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RECRUITING PROSPECTIVE UW STUDENTS IN VIETNAM

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Report: Recruiting Prospective UW Students in Vietnam

In the 20th century, the histories of Vietnam and the United States became interwoven. Decades of political and military conflicts led to the Vietnam War (1955–1975), a catalyst for cultural, communication, and legal issues unfolding to this day in both Communist Vietnam and democratic America. It would be imprudent to ignore these shared ties and experiences given opportunities they provide for establishing meaningful relationships between the Vietnamese people and organizations in the West. This report will attempt to provide an overview of Vietnam today, as well as the cultural and media environments contained therein, with an eye toward utilizing advertising and other types of communication to recruit prospective students from Vietnam on behalf of an institution of higher education in the United States (the University of Washington in Seattle).

Vietnam's country profile

Vietnam has a population of 100,000,000 citizens (nearly one-third that of the U.S., despite having much smaller total land area) with a 2020 median age of 32.5 years—a large market with young, potential consumers of Western products (O'Neill, 2021). Today, 40 years after the Vietnam War, the vast majority of the Vietnamese public has a positive opinion of the U.S. (76%), with the number growing to 89% among the highly educated (Devlin, 2015).

Political structure

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) rules over every aspect of Vietnamese society, having taken control over formerly democratic South Vietnam after the American withdrawal at the end of the Vietnam War (*Vietnam Summary*, 2021). The Hanoi-based government is overseen by a president, prime minister, secretary general, 14-member executive politburo, and a 500-seat unicameral national assembly known as the *Quoc-Hoi*.

Economic structure

The CPV introduced a market-based economy in 1986 that, although plagued by corruption, has over time led to economic growth, declining poverty amongst citizens (except for ethnic minorities), and a growing GDP per capita of $8,200 in 2020 ($798 billion GDP overall) from industries including tourism, agriculture (rice, vegetables, sugar, pork, fruit, and coffee), energy (mining, coal, and oil), construction (steel, cement, and glass), and manufacturing (*Vietnam Summary*, 2021). The native currency is the Vietnamese dong (VND), each worth roughly 0.000044 U.S. dollars as of February 2022 (*Vietnamese Dong to US Dollar Exchange Rate Chart*, 2022). Private ownership of media outlets is prohibited (M. Nguyen, 2018).

Members of Vietnamese society possess an open desire to continue adopting a more Western-style, capitalist economic system, seeing international trade as both a means of upward mobility (America has more than any other country contributed to Vietnam's economy, becoming its largest export market worth $35 billion annually, nearly a quarter of all Vietnamese goods) and a protective shield against China's growing nationalistic-based antagonism toward Vietnam in the South China Sea (Devlin, 2015). Vietnam has turned itself into a manufacturing hub, exporting broadcasting equipment, phones, circuits, shoes, and furniture (*Vietnam Summary*, 2021). Unemployment is just 2%. With GDP forecast to grow roughly seven percent each of the next five years, there is a large populace, with positive opinions of both the U.S. and international trade, whose younger members are looking to climb the social ladder, and who increasingly have the financial means to do so (O'Neill, 2021).

Mass media

A reflection of the prohibition on private ownership of media outlets, the CPV exercises control over all broadcast and print media, as well as citizens' internet access (M. Nguyen,

2018). Although initially operating a *Soviet/Communist (state-run)* media system in which the government produced all content, Vietnam has been inching toward an *Authoritarian* media system that, while implementing censorship control through the Ministry of Information and Communications, and the Propaganda and Education Commission (removing content deemed contrary to party dictates or contributing disharmony to society), incorporates content produced by private entities—reportedly as high as 90 percent in recent years (*2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Vietnam*, n.d.).

Vietnam Television (VTV) is the sole national TV network, with local stations throughout the country broadcasting a mix of programming from the parent feed as well as regional centers, incorporating messaging deemed beneficial by the CPV for citizens' intellectual and spiritual growth (*Functions, tasks and organizational structure of Vietnam Television Station*, 2018). The Voice of Vietnam (VOV) is the CPV's national radio network, with several channels utilized across FM, AM, and shortwave (*Vietnam Communications*, 2018). On average, Vietnamese citizens spend two hours and 40 minutes every day watching television (broadcast and streaming combined), as well as 41 minutes listening to broadcast radio, 44 minutes to podcasts, and 69 minutes to music streaming services (*Digital 2021: Viet Nam*, 2021). Vietnamese organizations incorporate foreign platforms into their content's distribution, including YouTube and Spotify (*Hỏa Lò Prison Launches Exclusive Radio Channel on Spotify to Lure Younger Audience*, 2021; *VN Feature Films Screened Free on YouTube*, 2021). The websites of foreign radio stations such as Radio Free Asia, Voice of America, and BBC Vietnam have at times been deemed "politically or culturally inappropriate" and blocked within Vietnam (*Vietnam Human Rights Report for 2020*, 2022).

In 2021, Vietnam had an estimated 68,720,000 internet users, the 12th highest tally of all countries in the world (*Country Comparisons: Internet Users*, 2021). On average, a Vietnamese person spends nearly seven hours online every day across all their devices (*Digital 2021: Viet Nam*, 2021). Many have found ways around the government's curated programming and internet censorship by using VPNs (virtual private network connections) and home satellite equipment to access foreign content, though being caught doing so can lead to fines, detainment, and even arrest (*Vietnam Communications*, 2018). There is opportunity here for organizations willing to pay. For example, the VOV radio network regularly announces its "partnership" with various businesses. It is a "public secret" that some Vietnamese media relies upon businesses for funding (Nguyen-Thu, 2018). Potential routes include sponsorship or public relation activities (e.g., awards for radio listeners).

The primary newspaper of the CPV is *Nhân Dân*, translated into English as the *People's Daily* or *People*. The government has limited the number of newspapers and magazines allowed in each city or region, shutting down publications, forcing others to merge, harassing journalists who advocate for greater freedom of the press, and imposing fines on journalists and publications that publish what party officials determine to be misinformation or fail to cite their sources of information (*2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Vietnam*, n.d.). Additional major newspapers include *Hanoi Times*, *Tuổi Trẻ* (Ho Chi Minh City), *Saigon Times*, and *Lao Động* (*Labour*). On average, Vietnamese citizens spend one hour and 57 minutes every day reading print publications, physically and online (*Digital 2021: Viet Nam*, 2021).

As a means of content delivery, mobile phones dominate. Less than four landline phones are used per 100 Vietnamese citizens. And yet, 143 mobile phones are used per 100 people (*Country Comparisons: Internet Users*, 2021).

Infrastructure

Despite sustained investment (as compared to GDP) in recent years, Vietnam's transportation and energy sectors are the country's weakest in terms of infrastructure, with increasing power blackouts (due in part to reliance on diminishing hydro-electric capabilities), traffic jams, and aging roadwork (X. T. Nguyen & Dapice, 2015). Although the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic slowed the expansion of 4G and 5G cellular service, data centers are being built in Ho Chi Minh City, Amazon Web Services is launching a new "AWS Local Zone" in Hanoi, cross-country fiber-optic cable is being laid, and microwave relays are being constructed to bolster telecommunications infrastructure. (*Amazon Web Services to Set up Local Zone in Hà Nội*, 2022; *Vietnam Communications*, 2018).

Legal structure

There is no judiciary independent from the ruling Communist party (*On the Upswing: Vietnam's Political Structure Explained*, 2020). Courts are subordinate to the legislature and legal decisions reflect laws as already passed by the party-controlled national assembly (*A Look at Vietnam's Legal System*, n.d.). Government ministries, party officials, armed forces, and the police enforce all laws, purportedly with the goal of maintaining societal order and harmony.

For example, to quell growing discord amongst the Vietnamese citizenry in 2018, the government passed that year's Cybersecurity Law. While mass media had ignored protests breaking out across the country in response to pending legislation that would allow 99-year leases within Vietnamese sovereign territory to be signed by Chinese investors—an idea anathema to many—coverage expanded on social media, aided by Facebook's ability to livestream video from the protests, chipping away at governmental control of the narrative (Nguyen-Thu, 2018). The Cybersecurity Law sought to reassert the government's control of

what citizens could say and do online. The law required foreign tech firms such as Facebook and Google to do the following: open offices within the country, turn over to the government Vietnamese users' data including personal information and posts, allow party officials to censor posts, and execute content takedown requests within one day of submission (M. Nguyen, 2018).

Another example of legal enforcement: restrictions exist for billboards in various Vietnamese cities. In Hanoi, for example, city regulations require that Vietnamese text appear larger than any other language, that foreign languages be translated into Vietnamese, and that Vietnamese text appear on top. Violations incur fines and sign removal (*Many Hanoi Billboards Violate Law*, 2016).

Social structure

With an estimated 102.8 million citizens in July 2021 (the 15th largest country total globally and one of the densest with 311 citizens per square kilometer), Communist Vietnam has an official language (Vietnamese) but no official national religion—in fact, 86 percent of citizens refrain from even subscribing to one (Statista Research Department, 2022c; *Vietnam Summary*, 2021). The three largest faiths are Catholicism (6.1%), Buddhism (5.8%), and Protestantism (1%). The CIA Factbook further reaffirms that Vietnamese society, growing as estimated 1% annually, is very homogenous: 85.3% of the population belongs to the Kinh (Viet) ethnic group, with additional groups being Tay (1.9%), Thai (1.9%), Muong (1.5%), Khmer (1.4%), Mong (1.4%), Nung (1.1%), other (5.5%). Life expectancy has increased from approximately 50 years in 1950 to 76 today (Roser et al., 2019). Roughly 114 Vietnamese babies are assigned male at birth for every 100 assigned female, with a fertility rate of 2.11 babies born per child-bearing adult (Statista Research Department, 2022a). Today, the median age of the Vietnamese population is 32.5 years (Statista Research Department, 2022b).

Vietnam's cultural profile

Consumers make evaluations of products and brands every day based upon ingrained values, constructs that the consumers may not know they possess after a lifetime of conditioning. Outward expression of values can be seen through rituals, "heroes," and symbols (de Mooij, 2022, p. 84). Determining what those root values are—as measured broadly across a nation or culture—can aide marketers and communicators in connecting with and ideally persuading behavioral change (e.g., making a purchase) from regional audiences (de Mooij, 2022, p. 67-68). For my portfolio project, I am looking at the communications options available to the University of Washington (Seattle) when recruiting students currently living Vietnam. To build a strategy, Vietnam's various cultural measurements must be considered, and then compared with those of the United States.

Hofstede's dimension scores

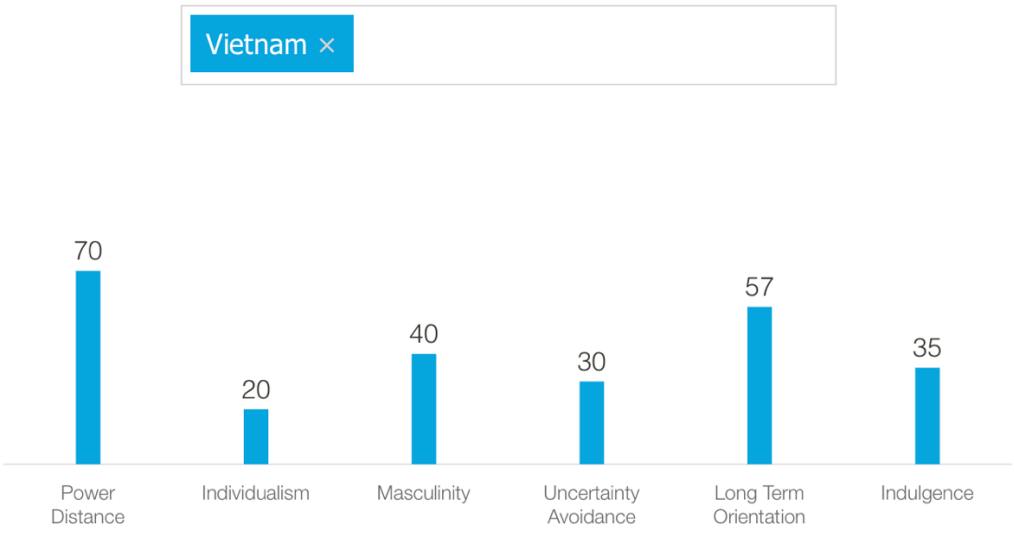
Dutch anthropologist Geert Hofstede created and over time expanded a system into which people's values can be measured at the cultural (i.e., national) level. Individual citizens' values may differ—especially the more heterogenous a population is—but broad cultural insights allow for international comparison. Hofstede's now-six dimensions are distinct statistically and can appear together in any combination, titled: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence (Hofstede, 2011). Vietnam's cultural measurements according to Hofstede can be found in Figure 1.

Power distance

Inequality of power exists between humans, more so in some cultures than others. Hofstede's power distance dimension shows how a given society's less powerful members accept or expect that power is distributed unequally. Hofstede (2011, p. 9) wrote, "It suggests

Figure 1

Vietnam's Hofstede Cultural Measurement Scores



that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders." Vietnam appears on the higher end of the power distance scale with a score of 70. Higher scores correlate to people (again, broadly) increasingly believing unequal access to power is an expected fact of life, not necessarily to be questioned. Given the lack of questioning, corruption can both occur and be covered up more frequently. Hierarchy, obedience, respect, and centralization dominate life. "Subordinates expect to be told what to do and the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat" (*Country Comparison Vietnam*, n.d.; Hofstede, 2011, p. 9-10).

Individualism

How individuals fit into groups of other people varies from culture to culture, including their obligations to one another. This spectrum is measured in Hofstede's individualism dimension (Hofstede, 2011, p. 11). Vietnam appears on the lower end of the individualism scale with a score of 20. Lower scores correlate to pronounced collectivism, societies in which people tend to belong to groups bigger than just themselves or immediate family—providing care,

sharing responsibilities, and showing loyalty. People seek to belong, maintain harmony, and not feel shame by offending others. Decisions are often determined by the group. People are aware of and increasingly oppose those outside their group(s). The purpose of education is to master skills and tasks, as opposed to pursuing academic inquiry for enjoyment (*Country Comparison Vietnam*, n.d.; Hofstede, 2011, p. 11).

Masculinity

Perhaps better named assertive/caring as opposed to masculine/feminine, Hofstede's "masculinity" dimension assigns gender to roles, behaviors, and beliefs (e.g., it is "masculine" to be competitive and "feminine" to be nurturing), and then measures how different cultures fit into his paradigm (Hofstede, 2011, p. 12). At 40, Vietnam has a score trending toward "feminine." Women tend to occupy positions of power both in politics and households. They deal with both facts and emotions, just as men tend to do. Family life is important. Boys and girls are allowed to cry. Fighting is discouraged. According to Hofstede Insights, such a score also correlates to the following:

> The focus is on "working in order to live", managers strive for consensus, people value equality, solidarity and quality in their working lives. Conflicts are resolved by compromise and negotiation. Incentives such as free time and flexibility are favoured. Focus is on well-being, status is not shown. An effective manager is a supportive one, and decision making is achieved through involvement (*Country Comparison Vietnam*, n.d.; Hofstede, 2011, p. 12).

Uncertainty avoidance

Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance dimension shows how comfortable (broadly) members in a culture are when dealing with ambiguity and unstructured situations. Hofstede (2011, p. 10)

wrote that those uncomfortable with such novel and new experiences try to avoid them "by strict behavioral codes, laws and rules, disapproval of deviant opinions, and a belief in absolute Truth; 'there can only be one Truth and we have it.'" Vietnam appears on the lower end of the uncertainty avoidance scale with a score of 30. Lower scores correlate to cultures more willing and able to accept ambiguity in their lives, with less rules in place to squash the "new." People dislike rules and prefer to abandon unnecessary ones. More deviance from the norm is allowed ("what is different is curious," not dangerous). Relativism and empiricism rule in philosophy and science. Teachers are allowed to say, "I don't know." Schedules are flexible. Punctuality can be lacking. Life is less stressful and anxiety-inducing (*Country Comparison Vietnam*, n.d.; Hofstede, 2011, p. 10).

Long-term orientation

Hofstede's long-term orientation dimension is a difficult one to summarize because it touches upon many seemingly disparate topics. De Mooij (2022, p. 130-131) wrote that a short-term orientation measures "values of national pride, tradition, low thrift, self-esteem, self-enhancement, religion, magnanimity, and generosity." Broadly, the people in these cultures tend to be religious, harboring a belief that their problems will be solved by a God. They are also greater users of oral communication, relying upon friends, family, and television to obtain information. Given their interest in self-enhancement, Facebook has seen heightened utilization.

Vietnam lands atop the mid-section of the long-term orientation scale with a score of 57. Higher scores correlate to a culture's more long-term orientation. De Mooij (2022, p. 130-131) wrote that these include "longer-term thinking, thrift, perseverance, and pragmatism." Instead of expecting a God to solve their problems, people are more self-reliant. People use written communication more than oral, displaying higher literacy rates. In addition, Hofstede (2011, p.

15) wrote that important events are believed to occur in the future as opposed to the present. Adaptability is prominent, whether it is a person navigating their environment, making determinations of good vs. evil, evaluating the perpetuation of traditions, or determining truths (*Country Comparison Vietnam*, n.d.). Tasks guide family life and young people see failure as a lack of effort. Thrift and saving money for the future are important goals.

Indulgence

Hofstede's indulgence dimension looks at a culture's restraint toward pursuing happiness. The higher-scoring, indulgent cultures are societies that allow "relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun" (Hofstede, 2011, p. 15). Vietnam tends toward restraint with a score of 35. Such lower-scoring countries control "gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms." These are societies of "less": fewer happy people, less control over lives, less freedom of speech, less leisure, a diminished ability to remember happy emotions, lower birthrates within educated populaces, fewer people taking part in sports, and fewer obese people.

Additional cultural metrics

Cultural markers can be found beyond Hofstede's six dimensions. These include how information is transmitted, time is viewed, and nature is treated.

High-context communication

As is common with many East and Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam is a high-context communication culture. Messaging requires the audience to decode it for meaning. Despite little being explicit, well-programmed audiences can quickly and efficiently do so. To outsiders, these messages may be inaccessible. De Mooij (2022, p. 113) wrote, "To the observer, an unknown high-context culture can be completely mystifying, because symbols that are not known… play

such an important role." This contrasts with countries like the United States in which a more direct, low-context communication style exists. In low-context cultures, information transfer does not occur as rapidly because ideas must be explicitly verbalized with less of a reliance upon symbols, signs, and heroes. Communication is direct and unambiguous. Appeals are made directly to an audience.

Attitude toward time

Vietnamese perceptions of time and the importance of patience are heavily influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism, with people generally focusing on extended periods stretching into the past (de Mooij, 2022, p. 115-116). Of importance to outside organizations selling expensive products or experiences (e.g., a college education abroad) with important deadlines is that, for the Vietnamese, "rushing personal or professional decisions or activities is deemed unwise and likely to spell disaster" (Sykes, 2022b). An opportunity exists for Western cultures, however, who tend to focus on the future. Sykes further wrote that, as Vietnam's economy has grown rapidly, younger entrepreneurs share a future-focused mindset, seeing time as a valuable resource to be used for self-advancement and making money.

Some cultures are monochronic in nature, focusing on time as a commodity that requires attention to organization and schedules, as well as completing one thing after another in sequence. As with many Asian countries, Vietnam trends more polychronic. Its people view time with more flexibility, taking on multiple tasks at once. Their work and personal lives bleed into one another. De Mooij (2022, p. 116) wrote, "Time is more like a vast, never-ending ocean, extending in every direction." However, unlike many Latin American and Southern European polychronic countries, the Vietnamese place an emphasis on punctuality. Sykes (2022) wrote, "Punctuality is the vital ingredient for harmonious relationships, preserving 'face,' and

progressing in both life and business. Meeting deadlines and appearing at agreed times earns… the most important currency known to the Vietnamese: respect."

Relationship with nature

Living in harmony with nature is a pervasive desire across Asian cultures. Unlike in the U.S., nature is not to be controlled. Humans, nature, and even the supernatural exist as extensions of one another (de Mooij, 2022). For the Vietnamese, such beliefs can come from Confucian and Taoist philosophies, as well as foreign influences (*Vietnam Superstitions and Folklore*, 2022). Stunning vistas of green Vietnamese countryside and blue-green oceanside bays can possibly explain the populace's natural reverence. However, this feeling has been especially strained in recent decades given rapid industrial and economic development. Urban pollution has been growing. And environmental problems such as destruction of natural habitats are of increasing concern to citizens (Pham & Rambo, 2003).

Dimensions and metrics of note from a Western perspective

Tension exists between several of Vietnam's scores. The country's mid-range score for long-term orientation (57) would indicate believing in one's own control over their circumstances as opposed to leaving it up to a God, however Vietnam's lower indulgence score (35) would suggest a pervasive feeling of helplessness. That indulgence score would also suggest broad unhappiness and an inability to remember positive emotions, however the low uncertainty avoidance score (30) would suggest a happier populace that experiences less stress and anxiety. The indulgence score would suggest a greater number of police officers, however the uncertainty avoidance measure would suggest a broad, cultural dislike for rule following. The low uncertainty avoidance score would also suggest a comfort with ambiguity yet, as a high-context culture, that very state of being is avoided in communication.

Vietnam's communication profile

Not all Asian countries (Southeast, East, and South) are broadly uniform in their communication patterns and preferences. While Vietnamese society is collectivistic with scores trending toward "feminine" and lower uncertainty avoidance on Hofstede's cultural measures, fellow collectivistic Japan's society instead trends extremely high in "masculine" and uncertainty avoidance scores. Collectivistic China scores 30 points higher than Vietnam in long-term orientation, and India scores nearly 30 points higher than Vietnam in individualism. Hofstede confirmed such variety was possible again because, even though some correlations may appear, each cultural dimension is statistically unique (2011, p. 8). Vietnam's particularities can be broken down in the following ways.

Verbal communication

Vietnamese people place importance on "face" (one's public dignity and respect) and through their verbal contextual style—correlating to their higher power distance and lower individualism Hofstede scores—have an intricate system of addressing one another based upon both the type and strength of relationships between speakers, including different words for siblings based upon the order of birth, and altered pronouns depending upon age, sex, and social status (de Mooij, 2022, p. 280; Sykes, 2022a). Ishii's model of Asian interpersonal communication describes much construction of meaning occurring, including not only manifestations of respect (e.g., not looking someone directly in the eye for too long while speaking) but also an establishment of common experience, a lack of speaker dominance, and an internal decoding of in-direct messages (de Mooij, 2022, p. 274). Furthermore, de Mooij writes that this all happens in multiple directions, with group beliefs and statuses considered and silence incorporated—itself a form of speech, guided by Buddhist and Taoist emphases on tranquility.

Vietnam has an upper mid-range, long-term orientation score. De Mooij (2022, p. 130-131) wrote that such a score correlates with a society's preference for written communication (with higher literacy rates), as opposed to oral. Given Vietnam's high-context communication style, indirect messaging, and preference for written communication, its people are again well-programmed to receive and decode text rich with symbols, signs, and heroes. Languages utilized in Vietnam include Vietnamese, French, English, Mandarin, Hmong, Khmer, Northern Dong, Tày, Cham, Nùng, and Muong.

Correctly showing diacritical marks on Vietnamese words is paramount as typos or oversights can easily change the meaning of words. (To Westerners who cannot speak tonal languages, they can be mystifying.) Just the closeness in spelling to offensive or vulgar terms can be enough to get government officials ordering content removal (*Coca-Cola Removes Slogan Deemed "Vulgar" by Culture Department*, 2019). The written language bearing those marks emerged in a different form nearly 2,000 years ago, primarily as Chinese characters, with the switch to today's mapping of sounds to the Latin alphabet (the *quốc ngữ* system utilizing diacritical marks to represent different vowel tones) was not made until 1910 (McGraw, 2022). Unlike how the Chinese Pinyin or Japanese Romaji romanization systems simply complement their languages' pictographic character sets, Vietnamese only uses Latin letters.

Nonverbal communication

Seeking to maintain harmony and show respect for elders and authority figures, Vietnamese people tend to avoid all of the following: looking someone directly in the eye for long periods (especially if they are of different statuses in age or professionally), firmly shaking hands, and/or smiling broadly (de Mooij, 2022, p. 274; *Vietnam Non-Verbal Communication*, n.d.). They tend to smile demurely to convey agreement, embarrassment, or apology. They avoid

waving when greeting and touching someone on the head or shoulder (Sykes, 2022a). Minor offense can be felt if any of these preferences are ignored. Winking can be considered indecent when directed at someone of the opposite sex (*Vietnamese Non-Verbal Communication*, n.d.). Given higher power distance and lower uncertainty avoidance scores, Vietnamese people can be expected to exhibit a *group-implicit* style of communication that is succinct in message delivery and requires individuals to read each other's minds, a skill they begin practicing in childhood (de Mooij, 2022, p. 281).

Visual communication

Given that Vietnamese culture is collectivistic and high-context, symbols, signs, and heroes from Vietnamese culture connect with audiences better than direct appeals in physical advertisements' copy or from a narrator/spokesperson in a video or radio spot (de Mooij, 2022, p. 288-290). Important symbols in Vietnamese culture include the mythical Chim Lac bird, the lotus flower, and yellow stars (*Flag Details*, 2022; *National Flower*, 2022; Kalmusky, 2018). Elements and concepts likely to connect with Vietnamese audience members would be logos, benefits to one's in-group, practical value, history, tradition, wisdom, expertise, leaders, and authority (Marcus & Gould, 2000).

Given a lower uncertainty avoidance score, it is expected that Vietnamese people would connect better with websites focused on concepts (not tasks), featuring large, aesthetically pleasing colors, typography, sounds, and imagery of authority figures and nature (Marcus & Gould, 2000). Furthermore, although navigation redundancies should be avoided, people in such cultures do not mind having less control over where web links may take them as they venture away from their original location, readily engaging with a site filled with maximum content and choices, and enjoying their ability to wander. As the majority of Vietnamese citizens access the

internet through mobile devices (*Country Comparisons: Internet Users*, 2021), efforts should be made to ensure visuals elements are able to load in a mobile-ready format: space allowances should be incorporated so that links are easy to tap with one's finger on a variety of screen sizes; text and documents should be easy to read on smaller screens; and, versions of image, audio, and video files that are called from the server(s) should be small enough in file size to load on consumer's phones despite slow network speeds or inconsistent access to cellular or wi-fi signals.

Media communication

When advertising crosses national borders, it can lose a shared cultural understanding between message producers and receivers. Audiences may not have the ability to recognize cultural values and understand the intent of an advertisement, making it exceptionally difficult for message producers to anticipate audience responses and effects if any on purchasing behavior (de Mooij, 2022, p. 287). However, cultural metrics provide some insight into what advertising appeals (the content of ads) and executional styles (the delivery) may best connect with a targeted audience. Looking at high-context Vietnam's various communication preferences—and contrasting them with those of the low-context United States—sheds light on possible adaptations required for U.S. organizations to connect with the typical Vietnamese consumer (de Mooij, 2022, p. 269).

Advertising appeals (content)

Vietnam is a high-context, literate, collectivist culture whose citizens broadly employ an indirect communication style. Because of an upper-mid-range, long-term orientation score, de Mooij (2022, p. 290-291) wrote that Vietnamese audiences may connect more strongly with "low argumentation, metaphors, magic, symbolism, aesthetics, and wordplay." (That last item

may be dangerous territory for those who are not native Vietnamese speakers.) Ads should rely more upon visuals than text or verbalization. In fact, high-context consumers may seek meaning in simple visuals that was never intended by the producer. (The audience *expected* there to be more.) The Vietnamese flag colors of red and yellow represent tradition, loyalty, and collective success, and they should feature in print and video collateral. Visuals and symbols are also important as a representation of corporate identity. Vietnamese audiences can be expected to connect with subdued, harmonious messaging that supports group norms and saving "face." Celebrities can be seen alongside the product, but not serving as a spokesperson speaking directly to the audience. Drama, metaphor, and songs are popular. For East and Southeast Asian cultures, communicators can also be mindful of the Buddhist mass communication model components: theme glorification, main idea explanation, allegory, karma and truthfulness, and peace-of-mind summary.

Given a higher power distance score, Vietnamese audiences broadly connect with the reaffirmations of obedience and respecting elders and those in power. On the flipside, corruption can be prevalent throughout society and should be anticipated by any American organization, which must then decide how to adapt given its own ethical frameworks (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999; Hofstede, 2011; Planken, 2013). With Vietnamese culture's lower indulgence score, an institution of higher education's appeal for prospective students in Vietnam should focus less (if at all) on the thrill of one's self-enhancement for their own benefit nor their possibly exciting, personal adventures abroad. Reflective of an upper-mid-range, long-term orientation score, a serious, task-oriented education that can benefit one's family and extended clan, whether immediate or as part of better days lying in the future, should be shown. American higher education party culture should not.

Building relationships is key to successful communications in a collectivistic society, even if the end goal is selling a product or service. In Communist Vietnam, it behooves foreign organizations to also develop good relationships with government officials to navigate regulations and ideally lessen the blow of possible future punitive measures. For example, when the taglines for a recent Coca-cola campaign were deemed vulgar by government censors, the beverage company was allowed to work with party officials to adjust the content as opposed to the product or corporation being banned from the market (*Coca-Cola Removes Slogan Deemed "Vulgar" by Culture Department*, 2019).

Collectivistic audiences do not react well to information-dense product pitches that argue why a consumer should take a certain action. Feelings take precedent over the product. Given a lower individualism score, Vietnamese people typically would not be active seekers of information—instead, they glean information through their relationships, including with family, fellow discussion board users, and, if deemed trustworthy, corporations. Focusing on product details in an ad as opposed to positive emotions or a good mental place of being are more likely to fail at resonating with audiences. And the more audience members like an ad, the higher the likelihood they will purchase the product incorporated into it (de Mooij, 2022, p. 295).

Execution styles

Foreign organizations must understand Vietnam's culture and be respectful of it in order to connect with Vietnamese audiences. More effective campaigns may be borne out of hiring native Vietnamese communicators in Vietnam ("boots on the ground") with mastery over the language, a deep societal appreciation, and an ability to build relationships with CPV officials. De Mooij (2022, p. 298) wrote that collectivistic Asian cultures may be advertised to most effectively by doing the following: "make friends with the target audience… prove that you

understand their feelings… [and] show that you are nice." Consumers trustful of and familiar with an organization/brand will then possibly make a purchase, only after which they will discover the product's quality or benefits. (The "feel-do-learn" consumer behavioral model.) With a lower uncertainty avoidance score, Vietnamese culture is more accepting of newer technologies and online platforms. Given its lower "masculinity" Hofstede score, most popular in Vietnamese culture in terms of higher education websites are those crafted with softer, more people-oriented appeals. Assertiveness in execution—talking directly at audience members as individuals whose own self-empowerment is supposedly of importance—is off-putting.

For example, a Western organization could become a featured business partner on Voice of Vietnam (VOV) national radio network programs by either paying sponsorship money outright or providing financial support in other ways such as investing in community initiatives or prizes for program listeners. Take advantage of the trust listeners feel toward VOV. If appearing on air (ensure the person is a native Vietnamese speaker, ideally with a more widely understood northern accent), refrain from talking about the product or service, at least in initial broadcasts. Instead, provide an experience. Plant positive thoughts and emotions into listener's minds. Remain humble. Be nice. Extoll the Vietnamese virtues of family, loyalty, and collective harmony. Build a relationship with the audience. Express gratitude for their existence as listeners. Over time, if they feel happy and trusting when hearing an organization's representative(s) talk, or when the VOV personalities talk about their "business partner," listeners would be more likely to then engage with their extended groups about the product or organization and potentially make a purchase. Never put the VOV personalities in the position of losing "face" because of a connection to the organization.

Another possible execution route: register with the CPV's Ministry of Information and Communication, partner with a Vietnamese educational ministry department, and launch a website to facilitate communication between consumers regarding opportunities in higher education abroad. (Site member data must be housed on servers within Vietnam and made readily available to government officials upon request. Party officials must have access to censor posts contrary to CPV regulations. And the organization must be ready to remove posts within one day of government requests to do so.) Some trained, native-speaking bloggers can be employed to help start conversations including how this important investment can bring greater happiness and harmony to one's in-group, but the most essential element would be discussion boards that are aesthetically pleasing, easy-to-use, reflective of Vietnamese symbolism, and able to load quickly on mobile devices regardless of screen size and network speed. Allow site visitors to explore and ask questions. (If good relations have been established with party officials, government censors may help ensure that nothing vulgar, salacious, or disruptive to community harmony appears and/or remains visible on the site.) In the past, a recommendation might have been made to incorporate Facebook's Connect login into the discussion board to facilitate easy onboarding, or to simply have audience members engage within a Facebook group. The risk is that an organization is not only trying to navigate governmental regulations but also to anticipate and survive the operating whims of Facebook. Fortunes have been made and destroyed because of platform changes made with little forewarning by the American social media giant.

Finally, given an eye toward the University of Washington, the communication team could lead the charge on establishing strengthened, mutually beneficial relationships with higher education institutions in Vietnam. If UW academic and registrar staff are overwhelmed and

unable to coordinate curricular efforts, offer to learn what materials and information they need and then get it to them. For example, academic credit for course equivalencies could rely upon sample syllabi being shared between the universities and translated between languages. Messaging may need to be tailored for Vietnamese education counterparts to explain why this is necessary, how these documents will be used, and what is the collective benefit. Also, time is required to track down and organize all these materials, as well as initiate required paperwork. Coca-cola's communication team famously stepped in to help manage relationships with Egypt in 1951 when boycotts were threatened over perceived religious disrespect in the product packaging and promotional materials. (A conspiracy theory arose among the Egyptian populace that "No Mohammed no Mecca" could be seen in Arabic when holding the Coca-cola logo up to a mirror.) UW's communication team, too, can step in to help lead relationship building efforts, in this case with Vietnamese institutions (and, as always, government officials).

Conclusion

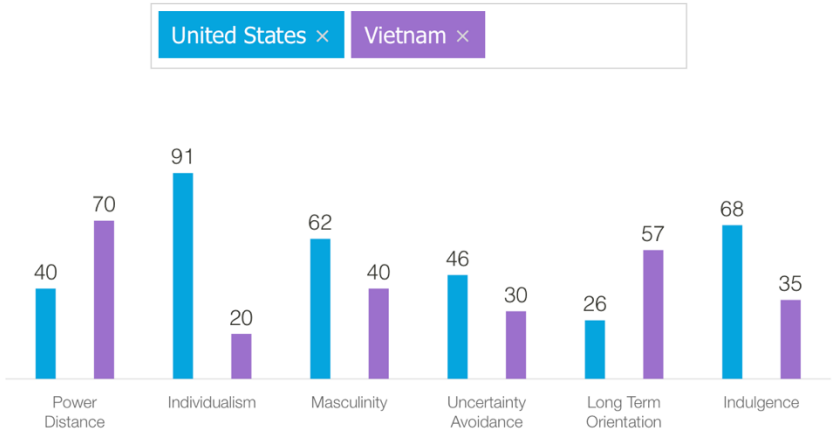
Not too far in the past, Vietnamese people lived under 100 years of French colonial rule and before that over 1,000 years under the peoples of modern-day China. When a 20-year war broke out in the 20th century over the Western ideal of democratic rule in Vietnam, the northern Communist regime won, ensuring continued authoritarian rule. All media activity occurs within the shadow of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Good relations with the CPV may be critical for foreign organizations attempting to navigate Vietnamese regulations and laws, especially in regards to media placement. During recent decades, the CPV has maintained control over the only national television and radio networks and has begun tightening a formerly looser grip on print publications. Social media increasingly disrupted government officials' ability to control flows of information *en masse*, leading to legislation restricting online activity.

Citizens have utilized satellite equipment and virtual private networks (VPNs) to access content from beyond Vietnam's borders, although punitive measures have been taken against those found to do so. Companies believed to be encouraging such behavior risk losing access to this market. Foreign messaging running counter to party beliefs and priorities will be censored.

Vietnam has a high-context communication style and the United States low-context. Vietnam is a more homogenous society focused on in-groups while the U.S. is heterogenous and individualistic. Several Hofstede score comparisons have differences greater than 30 points: power distance (40/70), individualism (20/91), long-term orientation (26/57), and indulgence (35/68). (For a visual comparison, see Figure 2.)

Figure 2

Hofstede Cultural Measurement Scores for Vietnam and the United States



American organizations must account for large cultural differences to reach general Vietnamese audiences. Again, such tactics might include:

- Hire communication professionals native to and living within Vietnam to help guide messaging and, if for nothing else, protect against nonsensical or offensive material getting transmitted.

- Hire lobbyists native to Vietnam to pursue beneficial relationships with governmental and regulatory officials.
- Use more indirect messaging, rich with appropriate signs, symbols, and heroes from Vietnamese culture.
- Rely less on images of diversity in heterogenous America that might remind in-group-focused Vietnamese consumers of all the out-groups in the U.S.
- Given Vietnam's higher power distance score (70) and low individualism score (20), avoid appeals to the American ideals of freedom and independence, and instead focus on hierarchical structures, guidance from persons of power, and loyalty to family and in-groups (including in this case, perhaps, how a young Vietnamese person's American education can help support those to whom they are loyal back home).
- Given Vietnam's higher long-term orientation score (57), lower indulgence score (35), desire for thriftiness and saving for the future, place importance upon learning "to do" rather than general inquiry and how one's extended in-group will be supported by investing in an advanced education abroad—a difficult journey requiring focus and perseverance, with little time for lounging about and partying. (The latter may come to pass at an American institution, but that does not need to be demonstrated in messaging appeals.)
- At an American institution of higher education, persuade Admission, Financial Aid, and Residence Life to increase flexibility with application deadlines and other important dates for the more polychronic Vietnamese students. Although the Vietnamese tend to place great importance on punctuality, use indirect messaging to

encourage those students to meet such deadlines (without making them feel a strict, American culture is forced upon them from the outset).

During the 2017–2018 academic year, Vietnamese citizens comprised the sixth largest group of international students in the U.S. by country of origin (24,325), contributing $881 million to the American economy (*Vietnamese Students in the United States Increase for 17th Straight Year*, 2018). Asian immigrants and citizens have been integral to Seattle's development stretching back to 1860 (Visit Seattle Staff, 2022), with the greater Seattle metropolitan area today containing the sixth-highest concentration of Asians (18%) throughout all U.S. regions (Statista Research Department, 2020). Between the three primary University of Washington (UW) campuses located in and around Seattle, Asian American students are second only to Caucasians in population total (13,954 versus 24,154 for the 2020–2021 academic year), with the former having grown in size every year since 2012 (Office of Planning & Budgeting, 2022). Although it must be understood that Asians and Asian Americans are not a monolithic group in political beliefs and consumer behaviors (last year an Asian American was elected mayor of Seattle, but in spite of divided opinions amongst that overall identity group; Yam & Venkatraman, 2021), and that they have also faced harsh discrimination and violence throughout the mid-19th century through the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Nelson, 2021), this population growth can potentially continue in this specific region as many cultural and support systems are in place to welcome and incorporate newcomers. An opportunity exists for an educational institution such as UW to take advantage of and contribute to that growth through recruitment of college students from Vietnam. Cultural insights can guide UW's efforts to connect with these prospective consumers.

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