



CONSUMPTION, THE SELF, THE SOCIETY AND TECHNOLOGY – A STUDY OF YOUTH IN HANOI CITY (VIETNAM) 30 YEARS AFTER ECONOMIC RENOVATION

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Abstract

Economic renovation since 1986 has brought about significant changes to Vietnam society. Investigating the consumption of educated youths studying in Hanoi will not only discover the trends in consumption of youth today, but also help clarify the interaction between the individual's self and the society. Based on the data of a questionnaire survey on 400 undergraduate students of five universities in Hanoi (Vietnam) and in-depth interviews with 16 students, this paper demonstrates the role of consumption as a tool to communication and expressing the self of those Vietnamese youth in connection with the others. Besides identifying some signals of a developing economy manifested in consumption trends of Vietnamese youth, the study finds that their consumption trends tend to aim at satisfying their self rather than connecting them with the others. Although 'the social' is documented in the way youth spend their money, it appears that 'the individual' is more important in youths' decision in selecting

products' brands and origins (authentic vs. fake products; Vietnam vs China and other countries origins). The study also finds that technological products play significant roles in youth's life although the extent to which technological application is exploited by youth is quite limited.

Keywords: Consumption, Vietnamese Youth, Self, Society, Technology

INTRODUCTION

Consumption is far beyond an economic behavior, it represents the interaction between individual's self and the socio-cultural conditions of a society in general and a population in particular. It can be defined as activities that consumers culturally and symbolically buy and use commodities for the process of self-presentation (Goffman 1969). Consumption practices are not only 'practical doings', consumption practices also combine acquisition, usage and meaning-making of the particular goods available and advertised in the market that youth consumes (Pham Hai Chung, 2015). Consumption is not only about individual behaviors, it signals how society is organized and stratified by brands of goods acquired by particular populations, and how individuals communicate their self to other persons. Hence, studying youth's consumption provides an important insight into the ways in which society is moving (Theodoridis and Miles 2019), and promote our understanding of how consumptions function as mechanisms of integration and/or social exclusion.

Since 1986, Vietnam has entered an era of economic renovation (Doi Moi), which promotes market economy and allows the development of different economic sectors, including private and foreign sectors, hence making the way for the emergence of a consumer society (Breu, Salsberg, & Ha, 2010). On the other hand, Vietnam are still strive to maintain socialism orientation and its cultural tradition in this process of international integration and globalization, making it an interesting site for studying consumption as the outcome of the interaction between the individual and the society.

This study examines the consumption of young consumers of urban settings as Hanoi, Vietnam. This population, aged between 16 to 30 years old, were born after Vietnam entered Doi Moi, growing up in the context of rapid economic development and social changes. They are, as Theodoridis and Miles (2019) point out, 'not unified and homogeneous but constitute a wide spectrum from those who can consume conspicuously to those who can barely consume at all'. Different from previous generation who was born and matured in the context of a centralized, bureaucratic and subsidized economy and hence strongly influenced by a quite pure socialism ideology, this generation of youth are exposed to a conflicting complex of

ideologies and cultures propagated through various sources such as education, mass media, domestic and international commodities, films/movies and music. This exposure is even more obvious in big cities like Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, where both traditions and foreign impacts are both strongly influential, making it a significant consumer space. Besides, another reason for conducting a study of youth consumption in city like Hanoi is as Featherstone (1991, cited in Pham Hai Chung 2015) suggests, we must shift our attention to emerging transnational cultures spreading across national boundaries as a consequence of globalization processes, marked by "economic prosperity, a larger, consumer – oriented middle class and the growth of cities and of industry" (Stearn 2001, p. 129).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted on a specific population of youth, who are undergraduate students studying and living in Hanoi city. They are specific because regarding age, they belong to the middle-age group (19-21) of youth, and they are the most popular representatives of youth in big cities like Hanoi as Nguyen Huu Minh et al (2016) point out and called as the new emerging middle-class educated young professionals of Hanoi.

This research applied a mixed-method approach. It used questionnaire survey to draw up a general picture of how young people in Hanoi buying consumption goods for their daily life, and in-depth interviews to get an insight into the motivation and reasons underlying their behavior. The data collection was first conducted with eight in-depth interviews, and the collected qualitative data was used to design questionnaire. The questionnaire survey was conducted with the participation of 400 undergraduate students from 5 universities in Hanoi, following with another five in-depth interviews to clarify points that researchers want to understand more from the survey data. The whole process of data collection lasted eight months in 2018.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The areas in which youth spends most of their money in monthly and the signals of a developing economy

The following figure shows the areas in which youth in Hanoi generally spend the most in a month. Students were asked to select up to three areas they spent most of their money in monthly. Since undergraduate students studying and living in Hanoi are composed of different living conditions and socio-economic backgrounds, the areas they spend most of their money in per month are quite different. For those who are living with their family and hence need not to pay much for food or accommodation, their spending peaks at areas like transportation or for

electric devices, whereas those whose family are not in Hanoi, they might have to spend most of their money for accommodation and food. The differences in spending areas of Hanoi students are presented in the following figure.

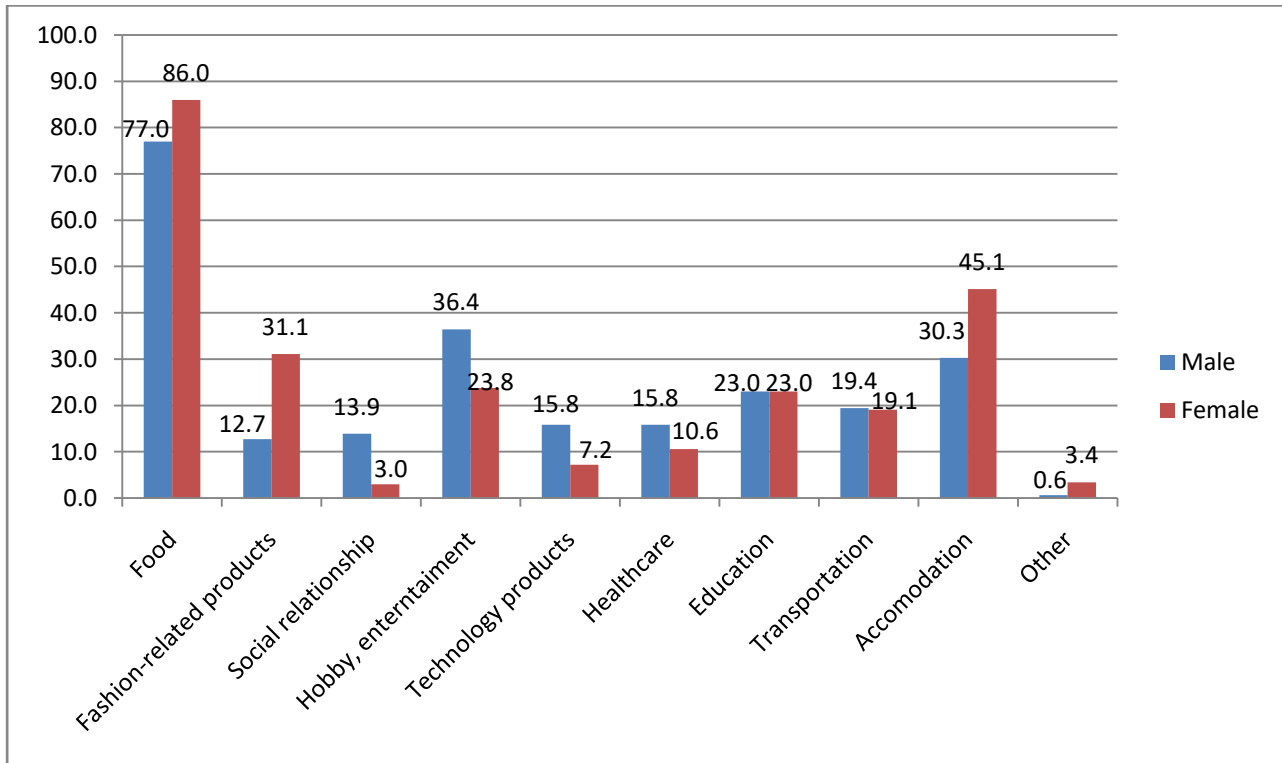


Figure 1: Areas that youth usually spends most of their money in monthly

Different from our expectation that in early adulthood building up social relationships is of great importance in preparing an independent life as a social being, not many students invest most of their money in social relationship. The reason may be that most of them do not have much money so they have to use their money on more essential needs such as food or accommodation. Among the small number of students who spend most of their money on building up relationships, the rate of male students is nearly five times the rate of female students (13.9% vs. 3% respectively). This finding is quite consonant with Vietnamese traditional culture which expects male to have active social life and career whereas a standard female should invest her time and energy for family.

The spending of students studying in Hanoi shows two signals of a developing economy. The first signal is that spending on essentials such as food and accommodation are largest. It is noteworthy that the rate of students who selected food as the area they spent the most of their money for is outstandingly high (77.0% of male students and 86% of female students), even

more than two times the rate of students in the second largest spending area as accommodation (30.3% of male and 45.1% of female). This signals a poor living standard that people have to spend most of their money for basic needs as food, clothes and shelter. According to World Bank Global Consumption Database, 2014, two-third of poorest people spending goes to essentials.

The second signal is the tradition of mutual dependency among generations. Even though Vietnam has seen a gradual but steady increase of nuclear families and the detachment of youth from family in search for independent living and personal career, the fact that Vietnamese parents still provide various kinds of support for their children, including accommodation, money, and necessities, even when their children have their own family is quite popular (Etienne Mahler, 2018). In exchange, children is considered as a kind of capital or insurance for the old age in Vietnam, and expected to take care of their aged parents (Tran Thi Minh Thi, 2016). Hence, the cultural habit that youths, such as undergraduate students, living with their parents and receive their parents' subsidy for their living and studying is considered as a normal arrangement. This mutual dependency between parents and children helps explain more for the spending allocations of students as presented in Figure 1. Those living with their families in Hanoi will spend their money mostly on areas such as travelling, buying study materials or paying for extra-curriculum courses of their interest such as English study or painting. Meanwhile, students whose family lives outside Hanoi usually find that paying for accommodation or food are their largest spending monthly.

This finding is in the same line with some research on consumption of disadvantaged communities (e.g. Deustch and Theodorou 2010, Chin 2001) in that consumption of youth from disadvantaged communities, such as Africa American, reflects a mutual dependency between generations. Deustch and Theodorou (2010) in their ethnographical study of black youth community in the US specifically find out that black youth's consumption is deeply social and represents an awareness of sharing, reciprocity and mutual obligation. This is very different from consumption of youth from developed countries. As explained by Girma Mulugetta (2002), families in developed countries surrender many of the functions previously concentrated within it to other social institutions, and "whether or not the shift in responsibility is adequate to render the required economic support is dependent on the development of societies. But generally speaking, the welfare states have relieved children from the obligation of supporting their parents in old age. In such societies the traditional form of assistance and support to the aged has decreased tremendously. It is therefore this interplay of obligations and roles that make the issue of intergenerational relations a complex one." Therefore, mutual dependency between generations in developed countries is not as prevalent as in their developing counterparts.

Consumption, identity, and social life

One of the concerns of this study lays on how students spend, especially on fashion, to express themselves and connect to the others. It is expected that the most popular reason for students to spend on fashion is to invest in communication. Studies show that the way youths buy and wear fashion products such as clothes, shoes or watch can serve as tools for social integration or to communicate a desired image (McCracken 1989; Fournier 1998; Ahuvia 2005; Penaloza et al 2012). Fashion products provide symbolic capital to allow one to differentiate his/her self from the others and express his/her social identity (Campbell 1987; Belk et al 2003). Hence, we expect that students would invest in fashion as fashion is a powerful means to communicate with the other about themselves, to signal others about 'us' (the message of 'we are in the same group because of having something in common such as cultural taste or SES background') or 'them' (the message of 'we are different'). This expectation is based on the fact that students are young persons preparing for their career and an independent life of a social being, and hence building significant social relationships in general and networking with their potential partners (classmates at the present moment) in particular are of great importance for their future. However, data shows that the most popular motivation for students in spending on fashion is to satisfy themselves instead of communicating with others. The following table shows the purposes for which students consume fashion.

Table 1: Purpose of consuming fashion-related products

Purpose of consuming fashion-related products	Mean (Min, Max) 1=absolutely not true; 5=absolutely true	Standard deviation
To express myself (*)	3.41 (1,5)	1.22
To relax and have fun (**)	3.62 (1,5)	1.13
To make others impressed of my style	3.49 (1,5)	1.17
To create resemblance to boost my integration into my groups	3.14 (1,5)	1.22
To boost my connection with some others by going shopping together	3.27 (1,5)	1.22

(*) Chi-square test documents a significant association between this purpose of spending and gender ($X^2 = 13.440$; $df=4$; $p<.01$)

(**) Chi-square test documents a significant association between this purpose of spending and gender ($X^2 = 15.130$; $df=4$; $p<.005$)

The other purposes: No difference between male and female students

Our data is in the same line with previous studies (such as Friere 2009) that youth of modern days enters into a 'pleasure-seeking' and 'distraction-oriented' phase as a society linked to the market economy, therefore their consumption is popularly oriented towards self satisfaction. Among the five reasons that youths in Hanoi refer to in explaining for their fashion-related consumption, the motive of being relaxed and having fun is the most popular (highest mean score – 3.62, lowest standard deviation – 1.13), following by another other-oriented motive as 'to make others impressed of my style' (mean score=3.49, standard deviation=1.17). Explaining for this motive, Csikszentmihalyi (2000: 269) holds that consuming indeed relates to the need to love and beloved. Observation of youth in modern Vietnam however makes us more inclined to Fung (2009)'s proposition that being admired by other people is highly significant for youth because it provides a sense of stability (i.e. being bonded) in the context of modern life made up of rapid changes which causes uncertainty and anxiety.

Using fashion as a means to boost their social integration is not a popularly strong motive for students, and the strength of this motive is differentials among students (lowest mean score=3.14, highest standard deviation=1.22), meaning that some youths pay little attention to the usage of fashion-related products to create their social identity and integration, whereas some other strongly do. It is more popular to youth in Hanoi that they resort to the process of shopping as a way to connect with others (mean score =3.27, sd=1.22). It appears in our study that youths in Hanoi differentiate between two ways of social integration, creating a social identity with something in common with the other (the 'us' message in fashion consumption) vs. being connected to other by involving in common activities; and they somewhat favor the later to the former.

Responding to the fact that youth is a complex population that includes both well-off and financially disadvantaged individuals, Deutsch and Theodorou (2014) raised a question that 'if self-perception and social expectations are increasingly defined by consumptive practices and aspirations in a society whose motto can be aptly summarized as *consumeo ergo sum*, what then of those who cannot consume?' (p.251). These researchers also proposition that young consumers whose purchase power is limited have to face with a choice: find a way to acquire material goods or remain identityless in a condition that identity is marked and recognized by consumer choice. Our study however documents that identity construction via fashion consumption is not limited by purchase power. Young consumers, particularly educated youth in this study, flexibly find their way to construct their identity within their own purchase power. We have interviewed some students who are financially disadvantaged and they construct their style by practical strategies such as pursuing a simple but elegant style, or applying some do-it-yourself techniques as embroidering to make up the style they want.

I prefer simple and nostalgic style. I often buy secondhand clothes. I love these old clothes and its looking-old. I want my outlook appears somewhat old, nostalgic, tidy and reticent. That's what I want others to perceive me. I don't have money so I rarely buy clothes even secondhand ones, but when I buy I am quite selective (Female, 21 year-old, 3rd year student).

Brands and consumption

International brands vs. Domestic brands

It is documented in existing literature on youth consumption that the preference for foreign brands is increasingly implicit in developing countries (Ger et al 2012). Pham Hai Chung (2015) also finds that Vietnamese youth tend to prefer foreign brands and are likely to be brand conscious. Deutsch and Theodorou (2010) further states that consumption is no longer only about constructing an individual identity, it is also a means for acting as part of a social whole, constructing an unified national identity. Through consumption, consumers also support the economy while masking their differences across race and social class, hiding the disparities in their abilities to consume (p. 249).

However, our data on undergraduate students studying in Hanoi shows that youth seems not care much about foreign brands, as presented in the following figure.

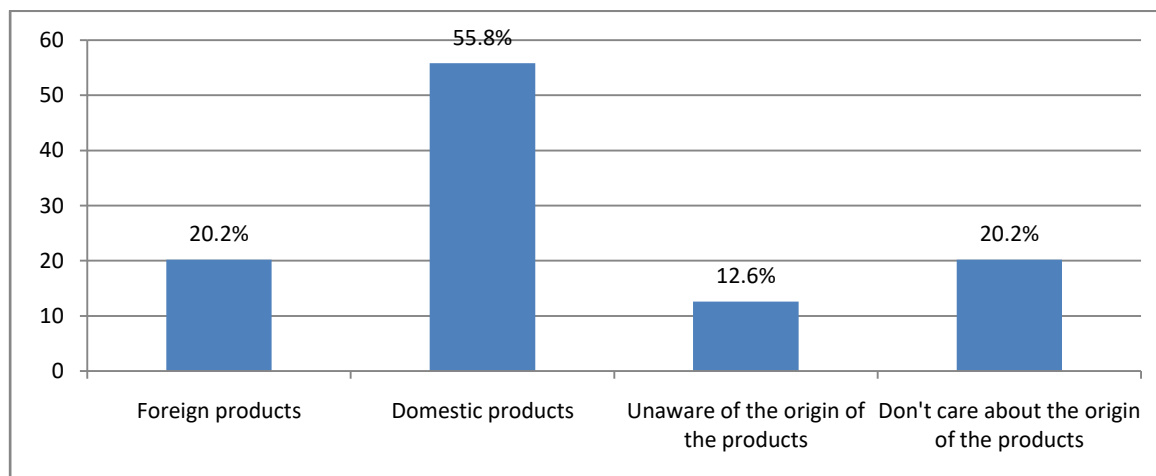


Figure 2: Youth's choice of products' country of origin

Our data shows that more than half of the youths who participated in our survey choose domestic products, whereas only 20.2% favors foreign products. The other do not care about the country of origin of the products they consume. This difference appears to related to students' living standards. Young interviewees whose living standard is high tend to prefer foreign products, whereas those whose living standard is lower tend to prefer domestic products

or even do not care for the country of origin. Different from other studies that young consumers favor domestic products because of their awareness of their identity as a member of their society, our in-depth interviews show that some choose domestic product because of their awareness of national identity as a part of personal identity, whereas some do so just because they believe that the quality of domestic products is generally good when their price is more affordable.

Moreover, different from the finding of Pham Hai Chung (2015) that Vietnamese youth tend to discriminate against Chinese products and favor Western ones with an implication that they want to be more integrated into Western culture and keep themselves away from a China-related image, our observation documents that this discrimination is significantly weak. Youth is, in our study, mainly cautious of Chinese fresh food without reliable information on origin. On the contrary, they are quite interested in Chinese products, especially fashion-related products or processed food with transparent origins.

Chinese food is delicious. Sometimes we have friends going to China for a study exchange, we often give them money to buy something for us, like watch, bags, shoes, or processed food. Chinese products are good in quality and their price is affordable for us (Female, 20 year-old, 2nd year student)

Authentic goods vs. fake goods

As shown in the following figure, the rate of female students who consume fake products significantly higher than of male students (77.9% and 65.8%, respectively).

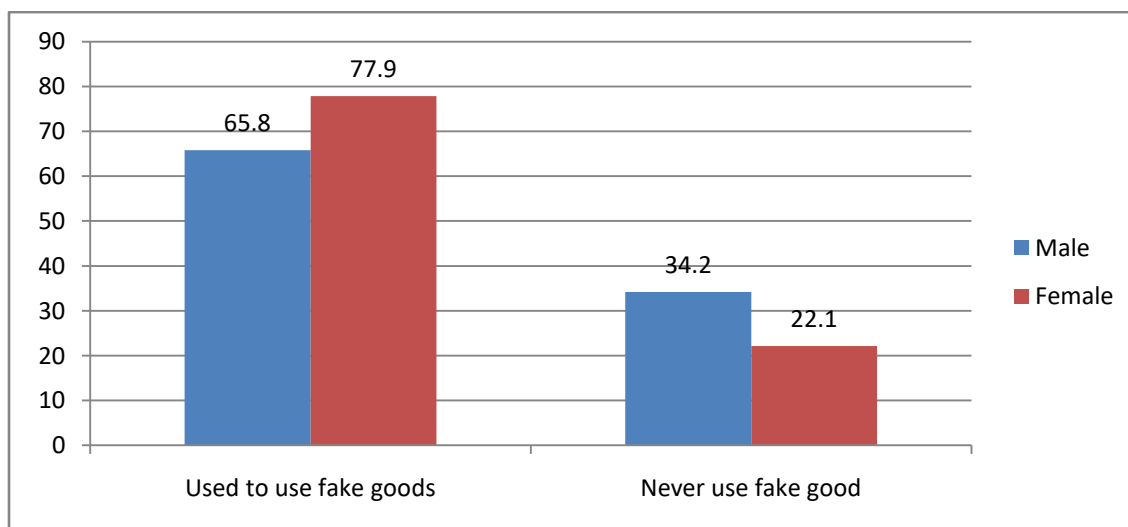


Figure 3: The rate of youths who consume fake products by gender

Fake products that students consume are mostly related to fashion, such as clothes, bags, shoes, or jewelry. Fashion-related fake products are consumed quite popularly in Vietnam, especially in a crowded and dynamic city like Hanoi. There are two common sources of these products. One from China, with a various range of choices with a differentiation regarding level of quality, such as 'first class products' (*hang loai mot*) referring fake products made with so high quality that it is quite difficult for common people to differentiate them with authentic products, whereas 'second class products' (*hang loai hai*) indicating somewhat poor quality and consequentially much lower price. Another source is products labeled 'Made in Vietnam', being marketed with a myth that they are authentic products of international brands whose factory locates in Vietnam but for some reasons, such as having some faults, they are not packed for sending out to sellers, and instead of being discarded they are slipped to the market with a much lower price than the qualified ones. Whereas fake products from China are mostly marked themselves with luxury brands such as Hermes, Chanel or Dior, 'Made in Vietnam' products are mostly middle-class to common brands such as Tommy Hilfiger, Mango, or Zara.

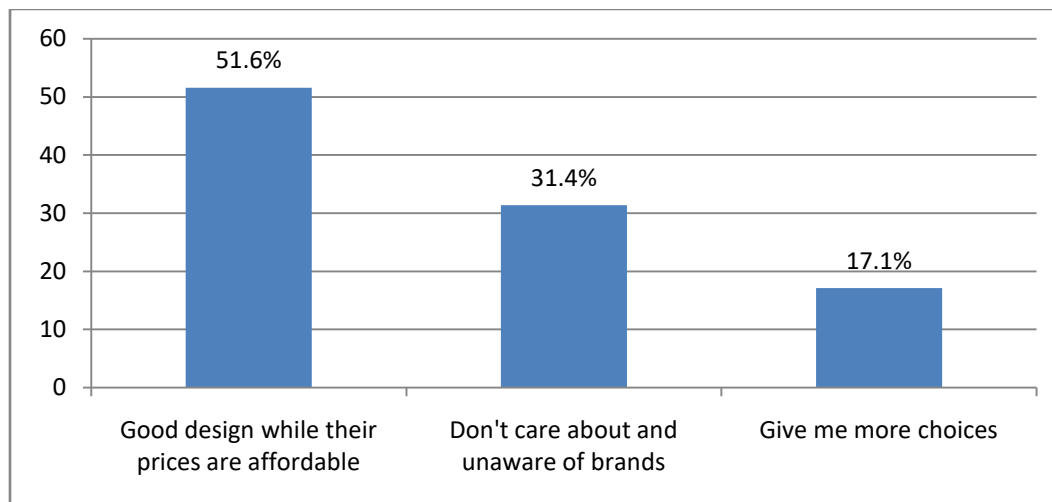


Figure 4: The reasons for buying replica/fake products

Different from our proposition that students might buy fake products in order to make up an identity they desire (e.g. a luxury image of self), none of our survey participants referred to this reason. The most frequently quoted reason is that the students like the design of these products while their prices are affordable. Nearly one third of survey participants claim that they use fake product just because they do not care about and even are unaware of brand name. Some others explain that fake products give them more choices.

I do not care about brand. I buy clothes that are comfortable and affordable, and of course they must suit my taste. Actually I don't care about brand not because I don't care, but because I don't have money. Clothes with brand name are pricey (Male, 20 year-old, 3rd year student).

The reason for why none of participants referred to using fake products to make up their image, which is a very popular reason for using fake products among some other populations such as small traders, may be because the gap between the two social strata – common undergraduate students and the persons who consume luxury products – is so huge that students do not think of pretending those who has nothing in common with them in lifestyles. This is different from small traders, for example, who are strongly aware of how important their appearance is in gaining their customers' and partners' trust and hence some of them may purposively use fake product to make up an image of financial success. For undergraduate students, according to our data, the meaning of using fake products is just to satisfy their aesthetic taste, or even meaningless.

I has a friend who studies at an university whose students are often rich and strongly aware of and care for the brands of the fashion products they use. He bought an pair of shoes, replica, at VND1,000,000 [*interviewee stressed on the price, implying it is a very high price*]. He can afford a pair of shoes which is authentic at higher price, but he loves that shoes. Even thought he loves that pair of shoes very much, he dares not to wear it to school because they are replica products, and their school mate will know if he wears an authentic product or not. So he only dares to wear it when he visit his hometown in a rural province. When he wears them he is very proud of them. But he never wears them to school (Female, 21 years old, 4th year student).

Interestingly, even when buying fake products, students preferred products with tag that declared they are made in Vietnam. This preference is quite popular that many shops name themselves 'Made in Vietnam' to attract buyers. However, in-depth interviews indicate that this trend does not mean they want to support domestic production industry. Some do that simply because they believe products 'Made in Vietnam' may have good quality while price is affordable.

Consumption and technology

There are small but noteworthy number of youths who claim that they spend most of their money monthly for technology products, of which the number of male respondents is two times that of female (15.8% and 7.2%, respectively). This finding is in the same line with other studies on youth consumption and technology. Pham Hai Chung (2015) finds that youths are more inspired to consume goods in technology, transportation and fashion, because the consumption

of these products claims new values and promotes the lifestyle of a young urban generation. Theodoridis and Miles (2019) even state that being a youth nowadays is signified with the technology-related activities such as browsing online, chatting online, e-shopping, blogging, vlogging, and so on.

It is explicit that Vietnamese youth does not stand out of this trend. Any random observation of Vietnamese youth in public spaces as well as in café shows that they are addicted to technology-related products such as headphone or mobile phone, even when they are in a group interaction. Smart phone becomes more and more indispensable in youth's life. They use smart phone for a wide range of purpose: taking picture of their coffee/dishes, take note of their activities, record or play music, playing game, or update their activities on social networks like Facebook or Twitter. Technology-related products in general and smart phone in particular play critical roles not only in their personal life but also in the way they communicate themselves with other persons (e.g. displaying an image of themselves as they desire to others, maintain and open up contacts with people they are interested in without any limitation caused by geographical borderline). It might be overstated if saying the young generation is a technology-dependent generation, but the dominant presence of technology in general and smartphone in particular in Vietnamese youth's life nowadays is undeniable. Cochoy et al. (2017) claim that this trend constitutes manifestations of the contemporary ongoing development of new cultures of consumption in which new forms of communication play a key role. And as such, it can be argued that technology does not only facilitate daily activities but also contribute ways in which identities are reaffirmed or challenged in the quick-fire complicated interactions between the local and the global.

One of the application of technology in modern consumption is the boost of online shopping. It is different from our expectation that youths in Hanoi are increasingly interested in online shopping, in-depth interviews show that many of them are not so interested in online shopping. Instead, they are more inclined to traditional market where they can touch the product and try it out.

No, I hardly buy anything online. Sometimes I consider very well before buying a product, try it again and again, and then I still find disappointed when bringing it home. Buying online we can not touch and try the products, it is too risky (female, 19 year-old, 2nd year student).

On the contrary, some youths strongly advocate online shopping. The following table presents the reasons for why youth in Hanoi choose online shopping.

Table 2: Reasons for preferring online shopping

The reasons for why youth prefers online shopping	Mean (min, max) 1=absolutely not true; 5= absolutely true	Standard deviation
I don't need to leave home for shopping	3.96 (1,5)	1.19
I can save my time from travelling	3.97 (1,5)	1.07
I can do my shopping anytime I want	4.05 (1,5)	1.06
I can spend my time on considering a product as long as I want	4.00 (1,5)	1.17
I will not be disturbed by sale staff	3.77 (1,5)	1.09
I can save my privacy in shopping	2.53 (1,5)	1.20

As shown in the table, the most popular reason for youth to buy something online is that online shopping are very flexible, allowing them to buy any time they want (mean score=4.05, sd=1.06) and spend as much time as they can to consider a product (mean score=4.00; sd=1.17). Besides, online shopping help save their time from travelling from home to shops, which is very useful for consumer because most of Vietnamese people still maintain their habit of visiting a traditional shop instead of going to shopping malls, and travelling from shop to shop is quite time-consuming. Moreover, online shopping open up a much wider range of choice for young consumers, since they can stay in Vietnam and buy a dress in the US.

My friends mostly buy food via mobile app such as Now or Grab Food, they provides a lot of discounts and promotions. I never buy food online, but buying clothes I do. I love a brand but they do not open any store in Hanoi, only in Ho Chi Minh city. Then I have to buy it online and they ship the dress for me from Ho Chi Minh city. Some of my friends even order things from Tao Bao, good and cheap. So why not? (female, 20 year-old, 3rd year student).

In addition, keeping privacy including being shielded from the approach of sale staff is another important reason for students to consuming products via online channel. With these advantages, it is feasible for online shopping to become dominant mode of purchasing, replace traditional ways and hence construct a new practice of consumption and how consumption affects consumer's identity, especially when all borderline between community and even countries are abolished.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Being conducted on a young educated youth studying in Hanoi, this study documents some noteworthy trends in youth consumption. The consumption practices of youth in Hanoi signifies features of developing economy, namely the largest spending go to necessities such as food and accommodation, and mutual dependency between generations of family. It also observes a construction of identity as an individual and at the same time a member of society. In this construction, technology plays an increasingly determinant role.

Our study documents a quite practical consumption practices among young educated consumers in Hanoi. They care about the quality of products, the suitability of products with their consumption purpose and prices. More or less this trend signifies individualism in consumption in the meaning that youth consume something and how they consume it firstly for themselves.

There are some limitations of this study. This study was conducted on a special group of youths living in Hanoi, namely common undergraduate students. They are intellectuals, and their study at universities indicates their orientation towards a working life. Therefore, their spending may be affected by their particular aims such as building network or rationally considering spending allocation to balance various activities such as accommodation, education, and hobby and entertainment. The other youth populations whose spending may be very different from students such as working youth, youth from migrated families, or youths from super rich families who often be called 'rich kids'. Further research could examine the consumption trends of these particular youth populations to see how particular living conditions may affect their spending behaviors and the interaction between the individual and the society in consumption.

This study suggests that future research can also reconsider the concept of childhood and adulthood. The borderline between childhood and adulthood seems blurred in modern Vietnam. Students of 20 year-old are not a child in traditional perspective, however, their life which is highly dependent on family's subsidy make them are more likely to be a child rather than an adult. So, it is worth to re-conceptualize the concepts 'childhood' and 'adulthood' in accordance to their living arrangement and their level of independence, instead of referring to only the age.

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