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**PLACE BRAND COMMUNICATION
IN VIETNAM'S EXTERNAL AFFAIRS TODAY**

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INTRODUCTION

1. Rationale for the Study

In the context of globalization and deep international integration, image and reputation have increasingly become strategic resources that determine the competitiveness and positioning of both nations and localities. In Vietnam, this orientation is clearly reflected in the policies of the Party and the State, which emphasize enhancing national image and credibility through external affairs activities, in which Place Brand Communication (PBC) plays an increasingly important role.

Accordingly, localities have become direct actors in external affairs, with their development increasingly dependent on how they are perceived by the public. In the digital communication environment, PBC has become a crucial tool for shaping image, strengthening trust, and enhancing external attractiveness. From a theoretical perspective, place branding is formed through a process of strategic communication and consistent management, encompassing three main forms—physical, traditional, and word-of-mouth—thereby contributing to shaping brand image and guiding public perception in external affairs.

However, in the Vietnamese context, PBC still faces several limitations, including a lack of integration, inconsistent messaging, and the absence of effective evaluation mechanisms. At the same time, existing studies lack empirical evidence on the relationships between communication forms, brand image, and external affairs effectiveness, particularly at the local level. From these issues, researching PBC in external affairs in Vietnam is necessary to clarify its mechanisms of influence and propose solutions to enhance its effectiveness.

2. Research Objectives and Tasks

2.1. Research Objectives

This dissertation aims to clarify the theoretical and practical foundations of Place Brand Communication (PBC) in external affairs, analyze the impact of communication forms on brand image and external affairs effectiveness, and propose strategic and integrated solutions to enhance its effectiveness.

2.2. Research Tasks

To achieve these objectives, the study conducts a comprehensive review of relevant research to identify gaps, develops an analytical framework and research model, examines the current situation in selected localities, tests the relationships using SEM, and proposes solutions appropriate to the context of international integration.

3. Research Object and Scope

3.1. Research Object

The research focuses on PBC in external affairs in Vietnam.

3.2. Research Scope

The study is conducted across five representative localities—Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, Bac Ninh, and Dak Lak—over the period 2023–2025. Secondary data are collected up to 2025, while the quantitative survey is conducted from June to December 2025. In terms of content, the study focuses on analyzing the relationship between communication and external affairs effectiveness, without going deeply into economic indicators.

4. Theoretical and Practical Foundations and Research Methods

4.1. Theoretical Foundations

The study is grounded in theories of PBC, nation image, and place branding by Simon Anholt; public relations theory by James E. Grunig, Todd Hunt, and Scott M. Cutlip; as well as approaches to integrated communication, signaling, and soft power by Michael Spence and Joseph Nye. Within this framework, PBC is examined through three main forms physical, traditional, and word-of-mouth which contribute to shaping brand image and influencing public perception in external affairs.

4.2. Practical Foundations

In the context of implementing Resolution No. 22-NQ/TW, the 13th National Party Congress documents, and the Strategy for Promoting Vietnam’s Image Abroad for 2021–2030, local communication has become a strategic tool for enhancing external affairs effectiveness and attracting resources. However, in practice, there remains a gap between communicated messages and the perceived local brand image, highlighting the need to clarify the relationship between communication, brand image, and external affairs effectiveness.

4.3. Research Methods: The dissertation adopts a mixed-methods approach in which quantitative methods play a primary role in testing the model and hypotheses, while qualitative methods support interpretation. The study synthesizes secondary data from academic studies, policy documents, and official reports to build the theoretical framework and identify research gaps. At the same time, content analysis is employed to examine local communication materials, thereby clarifying messages, modes of representation, and their alignment with external affairs objectives.

Quantitative data are collected through a survey using Google Forms, with 763 valid responses from five localities. Statistical and modeling techniques, including Cronbach’s Alpha, EFA, CFA, SEM, and ANOVA, are applied to test measurement scales, the research model, and differences among localities. In addition, in-depth

interviews with seven experts are conducted to complement the quantitative findings and assess the feasibility of proposed solutions. Comparative and synthesis methods are also used to derive general conclusions and policy implications.

5. Research Questions and Hypotheses

5.1. Research Questions

The study examines how communication forms—physical, traditional, and word-of-mouth—influence the formation of local brands, how local brand image affects external affairs effectiveness, and the mediating role of brand image in this relationship.

5.2. Research Hypotheses

The dissertation develops hypotheses to be tested using the SEM model, in which communication forms are expected to influence local brand image, local brand image is expected to affect external affairs effectiveness, and it is proposed to act as a mediating variable between communication and external affairs effectiveness. In addition, differences across the five localities are examined.

6. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

The dissertation contributes to the theoretical foundation of PBC in external affairs by clarifying the relationship between communication, brand image, and external affairs effectiveness, and by proposing an integrated research model.

6.2. Practical Contributions

The findings provide a useful reference for policymakers and local authorities in implementing brand communication strategies associated with external affairs.

7. Novel Contributions of the Study

The study approaches PBC as a strategic component of external affairs rather than merely a promotional tool, develops an integrated model, combines quantitative and qualitative methods, compares multiple localities, and proposes both general and context-specific solutions.

8. Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 reviews studies on **PBC**. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical and practical foundations, research model, and measurement scales. Chapter 3 analyzes the current situation and tests the SEM model. Chapter 4 provides in-depth analysis and proposes solutions.

Chapter 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. International Studies

1.1.1. Studies on conceptual foundations and approaches to PBC

Studies by Mihalis Kavaratzis and Simon Anholt provide the theoretical foundation by approaching PBC as an integrated process combining communication, governance, and social experience, rather than a standalone promotional activity. More recent studies (Karsten Eshuis, Sebastian Zenker) extend this perspective by emphasizing interactivity, trust, and the digital communication ecosystem. These studies indicate that PBC is a socio-governance process closely linked to local image and positioning in the context of globalization.

1.1.2. Studies on stakeholders and governance models of PBC

Research by Gregory Ashworth and Mihalis Kavaratzis affirms that PBC is a multi-stakeholder process involving government, businesses, and the community, rather than being controlled by a single actor. Recent studies (Karsten Braun, Sebastian Zenker) highlight the coordinating role of government and the importance of flexible governance models in the digital context. These findings suggest that communication effectiveness depends on governance capacity and stakeholder coordination.

1.1.3. Studies on methods and tools of PBC

Studies by Mihalis Kavaratzis and Gregory Ashworth show that PBC is implemented through multiple methods, ranging from physical spaces and events to traditional communication channels. Recent studies (Sebastian Zenker, Robert Govers) emphasize the role of digital communication, social media, and platforms in shaping local image. This indicates a shift from single-channel communication to a multi-platform ecosystem, increasing both opportunities and governance challenges.

1.1.4. Studies on PBC in relation to external affairs and soft power

Studies by Simon Anholt and Mihalis Kavaratzis affirm that PBC is a tool of soft power, closely linked to governance capacity and external affairs strategies. More recent studies (Gert-Jan Hospers, Robert Govers) continue to highlight the role of institutional credibility, sustainability values, and digital communication in enhancing international influence. However, research gaps remain in developing countries such as Vietnam, particularly in approaching PBC as a component of external affairs.

1.2. Domestic Studies

1.2.1. Studies on local branding and image

Domestic studies (Nguyễn Thị Thu Hương, Trần Minh Huy) show that local branding is approached from multiple dimensions, including identity, public perception, and development governance, while emphasizing the role of experience

and governance capacity in shaping image. Recent studies (Nguyễn Thành Trung, Trần Thu Trang) have begun to expand toward governance and development perspectives, but generally have not yet approached PBC as a tool of external affairs and soft power, instead focusing mainly on internal resource development, tourism, and investment attraction.

1.2.2. Studies on place marketing and tourism development

Domestic studies mainly approach place marketing from a tourism-oriented perspective, emphasizing experience, satisfaction, and word-of-mouth communication, particularly in the digital environment, but have not yet developed a theoretical framework for PBC in image competition and external affairs.

In terms of communication methods, physical communication is considered the foundation for shaping local image through urban space and symbols (Nguyễn Quang Minh; Trần Thị Thu Hà; Lê Hoàng Nam; Phạm Thị Lan Anh); traditional communication plays a guiding role through media and events (Nguyễn Văn Dũng; Lê Thị Mai Phương; Phạm Thị Thu Hằng); while word-of-mouth communication—especially on digital platforms—has a strong impact on public perception (Nguyễn Đình Thọ; Trần Đức Thanh; Nguyễn Thị Thanh Huyền). Recently, some studies have begun to address an integrated approach (Nguyễn Hoàng Long; Phạm Thị Kim Oanh et al.); however, the application of these methods as tools of external affairs and soft power remains limited.

1.2.3. Studies on PBC methods

In general, domestic studies mainly analyze communication methods separately, including physical communication (Nguyễn Quang Minh; Trần Thị Thu Hà; Lê Hoàng Nam; Phạm Thị Lan Anh), traditional communication (Nguyễn Văn Dũng; Lê Thị Mai Phương; Phạm Thị Thu Hằng), and word-of-mouth/digital communication (Nguyễn Đình Thọ; Trần Đức Thanh; Nguyễn Thị Thanh Huyền). Communication effectiveness is recognized as depending on consistency and its alignment with actual experience; recent studies (Nguyễn Hoàng Long; Phạm Thị Kim Oanh) have begun to shift toward an integrated approach. However, there is still a lack of systematic research clarifying the interaction among these methods within a unified communication structure, especially in the context of international integration and the requirement to link with external affairs and soft power.

1.3. Assessment of the Literature, Research Gaps, and Research Direction

1.3.1. Assessment of existing studies

International research has developed a comprehensive theoretical framework, approaching PBC as a socio-governance - external affairs process linked to public

diplomacy and soft power, while also identifying challenges posed by digital and platform-based communication. In contrast, domestic research, although showing progress, has not yet considered PBC as an integral component of external affairs and still lacks an integrated approach combining communication, governance, and external affairs.

1.3.2. Research gaps and research direction

The main research gaps include: the lack of studies approaching PBC as a tool of external affairs; the absence of integrated models of communication methods; and the shortage of comparative and multi-stakeholder studies. Accordingly, this dissertation is oriented toward examining PBC as a strategic tool of local external affairs, analyzing an integrated communication structure, and conducting inter-regional comparative research, thereby contributing to theoretical development and supporting practical local governance in Vietnam.

Chapter 1 Summary

Chapter 1 synthesizes and analyzes both international and domestic studies, clarifying the theoretical foundations, trends, and research gaps in local branding and brand communication. Local branding is understood as a composite construct associated with identity, governance, and public experience; three communication methods—physical, traditional, and word-of-mouth—need to be integrated to build a sustainable image, forming the basis for the dissertation’s theoretical framework and research hypotheses.

Chapter 2: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LOCAL BRAND COMMUNICATION

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

Local branding is an interdisciplinary concept derived from place marketing, communication, and public governance, reflecting the set of perceptions, impressions, and associations that the public holds about a locality. These perceptions are formed through both real experiences and communication activities, encompassing tangible elements (landscape, infrastructure, services) and intangible elements (cultural identity, history, symbolic values).

Within the scope of this dissertation, local branding is understood as a system of identity values, images, and associations formed by the public through experiential interaction and communication, thereby reflecting the level of identity, credibility, and attractiveness of a locality in the context of international integration.

This approach emphasizes that local branding is not merely the outcome of communication, but an intermediary mechanism that transforms communication activities into external affairs effectiveness, manifested through levels of awareness, trust, and the ability to attract international cooperation.

2.1.1.2. Roles of local branding

Local branding helps position identity, create competitive differentiation, and attract investment, tourism, and high-quality human resources. It strengthens community cohesion, promotes residents as “natural brand ambassadors,” and enhances soft power, credibility, and international cooperation. Thus, local branding serves as both a communication tool, a cultural-political symbol, and a driver of sustainable development.

2.1.1.3. Components of local branding

In this dissertation, local branding is conceptualized as a comprehensive structure consisting of core values, positioning, brand storytelling, identity systems, and real experiences. These elements interact to create initial impressions and reinforce public trust, while also serving as the foundation for communication strategies and the development of the local brand image scale.

In particular, local brand image is identified as the central outcome of the entire branding and communication process, reflecting the combined perceptions, emotions, and evaluations of the public. This image is formed through both communication and real experiences and includes two main dimensions: cognitive perceptions (material conditions, infrastructure, development capacity) and affective perceptions (likability, trust, and favorability).

The dissertation emphasizes that local brand image is a key mediating variable linking communication activities to external affairs effectiveness, reflected in awareness, credibility, and attractiveness in the context of international integration.

2.1.2. Concept and roles of PBC in external affairs

2.1.2.1. Concept of PBC and local brand image in external affairs

In this dissertation, local branding is approached and operationalized as “local brand image” in public perception. On that basis, **Local Brand Communication (PBC)** in external affairs is defined as the intentional design and implementation of communication messages and activities aimed at influencing public perception, thereby shaping and reinforcing local brand image as a foundation for enhancing external affairs effectiveness in the context of international integration.

Based on this approach, the dissertation draws on theoretical perspectives on brand image and public perception to develop and construct the measurement scale for “local brand image” in the subsequent quantitative research model.

2.1.2.2. Concept of external affairs

External affairs refer to activities undertaken by the state and local authorities to establish, maintain, and expand international relations, protect interests, and enhance national standing. Today, external affairs have expanded in terms of actors, forms, and content, encompassing state diplomacy, economic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and people-to-people diplomacy, with the participation of local governments and businesses (Nye, 2004; Melissen, 2005). In Vietnam, external affairs constitute a strategic pillar involving coordination among central government, local authorities, and the community, in which PBC plays a key role in building image, credibility, and soft power.

2.1.2.3. Roles of PBC in external affairs

PBC functions as a soft power tool that helps position image, enhance credibility, and attract investment and international cooperation. It integrates physical, traditional, and word-of-mouth communication to project identity and values, while also strengthening internal cohesion through community participation. This communication fosters positive perceptions, shapes favorable images, and transforms perception into cooperative actions, thereby serving as a strategic axis linking local identity with external affairs effectiveness (Nye, 2004; Kapferer, 2012).

2.1.2.4. Structure of PBC in external affairs: actors, content, and methods

In this dissertation, PBC in external affairs is conceptualized as a system comprising three components: actors, content, and methods, which operate together to shape local image and influence external affairs effectiveness.

Actors include government, media organizations, businesses, communities, and the public, in which government plays a guiding role while other actors co-create and disseminate the image.

Communication content reflects local identity, positioning, and development values, forming the basis for public perception and trust.

Communication methods include physical, traditional, and word-of-mouth channels, corresponding to recognition, orientation, and diffusion, collectively shaping local brand image, which acts as a mediator between communication and external affairs effectiveness.

2.1.2.5. Criteria for evaluating PBC effectiveness in external affairs

In this dissertation, PBC effectiveness in external affairs is understood as the degree to which communication activities are transformed into brand image in public perception and subsequently influence external outcomes. This effectiveness is not directly generated by communication but operates through the mediating role of local brand image.

Accordingly, effectiveness is reflected through a cognition–attitude–behavior sequence, beginning with awareness, followed by trust and favorability, and reinforced by the ability to diffuse across media channels and social networks. When accumulated, these factors translate into concrete external outcomes such as investment attraction, tourism development, and expansion of international cooperation.

Thus, the dissertation approaches communication effectiveness as a continuous transformation process, in which local brand image plays a central role and serves as the basis for measuring external affairs effectiveness.

2.2. Practical foundations of PBC in external affairs in Vietnam today

2.2.1. Orientation of local external affairs in the context of international integration

In the context of implementing Resolution 22-NQ/TW (2013) and Directive 26-CT/TW (2018) on international integration and external information, external affairs have increasingly been deployed in a multi-level and decentralized manner, closely linked to socio-economic development. Within this orientation, PBC is identified as an essential component of external affairs, playing a role in shaping image, strengthening credibility, and enhancing local attractiveness in the global competitive environment.

In practice, local external affairs operate through a multi-stakeholder mechanism, in which brand communication serves as a connector, ensuring consistency and diffusion of local image externally. However, effectiveness varies across localities, depending on governance capacity and the level of communication

integration in external affairs strategies. In the digital communication context, local image is increasingly co-created, requiring consistency between brand communication and actual development practices.

Based on this general orientation, the following section analyzes practical cases in five representative localities: Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, Bac Ninh, and Dak Lak, to highlight differences in approaches and implementation levels.

2.2.1.1. Hanoi

Hanoi positions itself as “civilized – peaceful – creative,” linking brand communication with cultural diplomacy and soft power. Communication is integrated into external affairs through international conferences, investment promotion, and cultural cooperation, thereby enhancing the capital’s position. Effectiveness depends on inter-agency coordination and implementation consistency.

2.2.1.2. Ho Chi Minh City

Ho Chi Minh City positions itself as an “economic hub – innovation center – global connector,” closely linking communication with economic diplomacy. Investment promotion activities and international forums also function as image communication channels. However, the approach tends to prioritize economic aspects over socio-cultural balance.

2.2.1.3. Da Nang

Da Nang develops the image of a “livable city,” emphasizing quality of life and experience. Communication is mainly conducted through events and international exchanges, creating diffusion effects through real experiences. However, sustainability depends on alignment with long-term development strategies.

2.2.1.4. Bac Ninh

Bac Ninh positions itself as an industrial and FDI-attracting locality, linking communication with economic diplomacy. Content focuses on infrastructure, investment environment, and administrative reform, combined with selected cultural elements. Communication is primarily conducted through investment promotion and official channels.

2.2.1.5. Dak Lak

Dak Lak combines economic and cultural diplomacy, with coffee and Central Highlands identity at its core. Communication through festivals and events enhances awareness and favorability, while supporting trade promotion and international cooperation.

2.2.2. Factors affecting PBC in external affairs in Vietnam today

2.2.2.1. International factors

PBC is increasingly influenced by globalization, image competition, and cross-border digital communication. According to Anholt (2010), brand messages must reflect identity while aligning with international standards and expectations, serving national external affairs goals. The digital communication space enhances deterritorialization, requiring professionalism, crisis management capacity, and cross-cultural consistency (Dinnie, 2015). At the same time, standards of transparency, governance, and sustainability increasingly shape local image-building (Lucarelli & Giovanardi, 2016), while global competition drives the integration of PBC with digital, green, and inclusive transformation trends (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005).

2.2.2.2. Domestic factors

Domestically, PBC effectiveness largely depends on governmental communication governance capacity, socio-cultural identity, level of international integration, media systems, and policy frameworks. Localities with clear strategies, strong inter-sectoral coordination, and effective use of digital platforms tend to achieve stronger external image diffusion. Conversely, limitations in resources and institutional coordination remain barriers reducing consistency and effectiveness.

2.3. PBC Model

The PBC model in this study is developed based on the context of five localities—Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, Bac Ninh, and Dak Lak—reflecting differences in culture, economy, urban development, and communication capacity. The model is designed as an open and flexible system adaptable to context, combining theoretical generalization with practical applicability.

2.3.1. Proposed research model and measurement scales

2.3.1.1. Theoretical framework: Actors – Content – Methods

In this dissertation, PBC is conceptualized as an integrated system in which local image is formed through the interaction of actors, content, and methods, and influences external affairs only through the mediating mechanism of brand image.

Actors determine who communicates, content determines what is communicated, and methods determine how communication is conducted (Kavaratzis, 2005). Their interaction forms the basis of local image, a core resource for external affairs effectiveness (Nye).

2.3.1.2. Proposed research model and SEM testing model

The proposed model reflects the impact mechanism of physical, traditional, and word-of-mouth communication on the perceptions of residents, tourists, and international partners, forming local brand image as a mediating variable. Brand image both conveys value and directly and indirectly influences external affairs effectiveness.

The variables include physical communication (VL), traditional communication (TT), and word-of-mouth communication (TM) as independent variables; brand image

(HA) as the mediating variable; and external affairs effectiveness (HQ) as the dependent variable. The integration of four theoretical foundations—IMC, Brand Identity, Word-of-Mouth, and Place Image—forms a coherent theoretical framework. Based on this, the model is proposed for hypothesis testing using SEM.

2.3.1.3. Research hypotheses

Based on the theoretical model and analytical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Physical communication (VL) positively affects local brand image (HA).

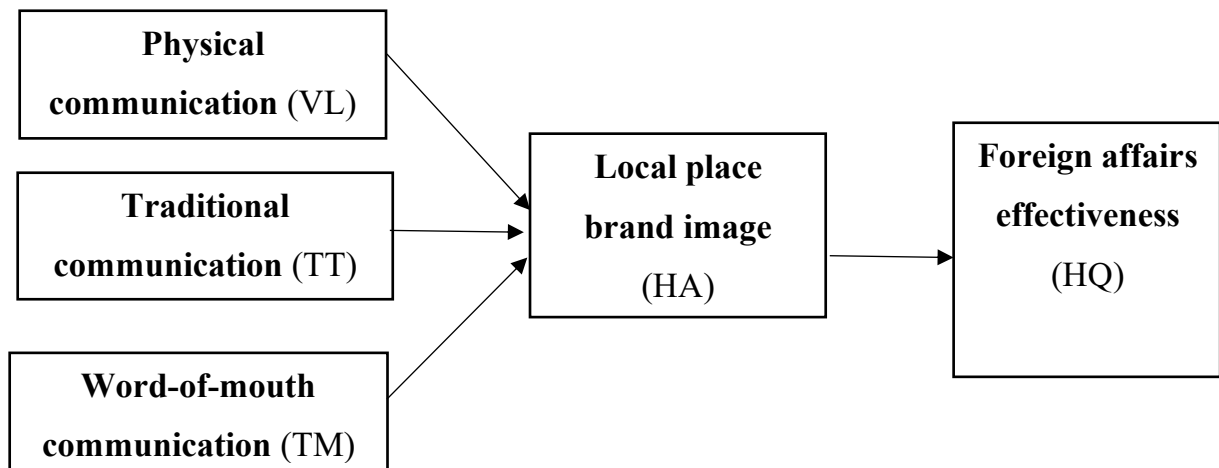
H2: Traditional communication (TT) positively affects local brand image (HA).

H3: Word-of-mouth communication (TM) positively affects local brand image (HA).

H4: Local brand image (HA) positively affects external affairs effectiveness (HQ).

These hypotheses reflect a causal chain from communication forms to image and ultimately to external affairs effectiveness, forming the basis for SEM testing.

Proposed model:



2.3.1.4. Measurement scales

The study develops measurement scales for five constructs: physical communication (VL), traditional communication (TT), word-of-mouth communication (TM), local brand image (HA), and external affairs effectiveness (HQ), based on international theories and adapted to the Vietnamese context. The scales are tested using Cronbach's Alpha, EFA, CFA, and SEM to ensure reliability and validity.

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 clarifies the theoretical foundations and relationships among brand communication, brand image, and external affairs effectiveness. Three communication forms are systematized, and a research model with brand image as a mediating variable is proposed, suitable for the Vietnamese context. A mixed-method research design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches is established to ensure comprehensiveness, reliability, and testability, providing a foundation for subsequent analysis and hypothesis testing in the following chapters.

2.3.1.2. Measurement Scales Used in the Study

This study develops a system of measurement scales for five core constructs: physical communication (PC), traditional communication (TC), word-of-mouth communication (WOM), local brand image (BI), and external affairs effectiveness (EA), grounded in international theoretical frameworks and adapted to the Vietnamese context.

Physical communication (PC) measures tangible elements such as architecture, symbols, and physical promotional materials. Traditional communication (TC) assesses the role of press, television, and official events. Word-of-mouth communication (WOM) reflects information diffusion through communities and social media platforms. Local brand image (BI) captures cognitive perceptions, emotional responses, and brand credibility, while external affairs effectiveness (EA) measures impacts on international cooperation, partnerships, and global reputation.

The measurement scales were preliminarily tested before being assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to evaluate reliability, validity, and relationships among variables.

2.3.2. Comparison and Impact Mechanisms of the Three Forms of Communication

The three forms of communication interact within an integrated ecosystem to form and sustain local brand image. Physical communication influences perception through direct experience; traditional communication guides official and authoritative messaging; and word-of-mouth communication diffuses emotionally resonant and highly credible information. Their impacts vary across different stages of brand development, and flexible integration of these forms enhances external affairs effectiveness and local credibility.

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 clarifies the theoretical foundations and relationships among local brand communication, local brand image, and external affairs effectiveness. The three forms of communication are systematically conceptualized, and a research model positioning local brand image as a mediating variable is proposed, reflecting the Vietnamese context. The mixed-method research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, provides a solid theoretical and methodological foundation for the analyses and hypothesis testing presented in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3: CURRENT SITUATION OF LOCAL BRAND COMMUNICATION (PBC) IN EXTERNAL AFFAIRS IN VIETNAM

Chapter 3 analyzes the current situation of **Local Brand Communication (PBC)** in external affairs in Vietnam based on survey data collected from five localities: Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, Bac Ninh, and Dak Lak. The analysis focuses on clarifying the role of communication forms in shaping local brand image and influencing external affairs effectiveness in public perception, thereby providing empirical evidence to test the research model and hypotheses.

3.1. Current situation of actors, content, and methods of PBC in external affairs

Overall, PBC in Vietnam has formed a system consisting of actors, content, and methods; however, these components have not yet operated in a coordinated manner. The lack of integration limits the ability to transform communication activities into a consistent brand image and sustainable external affairs effectiveness.

3.1.1. Current situation of PBC actors in external affairs

The system of actors is relatively comprehensive, involving government, media, businesses, and communities; however, coordination remains fragmented. This reduces the synergy in co-creating and disseminating local image, leading to inconsistencies in external communication messages.

3.1.2. Current situation of PBC content in external affairs

Communication content has become more diverse but still focuses mainly on event-based information and fragmented promotion. The lack of strategic positioning and storytelling limits the depth of perception, thereby constraining the formation of a clear local brand image among international audiences.

3.1.3. Current situation of PBC methods in external affairs

Physical, traditional, and word-of-mouth communication methods have been implemented across the studied localities but have not been effectively integrated into a unified system, reducing overall effectiveness in building local brand image.

Physical communication is most evident in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang through urban spaces, iconic structures, and modern infrastructure, while Bac Ninh and Dak Lak mainly exploit cultural values but have not fully transformed them into strong identity experiences.

Traditional communication in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City achieves high media coverage; however, content remains largely administrative and event-oriented, lacking deep brand positioning.

Word-of-mouth communication is particularly strong in Da Nang and Ho Chi

Minh City due to tourism and social media, whereas Bac Ninh and Dak Lak rely mainly on organic community diffusion, resulting in more limited impact.

Overall, the lack of integration among the three methods reduces the synergistic effect, limiting the transformation from communication into brand image and external affairs effectiveness.

3.2. Survey on the current situation of PBC in external affairs

The survey reflects the current state of access, reception, and diffusion of local brand image in public perception across the studied areas. The results provide important empirical evidence for evaluating the role of brand communication and testing the research model.

3.2.1. Sample distribution and demographic characteristics

The survey includes 763 observations collected from five localities, with relatively balanced distribution: Hanoi (29.9%), Ho Chi Minh City (28.0%), Da Nang (18.0%), Bac Ninh (11.9%), and Dak Lak (12.2%). Respondents include local residents (48.6%), tourists (26.3%), businesses and investors (14.7%), and public officials (10.4%), reflecting diverse stakeholder groups.

Most respondents have been connected to the locality for over one year (87.7%), with the dominant age group being 25–44 (60.9%), and 58.7% holding at least a university degree. Gender, age, education, and income distribution are relatively balanced, ensuring representativeness and reliability for quantitative analysis.

3.2.2. Current situation of access, reception, and diffusion of local brand image information

The public accesses information through multiple channels, with social media and traditional media dominating, indicating a clear multi-channel communication trend. Levels of reception, trust, and sharing are relatively high, particularly highlighting the role of word-of-mouth communication.

3.2.2.1. Information access channels

Social media is the most popular channel, followed by press, television, and interpersonal communication. This reflects multi-source information behavior and the need for integrated communication strategies.

3.2.2.2. Levels of reception, trust, and sharing behavior

Survey results show high levels of information reception (87.6%), moderate to high trust (75.2%), and 67.6% of respondents have shared information, mainly related to landscapes, culture, and cuisine. This confirms the significant role of word-of-mouth communication in image diffusion.

3.3.3. Assessment of PBC based on survey results

Overall, PBC forms are evaluated positively. Physical communication reaches $M_{VL} = 3.62$, reflecting the role of space and tangible elements but with limitations in consistency. Traditional communication achieves the highest level ($M_{TT} = 3.85$), particularly in enhancing understanding ($M = 3.91$), confirming the role of mass media in building trust. Word-of-mouth communication reaches $M_{TM} = 3.70$, with the highest trust level ($M = 3.79$), highlighting the growing importance of community sharing and social media.

3.3.4. Comparison of PBC across provinces and cities

ANOVA and Welch tests indicate statistically significant differences among localities ($\text{Sig.} \leq 0.011$). Da Nang has the highest word-of-mouth communication ($M = 3.84$), while Dak Lak has the lowest ($M = 3.38$). Hanoi leads in traditional communication ($M = 4.00$) and external affairs effectiveness ($M = 3.85$), whereas Dak Lak records the lowest brand image ($M = 2.68$) and effectiveness ($M = 2.53$). Results show that Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang outperform others, while Bac Ninh and Dak Lak still face limitations, highlighting the need for context-specific strategies.

3.4. Evaluation of the relationship between PBC, local brand image, and external affairs effectiveness

Survey results indicate a strong interrelationship among PBC, brand image, and external affairs effectiveness. Public perception is generally positive, though diffusion and effectiveness vary across localities.

3.4.1. Evaluation of local brand image

The average score for local brand image is $M_{HA} = 3.37$ ($SD = 0.92$), indicating a moderately positive but not yet distinctive image. Elements such as identity, cultural values, and promotional impressions remain at an average level, reflecting inconsistency in branding.

3.4.2. Evaluation of external affairs effectiveness

The average score for external affairs effectiveness is $M_{HQ} = 3.44$ ($SD = 0.93$), indicating a relatively positive perception. Brand communication contributes to awareness, credibility, and cooperation opportunities, but its impact depends on actual experience and implementation capacity.

3.4.3. Impact of communication forms through SEM model

The study employs SEM to clarify the impact mechanism among PBC, brand image, and external affairs effectiveness, allowing simultaneous testing of direct effects and the mediating role of brand image.

3.4.3.1. Reliability test (Cronbach's Alpha)

All scales achieve acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha ranging from 0.838 to 0.865, and item-total correlations above 0.3. One item (VL5) is removed to improve reliability.

3.4.3.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

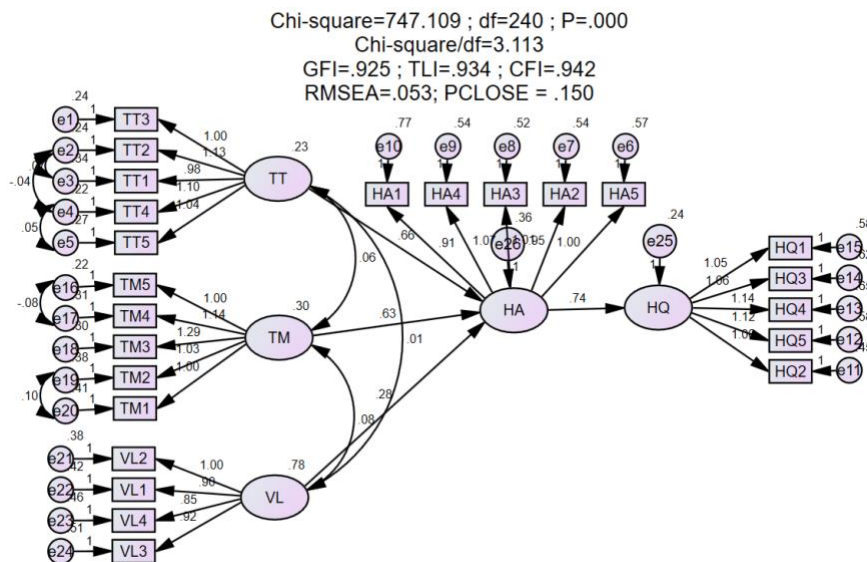
EFA results show data suitability with KMO = 0.906 and significant Bartlett's test. Five factors are extracted, explaining 64.91% of total variance, indicating a clear structure.

3.4.3.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

CFA results indicate good model fit (Chi-square/df = 2.774, CFI = 0.952, TLI = 0.944, RMSEA = 0.04), ensuring reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

3.4.3.4. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

SEM results confirm good model fit (Chi-square/df = 3.311, GFI = 0.925, TLI = 0.934, CFI = 0.942), with RMSEA = 0.053 and PCLOSE = 0.150, indicating low error and reliable interpretation of relationships among PBC, brand image, and external affairs effectiveness.



Bảng 2: Kết quả mô hình cấu trúc SEM

Type of relationship	Hypothesized relationship	Estimate (unstandardized)	p-value	Estimate (standardized)	Conclusion
Direct effects	TT → HA	0,660	0,000	0,372	H1 supported
	TM → HA	0,633	0,000	0,405	H2 supported
	VL → HA	0,285	0,000	0,294	H3 supported
	HA → HQ	0,742	0,000	0,790	H4 supported
Mediating effects	TT → HA → HQ	0,585	0,001	0,294	H5 supported

(Source: Survey result, 2025)

Table 2 shows that all hypotheses are supported ($p < 0.01$). Among them, word-of-mouth communication has the strongest impact on local brand image ($\beta = 0.405$), followed by traditional communication ($\beta = 0.372$) and physical communication ($\beta = 0.294$). Local brand image has a very strong effect on external affairs effectiveness ($\beta = 0.790$), highlighting the pivotal role of branding in attracting investment, tourism, and international cooperation in localities such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang, while Bac Ninh and Dak Lak are gradually leveraging their identity-based advantages.

The results also confirm the mediating role of local brand image between traditional communication and external affairs effectiveness, with an indirect effect of $\beta = 0.294$ ($p = 0.001$). This indicates that traditional communication channels are only effective when aligned with a consistent brand strategy.

The three communication forms explain 50.3% of the variance in local brand image, while brand image explains 62.4% of the variance in external affairs effectiveness (see SEM results appendix), demonstrating strong explanatory power and high practical relevance of the model.

3.4.3.5. Bootstrap results

Bootstrap testing with 2,000 samples shows that the estimated coefficients are stable, with minimal bias and CR values within the ± 2 threshold. These results confirm

the high reliability and generalizability of the SEM model in studying PBC.

3.3.1. Strengths

The findings indicate that PBC is most effective when implemented in an integrated manner, where communication forms do not operate independently but complement each other in shaping brand image. This is consistent with contemporary theoretical approaches that conceptualize local branding as a system of meaning co-created through multiple touchpoints and public experiences.

The prominent mediating role of local brand image suggests that communication only generates external value when it is transformed into stable perceptions, trust, and positive sentiment. This reinforces the view that brand image is a central soft resource in local external affairs.

3.5. Strengths, limitations, and causes of PBC in external affairs in Vietnam

Based on quantitative analyses, including descriptive statistics, ANOVA, scale testing, CFA, SEM, and Bootstrap, PBC plays a significant role in shaping brand image and enhancing external affairs effectiveness. This section clarifies the main strengths, limitations, and underlying causes of PBC in the Vietnamese context.

3.5.1. Strengths and causes

The results show that PBC has initially been effective in shaping brand image and supporting external affairs, thanks to the multi-channel integration of physical, traditional, and word-of-mouth communication. SEM results confirm that all three forms have positive and statistically significant effects, with brand image acting as a key mediating variable. Traditional communication remains foundational, while word-of-mouth and experiential elements enhance diffusion and memorability of local image.

3.5.2. Limitations and causes

Despite these strengths, PBC exhibits disparities across localities and uneven effectiveness, depending on resources and development contexts. The transformation from communication to external affairs effectiveness remains limited, as activities largely focus on raising awareness rather than building a deep and sustainable brand image. Additionally, although word-of-mouth communication has strong influence, it is difficult to control and may lead to fragmented messaging without consistent strategic direction.

Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter 3 demonstrates that PBC plays an important role, but its effectiveness depends on the level of integration and coordination among its components. The dissertation analyzes the current situation from three dimensions—actors, content, and

methods—thereby clarifying how communication is implemented in external affairs. The results indicate that communication content has begun to emphasize core values but lacks strategic orientation and consistency. Communication methods are diverse but insufficiently integrated to create synergy, while actor participation is broad but uneven in capacity and coordination. SEM analysis confirms that communication positively influences brand image and external affairs effectiveness, with brand image serving as a mediating variable. These findings identify key strengths, limitations, and causes, providing a foundation for proposing solutions in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: EMERGING ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS TO ENHANCE LOCAL BRAND COMMUNICATION (PBC) IN EXTERNAL AFFAIRS IN VIETNAM

4.1. Emerging Issues and Strategic Directions for PBC in External Affairs in Vietnam

4.1.1. Emerging Issues

Quantitative results and in-depth interviews indicate that Local Brand Communication (PBC) in Vietnam has made notable progress in major urban areas. However, disparities remain between developed and smaller localities in terms of strategic orientation, inter-sectoral coordination capacity, and the application of digital technologies. Many experts emphasize that word-of-mouth and traditional communication continue to play a crucial role in shaping public perception and external effectiveness, while physical and digital communication channels have not yet been fully integrated. This highlights the urgent need for a strategically integrated communication approach centered on brand image.

4.1.2. Strategic Directions for Strengthening PBC

The combination of quantitative findings and expert interviews shows that although local communication has improved, it still lacks integration and a unified strategic orientation, leading to limited spillover effects, inconsistency, and suboptimal external performance.

4.1.2.1. Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) Orientation

A key strategic direction is to promote an integrated communication model that aligns all channels, tools, and messages under a consistent and long-term strategic framework. Community experience should be positioned as core content to enhance credibility, attract investment, and improve external effectiveness. This aligns with the IMC framework in brand management proposed by Madhavaram et al. as a strategic tool for achieving comprehensive communication objectives.

4.1.2.2. Promoting Digital Transformation and Social Media Utilization

In the era of Industry 4.0, digital transformation and social media serve as strategic tools to enhance brand awareness and diffusion. Quantitative results reveal that most people access information through social media, while interviews with leaders and experts highlight its effectiveness when combined with creative content strategies, two-way interaction, and modern technologies. This contributes to the development of a sustainable “digital local brand ecosystem.”

4.1.2.3. Linking Local Brands with the National Brand

Currently, the connection between local brands and the national brand in Vietnam remains weak, resulting in fragmented and uncoordinated promotional efforts. In-depth interviews show that many localities do not align their campaigns with national branding programs, reducing consistency in external communication. Therefore, a multi-level coordination mechanism between central and local authorities is necessary, allowing each locality to develop its unique identity while aligning with shared core values, thereby strengthening national soft power in line with Dinnie’s nation branding perspective.

4.1.2.4. Aligning Brand Communication with Sustainable Development Goals

Survey and interview findings indicate that the public increasingly expects PBC not only to promote images but also to reflect cultural, environmental, and community values. Integrating sustainable development goals into communication strategies will help build authentic, credible, and attractive local brands, while reinforcing the national image in the context of global integration.

4.2. Solutions

Based on the synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings and strategic orientations, PBC in Vietnam requires a coherent and strategic system of solutions built on four main pillars: physical communication, traditional communication, word-of-mouth communication, and brand image management linked to external effectiveness. These solution groups should both leverage their individual strengths and be closely interconnected to form an effective communication ecosystem in the context of integration and digital transformation.

4.2.1. General Solutions

4.2.1.1. Physical Communication Solutions

Physical communication serves as a key visual touchpoint. It is necessary to standardize local brand identity elements (logos, colors, slogans) and integrate distinctive cultural features into public spaces. Developing experiential spaces such as smart tourism information centers and integrating them with public transportation can

enhance interaction and brand recall. Public–private partnerships should be promoted to optimize both financial and creative resources.

4.2.1.2. Traditional Communication Solutions

In a multi-dimensional information environment, press, television, and radio continue to shape public perception and reinforce trust. It is important to increase the frequency of official information, strengthen central–local coordination to ensure message consistency, and innovate content toward storytelling and human-centered narratives linked to local experiences and heritage.

4.2.1.3. Word-of-Mouth Communication Solutions

Word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) have strong diffusion power and build social trust. Studies show that eWoM significantly influences brand image on social media. Encouraging communities to share experiences through creative hashtag campaigns and collaborating with influencers (KOLs, bloggers) can transform residents and tourists into “brand ambassadors.”

4.2.1.4. Brand Image and External Effectiveness Solutions

A long-term branding strategy should clearly define core values and strengthen the linkage between local and national brands to create synergy. Applying digital technologies for data monitoring, sentiment analysis, and performance measurement enables timely strategic adjustments. Additionally, developing professional human resources and building networks of communication ambassadors (experts, overseas Vietnamese, artists) will enhance national soft power.

4.2.1.5. Reducing Regional Disparities

ANOVA results indicate disparities in communication capacity among localities, particularly in physical and traditional communication. Therefore, regional support policies (financial assistance, technical support, inter-regional model sharing, and digital platform development) are necessary to narrow gaps and ensure more balanced development of brand image and external effectiveness nationwide.

4.2.2. Local-Specific Solutions

In-depth interviews with experts and local leaders reveal that communication effectiveness depends heavily on socio-economic context and governance capacity; thus, tailored and flexible solutions are required instead of a uniform approach.

4.2.2.1. Hanoi: Leadership Role and Standardization of Brand Image

Hanoi should develop a coherent brand message that reflects cultural and historical depth while maintaining consistency across both official channels and social media, thereby reinforcing its role as a national symbol domestically and internationally.

4.2.2.2. Ho Chi Minh City: Openness and Co-creation

Ho Chi Minh City should maximize the creative potential of communities and digital enterprises in co-creating brand content, within a clear strategic framework to ensure consistency across multiple platforms.

4.2.2.3. Da Nang: Enhancing Experience and Credibility

Da Nang should focus on strengthening real experiences and leveraging feedback from tourists and residents through digital platforms to monitor and adjust communication strategies in real time, ensuring long-term credibility.

4.2.2.4. Bac Ninh: Modernizing Cultural Identity

Bac Ninh needs to transform its rich traditional values into modern communication content, using creative storytelling approaches to engage digital audiences effectively.

4.2.2.5. Dak Lak: Community Empowerment and Capacity Bridging

Dak Lak should build a community-centered brand identity platform, empower residents in storytelling, and enhance digital communication capacity to reduce gaps with more developed localities and increase brand diffusion.

Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 confirms that Local Brand Communication (PBC) plays a central role in shaping brand image and enhancing external effectiveness. All three main communication forms show positive impacts based on SEM results and expert interviews. The proposed solutions emphasize integration, alignment with local characteristics, and the leadership role of government alongside community and business participation. This provides a foundation for developing modern PBC strategies to support international integration and sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

In the context of deep international integration, Local Brand Communication (PBC) is affirmed as a strategic tool in external affairs, contributing to shaping national image, enhancing trust, and strengthening soft power. This dissertation adopts a systematic approach by combining qualitative and quantitative methods to develop an analytical framework and empirically examine the relationship between communication, brand image, and external effectiveness in Vietnam.

The findings indicate that local brand image plays a central mediating role in translating communication activities into external effectiveness. Among communication forms, word-of-mouth and traditional communication exert stronger influence than physical communication. Additionally, communication effectiveness largely depends on coordination capacity, strategic thinking, and stakeholder engagement.

Based on these findings, the study proposes integrated, synchronized, and sustainable directions and solutions aligned with external affairs and local development goals. In terms of contributions, the research clarifies the mediating role of brand image and provides valuable empirical evidence for policymaking in external communication.

Despite certain limitations in scope and data, the findings offer a useful scientific basis for future research and practical implementation of PBC strategies, contributing to enhancing Vietnam's image and position in the international arena.

AUTHOR'S PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE THESIS TOPIC

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