation propaganda (Bekbolatuly & Karaulova, 2019). It was hardly seen as a driver of business growth. Additionally, the direct political influence on PR in Mongolia could relate to the "technology of financing political parties through circles of firms" (Filipov, 2021, p. 115), both in business and the media. Mongolian politicians share ownership of businesses and private media. This results in "corruption as the biggest problem between politics, business, and the media in Mongolia" (Reporters Without Borders, 2016, para. 8).

Second, the national economy impinges on PR in Mongolia. The three sectors that actively use PR in their communication are finance, mining, and telecommunications. Financial organizations consolidate

considerable financial resources and provide e-commerce opportunities but compete in a small market. Similarly, telecommunication companies demonstrate little product differentiation and “focus on long-term ‘relationships,’ not short-term ‘profit’ or more ephemeral ‘image’” (Bowen, Moon, & Kim, 2018, p. 72). The severe ecological problems and crises Mongolia faces are at the center of mining companies’ PR, which contribute the most to Mongolia’s GDP. PR has proven to be an effective radar system for locating organizational issues and their crisis projections and impacts on corporate reputation (Coombs, 2018). Furthermore, industries such as mining directly impact the environment and human health; therefore, they are open to weak underlying trust (Griffin, 2014).

The media influence the development of PR. Despite the high penetration of social media—79% of unique social media users (2.6 million), with 99% of social media use occurring through mobile devices (Kemp, 2021)—mainstream media continue to play an important mediating role. The fake news shared on Facebook made it hard for the wider public to rely on SNS as a reliable source of information (Baasanjav, 2020; Castagna, 2017). Therefore, the media environment requires Mongolian PR specialists to be skilled in traditional media relations. PR experts and journalists have a warm relationship based on delivering valuable news information. While personal and professional relationships with journalists and editors are vital for effective media relations, PR professionals in Mongolia need to know about social media because it is the fastest-growing media segment. However, differences in usage are widening due to socioeconomic status, education, and cultural background. For example, people who migrate from the countryside to Ulaanbaatar and live on its outskirts demonstrate different communication behaviors, which affect their trust in social media information.

Culture in Mongolia is a crucial factor in communication campaigns. Communications experts are strongly advised to respect Mongolian traditions, beliefs, and religion in their communication actions. The PR profession in Mongolia is regulated with little internal competition; the profession is “undergoing transformations and struggling with implications deriving from the top-down management style inherited from the Soviet years” (Peterson & Erzikova, 2016, p. 197). Furthermore, although the organizational culture in Mongolia’s PR agencies or communications departments is socially coherent, employees work in relative isolation.

Conclusions

PR in Mongolia is a developing industry strongly influenced by the concentration of politics and business. Therefore, it raises practical and ethical concerns, particularly in media relations. However, the fast development of social media positively impacts PR because it creates a more transparent and competitive environment. The perception of PR as a social communication technology capable of bringing about organizational- and social-level change motivates businesses and NGOs to hire PR specialists in Mongolia. The main challenge is community relations because simple marketing campaigns provide limited results in this small but growing population.

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