VALUES AND IDENTITY
IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE
IN MALAYSIA

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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This is a study of values and identity within the public relations profession in Malaysia. Although the study has a national focus, its implications are global, because its context is created by the intersection of three current areas of debate and examination: 1) the renewed focus on Asian values which seeks to articulate Asian values as a way of supporting Asia's pathway to modernisation; 2) the open challenge to assumptions about the transferability of theory between countries around the world, about whether theory can be universal or whether different theories or different versions of theories are needed to help explain practice in different parts of the world; and 3) the re-emerging focus on values underwriting the public relations profession.

Malaysia's growing public relations profession is playing a crucial communication role in support of the country's move towards industrialisation. In Malaysia, issues of culture, modernisation, Westernisation, and globalisation are both real and topical.

Through the values framework, the study aims to contribute in three ways: 1) To develop and test an alternative, but equally useful, framework and method for comparing public relations practice between countries; 2) to investigate the influence of specific cultural and professional variables on public relations practice in Malaysia, to further understand specific variables which might lead public relations practice to differ between countries; and 3) to contribute to the definition of Asian values by defining one component, that is, the personal and professional values of a sample of public relations practitioners in Malaysia.
The research was undertaken in two parts. The first, using a survey and structured interviews, examined the influence of two cultural variables (ethnicity and gender) and two professional variables (years of experience and work environment) on values held. Ethnicity and years of experience led to significant differences in the values held, with each variable influencing different value dimensions. Gender and work environment had some influence but generally in combination with ethnicity and years of experience respectively. The study found a distinctive U-shaped curve related to years of experience, which means that practitioners' value priorities change as they gain more experience in the profession. All four of the variables studied could be significant in accounting for difference in professional practice in other countries.

The second part, using repertory grid methodology, examined values and identity. It identified core values central to public relations practice in Malaysia, and interpreted these core values as statements of self-identity. The nature of identity as a public relations practitioner may also account for differences in public relations practice between countries.

Combining both parts, the study has revealed values that underwrite public relations practice in Malaysia, the aspects of self-identity important to the profession, and the way in which those values and identity have been influenced by cultural and professional factors. It therefore leads towards the development of a theoretical foundation for "culture-specific" public relations in Malaysia.

This exploratory study has generated findings which challenge the expectations of Schwartz and Bilsky's values theory, on which the values analysis was based.
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