

**THE ALTERNATIVE CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION: A CASE STUDY ON GLOBAL POP
MUSIC OF VIETNAMESE YOUNG CONSUMERS**

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to analyze the dynamic of cultural hybridization. Our (n) ethnographic data on global popular music consumption of Vietnamese youngsters reveal an alternative model of cultural hybridization: the juxtaposition of global cultures coming from different origins is given meanings and it is naturalized by local values and concepts.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural globalization is one of the prominent theoretical fields for consumer researchers to study the consumption experiences of local consumers in relation to disjunctive transnational cultural flows (Appadurai 1990). There are four major research streams: consumption practices of western commodities in emerging markets (Ger and Belk 1996; Coulter, Feick and Price 2002, Sandikci and Ger 2002, Eckhardt and Mahi 2004); identity projects of local consumers (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Sandikci and Ger 2010); resurgence of local culture (Wilk 2006; Kjeldgaard and Otsberg 2007; Cayla and Eckhardt 2006; Nguyen and Belk 2012) and resistance of local consumers to hegemonic brands (Thompson and Arsel 2004; Boder and Chanavat 2009) or western advertisement (de Barnier and Qader 2011). All these pieces of research have focused on the encounter of one global culture and one local culture, except for the work on inter-local youth culture from Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006). Moreover, they have referred to cultural flows which come only from the westernized culture of consumption. Hence, these research streams under-estimate the influences of non-western cultures onto consumption practices of local consumers.

This study aims to address the fore-mentioned theoretical gaps. Adopting the perspective of multi-global cultures (Ger and Belk 1996), our intention is to better understand consumption practices of local consumers which are simultaneously shaped by many global cultures coming from different origins. This study also contributes to extend the research stream on youth lifestyle construction in emerging markets.

In terms of context, we focus on the interpretation of pop music culture of young Vietnamese people. Our research is shaped around two main questions: How

do Vietnamese young consumers interpret South Korean pop music (K-pop) and Anglophone pop music (USUK-pop)? How do K-pop and USUK-pop involve in structuring Vietnamese youth lifestyles?

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the domain of cultural globalization, the interplay of global and local cultures is presented according to three different scenarios. The first scenario refers to the notions of “McDonaldization” (Ritzer 2008) or cultural imperialism (Tomlinson 1999). It describes how local culture is assimilated into global consumer culture through the consumption of global products representing western (especially American) values. It implicitly asserts that local consumers are passive in their consumption of global products. Differently, the second scenario supports an argument that local culture is restructured and its traditional values are renovated thanks to the innovative re-articulation of global products that local consumers integrate into their everyday life practices (Berger and Huntington 2002). This scenario is well illustrated through the Ainu ethnic case in Japan (Friedman 1994) and Belizean cuisine (Wilk 2006). In other words, for the adherents of the second scenario, rather than threatening local values, globalization valorizes cultural differences (Appadurai 1990). The last scenario stands for the cultural *mélange* process (Pieterse 2009), named creolization (Hannerz 1992) or cultural hybridization (Pieterse, 2009). It is depicted as the interjection of local into global culture. Indeed, global culture is modified and transformed in order to fit local context. But differently from the second scenario, ‘foreignness’ still present. This cultural *mélange* process produces a hybrid culture which structure is constituted by both ‘foreign’ and native elements. In other words, the hybrid culture

is a localized version of 'global structures of common differences' (Wilk 1995, 117)

Although the scenario on cultural *mélange* shares the same vein with the second one, it accepts also the possible commonness between different locals. And the core of this commonness is western (or American) concepts and values (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006).

Our research is in line with the third scenario. But differently to prior research that focus on the tenet 'difference' of the 'global structure of common difference', we look at its tenet 'common'. We seek to promote the alternative model of cultural hybridization in which the core of tenet 'common' is multi-sources, rather than only western one. Henceforth, we stand for the idea of multi-cultural hybridizations.

2. CONTEXT AND METHOD

We have conducted our research in Vietnam, considered as an emerging market which is situated at the crossroad of many global cultures (from Hindu and Chinese in the past to Western and East Asian at present). This market is also engaged into on-going transition from Soviet economic model to free-market economy under direction of Communist Party (Shultz and Pecotich 1994). This allows us to understand how Vietnamese consumers incorporate these global cultures into their construction of lifestyles.

We look more particularly at the foreign music consumption of young Vietnamese consumers (age from 15-25). We focus on two important musical stream in Vietnam: South Korean pop music (K-pop) and Anglophone pop music (USUK-pop). This fieldwork has been chosen for many reasons: (1) nearly 60% of Vietnamese population are under 30 years old (EMIVN 2010); (2) these young consumers were born during transition phase of politico-economic infrastructure of Vietnam; (3) they constitute a main target of transnational

corporations due to their particular consumption behaviors (EMIVN 2010); (4) music holds a prominent role in youth lifestyles (Laughey 2006).

Our method of data gathering qualitative and based on (n)ethnography (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Kozinets 2010). We adopt the phenomenological paradigm (Thompson et al 1989) to investigate the lifestyle construction of young consumers in post socialist society with reference to their consumption of global cultural products.

Concerning nethnography, we have done constantly participant observation in online music forums for Vietnamese youngsters (two forums for Vietnamese K-pop community and one for USUK-pop community). We have had more than 40 mail exchanges with active participants in these forums. We collected fan-made videos, photos and coded 75 posts which overtly discussed influences of these music on lifestyles of Vietnamese youngsters. We also followed the most popular Vietnamese online magazine for youth which update constantly information on K-pop, USUK-pop and Vietnamese youth lives. We used both articles and comments of readers as data.

By ethnography, the first author conducted fieldwork in four diverse localities of Vietnam of which two are big cities (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city) and two others are small cities towns located in the Center of Vietnam (Nha Trang and Tuy Hoa). To investigate the consumption practices of Vietnamese youngsters, field-notes and photos have been taken in restaurants, market mall, coffee shop, fashion boutiques attended by youngsters. The first author also participated in two fan meetings (one of pro K-pop and one of pro USUK-pop) and 2 K-pop concerts. Moreover, he conducted 23 in-depth interviews (1-3 hours) with young people (aged 15-25). Data analysis followed the

guidelines of the hermeneutical approach (Thompson 1997).

3. FINDINGS

The results presented depict the particular experiences in consuming global cultural products of young consumers living in post socialist society.

3.1. KAWAII (CUTE) K-POP VERSUS COOL USUK-POP

For young Vietnamese consumers, K-pop and USUK-pop are two musical styles built on two different cultural values and concepts. As such, K-pop represents *kawaii* (cute) culture which is defined as feminine, teeny (Kinsella 1995; Granot et al 2014), popular and pinky (Yano 2013). USUK-pop is associated to cool culture which termed as masculine, authentic, individualistic and rebellious (Pountain and Robins 2001; Belk et al 2008). Although *Kawaii* (cute) culture originates from Japan, it has become popular with the expansion of K-pop in Vietnam. This distinction is carried out from the youth reception of images of K-pop and USUK-pop.

Minh (young girl, 23, pro K-pop) asserts that the attractiveness of K-pop lies in the childlike look and acts of singers. She describes:

"[...] They [male singers] are very beautiful and cute. I mean, they have a baby face which skin is fair, smooth and beardless. They never wear a beard so they look younger than USUK-pop male singers who are in the same age as them. They're all skinny, but supportive and not effeminate. They're real fashionistas. They look very funny and beautiful in wearing pastel colors. When they do aegyo [cute facial and gestural expression], I can't hold my calmness. I go crazy for this. It's irresistible, you know."

According to Minh, the combination of childish expression with a feminine image produces the cuteness of K-pop male singers. In other words, K-pop promotes

not only a 'soft' masculine image (Jung 2011), in contrast with the macho masculine image appealing in USUK media culture (Louie 2012), but also an infantile type of masculinity. Minh argues that the 'soft - infantile' image of K-pop male singers doesn't make them effeminate, by contrast, it fulfills their masculinity. Concerning K-pop female singers, Minh notes that *"they always show their charm in the vulnerable looks and silly acts"*. As such, these music bands forge another image of the Asian feminine, which is less sexy but more infantile and sweet than the feminine image depicted by western media.

Moreover, the 'softness' of K-pop lies in the music videos (MVs) production. As Bo (young boy, 18, pro USUK-pop) discusses:

"Bo: K-pop is too soft, for me. From the beat to the lyrics, from the singers to their dance performance, all are softs. Even music video making, if you watch it carefully, you'll recognize that these music videos are based on the same structure: the pinky love story intertwined with some simple comical movements, that's all. It's so simple in compare with USUK-pop."

I: It means that, for you, USUK-pop MV is more sophisticated than K-pop MV?

Bo: Yep, I meant that. It's hard to understand USUK-pop music videos just by one look. There are a lot MV in USUK-pop, even if I would watch them again and again, I couldn't say that I understand their contents. Besides, there are more solo singers in USUK-pop than in K-pop. USUK-pop singers have a strong voices and characteristic in their performance. They are not controlled by disc company like K-pop singers are. So they could do whatever they want."

For Bo, pinky love is the common theme displayed in K-pop MVs. This theme is delivered by mini film with simple, comical dance movements of K-pop boy-bands or girl-bands on the soft electro beat. This simplicity of K-pop music plots make them more understandable, and memorable than their USUK-pop counterparts. To

explain this, Bo makes reference to record company's management strategy. He believes that by not being controlled by this one, USUK-pop singers are freer in implementing their characteristics than K-pop singers. Those characteristics lies in their powerful voices and their free style of performance. This remark implies that K-pop singers conform to record company in the production of MVs which are well modeled and controlled in order to fit the innocent and feminine imaginary of adult world of targeted young consumers. On the contrary, USUK-pop singers are more individualistic in making their own "authentic" music videos.

3.2. "I WANNA BE KAWAII-COOL"

In this section, we map out some aspects that capture the dynamic of the involvement of K-pop and USUK-pop in lifestyle construction of young Vietnamese consumers. These life experiential aspects are themed as: renovating masculinity, self-cultivating and rejuvenating traditional folk music.

3.2.1. *Renovating masculinity*

The massive expansion of K-pop in Vietnam has given rise to the 'boys over flowers' syndrome (Jung 2011) which refers to 'soft-infantile' masculine image among young people. This syndrome shapes the imagination and the temptation toward an ideal man of young Vietnamese girls. For our female informants, an ideal man is a young man who has an asexual beauty covered by cutesy trendy style and who can express his emotion publicly. Such image is quite new in Vietnamese context where the State promoted masculine image as a coalescence of Confucian concept of *wu* [military, hard, rough] (Louie, 2003) with communist values (self-control, self-sacrifice, rationality).

The syndrome 'boys over flowers' also affects the lifestyle construction of

some young straight boys. They dress tight outfits with pastel colors and decors, wear make-up and haircut promoted by Korean singers. Some of them dye their hair with fluorescent color and wear earring. They "don't care about critics about sexuality because manliness isn't reflected through [their] appearance" and that "beautiful boy is a trendy concept and because girls like it" (Bao, young boy, 20, pro K-pop). They incorporate *kawaii* (cute) culture into their style.

Nonetheless, the widespread of this new masculine image makes some young Vietnamese boys obsessed with the 'feminization of masculinity' (Louie, 2012). To against this phenomenon, they reconstruct their masculinity by incorporating masculine image provided by USUK-pop into their style. As Tu (young boy, year 23, pro USUK-pop) asserts:

"Nowadays, many young Vietnamese adopt Korean style. They try to be cute, to be fashionable. I don't like that. It looks queer, it is inappropriate for young man [...] To build my masculine look: I wear beard, I do bodybuilding, I do sun tan, I wear vintage, dark colored clothes and listen to USUK songs in the 1980s, 1990s"

For Tu, dark color of clothes and skin, bodybuilding and USUK songs signify 'hard' masculinity. These products/activities provide him a masculine appearance. Further, he affiliates to DIY motorbike club where participants share knowledge about motorbike and instruction to converse junk motorbike. This activity helps him forging his manliness and affirming his characteristic. However, his girlfriend is fancy of 'soft-infantile' masculinity. So to please her, he "shaves [his] beard, puts on cutie couple T-shirt with *kawaii* cartoon, does some romantic acts when she is around. But [he] keeps wearing dark clothes and tries to control his emotion. And when [he] is alone or with his friends [he] backs to [his] own style."

3.2.2. Self-cultivating

"I watch K-pop music videos to learn how to dress myself to look younger and fashionable. It [K-pop style] is less sexy than USUK-pop style. I also try to learn dance movements performed by K-pop singers [...] But when I am in bad mood, I listen to USUK-pop to boost me up"

(Mi, young girl, 17, pro K-pop and USUK-pop)

According to Mi, K-pop and USUK-pop are appropriate to cultivate her body and soul. On one hand, she consumes K-pop music videos to construct her own style and to build her dancing skill. On the other hand, USUK-pop music are regarded as sources for fulfilling her inner state. This tactic is relevant to self-cultivation in Confucian philosophy. Indeed, self-cultivation is a process through which an individual learns to cultivate his outer aspects (the body) as well as his inner one (the soul) to become a virtuous person (Tu 2000). Nonetheless, in doing self-cultivating, individuals should ensure their harmonious relationships with others (Tu 2000). For instance, in Vietnamese context, young people try to balance their pleasure seeking projects with the demands of their parents to avoid the conflict between them. In the case of Mi, she prefers more K-pop style than USUK-pop ones because it is more appropriate to her age. As she explains elsewhere in our interview, the sexiness of USUK-pop style makes her become naughty and non-virtuous. Thus, her parents will never let her wear it. Furthermore, she doesn't play USUK-pop music videos at home because *"[she] never have imagined how [her] parents will react when they see [her] watching USUK-pop music videos such as music videos of Miley Cyrus or Lady Gaga"*. Hence, she plays USUK-pop in an audio to *"listen to the song and to improve [her] English skill"*.

3.2.3. Rejuvenating traditional folk music

In search for their innovation, some Vietnamese youngsters make a mash up of traditional folk songs or traditional folk instrumental music which is only listened by older generation and electro/house or hip hop beat. Then, they practice break-dance on this remix. Break-dancing is negatively portrayed by the media as a form of pleasure seeking. Consequently, they rethink their performance by introducing some simple repetitive movements in traditional costume. For example, an indie group of young Vietnamese breakdancers has launched a hip hop/jazz concert in which they perform on the *xam* songs - a traditional music genre which was performed on northern street of Vietnam by blind people in the 14th century. This concert was well appreciated by both young and old generation (An Ngoc 2015). While national media applauded it as a reviving of traditional music, these young Vietnamese break-dancers regard it as their new experimentation in search for their uniqueness in the Vietnamese hip hop community.

4. DISCUSSION

We presented the young Vietnamese consumers' interpretation of two global cultural products originated from two different sites of cultural production. Our data interpretation sheds light on three points:

First, we observe that although the construction of lifestyles of young Vietnamese consumers has a same structure with global youth culture (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006), the 'common' tenet of this structure is dynamic rather than static. The core of this tenet doesn't only constitute western values and concepts as prior works have stated (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Ritzer, 2008), but also the non-western

one (in this case Asian values, see Iwabuchi 2004; Chua 2004).

Second, we detect an alternative model of cultural hybridization. Instead of interjecting the local into global cultures (Hannerz, 1992; Ger & Belk, 1996; Pieterse, 2009), the Vietnamese young consumers juxtapose the two global cultural components and use Vietnamese folk culture as the meaning channeling. In other words, local culture plays a role of myth which is used by youth to give the meanings to cultural *mélange* of two global cultures.

Third, the adoption of USUK-pop as a cultural resource against the power of K-pop and vice versa shows an alternative strategy of anti-cultural imperialism (Tomlinson 1990) of local consumers.

Parallel with restructuring and reviving local culture by creolizing global cultures, local consumers try to balance different global cultures existing in a local context. This strategy helps them to avoid the “power imbalance” (Ger and Belk 1996) between these ‘foreign’ cultures as well as between them and the local culture.

Our study is limited in focusing on one type of cultural products and of young urbanite consumers. Future research may take a more holistic view on multiple cultural products consumption in multiple setting. For example, it would be fruitful to examine the reception of foreign cultural products in the rural setting of Vietnam, where the environment is more conservative and there is less possibility for assessing global products.

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ANNEX:

TABLE OF RESULTS

	K-pop		USUK-pop		Vietnamese youth lifestyle construction	
	Singers	Music Videos	Singers	Music Videos	Gender	Self-cultivation
Kawaii (Cute)	'Soft-infantile' masculinity Pretty girls	Simple Modeled Colorful Love story	-	-	Beautiful boy	Pleasure seeking Self-centered
Cool	-	-	Hard masculinity Independent girls	Sophisticated Unique Innovative Meaningful	Rebel girl	Pleasure seeking Self-centered
Kawaii-cool	-	-	-	-	Kawaii-cool boy Kawaii-cool girl	Harmonizing body/soul Harmonizing self needs/parents' demands Harmonizing modern/tradition