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Journal of Business Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusres

Toward an understanding of young consumers' daily consumption practices in post-Doi Moi Vietnam

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Young consumer
Vietnam
Self-identity
Everyday consumption practices
Qualitative approach

ABSTRACT

More than 30 years have passed since *Doi Moi*, the economic and political reforms that transformed Vietnam into a lower middle-income market from one of the world's poorest markets. This transformation brought about changes in the consumption practices of Vietnamese consumers. Despite several studies focusing on these changes, the impact of the government's politics on young Vietnamese consumers' consumption practices has been largely unexamined. This study explores how young Vietnamese consumers develop and express their self-identity through their everyday consumption practices. Our findings from in-depth interviews and participatory observation indicate that consumption fosters reflexive self-awareness concerning the young consumers' competences, body sensitivities, and distinctive tastes in response to the control exerted by the government. The findings also reveal that young Vietnamese consumers use their everyday consumption practices to achieve individualization through self-emancipation, self-enrichment, and self-actualization, and to achieve socialization through self-authentication and self-cultivation. In this way, young Vietnamese consumers reject the communist identity and lifestyles promoted by the government.

1. Introduction

In 1986, in recognition of the inefficiency of the Soviet-type central planning of the national economic structure, the Vietnamese Communist Government (VCG) announced a reform program known as *Doi Moi* (renovation). This program introduced new market rules that set the business climate free, opening the market to transnational companies, privatizing national companies, and allowing global commodities and cultural contents (i.e., movies, music) to flow into the Vietnamese market (Shultz, Pecotich, & Le, 1994). In other words, the implementation of the *Doi Moi* policy transformed Vietnam into a market-driven economy. Since then, Vietnam has witnessed a steady economic expansion, reaching nearly 7% in 2015 (Deloitte, 2016) and achieved rapid growth of disposable income as well as consumers' expenditures, which reached up to \$150 million in 2016 (Euromonitor International, 2016).

The liberalization of the Vietnamese market is making way for the emergence of a consumer society (Breu, Salsberg, & Ha, 2010; Shultz & Pecotich, 1994) with dramatic changes in the social and cultural landscapes. These changes have been observed firstly in the emergence of new social classes (Van-Nguyen, Drummond, & Bélanger,

2012), the majority of which is middle-class, consisting of young urban educated professionals (King, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2007). Secondly, changes have been seen in the reconfiguration of social relationships and gender roles. For instance, some scholars observe that, despite the strong patriarchal structure of Vietnamese society, Vietnamese women today have an equal voice with their spouse in family decision making (Nguyen, Parker, Doan, & Brennan, 2012; Penz & Kirchler, 2012). Other scholars note that Vietnamese children also have a particular say in family purchase decision-making (Nguyen & Belk, 2013; Watne, Brennan, & Parker, 2013). Thirdly, changes include the replacement of pre-reform values and norms (e.g., asceticism, collectivism) by new ones (e.g., materialism, hedonism, individualism). These new values and norms have been introduced by global commodities and cultural flows (Le & Jolibert, 2001; Nguyen, Nguyen, & Barrett, 2007; Pecotique & Shultz, 1993; Soucy, 2003).

Finally, changes have also occurred in the VCG's politics on consumption. Although consumerism had been downplayed in favor of production and conspicuous consumption was discouraged before *Doi Moi*, these have since been legitimized. However, only commodities that are appropriate to the values and norms set up by the government are authorized. For example, the government has recently banned some

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.10.002>

Received 30 October 2016; Received in revised form 30 September 2017; Accepted 3 October 2017
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popular songs written by South Vietnamese songwriters during the Vietnam War period. According to *Tuoi Tre News*,¹ a major daily newspaper in Vietnam, these songs displease Vietnamese authorities because of their alleged anti-government content. In addition, some books, music spots, and magazine or journal articles are also restricted by the government as their content is regarded as “poisonous and harmful,” “superstitious,” and “sexually stimulating” (Nguyen & Thomas, 2004).

Through the politics of consumption, the government keeps the consumption practices of Vietnamese consumers under its control and thus strongly influences how Vietnamese consumers, especially young consumers, experience and organize their daily life. These changes have also had a huge impact on Vietnamese consumers' perceptions of themselves and their relationships with others.

The transition in Vietnam since *Doi Moi* from a so-called communist society to a consumer society has attracted the attention of consumer researchers in two research streams. The first stream looks for objective measures to evaluate the impact of changes in the macro structure (socio-economic and cultural structure) on consumers' perceptions and behaviors, as well as on interpersonal relationships. For instance, Shultz (1997, 2007) and Shultz, Westbrook, and Nguyen (2007) have measured the effects of the *Doi Moi* policy on consumers' perceptions of life satisfaction, leadership, and product quality; Shultz and Pecotich (1994) have developed new assessments of consumption patterns in Vietnam; and Nguyen and Belk (2013) have dealt with changes in interpersonal relationships in the context of wedding rituals. The second stream of research focuses on the emergence of new values, attitudes, and perceptions that consumers adopt through consumption. For example, Nguyen, Jung, Lantz, and Loeb (2003); Nguyen et al. (2007), Nguyen and Smith (2012) have looked at shopping behaviors of Vietnamese consumers and shown that hedonism and status orientation motivate Vietnamese consumers to engage in impulsive buying and to choose foreign products over the local ones.

Previous work in these two research streams has offered an insightful and comprehensive look at changes in consumer behaviors in post-*Doi Moi* Vietnam. However, it has paid little attention to understanding the role and meaning of consumption in everyday life, and particularly the significance consumption may have in the tension between the values of an emerging consumer society and the values espoused through the government's politics of consumption. To address this research gap, we consider the government's politics of consumption in our investigation of consumers' day-to-day consumption practices in post-*Doi Moi* Vietnam.

We pay particular attention to young consumers (aged 15–29), who represent nearly 30% of the population and who form the largest consumer group in Vietnam (Euromonitor International, 2016). The reasons for our choice are several. First, these young consumers were born in the transition period of Vietnamese society from communist to capitalist. In contrast to individuals aged 30–44, who were born before *Doi Moi*, these young consumers have had no experience with the ascetic lifestyle (Nguyen, 2012). Rather, they have grown up with the rise of foreign commodities in the Vietnamese market (especially foreign movies, music and books) as well as the emergence of various global consumer lifestyles. Second, those young consumers are well known as pleasure-seekers, culture consumers, and creative trend-setters, both generally (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006) and also specifically in the Vietnamese market (Nielsen, 2016). Third, this segment of consumers is directly under the control and surveillance of the government and is the segment most affected by the government's politics of consumption. We believe that by studying the consumption practices of young consumers, we can explore the changes of and tensions in daily life experiences and life organization of consumers in post-*Doi Moi* Vietnam.

To gain in-depth knowledge from a sample of young Vietnamese

consumers, we conducted qualitative research, using in depth-interviews combined with participatory observation in the field to collect the data. These techniques are particularly suited for revealing the experiential aspects of consumption in daily life. Our dataset captures thoughts, feelings, and experiences of Vietnamese consumers in the post-*Doi Moi* period.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we introduce the theoretical framework that we used to study youth consumption practices. This overview is followed by an overall description of the youth policy of the VCG. Then, we detail the research process. In the findings section, we discuss the key themes that emerge from our data analysis. We subsequently highlight our theoretical and managerial contributions as well as some limitations of our research. Finally, we conclude by calling for further research on the daily consumption experiences of young consumers in other transitioning markets.

2. Theoretical framework – youth consumption and modernity

The liberation of the market has put Vietnam on the path of modernization. Traditional social order and structures have been breaking down and are being replaced by new systems, while new life chances and choices have been emerging. To build an understanding of the way that individuals, especially young individuals, deal with social and structural changes, we draw on work that has explored the social and structural changes of modernity in Western contexts (Giddens, 1991; Miles, 2000).

Giddens (1991) has argued that the process of modernization entailed “de-traditionalization,” which leads to new uncertainties. Indeed, the traditional institutions (religion, social class, local community, and so on) that individuals draw on for self-identification and daily practices have become unstable. The crumbling of traditional institutions that gave certainty of identity and destiny can on the one hand be positively valorized as emancipatory for the individual. However, the individualization process also means that subjects must articulate their own self-identity. Given the dynamic and processual nature of modernity, or the liquefying consequences of modernity (Bauman, 2000) such self-identity articulations must necessarily be reflexive. Reflexive identities are, according to Giddens (1991), expressed in lifestyles, which

can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular form of self-identity (1991: 81).

Drawing on Giddens' arguments, Miles (2000) sees young people as more flexible than other demographic segments in their construction of lifestyles. Thanks to their creative minds, they are able to transform limited social resources for their own ends (Willis, 1990). Young people deal with anxiety created by socio-structural changes by adopting consumer lifestyles (Miles, 2000), and they use consumption as a resource to build and maintain their identities. Consumer identity makes young people feel that their everyday life is more stable.

Such stability is not manifested in the form of a deep-rooted sense of sameness, but in a flexible, mutable, and diverse sense of identity within which consumerism appears to present the only viable resource (Miles, 2000: 158).

In other words, consumption bridges young people's experiences of social changes with their experiences of themselves. This idea is substantially illustrated by other works, such as research on the Buddhist self's construction of young Thai individuals through their symbolic consumption (Wattanasuwan & Elliott, 1999); study of lifestyle construction of young people in Denmark and Greenland (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006); work on the reflexive identity project of Iranian young people (Jafari & Goulding, 2013); work on identity construction of millennial youth of social network age (Doster, 2012),

¹ <http://tuoi tre.vn/tin/van-hoa-giai-tri/20170409/tu-vu-cam-vinh-vien-5-ca-khuc-ban-goc-va-di-ban/1294680.html>

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