

Section I: Consumer Issues

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Globalization, Consumerism, and the Emergence of Teens in Contemporary Vietnam

Abstract

The Doi Moi (reform) program enacted by the Vietnam Communist Party in 1986 marked the country's transition from a subsidy to a market economy and signalled profound changes in life experiences for Vietnamese youth. The government-owned media that once indoctrinated youth into the communist ideologies became increasingly dominated by private corporations and opened the door for the rapid influx of Western cultural influences. Through analysis of newspapers directed at Vietnamese youth between 1995 and 2005, this article traces the historical emergence of teen Viet and teen culture. The concept teen broke the continuous life trajectory into discrete stages and marked the shift from an ideologically grounded youth under the Vietnam Communist Party to a market-oriented youth whose individual identities are cultivated through capitalist consumption.

Introduction

In today's Vietnam, young people between the ages of 10 and 19 are commonly recognized as a distinct social-developmental group. The terms *teen Viet* (Vietnamese teenagers), *dan teen* (teen population), and *tuoi teen* (teen-age) have become household terms used to describe this group of young people who are not quite children, not fully adults. The root word, teen, and the developmental group to which it refers—deemed adolescents by G. Stanley Hall¹—have a long history in Western developmental psychology and have become entrenched concepts in cultural constructions of the typical life trajectory. Likewise, a survey of contemporary Vietnamese media with its focus on teens and their distinct and often hyperbolically construed subculture may lead one to conclude that the concept *teen* is similarly ensconced in the public imagination. Newspapers frequently run articles with titles such as “Nhom teen dat nha di cuop” (A runaway teen group became robbers) and “Ngo nghech ve sex, teen nu ngam ngui thai nghen” (Ignorant about sex, female teenagers get pregnant). The recently emerged capitalist marketplace has also carved out a niche for teens. Viettel, a major Vietnamese mobile phone provider, offers a service *Co Con Tuoi Teen* (Having a Teenage Child) to assist parents of teenagers by sending news and information to users' mobile phones.

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The anxiety surrounding teens and the commercialized infrastructure that exists in their wake reflect not just concern about teens as a developmental group, but also the recent concept of teen as a newly emerged type of person—a notion that did not exist in Vietnam until the past 10–15 years.² Indeed, while the language to name and describe teens is widely used and has a definite, shared meaning today, terms such as “teen Viet” and “tuoi teen” also elicit feelings of unease, if not outright alienation, for older generations in Vietnamese society. The foreignness of the term “teen” is undeniable. Recently borrowed from English, the term has no precedent in the Vietnamese language; neither a comparable word nor a comparable concept predated its import from the English language in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Therefore, knowing the history of Vietnam and the Vietnamized root word *teen* is crucial for understanding conceptualization and representation of teenage youth in contemporary Vietnam, as well as associated feelings of anxiety and alienation, and what may even be discerned as an aura of exoticism surrounding teenagers in Vietnam. This history also sheds light on the significance of teens’ presence and form in contemporary Vietnam and in the global economy, particularly Asian countries going through a globalization process similar to Vietnam. This is a history marked by rapid and drastic economic, social, and political change.

This study, part of a larger project on the conceptualization of adolescents during Vietnam’s recent decades of rapid sociopolitical change, traces the genealogy of terms such as “teen Viet” and “tuoi teen” in widely read newspapers aimed at this group. By outlining the appearance and ascendance of teens in Vietnam, I demonstrate how the import of a market economy dramatically shifted the balance of power in constituting life experiences from the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) to corporations selling teenage products. I argue that this shift is not simply a change in the locus of power but also a radical reworking of life itself. On the one hand, the market economy and the Western ideas with which it was associated broke the traditional Vietnamese conceptualization of life from that of a continuous trajectory into one of discrete stages of development, each characterized by distinct developmental needs and consumption needs. More significantly, the shift from an ideologically grounded youth under the VCP to a market-oriented youth also entailed a shift from ideas as the glue for social citizenship to embodiment—physical, emotional, and *individual*—as a marker and prerequisite for group membership and the development of a fully realized identity. In that light, this study—one of the first examinations of the concept of teens in contemporary Vietnam—will contribute to the existing literature about conceptualization and representation of teens, as well as the integral relationship between teenagers, the modern state, and the market—all of which are new concepts to contemporary Vietnam and many developing countries. It also provides unique insights into the influence of globalization on (re)shaping the media of one of the last remaining communist countries in the world, where the government used to impose totalitarianism on the press.

Vietnam: 1995–2005

From the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 until 1986, Vietnam was united under communist rule and had a closed-door policy, largely forbidding political, economic, and cultural exchanges with Western countries. During this period,

the VCP, via the revised 1980 Constitution, established strict linguistic and ideological control over the public. According to the Constitution, all public discursive forms in Vietnam must be “built on the principles and theories of Marxist-Leninism,” must “follow the artistic vision of the Vietnam Communist Party,” and must be geared towards “directing the public’s opinion, educating them on political, cultural, and scientific issues, and encouraging the whole society to work hard for the socialist cause.”³ Written rule was enforced by the VCP and lived, oftentimes wholeheartedly, by the people. Life, then, was not represented as a series of stages marked by the changing biological body and emerging individual personhood, as it is in Western societies. Communalism trumped the person, and the Party trumped all, creating the very terms upon which people understood their lives as developing communists. During the period between the end of the Vietnam War and 1986, teenagers in Vietnam did not exist as such. Dubbed as *thieu nien* (young in age, lacking in age), young people were portrayed as miniature communists whose thoughts, emotions, and behaviors modeled realized adult communists.⁴

Life for young people and broader Vietnamese society began to undergo drastic changes, beginning in 1986 when the VCP initiated the Doi Moi (reform) program. Under Doi Moi, Vietnam transitioned from a subsidy economy (i.e., the government dictated what to produce, how much to produce, and how to distribute what was produced to society) to a market economy with a socialist orientation, which allowed the private sector to develop and allowed increased trade with other countries. Following a few difficult transition years, the period between 1991 and 1995 brought unprecedented economic growth to Vietnam. At an average annual rate of 8%, Vietnam’s economic growth was among the highest in the world.⁵ Vietnam also revised its Constitution once again in 1992 to enable larger political, economic, and social reforms, all of which were geared toward losing the previously tight grip of the government. During the keynote address of the Politburo, the 8th Congress, held in Hanoi between June 28 and July 1, 1996, the VCP hailed this meeting as “a historic Congress marking the 10th year of reform in Vietnam.”⁶ After pointing out the success of the first decade of reform in “bringing the country out of socio-economic crisis” and “preparing the country for the first phase of the industrialization,” the report asserted that Vietnam was now “ready to start the new phase: industrialization and modernization.”⁷

The years following the 1996 Congress were marked by Vietnam’s gradual integration into the global political and economic community. After becoming a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Vietnam joined ASEAN Free Trade Area and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation in 1995 and 1998, respectively. The country also reestablished relationships with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 2001, signed trade agreements with the European Union in 2003, and expanded bilateral business relationships with many countries in the world. Finally, after decades of unsuccessful negotiation, Vietnam became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2007. In the words of economist John Thoburn, Vietnam had, in only one decade, launched itself into “the ‘club’ of rapidly globalizing developing countries.”⁸

Economic developments greatly benefited Vietnamese society in general, and Vietnamese youths in particular. Gains in education and health were impressive. On December 2, 1998, the Congress of Vietnam passed the Law on Education, aimed at popularizing secondary school education among all youths

between ages 11 and 18. High school enrollment rates increased from 51% in 1996 to 75% in 2005, a giant leap given that a unified 12-grade system with a new high school was only established for the first time in Vietnam in 1990. Enrollment in college also increased from nearly 900,000 students in the 1999–2000 academic year to more than 1.3 million in the 2004–2005 academic year, thus solidifying the idea that college education should be a standard, if not desirable, experience in the life trajectory for young people.⁹ Economic growth also spurred enormous gains in health markers. Youths in the late 1990s were a full developmental year ahead of their 1975 counterparts on measurements of height and weight; they also reached puberty a year earlier.¹⁰ Many of these gains are attributable to improved nutrition and living conditions.

Cultural changes were equally dramatic. Young people gained not only improved health and education, but also an entirely new sense of group identity as teens. The borrowing of English terms and the new representations of teen Viet and their culture in Vietnamese media mark important sociological processes in postwar Vietnam. These include changing power dynamics among the key groups that shape the media in Vietnam, specifically, and transformations in the way relationships between the state, media, and members of any given public shape life course ontology and experiences. Ultimately, by using Vietnam as a case study for understanding the impact of globalization, we gain greater insight into the role of the market economy in reconstituting the day-to-day realities of life, indeed, *creating* new forms of embodied personhood that differ dramatically from those which preceded it.

Methods

Materials and Procedure

Materials used for this study were historical and cultural artifacts, including newspapers, written laws and policies, literary and artistic works, high school textbooks, and political propaganda materials. The following four newspapers, published between 1995 and 2005, served as the primary source of data for this analysis:

- *Thieu Nien* (Vanguard teenagers newspaper) and *Hoa Hoc Tro* (Schoolflowers newspaper): two newspapers targeted directly at youth;
- *Nhan Dan* (The people newspaper, the official voice of the VCP): a political newspaper reflecting the official political and social agenda of the nation; and
- *Tien Phong* (The vanguards newspaper, the official voice of the Ho Chi Minh Youth League): a general-interest newspaper focused on a broad range of issues.

The period spanning 1995 to 2005 was selected because 1995 was the year that Vietnam and the United States normalized their relationship after two decades of embargo and sanctions following the Vietnam War. This event officially opened the door for Vietnam to join the global world. A preliminary examination of the mass media data indicated that terms such as “teen Viet” and “tuoi teen” had become popular and commonplace by 2005; thus, I chose 2005 as the cut-off point for the analysis.

Because the mass media in Vietnam has an integral relationship with the state—the media has been tightly regulated if not outright controlled by the VCP for several decades—studying discourse in state-owned newspapers allows me to identify and analyze how powerful entities, in this case the VCP and/or capitalists and markets, conceptualized young people during particular time periods.¹¹ Ninety-four percent of young people in Vietnam also identify the mass media as their most common source of information for a broad range of issues including love and marriage, gender and sexual relationships, pregnancy, and family planning, suggesting that media sources are among the most productive cultural resources for reconstructing popular discourse aimed at and actually taken up by young people during the study period.¹² Finally, because discourse about teens not only reflects and represents but also constructs and constitutes realities of teens and the larger Vietnamese society, media artifacts can be seen as sites where stories about teenagers were told and where the next chapter of the story was invented.

Among these newspapers, I used *Thieu Nien* and *Hoa Hoc Tro* as primary data sources to examine the emergence of terms and concepts integral to teen culture. *Nhan Dan* and *Tien Phong* were used as comparative reference points to *Thieu Nien* and *Hoa Hoc Tro* to contextualize the power of the state and to better understand how relationships between the state and the media impacted the conceptualization of teenagers. Besides the newspapers, I also collected political, historical, and cultural materials to develop a “big picture” of the social, political, and cultural conditions of Vietnam at different moments. These materials included junior high and high school textbooks on the subjects of moral education and literature as well as mandatory teaching guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education and Training. They also included posters; meeting memorandums; leaflets; propaganda documents distributed by the Ho Chi Minh Youth League; laws and other legal documents concerning teenagers and youth; and songs, popular paintings, and related cultural artifacts about teenagers or youth.

Data Analysis

I analysed the data in two rounds. In the first round, I simultaneously traced the appearance of the word “teen” (and modified derivations/phrases that incorporate the term) in *Thieu Nien* and *Hoa Hoc Tro* and analyzed the contents of the articles that described teenagers and teenage culture. I coded both explicit language and implicit meanings from the articles. To better contextualize these articles within the social and cultural environment, I read political newspapers and other contemporaneous documents to get a sense of the political, economic, and social conditions of Vietnam during these years.

After completing the first round of coding, I developed horizontal and vertical metathemes, taking into consideration political, economic, and social transformations in Vietnam. Vertically, metathemes were built by comparing representations about teenagers from *Thieu Nien* and *Hoa Hoc Tro* with those from the political newspaper (*Nhan Dan*) as well as the general-interest newspaper (*Tien Phong*). Thus, I was able to compare discourse directed at teenagers with discourse about teenagers from sources directed at adults and the general public. Horizontal metathemes were built by comparing and contrasting teen discourse over the span of ten years. Specifically, I looked for continuities and discontinuities, paying particular attention to how periods of stability and shifts in discourse

related to changing interactions between the government, the economy, and the emerging civil society over time.

Results

Commercialized Media, Westernized Discourse

As part of the economic liberation program started in the early 1990s, the government began reducing its media subsidies while continuing to safeguard its position as the sole owner and supervisor of Vietnam's media. To enable the media's transition from a fully subsidized educational and propaganda-making tool of the government to a commercial, profit-making endeavor, the Congress revised the 1980 Media Law of Vietnam. This revision, enacted in 1999, soon prompted newspapers to alter their content in an attempt to attract a larger readership and improve sales.¹³ Reforms also opened the door for big corporations to influence discourse through sponsoring content and advertising their products in newspapers.

Mass media and telecommunications expanded rapidly in the wake of the 1999 law and improved economy. For example, only 2 out of 1,000 people in Vietnam had telephones in 1991. By 1999 the number had increased to 32; by 2005, nearly all urban families owned telephones.¹⁴ Television and radio access, once a luxury, became the rule rather than the exception. In 2006, the Ministry of Planning and Investment reported that 90% of households could watch television and 95% could listen to the Voice of Vietnam during the previous year.¹⁵ Government TV networks also expanded from a handful of programs in the early 1990s to hundreds of programs, most of which were geared toward entertainment. Moreover, in urban areas of Vietnam, many families can subscribe to cable TV and watch foreign programs.

Following this trend, newspapers and magazines written for and about teenagers in Vietnam changed drastically. Since 1996, *Hoa Hoc Tro* newspaper, the largest and most dominant voice of Vietnamese teenagers, has displayed a clear process of commercialization and Westernization. Started in 1991 as a monthly newspaper with 20 black-and-white pages per issue, by October 1996 *Hoa Hoc Tro* had become a weekly publication with 36 pages; by the year 2000, this weekly newspaper had grown to 50 pages of content and 6 to 14 supplemental pages. Whereas most of the 20 pages in the newspaper between 1991 and 1995 were filled with poems, short stories, essays, question-and-answer columns, and comic strips, by 2005, the poems, short stories, and long feature articles had almost disappeared. In their place were very short news articles and stories about Vietnamese and Western entertainment stars and their latest products, trends in youth culture, quizzes aimed at self-analysis, and shopping guides. There was no mistaking that the newspapers had largely turned into guided shopping catalogues for young people. This shift could be the result of readers' demands or, vice versa, of newspaper-created demands that young Vietnamese people didn't know they had until they read the newspaper—or perhaps, this was a two-way street. Regardless of the reason for the shift, in *Hoa Hoc Tro*'s own statistics, the shopping guide was the section that attracted the most responses from its readers. For example, in the last two months of 2004, *Hoa Hoc Tro* received about 50,000 letters sent to the shopping section, compared to 10,000 letters sent to all other sections of the newspaper combined. The page that received the lowest number of contributing articles was in fact the short

story page, which was the famous section that launched *Hoa Hoc Tro* into its position as “the voice of young people” when it was first published in 1991.¹⁶

Another striking pattern in *Hoa Hoc Tro*'s transformation was the increasing involvement of corporations in the contents of the newspaper. This involvement manifested in two ways: (1) corporations provided coupons to *Hoa Hoc Tro* readers in exchange for being featured in a section called “Supermarket,” and (2) corporations sponsored regular columns and features in the newspaper, thus associating their names and products with youth culture. International trade and communication offered inroads for Western corporations, which quickly made their way deep into the discourse of teenagers. International content and English language terms became eventually dominated the pages of the newspaper, especially terms related to popular culture. Starting with words like “video clips,” “hot CD,” “single,” “album,” “movies,” “live show,” “games,” “files,” and “computer,” the newspaper inducted its readers into an expanding English vocabulary that embraced consumption and youth culture. Amid this expansion, the borrowing of a specific English term and its cultural connections were central: the term “teen” and the emergence of teen culture. This borrowing, unlike other cases, was not just a matter of adopting a word but of incorporating the world of shared meaning that the word represented. Simply speaking, it meant the import of the Western concept of a teenager and its accompanying teenage culture into Vietnam.

Within just a few years, the imported concept of a teenager would, in fact, become localized and blend into the social discourse as an authentic Vietnamese phenomenon, thus giving birth to the definitive concept of teen Viet.

The Import of Teen and the Emergence of Tuoi Teen

The English term “teen” began appearing in Vietnamese discourse in 2000. One of the earliest appearances of the term was traced to *Hoa Hoc Tro*'s Issue 325, published on March 2, 2000. In the section “*Sieu thi hifi*” (Hifi supermarket), the newspaper published an article with the title “Grammy 2000: A Victory Night for Santana and Disappointment to Teen Sensation.” In the Vietnamese version of the article, the term “teen sensation” was used one time, only at the end of the article, and appeared in English together with its Vietnamese translation in parentheses. In other cases, *Hoa Hoc Tro* used the Vietnamese translation of the word, which was *trao luu tre*, a translation that literally meant “youth trends/movements” rather than “teen sensation.”

Between 2000 and 2001, the term “teen” appeared several times in the above manner in *Hoa Hoc Tro*, that is, as an English word used to describe foreign teenagers. The first time the term “teen” appeared as a Vietnamese word—meaning it was written and pronounced as an English word but had a Vietnamese meaning and was considered part of the Vietnamese vocabulary—was in 2002. This was also the first year that the term “tuoi teen” appeared as a definite noun and concept. On page 14 of the special 2002 Tet Issue, *Hoa Hoc Tro* published an article entitled “Phim tinh yeu sen nang” (Love movies that are way too cheesy) with the subtitle “Nhưng bo phim tinh yeu dang ‘cong pha’ trai tim *teen-teen* mit uot” (Love movies that are breaking the cheesy *teen-teen* hearts). In the article, the author reviewed the formula for love movies that were often shown in Vietnam, including those made in Australia, South Korea, Hong Kong, America, Latin America, and Vietnam. The review of American love movies was as follows:

Love in American style:

Love in American style, well, hih . . . you must cover your eyes often! A boy meets a girl. He winks at her, she glances at him, and bam, they start holding hands, then “yogurt Kizz,” and . . . then, of course, they go to-a-place-that-everyone-knows-where. And only after that stage can their love story start seeing problems so that the two can really get to understand each other and develop real love. Especially, love in American movies is . . . easy to end. A love can end just like pressing the key Enter.

Plus point: Short, quick, exciting, many twists and turns, and romantic enough

Minus point: Easy to cause “thought disorder” to “*tuoi teen*”¹⁷

In this excerpt, American love movies are thought capable of causing a “thought disorder to *tuoi teen*.” In both the subtitle and the article, “teen” was taken from English but was entirely “Vietnamized”; it was even modified in a creative way, as in the case of the word “teen-teen,” which means “very teenager-like, belonging to teenagers only, characteristics of teenagers, or the sentimental part of being a teenager.” The term teen had been modified, incorporated, and by the early 2000s, institutionalized such that it reflected and created an emerging new youth culture in Vietnam.

By 2004, terms like “teen” and “*tuoi teen*” appeared on almost every page of *Hoa Hoc Tro* and were common in the social discourse. Frequent sections and columns such as “Teeny mart,” (Teenagers’ mart) “Truyen tranh teen” (Teen comics), “Phong cach teen” (Teen style), “Truyen tuoi teen” (Teen stories), and “Danh ngon teen” (Teen proverbs) made the terms “teen,” “*tuoi teen*,” and “*dan teen*” (teen nation) the defining concepts of teenage life in Vietnam. “Teen Viet” became the umbrella title under which Vietnamese teenagers labelled themselves, and in many ways, it was an organizing concept that constituted all Vietnamese teenagers. The term “teen Viet” was coined not just as an identifying label but also one of entitlement and honor since it signified a distinct and fully developed culture of *tuoi teen*. That culture consisted of (1) a distinct teen language/vocabulary/lexicon, (2) a distinct teen fashion and consumption culture, (3) a distinct system of teen beliefs/values, and (4) a distinct system of approved and highlighted or tabooed, but distinctively teen, behaviors.

The marketized, consumption-based, and individualistic teen culture that emerged in the wake of economic liberalization and globalization shaped Vietnamese life in profound ways, and as I will show in the following sections, this transition was not simply a cognitive shift ushered in by new concepts; in fact, teen Viet’s reliance on individuality, emotions, and embodiment mark a significant departure from the ideologically grounded life that existed in previous decades under communism.

The Proliferation of Teen Identities

Teen fashion and teen language were external markers of the new identities and teen role models that arose in and through teen Viet culture from the mid 1990s until today. Colorful teen fashions and flowery teen language simultaneously marked a new sense of aesthetics and became the vehicle through which

new identities were mobilized and occupied. The singular role models for youth erected through VCP propaganda in previous generations were replaced by more desirable and diverse identities that teens could choose. Even the idealized model of the high achieving academic teen was marginalized in the shadow of the many character types that teenagers could identify with and model themselves after. In the Tet issue of 2005, *Hoa Hoc Tro* devoted 14 pages to reviewing the most popular types of characters that comprise teen Viet (Table 1). Each type was coined with the word *cong dong teen* (teen community), but it was essentially a collection of prototypes for teen Viet: business teen, cine-teen, sports teen, hi-tech teen, stylist teen, music teen, and gossip teen.

The above teen prototypes differed significantly from the once cherished markers of ideal Vietnamese youth: political maturity; academic performance; engagement in school activities, Youth League movements, and community activities; and being good children in the family.¹⁹ Even the “being a good friend at school” criterion was redefined as “belonging to a teen community.” Here, peer interactions became the defining element for teen Viet, and in order to fit in with peers, teen Viet needed to, above all else, adjust their hobbies and consumption behaviors to fit those of desired peers. Once considered trivial, music, movies, fashion, and sports now became key aspects of teen Viet lives and were core features in their new identities. Key words used to describe teen Viet now include “cool,” “hot,” “stylish,” “hip,” and “trendy,” instead of “effort,” “sacrifice,” “self-discipline,” “good deeds,” “Youth League,” “Five lessons of Uncle Ho” (the five key teachings of Ho Chi Minh that Vietnamese youth hold as commandments), or “youth movements.” The idea of preserving innocence, which previously entailed being oblivious to money and the material world, was no longer important to teen Viet. Instead, teens were encouraged to embrace popular culture and the entertainment market. Moreover, because teen Viet now constructed their identities based upon commodity consumption and knowledge of commercialized popular culture, their sense of personal value became attached to commercial value. As I will demonstrate in the following sections, this individual identity and the commodities and hobbies through which it is expressed is intimately tied to the capitalist marketplace and depends in part on an increasingly elaborate and individual material selfhood—one in which bodies and emotions simultaneously consume and constitute themselves through marketized relationships.

Embodied Teens

It is perhaps no surprise that magazines, newly motivated by profit and backed by corporate dollars, increased their focus on product marketing. But when juxtaposed with even recent decades in Vietnam, during which young adults saw themselves as emerging communists whose individual identities were subordinated to the interests of the Party, the active pursuit of individuality through purchase, and even the increased focus on the body, is remarkable. Corporations, rather than the VCP, gained control of the media and therefore wielded great power in setting the terms upon which teens viewed themselves and their lives. Diana, a company that manufactured sanitary napkins and tampons, is one example. Beginning in 1999, Diana sponsored a question and answer column, “Diana answers the girls,” in which female readers of *Hoa Hoc Tro* could send questions about their menstruation and puberty concerns to a Diana representative. There was no information

Table 1. Models for Vietnamese teenagers¹⁸

Type/Model	Major characteristics
1 <i>Teen doanh nhan</i> (Business teen)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have a desire to make money and own a business - Already start a small business while still going to school - Key words: business, owner, market, decisive
2 <i>Teen dien anh</i> (Cine-teen, movies teen)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Know everything about the Oscars, “hot” movies, actors and actresses, history of movies, and other stories related to movies - Regularly buy newly released movies and watch movies every week - Know everything about different local theaters
3 <i>Teen the thao</i> (Sports teen)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Get up at midnight or dawn to watch live games in major European and American TV programs - Play sports regularly, almost to the point of obsession - Know a lot of stories about sports stars, game strategies, etc. - Excel in physical education at school - Participate and organize school soccer, basketball, and other sports teams and tournaments
4 <i>Teen tan tien</i> (Hi-tech teen)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Know everything about hot hi-tech trends and products - Spend a lot of time on the Internet to read about technologies and other information - Know how to fix computers and know how to make telescopes
5 <i>Teen xi-tai</i> (Stylist teen)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Know a lot about fashion and like to dress up in a way that highlights personality and difference - Have a high sense of fashion and creativity - Friendly and easygoing
6 <i>Teen am nhac</i> (Music teen)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Know a lot about music, music news, and trends, and love to listen to, play, and dance to music - Own CD player, MP3 player, minidisk, iPod, or a stereo system to play music - Spend a lot of time collecting music CDs and going to music events
7 <i>Teen thong tin</i> (Gossip teen)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Always have the most updated news about events and activities in school - Always have the most updated news about who is dating whom, who is breaking up with whom, etc. - Always know the most about the history and gossipy stories about the school, teachers, friends, etc.

about the representative’s credentials—whether the person replying to the readers’ letters on behalf of Diana was an expert in adolescent health and psychology or not. The authority of Diana was achieved simply through manufacturing a product related to menstruation. Moreover, in foregrounding issues of menstruation in *Hoa Hoc Tro*, Diana departed from the magazine’s prior ideologically and intellectually

focused content by drawing focus to biological and embodied aspects of youth development.

The power of corporations and products to create embodied identities was often exercised through a growing fashion industry. Between 1996 and 2005, and particularly after 2000, pictures of foreign teen stars and teen Viet wearing trendy clothes filled the pages of magazines, a phenomenon that was considered unacceptable in previous periods when focus on the body was deemed contrary to ideologically driven communal ideals. Clothing in the pictures was colorful, even mismatched, with multiple layers accentuated with several accessories. These pictures reflected the material world and excess. With its boldness and disregard for traditional Vietnamese ways of styling the body, this type of fashion was novel and foreign looking. Unlike their grandparents' and parents' clothes, which relied upon traditional markers of elegance, class, and culture, teen clothes were aimed at making a bold statement on the part of the individual. The new aesthetics emphasized creativity, difference, fun, comfort, youthfulness, and sexiness. For teen Viet, fashion was no longer about utility, but an essential channel through which they revealed and defined themselves. The body became a primary site for elaborating a unique, individual identity, a commodified form of self-expression. Personal consumption became not only acceptable but also recommended (if not required) for teens seeking to establish their places in the social order. This dynamic is illustrated boldly and concisely in the following fashion column, and deserves quoting at length.

Your Shoes are Gossiping about You

The kind of shoes that a girl likes says a lot to the world about her personality.

Sports shoes say:

My boss never walks a straight line, she has to jump up every three minutes. I don't always look clean because my boss rarely has time to take care of me, she is always busy, you know, with tons of hobbies and a mountain of plans. Living with her is tiring, but it's kinda fun because I am almost the only pair of shoes in her kingdom of shoes and sandals. She has a lot of friends because she is straightforward, friendly, open, and forgiving.

Sandals and girly shoes say:

My boss is quite shy when facing a lot of strange people. But when she meets her close friends, she talks like a machine gun and laughs constantly. She is super good at storytelling . . . But she has a weakness: she doesn't like to argue, she is afraid of confronting other people. I really don't agree with her on this point, cuz, without debating, how can we really understand anything, right?

Colorful flip-flop says:

My boss is a wizard of shopping. Even when she doesn't have a penny in her pocket, my boss and I can still spend a whole afternoon in the shops, just to look and try stuff on. Nobody knows the prices of different kinds of clothes and shoes like her.²⁰

The article sends a clear message to its readers: shoes mirror the self. In addition to showcasing a newfound appreciation for physical and external appearance,

the article suggests that one's physical appearance is an extension of one's inner beauty. This is in stark contradiction to pre-globalization media directed at teens in Vietnam, when physical appearance was not only viewed as secondary to inner beauty but even de-emphasized and tabooed because it was thought to distract girls and cause arrogance.²¹ The new teenage girl was encouraged to balk at social pressure and cultural traditions; instead, she struck out on her own and by doing so, revealed herself to be a unique, independent, and individual being. She began to resemble her Western teen counterparts.

Yet the new teen is not all-powerful, as the discourse of choice would have it. In this column, the teen girl's attempt to, literally, *fashion* her own identity bumps up against the agency of the objects she uses to do so. Shoes are granted remarkable agency. Except for the title, in which the author of the piece warns her reader that her shoes are gossiping about her, only one sentence is written from the narrative standpoint of a human being. Indeed, once informed that shoes gossip, the shoes themselves take over the column, divulging the personality quirks and hobbies of their so-called bosses. In a fascinating turn, the sandals and girly shoes even disagree with their boss! Here we see fashion choices not only as a means by which individual girls exercise agency in order to achieve a particular subtype of teen identity or to modulate personal information that is being conveyed tacitly through these choices, but also as a means by which commodities themselves exercise agency over the consumer. There is a not-so-subtle warning here that the teen who does not wield tight control of her fashion choices also loses control of herself; in fashioning the body, the teen girl is also marketing her identity in a calculated way. In this way, she is incited to maintain control of herself through market-based consumption.

Teen-Teen Language for Teen-Teen Feelings

Another striking feature of the newly emerged teen Viet is the rapidly elaborated system of language that took shape in this culture. In just a few years, teens developed distinct ways of speaking and writing, including new vocabulary, pronunciations, and shared meanings; teen language even deviated from the grammatical rules of the standard Vietnamese language. Teen Viet vocabulary expanded both via borrowing English words and by distorting old Vietnamese words and inventing new words that were comprehensible only among other teens. Labeled specifically as *ngon ngu teen* (teen language), the new language system of teen Viet had three major characteristics: (1) it was highly colloquial, conversational, and interactive; (2) it employed many words borrowed from English but then localized, modified, and Vietnamized, specifically to be used by teenagers; and (3) it was constantly evolving, creatively and dramatically. Over the years, this subsystem of language managed to penetrate into mainstream social discourse, despite the fact that it was strongly criticized by the older generations for being too colloquial, too casual, "too Westernized," and even "grammatically wrong." Among the most notable attributes of teen language was its emotional content. In fact, much of the linguistic creativity in the new teen language centered around creating new words to describe interpersonal relationships and feelings.

One clear example is the expanding list of words and phrases teen Viet developed to talk about love (*tinh yeu*) or love-like feelings without using the word "love": *tinh iu*, *tinh cum*, *cam tinh*, *tam ly thu vi*, *lo_ve*, *lop*, *ket*, and *bo ket*. Many of

these words never existed in Vietnamese vocabulary before the late 1990s and are not intelligible to people from older generations in Vietnam.

Another notable characteristic of teen Viet language is the frequent use of colloquial interjections. Colloquial interjections within sentences are, like many of the new teen words, predominantly emotive. This form of expression was neither present nor allowed in public media in previous historical periods. From 2000 onward, teen writers in *Hoa Hoc Tro* were free to add *hihi*, *haha*, *hehe*, *keke*, *kaka*, and many other colloquial words signifying laughter. In the same way, crying (*huhu*), choking (*ac ac*), breathing (*phu phu*), and other expressions were also employed in *Hoa Hoc Tro*, something that was never allowed in Vietnamese newspapers before 2000. Marketplace ads from *Hoa Hoc Tro* demonstrate several characteristics of the new teen language:

This pair of jeans, I will sell to you guys at a *super-duper friendly* price: only 100,000 dong. Please email, I've kept it there for a while *rùi*.

Auction: A special auction from brother Bo Dan Truong *nè*. A yellow, long-sleeve jersey, *very cool* for the fall. Of course, there is a *hugeeeee* signature of brother Bo in the back, *hehe*.²²

In the above example, the underlined Vietnamese words (*rùi*, *nè*) are distorted Vietnamese words. When added to sentences, they do not significantly alter the meaning of the phrase, but they do lend the writing a more interactive and endearing tone.

The ascendance of feelings among teen Viet was yet another marker of teen culture's creation of embodied, individualized selfhood. Much like the examples of identity formation and self-management achieved through calculated market-based consumption described above, corporations had a stake in eliciting and cultivating emotions. For example, Yo-Most, a company that produced yogurts, ice cream, and other dairy products, sponsored the page "News" in *Hoa Hoc Tro*, which featured news about teen culture. The substantive content of the page had no obvious link to any of Yo-Most's products, but the term "Yo-Most" was introduced and regularly used as an adjective to describe a new type of feeling particular to teenagers. "Yo! Feelings" was the phrase used to capture this emotion. "News" even invited readers to share their own "Yo!" feelings with the magazine:

Extremely happy, extremely excited! So exuberant! All these feelings make you want to jump up and scream "Yo!" on top of your lungs. Let's share those wonderful moments with "Yo! feelings" and your "Yo! friends." Yo-Most will have many gifts that are so "Yo!" to those who have the most "Yo!" stories to tell.²³

Whereas a government-controlled news column in previous eras had no impetus to incite feelings from readers—under communism, individual feelings were subjugated to ideology—Yo-Most clearly stands to benefit by branding a positive, exuberant teen emotion in its own name. The Yo! teen may not consume products by Yo-Most, but she/he will likely internalize positive feelings about the brand itself, allowing Yo-Most to weave itself into the fabric of teenagers' newly elaborated selves and identities that have cropped up in the wake of a marketized youth, the kinds of youth who do not exist outside of capitalist consumption.

Discussion

Economic liberation and globalization have transformed discourse for and about teenagers in Vietnam from a tool for the dissemination of communist propaganda and education into a marketplace. Amid a youth population far removed from the anti-American resentment that characterized postwar Vietnam, Western influences have made their way into everyday teen life. Teen Viet have acculturated to many aspects of the Western world and have since adopted the consumerist and individualist ideologies that characterize Western social life.²⁴ Whereas the VCP deliberately and successfully set forth the ideologies that shaped youth experiences and behaviors between 1975 and 1986, power over constituting the youth experience, now understood as teen culture, has since shifted to the globalized media and its corporate sponsors. Thus, the introduction of a market economy and decreased government control over the Vietnamese media has ushered in a profound transformation in the lives of youth.

As the country has moved away from the communist and collectivist ideals of past generations, teens have moved further away from their parents' culture and have embraced an ideology of individualism. Individualist ideals inflect every aspect of teenage life, from the way teens dress and talk to their attitudes about interpersonal relationships and community. The dynamics of this shift are captured in *Hoa Hoc Tro*, which shifted to publishing entertainment news in order to attract more readers and was, therefore, shaped by the agendas of the various corporations that sold products to teenagers. As the agenda of corporations became more important, consumption culture was developed as an important part of young peoples' lives; indeed, it set the very terms upon which these lives were built. Teens were represented as and became consumers. Coined with the term "teen," young Vietnamese teenagers were now viewed as a distinct social group that had its own language, fashion, value systems, and role models, all of which showed almost no continuity from the portrait of the model teens who preceded Doi Moi. Teen Viet marked a cultural disruption as they eschewed communalism and embraced the consumption culture and individualism of the West.

This process is not unique to Vietnam though. Thomas Frank documented vividly how American corporations such as Coca Cola successfully manufactured consumption culture for American youths in the 1960s, thus turning youths into vanguards of consumerism.²⁵ Such a phenomenon was repeated in Africa, India, China, Korea, Japan, and other postwar nations, where youths became the major forces behind the adoption and expansion of consumerism and the new civil society.²⁶ In that light, this study reinforces an established yet ever expanding theme: Human identities and experiences, particularly those of impressionable groups such as teenagers, were constantly defined and redefined by sociocultural changes rather than being confined to universal biological factors.²⁷ As early as the 1920s, Margaret Mead had argued that Samoan youths' behaviors were an integral part of their culture, which was different from American counterparts.²⁸

For teen Viet, decreased government control over media has introduced myriad possibilities for individual expression, but this expression is nonetheless created through a variegated but powerful force—corporations and the logics of global capitalism. Similar to the VCP-led government of the past, big corporations wield great power in setting the terms upon which teens understand their lives and develop a sense of self. The new Vietnamese teen is an embodied,

feeling individual unlike any of the teens that preceded her/him. This teen's life is fashioned in reference to an elaborate set of possibilities for selfhood, not just a single image of an ideal youth or developing communist. This teen represents the growing freedoms and choices that teens are allowed to exercise over their lives in the wake of decreased government control; at the same time it becomes clear that this very freedom is made possible by *and* is a precondition for capitalist consumption. Teen Viet, it seems, represent an embodied paradox of freedom and control.

Endnotes

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