

**BRAND CONSUMPTION IN  
CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM**

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**Doctor of Philosophy**



May, 2015

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to explore the features of a particular transnational consumer culture in Vietnam – the younger generation of urban consumers – a consumer culture that is shaped by the recent political history of post-socialist era in Vietnam and the country's economic transition. The research pays particular attention to ways in which globalizing processes in relation to consumption are negotiated and interpreted at the micro level i.e. the level of the consumer. Focusing, in particular, on the influence of brand consumption upon identity, it seeks to understand how these aspirational consumers within the two largest cities in Vietnam, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, define and make sense of themselves as a new emerging consumer force.

Assuming a qualitative research orientation, the study uses an interpretivist approach and case study methods to offer in-depth insight into the meaning-making practices of consumers within the context of the Vietnamese 'global' city, and the inter-relationships between globalisation and locality. Surveys were carried out among 600 Vietnamese respondents (610 distributed) in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, to understand precisely the identity work of urban youth through brand consumption. This data was supported by in-depth interviews with 16 urban middle-class and follow-up participant observation to explore the varied ways in which these consumers use and attach symbolic meanings to the products they consume to affirm their social identity, as well as the influence of local and transnational media on brand choices.

The findings presented via thematic analysis relate to the emerging themes of Consumption Practices and Identity work (Self, Face and Conformity). The survey results addressing the choices and opinions of CO (country-of-origin) among urban consumers indicate their attitudes toward Chinese brands, Domestic brands and Western brands, specific to the Vietnamese historical, political, economic and socio-cultural context. The findings also suggest that these urban consumers increasingly attach themselves to products to affirm their social status.

They believe in ‘material goods bring happiness’ and willingly pay for the latest ‘must-have’ brands. The ‘self’ in relation to the group or community is important and ways of consuming might be likened to an act of wearing a ‘mask’ by the consumer, which can be ‘loudly’ or ‘quietly’ displayed to fit in favourably with a particular social circle. The thesis concludes by bringing to the fore a discussion of the potential and existent tension of the traditional values and state doctrine in the formation of new consumer culture in Vietnam.

The study bridges the gap between local experience and transnational cultural forces by linking features of consumption-based identity to specific agendas associated with the Vietnamese historical, political, economic and socio-cultural context. The research’s insights about class integrated with consumerism can be of value to marketing and advertising professionals in emerging markets.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

HCM City

MOIC

VTV

TVC

GSO

CPV

Ho Chi Minh City

Ministry of Information and  
Communication

Vietnam Television

Television Commercials

General Statistics Office of Vietnam

Communist Party of Vietnam

## **Acknowledgements**

I owe special intellectual debts to Prof. Barry Richards and Dr. Carrie Hodges, my supervisors. I would not be able to go through this journey without their advice and criticism. They both supported me in my quests for knowledge and exploration.

My sincere thanks to Yale University for providing a stimulating environment during my research visit. I appreciate Prof. Erik Harms' intellectual comments and literature suggestions to address the gaps in my research. I received great support from Richie Richard, the curator, who helped me to access the latest research on modern Vietnam at the libraries of Yale University.

My warmest thanks to friends and colleagues at Bournemouth University for making my four-year academic period go smoothly. Jose with encouragement and patience carried me through the most difficult moments of a Ph.D. journey. Rudra always helped to make things possible. Tauheed, with his relaxing character, brought optimistic views about an academic career. Kathryn with kindness made long days balanced. Pete gave great help on my work with language improvement. Albert and Maggie with warm hearts eased the cold weather in the U.K.

I specially thank Jan Lewis, our research administrator, who offered support and keen advice all the time.

## **Declaration**

This thesis has been created by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree. The work in this thesis has been undertaken by myself except where otherwise stated. The materials related to findings and brand consumption research areas have been published in:

1. Hai Chung Pham., 2015. The role of media in shaping consumption habits in Vietnam, The 2<sup>nd</sup> International Corporate and Marketing Communications in Asia, Bangkok, Thailand.
2. Hai Chung Pham., and Barry Richards., 2014, Western brands in the minds of Vietnamese consumers, Journal of Consumer Marketing, Special Issue. (Forthcoming)
3. Hai Chung Pham., and Barry Richards., 2014, Urban consumer culture in Vietnam, 39<sup>th</sup> Marcomarketing, London, U.K, pp. 211-218.
4. Hai Chung Pham., 2014, Western brands in the minds of Vietnamese consumers, Emerging Markets Conference, India.

**Dedicated to:**

*Mom and Dad for a biggest nod of support and my five-year old son for “Let’s go to school, mom!”*

## List of Terms

**Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)** is an interdisciplinary research tradition aims to understand “the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader sociohistoric frame of globalisation and market capitalism” (Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 869). It is to understand the relation between meaning making practices of material resources and their lived culture.

**Globalisation** could be understood as “a set of technologies, institutions and networks operating within, and at the same time transforming, contemporary social, cultural, political and economic spheres of activity”(Schirato and Webb 2003, p. 21). Globalisation accordingly alters the consumer behaviour when aspirational consumers are adopting new pattern of consumption with the availability of product worldwide. It creates new phenomena of consumption practices and emergence of new consumer culture.

**Transnational Consumer Culture** reflects the interconnections between the global and the local in relation to consumption. It emphasises the negotiation of identities and webs of transnational interconnectedness, including flows of cultural objects and discourses.

**Urbanization** as a phenomenon that encompasses the majority of the world’s population is a consequence of a massive rise in the percentage of the population that is urban in the developing world (Clark 1998, p 85). That is the growth of cities and the transformation of the existing urban places, which are “important nodes where collective and individual consumption takes place on a massive scale” as the central role in daily life (Jayne 2006, p. 3).

**Modernity** refers to what Featherstone (1991) particularly shared the same idea with the definition of modernity by Weber (1978) that “modernity is contrasted to the traditional order and implies the progressive economic and administrative rationalization and differentiation of the social world” (p. 3).

**“Mô Đen” (Fashionable)** is a French loan word in Vietnamese.

**The global city** as a place is constantly being (re)made through linkages to other places (Trentmann 2008) through global flow of products and economic and cultural connections, where consumption plays central role in consumers’ daily life (Jayne 2006).

**Consumption practices** specifically indicate the consumption activities that the younger consumers culturally and symbolically use brands for the process of self-presentation (Goffman 1967; 1969) or extended part of self (Belk 1988) in the urban Vietnam. Consumption practices are not the only ‘practical doings’, they are a combination of acquisition, usage and meaning-making of particular brands.

**The younger generation of urban consumers** specifies the urban group who were born after the Vietnam War ended. They are between 15 and 35 years old. This group is called “*giới trẻ*” in Vietnamese.

**Western brands** - “*Thương hiệu phương Tây*” in Vietnamese meaning (pure translation) creates negative connotation among Vietnamese consumers about the history of colonial time. In Vietnamese surveys and interviews, I prefer to use the replaced term “*Thương hiệu Âu-Mỹ*” (American and European brands).

Additionally, in this research, people living in Hanoi would be addressed as **Hanoian** or people from Hanoi, while people living in Ho Chi Minh City is addressed as **Saigonian** or people from Ho Chi Minh City.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores issues associated with consumption in contemporary Vietnam. It is concerned with the way brand consumption has come to provide a symbolic resource for identity construction and, in particular, the various significations associated with the consumption practices of the younger generation of urban consumers in the country. In this chapter, I will identify some of the limitations in consumer culture research in emerging markets. The rationale for my thesis and research outline will be described in the later part of the chapter.

The study of consumer culture refers to the expansion of capitalist commodity production and social behaviours that relate to the purchase of goods (Bourdieu 1984; Belk 1988; Featherstone 1991). The modern market is widely celebrated for its ability (Oropesa 1995; Featherstone 1991) to satisfy the material, social and symbolic needs of consumers (Shipman 2008) whose consumption choices and identity have always been interconnected (Belk et al 2003; Arnould and Thompson 2005). Slater continues with the belief that consumption is all about "continuous self – creation... always improved and improving" (1997, p. 10). Thus, with the availability of material goods, consumption increasingly plays a central role in the construction of consumers' social identity.

Brands can serve as tools for social integration or to communicate a desired image (McCracken 1989; Fournier 1998; Ahuvia 2005; Penaloza et al 2012). They provide symbolic capital to allow one to differentiate oneself and express one's social identity (Campbell 1987; Belk et al 2003). At the psychological level, Friedman (1986) describes the meaning of brands as including tangible, objective attributes (such as prices) and intangible, subjective attributes (such as symbolic meanings, aesthetics or prestige). For example, the objective attributes of the Lexus brand are an expensive price and energy savings, and indicates a high social standing for the car owner in terms of intangible attributes. Intangible attributes are highly correlated to psychological consequences such as social status (Campbell 1987; Riesman 1950) and as a means to communicate 'self'



(Goffman 1969; Belk 1988). Reasonably, in a world which McLuhan (1964) predicted to be a "global village" or as Anderson (1983) later defined as an "imagined community", Bourdieu (1979; 1984) argues that aspiring consumers consider consumption as the prime meaning-making of everyday life. Media has a powerful role in the promotion of brands (McCracken 1989; Wernick 1991; Featherstone 1991) and can exert a powerful influence over the choice of brand names.

### **1.1. Consumer culture research in emerging markets**

The transitioning economies with the growth of their 'new' rich have great potential to develop new consumer cultures, as their situation changes with the integration and growth of Western style market capitalism (Featherstone 1991; Ger et al 2012). According to McKinsey Global (2012), emerging markets are expected to experience consumption more than six times faster than that in developed countries between 2010 and 2015. The growing consuming class increasingly characterises the emerging cities. Nearly 180,000 people move into cities daily, adding roughly 60 million new urban dwellers each year (Source: Intuit, October 2010). We would expect over one billion more people to join the consuming class in emerging markets by 2025, which is truly transforming the world economy. The young, urban, middle class consumers in emerging economies play an active role in the new culture of consumption, partly adapting to it, and partly creating it. They are attracted to here and now experiences (Jayne 2006), and the choices within the new practice of consumption. They are known for "their lifestyles... [based on] designer or brand-name[s]" (Chua 1998, p. 989).

In particular, the world is now witnessing the rise of a significant emerging class across Asia (China, India, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, among others) with new money and new demands (Stearn 2001). According to McKinsey Global, since the 1990s, the world's centre of economic gravity has gradually shifted from the US and Europe towards Asia. Luxury brands are feeding luxury-hungry consumers in Asia (Chadha and Husband 2006), where there is a growing appetite

for high-priced brands related to status consumption. The growth of the new consuming class and the appearance of new desires results in expansion of the market and redefinition of the world, following market logic (Sheth 2011).

Today's global consumers are faced with a wide range of styles and choices. It is not difficult to find a Western brand in global cities of Asian developing countries where "consumption and urban life have been a central component of the development of [an emerging] consumer society" (Jayne 2006, p. 3). The growing consuming class increasingly characterises the emergence of global cities.

Although some recent works feature *urban* or *the city* in their titles (e.g., Chawla 2006), they do not clarify the significance of the *urban* for consumers' experiences: *the city* is taken for granted and serves merely as a setting or backdrop for explorations of a miscellany of youth-related topics (Hansen and Dalsgaard 2008). Yet throughout the world today, global cities are significant places that will become ever more important in the developing world, not only for demographic reasons but also because they are the gateways to the global world (Hansen and Dalsgaard 2008, p. 4).

Jayne (2006) asserts that cities are significant consumer spaces within which unlimited opportunity for collective and individual consumption emerges on a massive scale. There is a trend in the emerging cities where aspirational consumers (the younger generation of the urban middle-class) adapt to the growing desire for brand consumption, as a means of creative self-expression (e.g., Chadha and Husband 2006; Ahuvia 2005; Dong 2008). As Featherstone (1991) suggests, we must shift our attention to emerging transnational cultures spreading across national boundaries as a consequence of globalisation processes, marked by "economic prosperity, a larger, consumer – oriented middle class and the growth of cities and of industry" (Stearn 2001, p. 129).

The younger generation of urban consumers as the new cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984; Featherstone 1991) in emerging markets actively welcome foreign influences, which is reflected in their response to the economic transition

and in their consumption practices. They actively add, retain and mix local and foreign elements (Wilk 1995; Stearn 2001) to shape their own consumption practices. This new phenomenon is illustrated at a clearer and deeper level within the young middle class in cities. The term 'middle-class ' has shifted to describe a group who has the means to rival the upper class and climb the social ladder. Raised in an era of rapid economic growth, the swelling 'new' middle –classes within emerging economies are avid global consumers, with new money and new demands (Robinson and Goodman 1996).

The younger generation of urban consumers – *Giới trẻ* (i.e., within the middle class, and as new cultural intermediaries) as the ‘new thinking’ group (Shultz et al 1994; 2012) are more likely to have access to global media and thus be exposed to varied presentations of ‘modern lifestyles’, which has an impact on the way they live and communicate with the world. Included within this group are the "urban new rich....and generally those people who are receptive to the seduction of goods" (Shultz et al 1994, p. 225). They are recognised as having an active role in negotiation and construction of individual and group identity/ies because they are at the root of much of modern life. They have the power to shape ideas, trends, cultures and thus consumption patterns and aspirations, because they have access to education, information, television, and the internet.

The emerging markets are now challenging researchers of consumption, including consumer culture theory (CCT) scholars, to pay closer attention to new connections between market influence and identity construction. This includes the adaptation of new marketing practices and concepts (Jackson 2004; Sheth 2011; Ger et al 2012) and our understanding of the relationship between the global economy and culture in a locality (Penaloza et al 2012). For example, conducting research on consumption specifically within China, India and Russia, Jackson (2004) concludes that globalisation forms the basis of a struggle with ‘public culture’ in India, ‘consumer nationalism’ in China, and ‘artful consumption’ in Russia. In particular, Jackson (2004, p. 168) described how a weekend family outing to a restaurant – most often on a Sunday night – was commonplace amongst all generations in India. In the context of China,

consumers of transnational media are imagining themselves as part of a larger community of Chinese co-ethnics, which is promoted in state-defined *Chineseness* (Jackson 2004, p. 170). In Russia, 'artful' consumption refers to the personalisation of products through the practices of mending and repair (Jackson 2004).

Consumer culture within the context of emerging markets may not be understood purely in terms of globalisation (Stearn 2001; Ley 2004). It encounters the global within a particular locale (Ger et al 2012, p. 32). Thus, each marketplace generates a specific consumption culture (Jackson 2004), which will be "re-written and re-mapped continuously" (Sherry and Fischer 2007, p. 3). Accordingly, the stream of potential fantasy materials with the active factors and actors is leading to new research on consumption in emerging markets, including Vietnam.

It has been argued that consumers have the possibility of defining their own path, one in which a balance might be found between one's need for individualism (difference) and the need for social group membership (similarity). The nature and direction of that path will be negotiated and adapted depending upon the particular cultural context (Wilk 1995; Hofstede and Mooij 2011). The interpretation of material is negotiated by consumers in the social/situational setting, as the woven phenomena of global connection and the extension of local culture (Wilk 1995; Stearn 2001; Ger et al 2012). CCT scholars go beyond viewing culture as a set of differences and similarities, to focus on cultural resources, and the tension and negotiations among local consumers. The research tends to focus on the intersections which create heterogeneity rather the homogeneity (Wilk 1995; Sherry and Fischer 2007). For example, Oswald (2012) found that Chinese consumers sought to show off their *savoir faire* by means of Western luxury brands, but acquire semiotic codes through their lens of Confucianism.

Consumer culture is situated within a particular cultural milieu (Fournier 1998; Penelozza 1994). Culture in this sense serves as a template for living and a lens through which people experience and make sense of their lives and the world around them (Penalozza et al 2012). Cultural differences in perception and values

are used to explain differences in consumption practices between consumers in different marketplaces (e.g. see Oswald 2012; Ahuvia 2005). Thus, this research brings to the fore the importance of culture in consumption practices in the non-Western context, specifically in Vietnam and the emerging markets.

My intent in this research project is not to deny the capacity of aspiring consumers and cities in emerging markets in claiming a global reach, but to explore their characters more fully, to the level of blending with local dynamic actors at the conjuncture (Wilk 1995; Kraidy 1999; Stearn 2001; Jackson 2004). Accordingly, a new standard familiar with locality, adapting to the globalisation would be founded and negotiated. Focusing on identity construction as created through brand consumption, I explore the complexity and dynamics of the process of negotiation and re-negotiation of identity work among younger Vietnamese consumers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The empirical study reveals important insights about the nature of transnational consumer culture within the context of Vietnam, and what it means to be a modern Vietnamese person today.

In my research, transnational consumer culture appears as a fine blend of *global* and *local* culture. It might be explained as the rise of consumerism, and not a complete surrender to 'Western values' (Trentmann 2004), due to "the continued power of nation states that moderates transnational movement of things, finances, ideas and people" Sirkeci (2013, p. 2).

The active promotion of national identity by the state can lead to positive/negative attitudes towards products/brands paired with country of origin in the local context. Smith (1991, p.175) is convinced that "a growing cosmopolitanism does not itself entail the decline of nationalism. The rise of regional culture areas does not diminish the hold of national identities". The integration of economies on a national level not only knitted together dispersed individuals and communities, it helped to define the unit of identity (Calhoun 1997, p.69).

As "a compelling study of a developing marketing system and transitioning political economy" (Shultz 2012; Nguyen et al 2013), Vietnam is awakening to luxury, with the likes of Louis Vuitton, Cartier and Mont Blanc opening stores

(Chadha and Husband 2006, p. 284). The practice of brand consumption among the younger generation is defined by "the local inflections and adaptations of these global lifestyles, particularly as influenced by so-called 'Asian values' – Confucian, family-centric, and conservative" (Dutton 2012, p. 6). In this study, I explore how under the new economic policy, Vietnamese younger generation of urban consumers have a wide range of product choices and enjoy "the excitement generated by the new discoveries themselves" (Wernick (1991, p. 7), yet within "the parameters established by the state" (Vann 2012, p. 167).

In this thesis, an interpretive approach is proposed for exploring the relationship between brand consumption and identity work among *giới trẻ* and the influence of global processes within this context. The empirical research will consider the neglected experiential, social and cultural dimensions of consumption in contemporary Vietnam, and the research agenda might be adapted to other cultural contexts; in particular other emerging markets or non-Western contexts.

## **1.2. Rationale for conducting research on brand consumption in contemporary Vietnam**

International friends and colleagues who have never been to contemporary Vietnam often give me a list of Vietnam war movies such as *Platoon*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, and *Apocalypse Now*, which still haunt them. The films are embedded in what they know about the Vietnam war, which led to an estimated 2 million deaths (BBC), with 8 million tonnes of US bombs dropped (the total tonnage of bombs dropped on Germany, Italy and Japan in the Second World War) (CNN facts), and the farmland polluted by US chemical warfare (Orange and Blue Agents). Vietnam remains one of the poorest countries in the world as the media describes it, with an inflation rate at over 700%.

Over the last 30 years, the consequences of the Vietnam War and how the country has quickly changed have been bound up with my memories and observations. Suffering, triumphs, fear, pride, and the reality of poverty confronted everyone and were the subject of daily conversations in my parents' and grandparents' time.

But these conversations have been gradually replaced by contemporary discussion of rapid economic development, films, consumption, lifestyles, education and work opportunities. The changes of contemporary Vietnam are definitely as impressive as the experience of having suffered from the War. It is clearly seen through the way people consume materials, and adapt to the practices of the new consumer culture in Vietnam today.

In the late 1980s in the North, during my primary school days, I still saw beggars from the centre of Vietnam where the battlefield was located pass by my window. The country was blocked under the embargo, which meant people lacked materials. There was not much variety, but a simple display of furniture in everyone's houses, as far as I could tell. The big difference between households was reflected in the Russian hand-imported or imported products. Before Japan entered the Vietnamese market, Russian products were highly appreciated by the Vietnamese public in terms of quality. My parents often looked for state officials who had been on a training or education exchange in Russia, coming back with many Russian-made items to buy, such as sinks, pans, irons, bikes, dolls, medicines. I got my first small "made in Russia" bike in this way, at a time when I still heard about the values of socialism (*Chủ nghĩa xã hội*)– and equality.

There was a popular Vietnamese traditional saying "*Phi thương bất phú*" (one cannot get rich without engaging in trade), which was widely taught across generations in Vietnam. A decade later, the government initiated the open-door policy, and people quickly seized any chance to increase business, by working more, or by getting additional jobs. When they started to have money, people began to buy visible products. I remembered carrying a rather heavy wooden chair in the rain to reach a neighbour's house to enjoy my first TV show '*Bông hoa nhỏ*' (a 2D animated show for children). My parents, a teacher and a marine officer, also opened a convenience store in the area, and we quickly bought a JVC-brand Japanese colour TV.

In the 1990s, the US ended the trade embargo on Vietnam, and everyone endeavoured to buy Japanese motorbikes (Honda), TVs (JVC), refrigerators, and

fans. Japanese-made products remained the highest-quality items during my parents' generation. I saw people in town desperately saving money to buy Japanese motorbikes (around 1,500 and 2,000 USD/each) which was a lot at the time. They were kept in the living room (Freire 2009), and sometimes became a topic of conversation with visitors.

By the 2000s, I was a student at the Vietnam National University in Hanoi which was well decorated to welcome Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary Clinton. People widely talked about *Hội Nhập* (Integration), one of the most visible signs of this was learning English. Chanel, LV, CK, L'Oreal were increasingly mentioned in trendy urban youth conversation, after their relatives overseas started bringing these brands home for them. English language training centres of and overseas education consultancy services bloomed in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Job applications accompanied by a certificate of English ability gave applicants a distinct advantage. People forgot about learning Russian and French, turning to English in evening classes or at in-house classes conducted by Vietnamese teachers. My friends from wealthy families prepared for IELTS and TOEFL in order to apply for higher education. If my father's generation were mostly sent to the USSR for further education and training, now they wished to send their children to the US, the UK and Europe to be educated. A Western education was highly valued in the increasingly competitive labour market in Vietnam. The homogenised images of the good life from Western consumerism began to appear all over, prompting consumers in emerging markets such as Vietnam to pursue "a material realization, or attempted realization, of the image of the good life" (Friedman 1996, p. 169).

I started by working as a teacher at Vietnam National University, and in 2007, I moved to the Academy of Journalism and Communication in Hanoi. My students were just 5 and 7 years younger than me, but a new generation had emerged through new consumption practices. HP, Vaio and MacBook laptops were prevalent in class. Korean make-up, mini-dresses, trendy hair-dyeing was commonplace. I learned about their desire to consume branded products, their styles and tastes in fashion, technology, transportation and so on. I gradually came



to understand their view of materialist values. A visiting American professor casually said to me that he was surprised to see the changes within the country, how friendly people were to American tourists, how peaceful he felt when running at Hoan Kiem lake in the morning, and how convenient it was to find all of the Western brands and foods in Hanoi.

I also worked for international organisations and for NGOs (AIPJ, WAN, KA, Global Sources) while teaching at the Academy of Journalism and Communication in Hanoi. I was a part-time market researcher and writer for Global Sources for three years, when I was assigned to conduct interviews and write about different industries throughout Vietnam. This job required interviews with directors and managers of small and medium sized companies, who always appeared in the latest fashion, consuming the latest products of technology and transportation. They built connections with each other through the brands they consumed.

Media representations affect perceptions of desirable personal attributes: physique, gender presentation, attention to style, and rare, or class attributes. In 1990, the Mexican movie "*Aprendí a Llorar*" ("I learned to cry", produced in 1979) and the Australian movie "*Return to Eden*" when first introduced to the Vietnamese audience, quickly became the most watched, and talked about, and proved to be big hits. Subsequently, my parents' generation started to talk about the images of wealth and the rich lifestyles. And then my Vietnamese students shared the DVD of *Sex and the City*, and talked about it in my classes.

Hanoi now attracts a large number of students and young professionals from Vietnam's central and northern, while Ho Chi Minh City as the main economic centre has a labour force from throughout the country. This somehow explained how my flights to Ho Chi Minh City often carried more passengers there than on the way back. The young come to these two cities for undergraduate education, in the hope of getting a residence or a well-paid job. The average income in these cities is double that of the national average. Also, the cities offer easy access to better private schools and healthcare. Today both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City

are full of skyscrapers, sparkling billboards and LED signs of brand names, and only decorated with government messages and red banners on specific public occasions. Nowadays, the younger urban population increasingly celebrate Valentine, Christmas, and New Year along with other Western holidays, with some local modifications. On the Christmas Eve, a large number of Santa Clauses with presents for children can be seen driving around the two cities.

Main streets in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are busy, and full of restaurants (e.g., Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese), fashion retailers (Hong Kong, Chinese, Thai, Korean, and carrying products made in Vietnam), shops with hand-imported products from the US, the UK, as well as Vespa and car showrooms. The urban elites prefer to socialise with friends and colleagues in trendy Western style coffee shops, karaoke clubs or restaurants (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas 2004). Ho Chi Minh City offers in the way of more nightlife, entertainment with financial temptation, while Hanoi creates more government employment opportunities.

As a cultural insider, I had a personal sense of comfort in understanding and observing the cultural changes of the young aspiring generation of urban consumers when "money becomes central to social formation" (Jayne 2006, p. 9). I observed the cultural shift from my parents' generation to my generation under the influence of globalisation, with Vietnamese consumers in cities adopting and emulating new patterns of consumption, gradually creating a new image of the emerging Vietnamese consumer force. With the appearance of global trade, people have more choices in consumption and they are more aware of branded products. From the experience of working with them, I observed the way they used products to show their identity, and which gave me the initial inspiration for and impressions about the topic of new consumption practices in Vietnam.

Between 2011 and 2012, reading the work of leading researchers about consumption, middle-class, urbanisation and identity in today's Vietnam (Freire 2009; King et al 2008; Hayton 2010; Harms 2011; Nguyen-Marshall et al 2012) greatly inspired me to contribute a new part of my understanding about contemporary Vietnam. For instance, King et al (2008) mentioned there has been

little social science research aimed at socio-cultural understanding of middle-class and young people in Vietnam. Thus, I wanted to undertake an investigation of aspiring consumer groups in urban Vietnam after the state reinitiated a modern capitalist-post socialist society, when nearly people talked about the life of material rewards and create "more modern selves and a more modern Vietnam not only through consumption, but also through participation and particular kinds of organizations and activities" (Vann 2012, p. 161). I came to the work "Saigon's Edge: On the margins of Ho Chi Minh City" by Erik Harms (2011) two years ago while starting my Ph.D. in the UK. He used ethnography and his own interpretation to describe modern Ho Chi Minh City in his research. His book really encouraged me to gain an overview and further insight into the identity of modern Ho Chi Minh City, where people live in "not only in a world with special challenges but in a world forged out of concepts and social meanings " (Harms 2011, p. 225). In my journey to an academic career, I was inspired to understand the narratives of my country, where the landscape had undergone material transformation, combined with symbolic associations linked to the history of the economic revolution, consequences of the war, the emergence of a new generation as the emerging consumer force, the values of socialism, and the new demands of globalisation and integration.

### **1.3. Research aims**

Vietnamese post-socialist reform paved the way to embrace consumer culture, particularly for those living in cities. Given the increasing visibility and power of Vietnam's 20 million urban consumers (Vietnam Investment Review, 2006), the research starts by asking the question: "what is the relation between identity construction and brand consumption for urban youth in Vietnam today?" Using the cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh as case studies, this research explores the influence of global and local discourse about consumption on the younger generation of urban consumers in contemporary Vietnam and how they (re)construct and negotiate their social identity. It also examines the varied ways

these consumers use, interact with and associate particular meanings with brands as signifiers of distinction within the context of their everyday lives.

In order to address the primary research question of this thesis, the study has four objectives:

- To consider how consumption practices of the younger generation of urban consumers in contemporary Vietnam are specifically shaped by the historical, political, economic and socio-cultural context
- To develop in-depth insight into the attitudes, motivations and aspirations of the younger generation of urban middle-class in Vietnam in relation to their consumption practices
- To identify and critically analyse the symbolic meanings these consumers associate with particular global and local brands and their significance
- To make an empirical contribution to existing knowledge regarding the consumption practices of the younger generation of urban middle-class as a transnational consumer (culture/class) within both emerging market contexts more generally, and post-socialist societies, in particular

I propose that the younger generation of the urban middle-class in Vietnam is influenced by consumption. Drawing on the concept of ‘distinction’ first proposed by Bourdieu (1984), this study focuses on the specific elements of distinction that the younger generation of the urban middle class use to distinguish themselves from other classes, employing the psychological, sociological and cultural logic of difference in the local context of Vietnam.

. The concept of ‘youth’ in Vietnam is defined as the age group between 15 and 35 (Hansen and Dalsgaard 2008), and which is termed "*Thanh niên*" or "*giới trẻ*". As more and more young people are identified as middle-class, they form the aspiring group which actively embraces consumption and values of materialism, are which is moving away from the culture of discipline to the culture of pleasure seeking.

The Oxford English dictionary defines ‘middle-class’ as the social group between the upper and working classes, including professional and business people and their families. The most widely used measure of the middle class was proposed in 2002 by Branko Milanovic and Shlomo Yitzhaki, who counted people with daily incomes between roughly \$10 and \$50, after adjusted for purchasing-power parity (Milanovic and Yitzhaki 2002). However, comparing incomes across countries at different levels of development represents an enormous challenge.

As a researcher of consumer culture, I am also aware of certain challenges encountered in studies of middle class in Vietnam. There is a lack of consensus concerning the concept of ‘class’ in Vietnam, thus defining middle-class is not an easy task (King 2008). The middle-class in Vietnam is usually described as 'emerging', and sometimes is referred as the 'new rich'. It is just the matter of word choice. Most authors (Shultz et al 1994; Gainsborough 2002; Vann 2003, 2006; Taylor 2004; Truitt 2008; King et al 2008; Freire 2009; Nguyen-Marshall et al 2012) agree that Vietnam currently has a middle class, which was engendered by recent economic reform along with economic development over the last 30 years.

In defining the political identity of the middle class in Vietnam, King et al (2008) used Evers’ concept of "strategic group" in rapidly changing economic circumstances, including civil servants, teachers, independent professionals and businessmen. Extending this approach, I define the middle-class in terms of both economic and cultural capital, as the professionals from the socialist managerial class or successful post-reform entrepreneurs, together with emerging indicators (possession of houses in the city, cars, and expensive items).

#### **1.4. Research Timeline**

*November 2011 - May 2012:* Researcher development workshops and Research design (literature review, methods) at Bournemouth University, England.

*June - July 2012:* Pilot study conducted in Hanoi.

*August 2012 - October 2012:* Revising work of the research design at Bournemouth University, England

*November - December 2012:* Surveys and in-depth interviews carried out in Hanoi.

*December 2012 - January 2013:* Surveys and in-depth interviews done in Ho Chi Minh City.

*February 2013:* Return to Bournemouth University, England

*March - April 2013:* Transcribing work and data input.

*May 2013:* Research visiting trip to update on recent research on emerging markets at Yale University, U.S.

*June 2013 - April 2015:* Data analysis and thesis writing-up

## **1.5. Preview of the chapters**

Chapter two lays out the background of Vietnam. I demonstrate the dynamics of local elements in term of discourse of globalisation and local consumption. The chapter includes a brief history of Vietnam including background on the state, economic transition and the media as factors actively influencing consumption practices in modern society. It discusses tensions within this complex web, as the setting where modern consumers learn to define themselves. To make sense of this, the chapter draws theoretically on a body of scholarship specific to the Vietnamese context that is used as a part of on-going identity work on consumers in Vietnam. This chapter contains discussion about several researchers' work on socio-economic developments in modern Vietnam, and refers again to the relevance of the literature in chapter three.

Chapter three sets out the key scholarly themes underpinning the research: identity construction and brands; distinction, status and conformity; middle-class, cultural intermediaries and consumer practices. The chapter presents definitions

and critical discussion of consumption and consumption practices within the context of emerging markets. It draws on specific theoretical works relating to identity work through brand consumption and re-examines conformity and face work in consumption in the context of collectivist cultures including Vietnam. The concept of the ‘cultural intermediaries’ – those groups who engage with transnational consumer culture as a way to mark taste and distinction – is also introduced. The tension between discourses on globalisation and locality is also considered. Chapter four indicates the methods used to explore the aims of the research. The way urban consumers negotiate the tension between the global and the local, and how consumers construct their self and social identities within the context of consumption is examined using qualitative research. An interpretive approach using mixed methods enhances the breadth and depth of understanding. The chapter explains why the combination of large-scale survey, in-depth interviews and participation observation is the best suited to exploring their experience of brand consumption. The thematic analysis of the survey, interview and observational data is also outlined.

Chapter five identifies the key findings from the study of brand consumption within the context of the younger generation of urban consumers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The chapter first considers the results of the surveys related to Country of Origin choice and attitudes towards Chinese brands, domestic brands and Western brands relevant to the Vietnamese historical, political, economic and socio-cultural context. In the final section of the chapter, the findings from both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are compared to reveal that the younger the consumer, the smaller the difference between these two cities. The findings reveal that consumers actively shift among different images to fit a certain group or social interaction. The chapter also addresses the specific features of consumer culture derived from economic transition, emergence of the consuming class in these two cities and the recent political history of post-socialist Vietnam.

Chapter six concludes by offering an understanding of how socio-political tensions are played out and negotiated by consumers, and the ways in which

global processes are interpreted within the context of consumption in post socialist Vietnam.

Chapter seven follows on from the previous chapter offering reflections on the contextual and theoretical contributions offered by the study, and implications of the findings for international marketers in Vietnam and consideration of future academic study. Personal reflections on the PhD journey and final thoughts are also offered in this chapter.



## **BACKGROUND OF VIETNAM**

In this chapter, a body of contextual information including the history of Vietnam, the emergence of the creative and cultural industries is considered, to demonstrate the dynamics of local elements in the emergence of transnational consumer culture in Vietnam. In addition to cultural forces and tensions, broader political, economic, and social events also frame and affect the success of globalisation (Ger et al 2012, p. 33). Thus, this chapter defines the main actors in the setting where the younger generation of Vietnamese consumers in cities learn to define themselves through consumption practices.

The primary aim of economic reform in 1986 was to lead Vietnam rapidly toward market capitalism (Freeman 1996). This reform was expected to replace isolationism with expanded external trade and commercial relations. The first Western supermarket opened in Ho Chi Minh City on October 1993. The first Media Index for Vietnam was completed by AC. Nielsen Vietnam in November 1993, and the U.S lifted the trade embargo on Vietnam in 1994. A major change occurred when the U.S granted Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) for Vietnam, marked by the visit of President Clinton in 2006, which helped Vietnam gain WTO accession as the 150th member in 2007. Vietnam reached approximately 7% annual GDP growth between 2000 and 2002, to establish itself as one of the fastest growing economies (The Economist, 2004), with the expanding economy of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

The Communist Party has put great effort into “cultivating support from the younger people” (Hayton 2010, p. 58) and transformed the media into “a highly differentiated commodity under loose control” (Pettus 2003, p. 109). With the growing availability of products (Featherstone 1991), the rise of advertising and the affordability of satellite television (Wernick 1991), the younger urban consumers in affluent nations increasingly construct their social values and lifestyles within the sphere of consumption (Bucholtz 2002). Global media offer ‘symbolic resources’ which young people use to make sense of their everyday

lives and experiences (McCracken 1989). Local audiences integrate global media in their lives through a selective process of constructing and redefining their selves. The policy of free market competition and the increasing prevalence of global media within Vietnam have impacted upon Vietnamese urban society in particular ways as will be analysed in the later part of this chapter.

## **2. 1. Vietnam in the context of economic transition and globalisation**

Doi Moi (literally, Renovation) at the 6<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (1986) aimed to produce a multisector economy driven by private enterprises under the state's control. It was hoped to bring 'miracle' contributions (Shultz 1997) to the development of the country and overcome the heavy consequences of the Vietnam War. "Throughout most of the 1980s it was reported that even if there had been money to buy goods there was nothing to buy" (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas 2004, p. 135). MacLean gives extensive description of the subsidy period (1975-1986) as the time of most struggles for Vietnamese people after the Vietnam War:

Inflation peaked at 775 percent, an estimated 70 percent of the population lived beneath the poverty line, and chronic food shortages meant fifteen million people nationwide were either severely malnourished or on the edge of starvation due to insufficient calories (2008, p. 283).

Gradually, the state leaders realised that "the main threat facing the country was economic backwardness, and that overcoming it would require co-operation with the sources of international finance and technology – the West" (Hayton 2010, p. 190).. After the failure of the second and the third Five-Year Plans (1976-1985) of the government to promote a centralized economy in transition to socialism

Freeman described the purpose of Doi Moi policy thus:

It signalled government acceptance of private economic initiatives and allowed the existing petty enterprises of the shadow economy to serve as both model and stimulus for many others that have since openly joined the informal sector (1996, p. 180).

Sachs and Woo (1994) described 'Doi Moi' as 'big bang' and distinguished it from "previous policy failures" (Libby 2011), which allowed Vietnam to become one of the fastest – growing economies in the world. In the book "Vietnam: a rising dragon", Hayton writes: "it's a process of forgetting old wounds and forging new ties, based, not on the horror of history, but on the hoped for horizons of the future" (2010, p. 181). Among Vietnamese people today, there is a felt need to catch-up with the world (Shultz 2012; Hayton 2010) after the subsidy period (a missing decade) when people endured chronic shortages.

By 1989, peasants spurred by incentives had produced a crop that made Vietnam the world's third largest rice exporter (Than et al 1993; Karnow 1994). Vietnam has also had remarkable success in reducing poverty, which has declined from 57% in 1992 to under 20% in 2004 (McCarty 2006, p. 5). In 2005, a Business Report by the World Bank and the international Finance Corporation showed that Vietnam is the third fastest-growing country of the ten that have reformed their economy. Hy V. Luong (2006) described Vietnam as continuing the trend toward stronger integration into the global economy, achieving in 2005 and 2006 its highest rate of economic growth (estimated at 8.4%) since 1997. The growth resulted from the significant increase in exports as well as in consumer and investment spending. The three biggest markets are the United States, Japan, and China (GSV, 2006). The government is in fact engaged in a massive restructuring of the whole economy. In 1990, Vietnam was largely still state planned, with 14,000 state enterprises dominating the market and only 100 private sector companies. This contrasts sharply with the situation in 2005, with the 3,000 remaining state enterprises outnumbered by 200,000 private sector companies (Economic Outlook. South East Asia I – December 2005). Beside the transformation of the economy and the cited goal of "Asian tiger status", the government puts emphasis on social and political stability (Abrami 2003). To keep the country moving forward under an economic 'open-door' policy, "Vietnam wants to be the friend of all nations in the world for peace, independence, and development" (CPV 2005, p. 502).

Against this background, consumer spending has been on a strong upward trend in recent years, underpinned by “higher wages, large remittance inflows, and improved credit availability” (Nguyen-Marshall et al 2012). Vietnam also attracts increasing numbers of external investors, especially the progressive retailers, such as Korea (Lotte), Japan (AEON), France (Bourbon), Germany (Metro). CNNMoney.com (May 2006) ranked Vietnam place third in ‘Top 10 countries for retail’ after India and Russia. The market witnesses expansion of supermarket chains and multinational retail group in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Demand for imported and domestically produced consumer goods has rapidly increased (Economic Outlook. Southeast Asia I – Dec 2005). The young and the ‘new’ rich in cities of Vietnam are becoming the dominant segments. “The reality of the consuming city is not unlimited opportunity for those who are economically more successful, nor is it that consumer culture inevitably generates entrenched social and spatial divisions” (Jayne 2006, p. 3). In contrast, the emerging cities offer product availability and open more chances of material purchasing among other groups such as urban youth who are increasingly inspired to spend more on material possession. The volume of consumption objects available to the average consumer increased dramatically in modernity. Not just the middle-class, the younger generation of Vietnamese urban consumers are more and more inspired to product consuming, gradually step onto the consumption ladder and increasingly become the target of companies. Many enterprises want to target them because they are aspiring groups who adopt “a learning mode towards consumption and the cultivation of a lifestyle” (Featherstone 1991, p. 19). Through consumption practices, people come to understand, imbue meaning in, and act upon objects encountered in the world. Consumption provides Vietnamese consumers the opportunity to refine themselves through interaction with objects in the world well-socialized members of a society. The aspirational consumers in urban areas of Vietnam are more linked to modernity, with better access to global markets where consumption becomes the social centre of their daily life and concern. The aspirational urban consumers play an active role in constructing their identity as well as give certain influence on other groups in consumption as

“cultural intermediaries” (Bourdieu 1984; Nguyen-Marshall et al 2012) through their uptake and adaptation of modern lifestyles (Vinh Bao Do et al 2009).

## **2.2. Global cities and Vietnamese urban consumers**

Global economies and societies become increasingly integrated within emerging cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, which have risen in power and influence as global cities. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City become the hub of cultural consumption in Vietnam market, which is “saturated with signs and images to the extent that anything can become represented, thermalized and made an object of interest” (Featherstone 1991, p. 101).

More than half of the country’s population were born after the 1986 reform (MacLean 2008). In 2009, the population of Vietnam between 15 and 65 account for 65 %, of which the urban population records 29.6 % (GSO). The government expected one – third of the population to be urban- based in 2010 (World Bank, 2008). In 2011, almost two–thirds of the urban population in Vietnam is under 30 years old and the average age is 25 (Carmody et al 2011). The literacy rate is 90.3%. With a population of over 91 million (GSO 2012), Vietnam becomes one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City contain most of the urban population.

Within this context and coupled with looser family obligations, and achieving career success at earlier ages, the younger generation of urban consumers (the urban youth) possess the economic means to express their identities and desires through material consumption in various ways. The younger generation of urban consumers in these two cities increasingly become the consuming class (Jayne 2006; Belanger et al 2012), leading to the emergence of transnational consumer culture (Featherstone 1991) in Vietnam.

**2.2.1. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City as global cities**

Hanoi located in the North is the centre of politics. It was occupied by the French in 1873 and passed to them ten years later. It is now the most important political centre of Vietnam, having a population of nearly 8 million. Ho Chi Minh City (previously called Saigon) was under the control of the U.S in Vietnam War for nearly 30 years. It now has nearly 10 million people.



**Figure 1 - Map of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City**

Urban dwellers in these two cities can access a wide range of media and have a far higher average income per head than residents have throughout the country. For example, in Ho Chi Minh City, the average income per head is more than three times the national average. This all has to be seen in “the context of widening global disparities...[which] cut across national borders, and divide high-income professionals, urban middle classes, and wealthy political elites from their poorer co-nationals in rural areas and low- income occupations” (Taylor 2004, p. 10).

Being one of the fastest growing economies (The Economist, 2004), with the expanding economy of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnamese urban consumers encounter access to variety of branded products by “the entry of

multinational enterprises...together with the launching and promoting of international brands” (Nguyen and Nguyen 2011, p.44). Consumers responded with a growing desire for self-expression (Belk 1988; 2000). The urban youth aspire to consume “the same products, services, brands, comforts, opportunities, protections, and securities provided by marketing systems in Europe, the United States, Australia and developed Asia” (Shultz 2012, p.12).

The expansion of urban areas together with increased migration; particularly amongst the younger generation, has brought more access to social meeting spaces and social opportunities free from family supervision, such as cafes, restaurants, karaoke, bars and other public places (Thomas 2001, 2002). The recent social and economic transformation that has taken place within these cities has led to a return to the active and lively street life in Vietnam (Thomas 2002; Drummond 2006; Freire 2009). A place for social engagement is visible, important, and particularly illustrated in the study of urban landscape by Thomas who describes people occupying the public urban spaces for ‘unofficial’ group activities (Thomas 2002). Drummond (2006) described the city dwellers who occupy public space to extend their domestic space, commercial space or use for personal expression. People enjoy more social activities and exchanges, which was not seen much in the street during 1980s (Thomas 2002, p. 1614). The public spaces in cities are the places for people’s sharing of interest, exchange of information, even comparing one another in terms of their children’s educational progress, material life, consumption patterns and practices. Several brands prove to be successful, thanks to the word of mouth communication within daily social groups in public spaces. Honda and P&G were successful in the Vietnamese market by adapting to this unique concept in most of their marketing campaign.



*A coffee shop in old living quarter of Hanoi*

*Photo credit: Pham Hai Chung*

Cities are in parallel power of economic and cultural capital (Featherstone 1991, Bourdieu 1984; Jayne 2006). However, the local elements are not totally removed from the consumption patterns of the urban consumers. In our daily lives, we encounter the coexistence and interpretation of the local and the global (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Ger et al 2012). Global elements blend in local hybridisation (Wai-Chung Ho 2003). In the work of Harms (2010) about “the margin of Saigon”, he asserts: “the city emerges as the material embodiment of a unique urban character that contains elements of the countryside but never fully blends with it” (p. 39). The local elements are “embodied performances of social identity that satisfy and play into received social expectations and stereotypes” (Harms 2010, p. 55).

The 'typical' Western wedding has been adapted by the younger generations of urban Vietnamese and serves as an example of mixture between modernity and tradition, foreign and domestic practices, filled with some rural elements, to create a new global-local way in cities in Vietnam. The engaged couple choose a Western wedding gown and suit, plan their reception at a nice hotel in city with wedding cake and champagne to show their modern and youthful identity. But before the reception at the hotel is the traditional wedding ceremony at home. The



groom, dressed in a suit, sees the bride in Western wedding dress at her house, and then they worship in front of an altar full of flowers, fruits, traditional cakes brought from the countryside, to cultivate kinship values and please their parents. A few years ago, it is common to witness the bride in western wedding dress, taken on the way to the reception at the hotel on a motorbike or the couples in a cyclo (xích lô).

Urban consumers adapt the capitalist lifestyle to overcome vestiges of traditional views and customs, but many traditional values and practices are maintained in daily life and combined in the consumption patterns. Many houses in cities are furnished with modern goods of European or American styles and Western canned food appears on dinner tables at homes frequently, but it is common to see Western food eaten with chopsticks. Le Thi Nham Tuyet reports in her study on Vietnamese women, for example, that:

“the women want to be civilized...their scope of social activities has enlarged... to be like the West or other women in developed countries, but meanwhile, they do not completely resist all the traditional values” (2002, p. 4).

The majority of urban youth in Vietnam are attracted to these cities, choices with the new practices of consumption, a wide variety of alternative lifestyles (Riesman 1950; Shipman 2008). This study aims to explore the two largest cities in Vietnam as the setting for consumption (Jayne 2006) with a level of transferability to the context of younger urban consumers elsewhere in Vietnam.

### ***2.2.2. Break from the past***

The younger generations in Vietnam are optimistic and want to forget the war (Shultz 1994; Hayton 2010). They welcome the foreign influences and embrace the new values of consumption to construct their own local practices of consumption. After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, in transition to socialism, a centrally-planned economy was initiated and totally controlled by Vietnamese government. Most of the younger generation want to forget the recent past of war and misery. Vietnam is often described by the international media and by researchers on Vietnam (Shultz 1994; Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas 2004;

Hayton 2010) as a country where the young have no memory of the Vietnam War and are not interested in hearing their elders' past stories about of hardship and dedication (Schiffrin 1999; Mensch et al 2003). Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas assert:

In spite of the many public commemorations of women's role in wartime and nation – building, these representations have failed to strike a chord with young women. While women who pursue self – interest, a desire for money, for clothes or romance are eroticised and viewed as independent, modern and Western. (2004, p. 147).

Critics describe the younger generations as more optimistic and outward looking, e.g.: “the growing optimism found in Vietnam, in contrast to the pessimism seen in other tottering socialist nations” (Shultz 1994, p. 43). Hayton (2010 p. 184) quoted a woman in her twenties saying “we look forward to closing the past and opening the future. Vietnam's young generation is dynamic and smart”.

The open door economic policy created fierce competition, ushering in a time when there was “an emphasis on the importance of money” (Phuong An Nguyen 2007, p. 310) as well as the desire for material life and products to be more instantly available, in reaction to the lack of products in the past. Mensch et al (2003, p. 249) concludes in his study that Vietnamese young people are concerned with finding jobs to enable them to “live an international – style ‘high life...as foreign products, advertising, movies, and television flood the country’”. ‘Increasing rates of divorce, rural-urban migration trends and changes in family structure indicate that new values and lifestyles are emerging (Freire 2009, p. 74).

The “integration of Vietnam into a global capitalist, market-based economy, the encouragement of social mobility and the accumulation of wealth” involves more young urban people moving to the middle class or the ‘new’ rich (King et al 2008, p. 807). They are described as the agents of social change and “treated as a key indicator of the state of the nation itself” (Griffin 1993, p. 9-10).

During the French colonial period, the definition of middle-class did not exist, yet as MacMahon notes:

The middle class has always been smaller and weaker in Indochina....The French gave fewer opportunities to the Vietnamese to gain administrative experiences than any other colonial power (1952, p. 27).

The economic boom resulted in the expansion of the Vietnamese middle class, which was made up of professionals. It characterizes sections of the new middle-classes as ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Featherstone, 1987 and 1991). Several attempts have been made to research the lifestyle and the middle – class’s potential to contribute to the emerging civil society and consumer culture of Vietnam (Shultz 1994; Shultz et al 1994; Gainsborough 2002; Vann 2003, 2006; Taylor 2004; Truitt 2008; King et al 2008; Freire 2009; Nguyen-Marshall et al 2012). According to Belanger et al (2012, p. 5) a middle class in contemporary Vietnam in this context of ‘market socialism’ is a group whose conditions of existence have been possible for less than 15–20 years. The middle – class in Vietnam is called “*Tầng lớp trung lưu*”. The term “middle class” is not preferred by Vietnamese media. The media and the state use the word “*Tầng lớp trung lưu*”, which means middle level in a “purely descriptive sense”. According to Dutton (2012), it is difficult to break down the category of “middle class” in Vietnam into more specific income levels because of a paucity of data.

The historical background and economic transition in Vietnam produced a group of new middle-class professionals in the role of cultural intermediaries promoting their own cultural influence to establish their position in a social world. The Vietnamese middle – class is engaged in many economic activities of many types and in many sectors, in both state and private sectors. King et al (2008) asserts that an educated professional class emerged during the late colonial period, including doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, interpreters, clerks, secretaries, technicians, schoolteachers, and journalists.



*A professional in Ho Chi Minh City*

*Photo credit: Pham Hai Chung*



*A professional in Hanoi*

*Photo credit: Bui Viet Tu*

The applicability of the concept of middle class in non – Western contexts arises from the literature on post socialist societies (Dutton 2012, p. 6). Within a Western context, the concept of the middle – class would have traditionally emphasised nobility, with social status related more to lifestyle, in contrast, social

status in Vietnam would be ascribed from wealth. Existing literature suggests that the middle-class in Vietnam display greater interest in consumption, leisure activities, accessing information and news, and the maintenance and achievement of social status rather than political dimension (King et al 2008, p. 806). They show strong commitment to education and an orientation to enhance the social status through visible products. Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai and Tambyah (2011, p. 76) concluded that many Vietnamese consumers believe material objects could showcase one's success and achievement, and bring happiness in life. In addition, the results of their study demonstrated a relatively low level of consumers' ethnocentrism among urban Vietnam consumers who prefer foreign brands and products to the local ones both to improve social standing and to consume better quality goods.

Vann (2003, 2006) conducted research on the middle – class consumer choice in Ho Chi Minh City. She describes people who:

“had limited disposable income, which they tried to spend wisely; their consumer decision making was a careful balance between cost and quality, style and durability. In an effort to be mo-den (fashionable), HCMC's middle class aims to follow regional and international trends in products like clothing, cosmetics, home décor, and motorbikes. But owning and displaying goods that are mo-den carries more significance for HCMC's middle class than simply enabling them to be ‘in fashion’. It allows them to see themselves as consumers of the types of goods that are popular in wealthier countries, and, therefore, as worthy participants in a global economy.” (Vann 2006, p. 191)

Vann (2006) points out that the concepts and expectations that come with these mandates little into how people thought about goods, shopping and property. People assigned labels to goods depending on how they envisioned the quality of the item. Middle class people relied on their own vocabulary and their own understandings of what goods were to inform their shopping.

Truitt (2008) draws our attention to *giới trẻ's* perception of motorbikes as a symbol of consumerism and class mobility. While King et al (2008) focus on the

identity and aspirations of middle – class youth, Gainsborough (2002) examines the middle-class political challenges to the state at the junction of free-market capitalism and continued talk of socialism. Western and modern socio-cultural practices became important symbols of a new social class in Vietnam. The middle class as the transnational forces had to be reformulated and reinvented to adapt the shape of contemporary society and culture through the modes of experimentation and negotiation (Belanger et al 2012).

*Giới trẻ* in Vietnam today study hard and work to “achieve material success” (Hayton 2010, p. 58). Since the early 1990s, students have had the freedom to study abroad without government control.. Most Vietnamese students, who are going to study abroad, prefer to pursue education degrees in the U.K, U.S, European countries, Australia and New Zealand. U.S and U.K institutions command great respect from Vietnamese institutions and students alike. The brand names of popular foreign universities appear on all banners related to education workshops in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Ashwill and Diep (2004, p. 35) described the increasing interest in overseas education and proficiency in the English language amongst the younger generation, as follows:

“full of energy, ambition, and a desire to be challenged that is not being fulfilled in their country’s institution of higher education – are intrigued by Western cultures. ...for them overseas study is a means to that end. Among Vietnamese young people, English has now become the language of choice. For the reformers and much of the educated younger generation, the United States represents modernity; its technology, universities, and popular culture are especially attractive.”

Vietnam had 106,104 overseas students in the 2011-2012 academic years (Vietnamnet 2013). According to WES, the country was the eighth largest sender of students to the U.S, having 15,500 in 2012.

### **2.3. The media landscape**

The Economic Renovation has greatly changed Vietnamese society, bringing people more opportunities for information and entertainment exchange, with the

literacy rate at 96.7% in 2001 (CPV 2005). The market economy brings a media market, in which Vietnamese consumers are offered a wide range of contents from local media products to global media products.

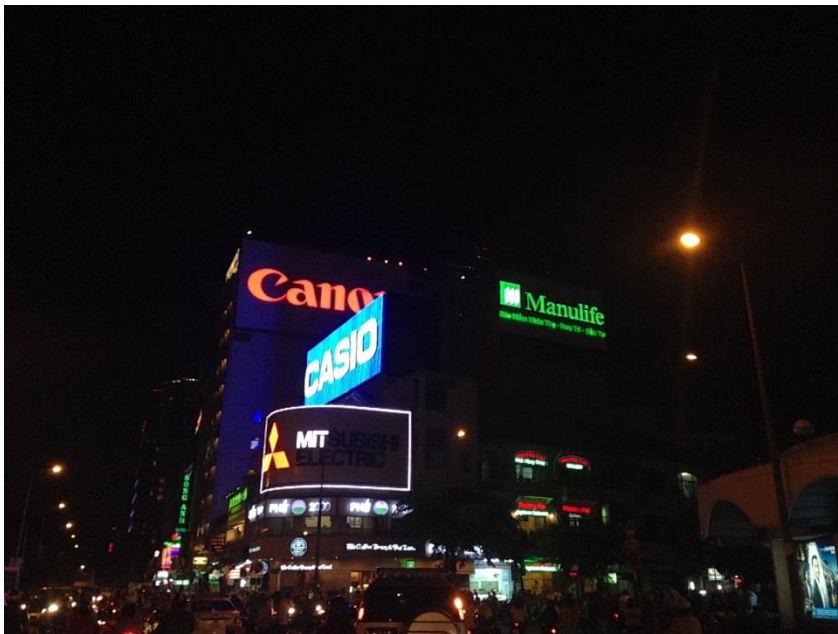
Advertising expenditure has grown in response to the economic growth at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century, because ‘the more competition that is present in a market, the greater the need to advertise’ (Doyle 2002, p. 41). Currently, according to the Vietnam Advertising Association (VAA), there are 3,000 advertising agencies, and advertising earns nearly 1 billion USD of annual revenue. Vietnam hosts over 30 representative offices of the world’s leading advertising companies and they account for 80 percent of the total advertising revenue (Vietnamnet, 2013). Vietnam Television (VTV) and HCMC Television (HTV) have applied a ‘one-price policy’ to all advertisers regardless of local or foreign origins since 1/1/2004, which creates certain advantages for foreign advertising agencies.

With the development of new technologies and neoliberal free market policies in trade and investment, multinational advertising corporations from the U.S and other developed countries started to have subsidiary operations or to establish branches in Vietnam. Vietnam TV began to accept foreign advertising and the first privately-owned advertising agencies open for business in 1993. Foreign advertising agencies such as Optel Media, Ogilvy& Mather, McCann-Erickson and JWT were respectively granted licences for representative offices in Vietnam, and then later joined by Saatchi and Saatchi, Chuo Senko, Lowe, Y&R and BBDO (Advertising Agency Directory Vietnam, 2010). The local TV networks in Hanoi, and particularly in Ho Chi Minh City, now have considerable income from advertising (Hayton 2010).



*A shopping mall with global brands in Hanoi*

*Photo credit: Hai Chung Pham*



*A busy street in Ho Chi Minh City*

*Photo credit: Han Pham*



According to Bloomberg BusinessWeek, consumer spending is forecast to rise 42 percent between 2012 and 2016. The urban youth in Vietnam spend more and more on buying products and enjoying material life. Most enterprises focus on this elite group by creating advertisements which constantly underscore the pursuit of modernity, as “more attention is paid to the differences between the segments of old thinking and new thinking” (Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai et al 2003, p. 15). Consumers actively embrace the new way of consumption practices from the West. Procter & Gamble, the world’s largest consumer-products company, entered the country a year after the embargo was lifted in 1994. They are using everything from good deeds to television advertising to hand washing demonstrations as the modernity quality to win Vietnamese customers (Bloomberg BusinessWeek, 9-15 July 2012). Global companies understand the main issues in contemporary Vietnam, including consequences of Vietnam War and lack of materials after a missing decade (the subsidy period). The adaptation of heterogeneous cultural materials, modern lifestyles, CSR images are wisely asserted in advertising to approach Vietnamese consumers.

The media system in Vietnam embodies a different model from other countries in ASEAN. While Thailand and the Philippines adapt the so-called Western model, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia feature a semi-controlled press (Guanarate 1999; Busch 2004), Vietnamese mass media are owned and controlled by the government, thus media private ownership in Vietnam is not allowed. There are 811 media organisations operating, including 178 newspapers, 528 magazines, 67 broadcasting stations, 37 online newspapers and one news agency with 17,000 professional journalists (MOIC, 2009).

Vietnam has witnessed the tremendous popularity of television, the film industry and the rapid growth of the internet. Television ownership is almost universal, with 92 % of rural Vietnamese and 97 % of urban families having a television (TNS Media Vietnam, 2009). Cable and satellite TV subscriber numbers are low

but rising - 400,000 and 70,000 respectively in 2009 (MOIC 2009). The first TV ratings measurement introduced by AC Nielsen Vietnam in June 1996.

No	Classification	2008
1	Cable TV	6.8
2	Digital/satellite TV (estimated)	20

**Table 1 - Table - Households with cable/digital/satellite TV per 100 households**

*(Source: White Book, 2009, MOIC, Vietnam)*

According to Vietnam News, based on what the TNS Media Vietnam conducted the research in 2010, VTV1 and VTV3 are most favoured by viewers while HBO, Star Movies and Cinemax, are the leading foreign pay channels. People in Viet Nam spend an average 4.3 hours per day sitting before their TV sets, slightly more in the north with 4.6 hours, while the figure is 4.2 hours in the south (TNS Media Vietnam 2009).

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In 2001, two new home-grown multi-channel cable TV networks were launched – Vietnam Cable Television (VCTV) in Hanoi and Saigon Tourist Cable Television (SCTV) in Ho Chi Minh City. Both offer an international package ranging from CNN, BBC World, TV5, ESPN and Discovery Channel to MTV Asia, Star Movies, Star World, HBO, Cinemax, Cartoon Network and TCM. The STAR TV network, owned by Rupert Murdoch, features many of the most popular choices such as V Channel (music programmes), Starworld (UK entertainment channel),

and Starmovies (Hollywood movies). Although STAR TV may not be the cultural integrator of Asia, it has indeed initiated a long process of cultural integration' (Levy 1994, p. 115). Among 63 cable and satellite channels offered, 36 channels feature full content imported from overseas.

State-run Voice of Vietnam (VoV) has six radio networks, including VoV 5 with programmes in English, French and Russian. The fact that people prefer to access TV and internet and motorbikes as the main transportation in Vietnam strongly increased lead to the number of radio sets per household in Vietnam low and reduce further in recent years (Vietnam News, 2009). According to GSO (2004), only 18.55% of households in rural areas have radios.

Vietnam's broadcast media are subject to the Press Law, which was passed at the 6th session of the 8th National Assembly of Vietnam on 28 January 1989. This law includes seven chapters and 31 articles specifying the role, function and rights of the media and penalties for violation, helping the government control the censorship of the press. The media of Vietnam is now managed according to the law by the Ministry of Information and Communication.

Only 30 per cent of the films and TV serials currently shown on Vietnamese television are currently made locally (Vienamnet, 2007). The rest are imported from producers such as the U.S, Korea and China and screened with a voice-over in Vietnamese. Despite liberalization measures offered by Vietnam in conjunction with its bid to gain WTO accession, the number of feature films imported each year may not exceed two-thirds of those domestically produced. The Cinematography Law amendments appear to leave the possibility for quantitative restrictions on importation of films for distribution. Foreign content is reportedly limited to 50% of broadcast time, and foreign programming is not allowed during prime time. (Decree No. 96/2007/ND-CP Cinematography Law, Vietnamese Government)

Megastar is the biggest distributor of Hollywood imported movies in Vietnam. It has the right to import from 60 to 80 % of imported movies in Vietnam (VN economy 2010). It is the sole distributor for two Hollywood movie production

giants, United International Pictures and Buena Vista International (Thanh Nien News 2006).

There were around 30,8 million internet users in Vietnam by Feb 2012 (InternetWorldStats). However, actual broadband access is higher as internet shops are popular in the rural areas. Additionally, according to Ministry of Information and Communication (2013), 100 % communes provide public telecommunication services, including broadband internet connection. In December 2008, the Ministry of Information and Communication set up a series of rules for restriction on internet blogs. Providers face fines or closure for breaking the rules, and cyber dissidents have been imprisoned. 70% of internet users access social networks, giving them a media platform where they can share what they think about the world around them.

The changing role of the media in Vietnam has permitted the public, especially younger publics, to be exposed to new forms of leisure and entertainment. Within a few years, a majority of young people have effectively moved to read magazines and access the internet, which is available at hundreds of cafes through Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Google ranked Vietnam as the top country searching the key word 'sex' in 2007 and 2008 (Hong et al 2009, p. 353).

The rate of mobile subscription in Vietnam is growing very quickly. About 800,000 new mobile are monthly added (Advertising Agency Directory Vietnam, Volume 1 2010). By the end of 2009, Vietnam's telephone subscribers accounted for 123 million phone subscribers or 143 phones per 100 people (General Department of Statistics, Vietnam). The market of mobiles is mainly occupied by iPhone (the U.S), Nokia (Finland), and Samsung (Korea).

According to the Nielsen Report (2010), Vietnam is added to the long list of countries where teenagers and young adults use more mobile data than any other demographic. Half of all Vietnamese aged 15-24 use mobile data. That group regularly accesses the mobile internet at triple the rate of all Vietnamese mobile users. According to MOIC, the most significant statistic related to mobiles,

however, is the number of 3G network users, which was up to 9 million by the end of 2010.

*Giới trẻ* spend more time on Internet rather than other traditional mean of media. “This youth, and especially the urban elite, also wants to ‘belong to the world’ via the internet” (Salomon and Vu Doan Ket 2007, p. 359). According to Vietnam E-commerce and Information Technology Agency (VECITA), it indicates that 81 per cent of Vietnamese Internet users go online on a daily basis, with a total online time of 5.6 hours per day, and 6.4 days per week. The report also shows that 36 per cent of the country’s population, or 34 million people, use the Internet, 18 million of who shop online. Internet users are hungry for information, entertainment and social connections. The first activity people access Internet is to chat with friends or online dating, but the second purpose is to look at the celebrity sites of actors, pop singers and others (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas Hardy 2004, p. 136).

The widespread internet development changed the purchasing habit of Vietnamese consumers. Consumers are still hesitant for online shopping due to the risk and uncertainty of stolen information and bank account. However, their habit of online shopping start coming to young urban people in Vietnam. They search for information for shopping, or order online but payment on arrival when they received the stuff is the popular purchasing behaviour now in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, due to the low trust on the online banking and the credibility of the domestic brands and shops.

Consumers are more dependent upon the on-line coupon discounts driving increasing preference for Groupon, for example. Consumers are facing the inflation and economic crisis these years in Vietnam, that’s they would save more as over half of consumers are suffering from recession (TNS Media 2012)

The media in Vietnam know how to negotiate between government policy and consumer taste. Media lure audiences with modernity and prosperity. Pettus (2003, p. 148) describes this trend:

As long as editors do not question the integrity or desirability of Communist Party rule, they can continue relatively unhindered to woo their specific readership.....The liberalized press occupied a hybrid cultural space between the purely ‘political’ and the purely ‘popular’, that serves the interests of social management as it feeds consumer fantasy.

Dutton (2012, p.21) emphasizes the powerful role of consumer advertising in “promoting modern European goods and the lifestyles that went with them....these advertisements were instrumental in creating an urban consumer culture of a type very different from that which had had existed previously”. Stories about Western consumption practices spread across all media in Vietnam every day. Fashion newspapers and magazines encourage urban youth interest in Western products and lifestyle. For example, Davines Haircare is the main sponsor for Dep Fashion show and popularly promoted on series of Dep Magazine (Beauty Magazine). Or the latest images of Victory Beckham’s outfits are widely seen on newspapers for women and teenagers.

The anonymity of urban life demanded a more obvious display of power and status. *Giới trẻ* actively seek to present their social status and media can provide ideas for them to construct their identity (Shipman 2008). The urban youth’s responses to the new landscape of media reflects “the changing relationship between popular youth culture and media in Vietnam... in which popular narratives and cultural icons are reshaping political views, constructing tastes and values and consolidating the market economy” (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas 2004, p. 136).

#### **2.4. Chapter Conclusion**

The emergence of transnational consumer culture in Vietnam leads to an increasing interest in identity constructive process through consumption (Featherstone 1991; Fisher and Sherry 2006), but produced in local context as a comprise to the power of state (Sirkeci 2013) and cultural codes (Belk 1988; Penaloza et al 2012). The contemporary globalising world affects upon young people’s lives to various degrees and in many significant ways. While embracing modernity and cultural globalisation, young Vietnamese do not altogether reject

the traditional values imparted to them by their parents and promoted by the Party. The Vietnamese younger generation of urban consumers pick elements of 'distinction'. They adjust their lifestyles to build up new forms of values through consumption practices and establish their position in urban society under the post socialist state control. Their consumption practices are combined and influenced by several actors in the unique context of Vietnam. They negotiate themselves in the web of state and capital market. They are both active and passive in the process of their identity construction.

*Giới trẻ* are commonly oriented toward the themes of modernization and globalisation. The hunger amongst the younger generation 'elites' has been for fundamental change after the whole country lived in period of struggle with a lack of material supply after the Vietnam War ended. The majority of the population is under 35, presenting a powerful new consumer force. The younger generation shows "a greater interest in matters directly relating to their lives, a desire to embrace socioeconomic and cultural changes wrought by the processes of globalisation" (Phuong An Nguyen 2006, p. 338). Through their gradual exposure to international products (through media such as the internet and cable television or through contact with tourists) as well as increased income, the younger generation within Vietnam's cities has entered fully into the mass consumption society (Freire 2009, p. 69).

Because class distinction is formed through consumption practices (Bourdieu 1977; Belanger et al 2012), the concept of middle class in the post socialist context of Vietnam is different from that existing in Western perception. Thanks to economic reform, Vietnam has quickly moved to a society dominated by a large intermediate emerging class, but generally supports a broadly socialistic ideology promoted by the State. The Vietnamese middle-class sharply believes in the values of materialism and social status indicated through material possession. They drive the demand of material display (Freire 2009). "Middle-class values" are the values of human capital and savings (Nguyen-Marshall et al 2012). The consumption practices are "central to the articulation of Vietnamese middle – class lifestyles and subjectivities" (Vann 2012, p. 157).

The younger generation of urban middle-class in Vietnam reposition themselves in “evolving social orders brought about by colonization, war, independence, communism, and a market economy” (Belanger et al 2012, p. 2). They care more about their individual needs and material life and use consumption as a marker of identity. Their social status and conformity are the elements popularly found in their consumption practices. At the same time, the state has sought to ensure its political survival, through the economic and social upheaval of market reform.

The economic transition reorders Vietnamese society as a stage for consumption. Consumers in contemporary Vietnam believe in “material wealth brings happiness”, placing great importance on material objects and exhibiting a tendency to judge others by their possessions. Consumers emphasise “the dramatization of the signs of status” (Canclini 1995, p. 210). To adjust to the values of this materialism, Vietnamese younger generation manage to negotiate their identities under the tension between globalisation and established traditions strongly preserved by the state. They both desire to inform their modern identity to enhance their social standing, and adapt to a certain social acceptance defined by the traditions and socialist past. Thus, the existence of socialism and capitalism can be seen everywhere in Vietnam, and illustrated through the urban youth’s consumption practices blended by all elements.

Media under the loose control of the state (Hayton 2010) rather than of the market as they do in Western democracies, act as the promotional role (Wernick 1991; Featherstone 1991) in creating the aspiration and desire amongst young urban people to come to the Western market, and seek products to satisfy their desires. At the same time, media also emphasize the compatibility between modern cultural standards and traditional values controlled by the state. They are the means by which the tension/contradiction between communism and markets is managed.

The dynamic of state and market relies on young people’s ability to adapt to these tensions. As long as all the actors within this complex web can effectively negotiate with each other, the Vietnamese landscape will continue to undergo



“the post – reform era promise of urban development, and [meet] the new demands of global capital” (Harm 2010, p. 225). This study will explore the phenomena that a tidal wave of consumerism has swamped urban areas in Vietnam, which may be channelled into different directions with a rival value system of traditions with strong promotion of the State.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*“Everything in social life can be said to have become cultural”*

*(Jameson, 1984)*

Consumption is regarded as a social action indicating certain meanings (Bourdieu 1984; Featherstone 1991; Shipman 2008). In contemporary societies, “core social practices and cultural values, ideas, aspirations and identities are defined and oriented in relation to consumption rather than to other social dimensions” (Slater 1997, p. 24). Modern consumers use “images, signs and symbolic goods” to “summon up dreams, desires and fantasies” (Featherstone 1991, p. 27). The values of consumption spread to all the consumers, and become the central focus of social life (Belk et al 2003; Featherstone 1991; Slater 1997; Rosenblatt 1999).

While representing a number of distinct theoretical approaches and case studies, consumer culture theory (CCT) researchers nonetheless share a common theoretical orientation toward the study of cultural complexity that programmatically links their respective research efforts (Arnould and Thompson 2005). They represent the relations and the interpretations which consumers define themselves between the meaningful ways of life and material resources (Bourdieu 1984; Featherstone 1991; Belk 1988; Arnould and Thompson 2005). The meaning making of consumption practices is mediated through markets (Sherry and Fischer 2008). The marketplace and its symbols are at the centre of consumers’ identity construction (Peneloza 1994; Sherry and Fisher 2008).

Emphasising the cultural aspect of consumption, this study investigates the tensions and negotiations between consumers’ social beings and their practices of brand consumption. It focuses to cultural dimension of consumption in context (Belk 1988). I seek to situate and contextualize the Vietnamese consumers’ life worlds by understanding the socio-historical universe in which they emerge and

how they actively rework and transform symbolic meanings to manifest their social identity and lifestyle goals.

This research project takes issues of brand consumption to explore them within a particular local context, that of Vietnam as an emerging economy. In this chapter, I discuss the main thematic areas of interest to conceptualize the study: *Identity and brand consumption, distinction, status, middle-class, cultural intermediaries and consumer practices*.

### 3.1. Identity and Brand consumption

‘Within the wider global frame of post-industrial capitalism’ (Elliot 2002, p. 2), the identity construction turns increasingly to consumption (Sherry and Fischer 2008; Penaloza et al 2012). Each individual is thrown back onto his or her own resources of goods to construct an identity (Belk et al 2003; Featherstone 1991) shaped through social interaction (Bourdieu 1984; Schroeder and Salzer-Morling 2005; Shipman 2008). One carefully chooses, arranges, adapts and displays brands to make particular stylistic statements that express the self (Goffman 1969; Belk 1989), presumably the ‘authentic identity’ of the owner (Featherstone 1991, p. 114). The social construction of self through brand consumption helps to examine the relation between the individual’s self and society (Fournier 1998; McCracken 1989; Avery 2012).

According to the Oxford English dictionary, Self is “‘a person’s essential being that distinguishes them from others, especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action’”. It’s one’s sense of her or his own identity. In other words, it raises the questions of “Who am I?”, “What is my identity?” and “What image do I carry?” that each individual in society was/is trying to find answers to and obviously, that is not an easy task.

Erving Goffman (1969) concludes in his work that selfhood lies in expressive performance. Each individual performs different roles within specific social settings. In social interaction, like in theatrical performance, Goffman suggests

that that the public identity is performed for an audience, whilst the private self is given to the maintenance of respect and trust in routine social interaction. Goffman calls 'front' and 'back' region in seeking to present a self – image. The front region refers to the 'screening – off of aspects of identity' that is staged. The back region is the way that each individual does not have to worry about the face they keep.

The interpretation of self varies from culture to culture, shaped by the particular cultural environments in which an individual has grown up. Accordingly, people who have grown up in different cultural contexts have different ways to view their selves and others' selves. Hofstede and De Mooji (2011) propose the dimension of collectivist - individualist in order to understand how individuals in various cultures evaluate themselves in relation to others. People brought up in a culture of the East are far more collectivist (Cova and Shankar 2012).

In 1967, Goffman published a book in which he described: "face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (p. 5). Positive face is the desire for approval and the desire to be appreciated and accepted by others. (Cocroft and Ting-Toomey 1994, p. 471). Thus, one may gain, save and maintain the face, which is supported by others' judgements.

Cultural variability (cultural values) would influence face work (Cocroft and Ting-Toomey 1994). It is, therefore, important to determine the meaning of 'face' in differing cultural contexts. Numerous studies have attempted to provide insights into a collectivist orientation and Confucian values closely associated with face work as the "front region" in the effort of enhancing the positive face and face protecting (for example, Cocroft and Ting-Toomey 1994; Wong and Ahuvia 1998).

In Confucian cultures, one might want to 'gain face' as an aspect of the social code of any social circle. Vietnam is considered as a country of Confucian heritage (Nguyen Viet Thang et al 2005); within Vietnam, the importance of

keeping one's dignity is emphasised (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). The concept of 'face' here, therefore, refers to the obligation of reciprocity combining "reputation, social standing, dignity and individual honours"<sup>1</sup> which may be given, lost, saved or challenged. Thus, within Vietnam, it is important to maintain oneself "a positive face" (*giữ thể diện*) or "corresponding front" (Goffman 1969), with respect to one's social circle or communities.

Consumers aspire to attach meanings to particular brands to convey ideas about the way consumers want to live, look and think (Belk et al 2003; Shipman 2008). Brands are fundamental to the way consumers present themselves in life, and the way they give meanings to it. Fournier (1998) legitimizes the brand as an active partner in the construction of the consumer's self, in which brands can be animated, humanized or personalized. Consumers capture and extract meanings contained within the brands (Avery 2012). They continuously seek and value "ongoing relationship with brands" (Fournier 1998, p. 343). Research on brands has done more to explore the relationship between consumers' identity work and brands (Ahuvia 2005; Fournier 1998; McCracken 1989; Belk 1988; Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004).

McCracken (1989) proposed the model of meaning transfer suggesting that consumers actively give certain meanings to brands. Consumers believe "the essential activity of consumption is thus not the actual selection, purchase or use of products, but the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself" (Campbell 1987, p. 89). Consumers assert the available symbolic resource of brand into their desired identity.

### ***3.1.1. Brands as a social mean to communicate self***

Brands are part of one's self-concept reflected in Goffman's treatment of presentation of self (1967; 1969) and Belk's argument of the extended self (1988).

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1 The sociological concept of face, Vietnamese dictionary

It communicates who individual is in the social interaction (Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1988). Consumers are likely to form brand associations with their self. Brands play an important role in documenting culture and making it concrete by encapsulating cultural ideologies, beliefs and values (Avery 2012, p.148).

Thus, relationships with brands help one to manage his/her social relationships with others (Fournier 1998; Avery 2012). Brands can serve as a social purpose by reinforcing the front region when consumers present the self to the other. For example, people would care more about brands of clothes, cars, which can be seen by the others while less attention would be paid to domestic appliances.

We are what we possess (Belk 1988). Russell Belk proposes that people tend to extend, and strengthen their sense of self through their engagement with brands. He suggests a consistent structure for the extend-self: persons, places and things to which one feels attached are more likely to be seen as part of their extended self. (Belk 1989, p. 130) asserts: “regardless of whether we seek to control an object or are controlled by one, that object can become part of extended self”. The extended self may be one of the most basic and powerful facts of consumer behaviour about how brands are used by consumers to communicate who they are. Consumers involve an evaluation of the brand associations or symbolism to whether they are appropriate in the current situation to enhance the self.

The possession of brands plays a role in the construction of a coherent identity narrative. Consumption becomes meaning-based, and brands are used as symbolic resources in identity construction. Consumers meaningfully form connections with particular brands to extend the self (Belk 1988; 1989) or strengthen the front region (Goffman 1969; Ahuvia 2005). Consumers’ identity is apparent within the narrative of the brands they present to the others (Fournier 1998; Belk 1989). The self is created through continuously monitoring and adjusting the narrative presented through behaviour and consumption practices.

### ***3.1.2. Narratives of brand meanings***

Consumers nowadays actively put on particular brands to communicate their self or extend their self. However, the contextual effects (Aaker et al. 2004; Schroeder and Salzer-Morling 2006; Oswald 2012) such as cultural constituted system (Bourdieu 1984; Belk 1988,1989; Wong and Ahuvia 1998), personal history and cultural processes (Schroeder 2003) and the protestant traditions in relations or the inner contradictions (Campbell 2003; Riesman 1950) should be taken into account of consumers' active negotiation of brand meaning. Culture constitutes consumers' world with beliefs and values (Belk 1989) which are embedded in the relationship between them and brands. Consumers' background knowledge also underlies influences of consumer behaviour. The meanings consumers ascribe to brands are also the process of negotiations with the appropriate rules and traditions. These factors contribute to, and constrain how brands work to produce meanings. "Culture, aesthetics, and history interact to inject brands into the global flow of images" (Schroeder 2006, p. 4). Market cultures are co-created through discursive negotiations and practices (Penaloza 2000). For instance, while Vietnamese urban youth embrace the new lifestyles, "the push and pull between modernity and Confucian and communist traditionalism can be felt in every corner of Vietnamese society" (Libby 2011, p. 210).

Elliott (2002, p. 2) concluded: "deep cultural assumptions governing how we see the self". The nature and structure of self is influenced by cultural contexts (e.g. Belk 1988, 1989; Belk et al 2003). The culture dynamics influence on the negotiation of the meaning transfer of brands to the consumers. For example, within Asian context, the 'face' in the identity work which is more interpersonal would be more linked with brand consciousness (Bao et al 2003; Liao and Wang 2009). 'Face' would act as the mediator between materialism and brand consciousness. Consumers with strong 'face' consciousness would attach more importance to the symbolic meaning of the brand such as status, prestige and self – image (Belk and Pollay 1985). For example, Southeast Asian consumers set the public display and symbolic meanings of brands in a more important place than other values (Wong and Ahuvia 1998).

In particular, within Vietnamese culture, Confucianism is closely linked to group behaviour (Vinh Bao Do et al 2009). The maintenance of face is a condition of interaction, not its objective (Cocroft and Ting-Toomey 1994). “One does not even learn why he is ready to follow the code, for a large number of different motives can equally lead him to do so” (Goffman 1967, p. 12). For example, the traditional belief in family sharing and harmony seems to explain why two seaters are not favoured for purchase in Vietnam when the urban dwellers plan to buy a car. Instead, they would prefer to choose a 4 seater car for a nuclear family or 7 seater for an extended family.

The significance of sociocultural context is important in the character of consumption meanings and preferences (Holt 1998; 2002). The cultural codes, including historical, socio-economic context constrain how brands are interpreted among consumers. The appeal of a brand with particular associations may be attracted to consumers in Western cultures, but may be associated in different ways in non-Western context or other marketplaces such as Vietnam. The emphasis of contextual effects on the relations between brands and identity work would be discussed in the other following thematic areas of interest.

### **3.2. Distinction**

In his research within the context of France, Bourdieu (1984, p. 169-75) asserts that people classify themselves and each other in terms of their classification of consumer goods “desirable, acceptable, or valuable” suggesting that consumers prefer the differentiated use of goods to establish their distinction in the social codes. The notion of class defined by Bourdieu (1984), like Weber is referred to similar social conditioning and material conditions of life. A person’s associations are determined by the capital they possess.

The cultural logic of difference in particular local contexts would be understood and manifest differently. The cultural capital that Bourdieu refer is continuously reproduced and reinterpreted among the local cultural elites. In emerging markets, such as Vietnam, the new generation of consuming class would typically use the



logic of symbolic systems of brands (Belk et al 2003) to produce distinctions contributing to the reproduction of the existing relations between classes and class fractions. It leads to the phenomena that numerous Asian middle class consumers have gone label crazy, falling under the spell of luxury brands (Chadha and Husband 2006) where we can see a growing appetite for high-priced brands among Asian emerging consumers for status consumption. In the study of Chinese consumers, Oswald's findings indicate that the marketplace is founded on nothing less than the personal and emotional associations consumers associate with brands (2012). The luxury brands did not extend their personal identities beyond the indication of status and savour-faire (Oswald 2012, p.134).

Bourdieu has the coherence in the sense that the purely arbitrary preferences of the dominant class in a position to dictate the cultural standards that separate the high from the low. The dominant class start acquiring the symbols of products and displaying them in earnest. In early 1990s, in Hong Kong, the first car was often a BMW or a Mercedes to indicate an entry into the luxe consumer society or to signify their social status (Chadha and Husband 2006, p.45). The symbolic value is underpinned by the interest of those who generate their legitimacy (Bourdieu 1984). Thus, the marketers can offer or promote the conditions of access or mobility aspirants' versions of legitimate cultural forms.

"Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" Bourdieu argues (1984, p. 5). In the case of countries with Asian values such as Vietnam, taste can be an indication of economic wealth and class distinction, signifying both symbolic and material capital. Taste, along with attitudes, preferences, manners, expertise, and educational credentials, forms an essential component of cultural capital, which is transmitted through the family, the education system. There is a strong connection between personal taste and family face in Confucian cultures (Wong and Ahuvia 1998; Ahuvia 2005). Personal taste is more concerned with other people's perception of them (Wond and Ahuvia 1998, p.430).

Tastes can signal identity through consumers' associations with their social groups (Muniz and O's Guinn 2001). Similarly, tastes that are held by a majority

will not provide clear signals of any one particular identity. Not only will majority tastes not clearly signal any group identity, but if holding a majority taste does communicate an identity, the identity signalled may be that one is a “conformist.” Thus consumers may avoid selecting products associated with tastes that are held by out-groups or a majority. Extending this, Holt 1998 (p.7-19) indicates that individuals with low cultural capital are more focused on their local environment with less ‘exotic’ tastes and a stronger orientation toward the local community than their high cultural capital counterparts (Holt 1998, p. 12-17). For example, the study by Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas (2004) identifies a majority of Vietnamese young women seeking Western cosmetics to make their skin white. In the Vietnamese mind-set, white skin expresses “a symbol of femininity, purity, sophistication and high social class” (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas, 2004, p. 134).

Bourdieu (1984) uses the concept of 'cultural capital' to make sense of class within the context of Culture and consumption. Bourdieu regarded the new middle class as being guided by ‘the cultural intermediaries’ who provide the necessary interpretations on the use of goods. Constellations of taste, consumption preferences and lifestyle practices are associated with specific occupation and class fractions. “Cultural intermediaries” refers to occupational groups who become more increasingly central to economy and culture. They would transfer the latest styles and attitudes toward others, therefore, influencing other social groups. However, Featherstone (1991, p. 44) expanded these occupational groups under the label, ‘the new cultural intermediaries’ to include all who engaged in ‘providing symbolic goods and services’ thus helping to shape lifestyle, taste, and consumption preferences.

The younger, educated middle classes would stand more for the trend and deeper level of blending practices of consumption. New groups of consumers for “whom consumption plays a central role in their ways of life” (Bocock 1993, p. 27) would appear to fit in the context of modern consumer society. Bocock adds:

“It was not so much the external characteristics of these groups which were new and distinctive, characteristics which were measured by such variables such as age, gender, ethnicity or socio-economic class, defined by occupation, but the internal dynamics of these new groups” (1993, p. 27).

As new cultural intermediaries, they have the capacity to negotiate with and between various traditions and cultures in order to produce new symbolic goods (Bourdieu 1984). For example, the new Vietnamese young female elites who are attempting to distinguish themselves “through conspicuous consumption of brands and odours, from sanitising their homes with the smells of disinfectants and deodorisers, to adorning themselves with modish styles, hair products and French perfume, and whitening their skin” (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas, 2004, p. 134). They are affected by both the lure of the material - aesthetic pleasures of consumerism and the local practices and culture.

The consumers who involve themselves in the complex interplay and negotiation between cultural/symbolic and economic capital are regarded as the new cultural intermediaries. They serve as a medium of new trends in consumption practices. Thus, the middle-class, new middle-class and urban youth (the younger generation of urban consumers) in Vietnam are the “new cultural intermediaries” that Bourdieu (1984) and Featherstone (1991) refer to. The research would explore the norms displayed through the practices of lifestyles in their ways of making sense of their identity work.

In different cultures with different beliefs, consumers would involve different sets of habitus in practices and strategies. ‘Habitus’ is one of the core concepts in the Bourdieu’s work (1977) and is strongly linked to cultural capital. ‘Habitus’ is acquired through activities and experiences, including beliefs and temperament (Bourdieu 1984). Habit is an open set of dispositions of individuals that generate individual practices, perception and attitudes. Habitus resides in a set of practices located in social fields, which can be displayed through the lifestyles of the consumers. The disposition constitutes a class habitus. Habitus provides a system of “durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu 1982, p. 53) and is less a set of conscious strategies and preferences than an embodied sense of the world and

one's place within it. Bourdieu's research focuses on French society, whilst this research on Vietnam emphasises taste as 'distinction' in terms of lifestyle for the purpose of class mobility and belonging. The dynamics of social fields shape social positions through lifestyles associated with middle-classness (Marshall-Nguyen et al 2012).

The changes in markets adjust the existing social class structures and norms of consumption. It overlooks the ways that people give meanings to subjective position of class through consumption. Emerging consumers in less economically developed countries often desire to display Western products and brands (Chalda and Husband 2006). In China, India, Thailand, Malaysia or Vietnam, for example, consumers are experiencing what in the Western world, occurred after World War II, when the culture of consumerism emerged strongly, and when consumers shifted to pleasure seeking in consumption (Stearns 2001). As more people become absorbed into the consuming classes, they not only merely create a new market, they think and behave differently, which, in turn, contributes to socio-cultural and economic transformation (Jackson 2004). There is more inspiration for material display and identity construction (Shipman 2008). The emergence of new consuming class the "cultivated" possess an immense store of knowledge that is the source of their aesthetic dispositions. Thus they fail to see that, in reality, the dominant aesthetic amounts to a "relation" to culture rather than a fund of special knowledge, which they are easily trapped in the status purchasing and conformity (Campbell 1987; Riesman 1950) in consumption.

### **3.3. Status and conformity**

Consumption is seen as a means of moving into or up social groups or classes. It has been suggested that consumers within emerging markets symbolically aspire to the level of consumption that others in their social circles have achieved (Rosenbatt 1997). The key feature is "consumption yields well-being or satisfaction not on the basis of its absolute level but always in relation to the level of consumption others have achieved" (Campbell 1987, p. 41). They are in the

status of conformity (Riesman 1950) to maintain the social relation with others or make an entrance to a social circle.

The preference for foreign brands is increasingly implicit in developing countries (Ger et al 2012, p.33). High-priced Western brands attract brand-obsessed consumers, including ones from “China and India’s rising new money” (Chadha and Husband 2006, p. 10) and other rising economies in Asia when the culture of consumerism emerged strongly, and when “walking down the street became an advertisement” (Stearns 2001, p. 128). The homogenized images of good life from Western consumerism expand all over the world. Consumers in developing countries believe in “global citizenship through global brands” (Strizhakova et al 2011, p.434). It increases the feeling of global participation (Dong and Tian 2009) in terms of quality and image (Belk et al 2003).

Consumption and status have specifically local meanings with roots in the dynamics of consumption in the emerging markets. Nowadays, within the context of emerging consumer cultures, compared to Western contexts, consumers place more emphasis on “the symbolic value of products, these cultural orientations influence the type of symbolic value sought from products” (Wong and Ahuvia 1998, p. 432). East Asian consumers, in particular, tend to buy Western brands for public display of their social status and wealth (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). Western brand names signal how one perceives oneself and wants to be perceived by others. It can provide access to certain social circles (Starr 2008). Thus, lavish expenditures have become a means for consumers to gain personal and social recognition (Chadha and Husband 2006). Henceforth, the acts of purchasing goods and services become the most important end in itself, rather than the use in practical value of the goods themselves (Chaudhuri and Majumdar 2006; Belk et al 2003; Shipman 2008). Many would spend a big amount of savings buying top-brand stuff, not for the practical value, but to save or secure one’s ‘face’ (Goffman 1969; Ahuvia 2005).

Characteristics of the ‘keeping up’ process classic of post-war 1950s in the U.S after the Second World War, are widely seen in emerging economies (e.g. See

Chadha and Husband 2006; Oswald 2012). The comparison between individuals or families is near each other in economic situation as individuals conform to the expectations of their immediate social surroundings. The individual is determined by society in the most trivial sense, obsessed with preferences, tastes, appearances, norms (Slater 1997).

One of the most notable books written about the conformity in 1950s is “the lonely crowd” by Riesman. Riesman approached the sociological analysis with a provocative interpretation of the American middle-class society in the period of transitional growth; bringing about a profound change in national character. He clarified three main characteristic types: tradition – direction, inner – direction and other – direction. The inner direction was regarded as dominating the society, but the tendency would be toward the dominance of ‘other-direction’ type which is considered as ‘the principal mode of securing conformity’ (Riesman 1950, p. 14). Riesman argues that people become inner-directed when discovering their potential by using their ‘inner gyroscope’ amidst the factors of personal mobility, rapid accumulation of capital and constant expansion in the society.

He particularly emphasises “other – direction” of the middle-class group in metropolitan areas whose identity and behaviour is shaped by its relationships:

The society is in transition from predominance of inner-direction to predominance of other-direction with other – directed people in middle classes of metropolitan areas. While the inner – direction is the typical description of the old middle – class, other – direction could be the dominant mode of ensuring conformity and typical character of the new middle – class (1950, p. 21).

The other-directed could only identify themselves through references to others in their communities (and what they earned, owned, consumed, believed in). Other – directed individuals would be highly dependent upon others to guide their standards and norms, while inner-directed people would base on their own individually-derived standards to obtain the feeling of control over his life and career. The other-directed might be the consumers with lack of consumption knowledge or less experienced consumption.

The origins and development of the Asian middle class or the 'new rich' (Robinson and Goodman 1996; Chua 1998; 1999) with global lifestyles adaptation and inflections of Confucian values shares the coherence with the domination of other-direction. It is important for the member of collectivist cultures places on relations with their group members. Other-directed Southeast Asian consumers focus “more on the public meanings of luxury products (Wong and Ahuvia 1998, p. 432). Chinese consumers expect luxury brands to inform their savoir-faire (Oswald 2012).

There is a close link between Confucian values or collectivist cultures and an obsession with luxury or high priced (Western) brands (Wong and Ahuvia 1998; Chadha and Husband 2006). Consumers consume luxury brands because they want to show off their socioeconomic status in the first place. Consequently, those new rich with the motive of other-direction to reach a desired image in which they want to be seen by others in society, in order to climb up the ladder of social status (Riesman 1950; Campbell 1987).

The other-directed might be the consumers with lack of consumption knowledge or less experienced consumption in the economic transition phrase; including those individuals who are not perceived as having good taste in goods, or do not know the right stuff to build up a certain image in society. Conformity in consumption occurs simply because some individuals do not have the required 'knowledge' of how to identify their self-image or spend money on the right products to possess a desired image. Therefore, they seek information through their observation of the group (Bernheim 1994) and react accordingly to ensure that they are doing things appropriately (Solomon 2011), or in this case, spending on the right products. They tend to stick to material products that are visible, might be defined as good prestige and, therefore, acceptable by the public.

With respect to the post-war context, such as post-second World War US society or post-war society in Vietnam, the younger urban consumers encounter the constant expansion of product availability after living in the period of material limit. Thus, they become the first buyers of almost everything at the entrance of

economic transition. As the new consuming class, they are other-directed for the guidance of consumption from others.

Vietnamese people are very conscious of “community existence ... a sense of belonging” (Lockard 1994). The emphasis is placed upon group harmony and the notion of interdependent self. They are very conformist in their consumption practices. The “keeping up” process among the consumers’ community is popular in Vietnam. It implies identity construction by imitation (Riesman 1950): because others have or do then they seek to have or do it, because they want to fit into a certain group. If they cannot meet the common standard, they would feel inferior to others (Veblen 1925; Bagwell and Bernhem 1996)

Individuals with an other-directed character would choose a given way of acting. Even in the age of other-directedness, there is still space for inner-directed character. The influence of traditions is widely seen in several Asian countries where people are influenced by Confucian values and dominant state ideologies. For example, a new class (middle-class) in Vietnam has formed in the experience of the (communist) political order and economic transition. Consumers within Confucian cultures are constantly under the pressure to live up the expectations of others. “Adorning yourself with visible symbols of success is not just for your own glory, but also for the greater glory of your family” (Chadha and Husband 2006, p. 145). They believe that conforming to the norms set by the communities is the proper way to behave and to consume (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). Group norms or judgments are important to each individual. Each is aware of the fear of being outcast from their community (Riesman 1950). The individual looks to the behaviour and beliefs of people around for guidance. This can lead to the recreation of pleasure of need satisfaction by refining the sensual stimuli involve.

“Modern hedonism presents all individuals with the possibility of being their own despot, exercising total control over the stimuli they experience, and hence the pleasure they receive. Unlike traditional hedonism, however, this not gained solely, or even primarily, through the manipulation of objects and events in the world, but through a degree of control over their meaning. In addition, the modern hedonist possesses the very special power to conjure up stimuli in the absence of any externally



generated sensations. This control is achieved through the power of imagination, and provides infinitely greater possibilities for the maximization of pleasurable experiences than was available under traditional, realistic hedonism to even the most powerful of potentates.” (Campbell 1987: 76)

The lifestyles of these emerging consumers are marked by pleasure seeking (Belk 1989; 2003). The pleasure seeking in new forms of consumption to feel socially integrated and accepted (Belk 1988; 1989) is strong among aspiring consumers in emerging markets. Pleasure then is no longer a property of external objects but of internal “spiritual” processes, gained by conjuring up emotional states through a mastery of the imagination (Campbell 1987; Rook 1984), by indulging in daydreams. While these daydreams are facilitated by the use of commodities, the pleasure is not in the immediate sensual effect of those goods on the consumer but in the consumer’s self-illusionary engagement with them. Campbell speaks of autonomous imaginative hedonism. The imaginative hedonist enjoys involvement in fictitious worlds, shares the adventures of invented characters, or dream him/herself into a semi-fictional identity by, for example, adopting a certain style of clothing, driving a particular car.

In general, in the context of post-war period with economic transition and the existence of Confucian values, such as Vietnam, the other-directed self and ‘Face’ saving are interwoven in the conformity of consumption. Consumers try to maintain and transform the link between self and society (Belk 1989; Campbell 1987). In some circumstances, people in Vietnam will define themselves through the groups to which they belong. They compare themselves with others who are similar to themselves on several dimensions. People realise their shared situation and define themselves accordingly as members of the same collectivity. This study on the construction of younger urban consumers’ identity will examine how far Riesman’s typology or the protestant traditions can be applied to the context of contemporary Vietnam.

### **3.4. Consumer practices**

Consumption indeed becomes a medium through which each individual in modern societies seeks for meaning to construct their desired images among their communities and distinguish themselves from other social groups. Increasingly, emerging consumers engage in social identity construction and power position when identity in collective society is being driven by consumerism, conformity for images of success, wealth and social status. Cultural codes and traditions enter consumerist society with the activation of politics and states leaving consumers to negotiate to reposition themselves within the context of transnational consumer society.

Globalisation creates an over-supply of goods of all sorts everywhere, which, Featherstone (1991, p. 13) argues, leads to a tendency towards cultural disorder. A culture of consumption emerges, mingling elements of the global with the local (Ger et al 2012, p.35), which might be referred to as 'blended practices' of consumption. The 'blended practices' would be influenced by a complex web of factors such as a collection of local perceptions (Belk 1989; Sherry and Fischer 2008), and interpretations of what consumer culture is and what participation in it entails (Belk et al 2003; Penaloza et al 2012) .

Several authors point to the existence of global – local way in the blending style (Hannerz 1996; Friedman 1990; Hermans and Kempen 1998; Stearn 2001; Wai-Chung Ho 2003; Ger et al 2012). Wai-Chung Ho (2003, p. 146) adds: “local actors become increasingly involved in global flows of meanings, images, sounds, capital, people”.

The blended practices of consumption refer to the consumption patterns which combine elements of local and foreign consumption values through globalized institutional forms. It is the diffusion of “structures of common difference” (Wilk 1995). Transnational consumer culture might be explained as the rise of consumerism (Featherstone 1991) and the negotiation of traditions (Riesman 1950; Campbell 1987) leading not a complete surrender to ‘Western values’ (Trentmann 2004). Within emerging markets, the culture of the West is likely

subjected to the local rework. Consumers can give brands the local meaning (Belk et al 1997; Ger et al 2012).

The move to standardization of modern consumer culture around the world has in turn stimulated localization (Friedman 1990; Stearn 2001; Trentmann 2004; Shroeder and Salzer-morling 2006; Sherry and Fischer 2008; Penaloza et al 2012). Each global brand has varied meanings and interpretations in different local contexts. Mapping markets (Sherry and Fischer 2008) is one of the areas of focus within CCT research. That is why producers have to adapt global brands to a variety of local conditions to enter the local market, to adapt the local ways of doing business.

Local consumers may energize the global desire, ignite homogenized images of good life and be in the need to conform (Clammer 1997, p. 14) but the practices of local consumption are blended with elements of local and foreign consumption traditions (Wilk 1995; Stearn 2001; Trentmann 2004). Their interests can be modified in favour of local tastes. Emerging consumers adapted consumerist values to more familiar local standards.

Consumption is involved in the creation and maintenance of social relationships (Riesman 1950; Bourdieu 1984; Fournier 1998). Certain active urban youth (the middle-class, new cultural intermediaries) in emerging cities would combine differently the obvious appeal of foreign styles with continued commitment to local values at different levels to communicate their desired images. In the work of “*The history of consumerism*”, Stearn (2001) used an example that Thai women were encouraged to wear European dresses to be like Westerners, not like the Japanese during the Second World War. They adopted the practice of wearing hats, the notable phrase ‘Hats will lead Thailand to Greatness’, and stockings. However, in order to keep up with the trend and the community, poorer urban females in Thailand resorted to making their hats out of bamboo, coconuts fronds and palm leaves.

Emerging consumers blend the national and the global, creating a mix that was thoroughly consumerist as its Western counterpart without being fully Western.

Ger et al (2012, p.33) discusses the allure of the global and the comfort of the local: “they can embrace globalized goods for the sake of modernity or status, or reject them in pursuit of nostalgia and authenticity, or connect global products to local consumption practices and give them local meanings”. Thus, the process is the negotiation with the local meaning makings, and other protestant traditions.

Individuals can use consumer culture to transcend the habituated orientations that emanate from their socialization in class and other social structuring (Arnold and Thompson 2007), in favour of more nuanced discussion of social reproduction (Campbell 1987). Consumers pursue identity goals through a dialogue with cultural codes imposed by dominant ideologies (Campbell 1987; Belk et al 2003; Penaloza 2001; Thompson 2004). The co-creation of market cultures includes an entire slate of actors – the state, religious institutions, and market-related intermediaries of various sorts (Karababa and Ger 2011).

Similarly, Featherstone (1991) argues that globalisation be seen as reflecting Western interests and control in transnational consumer culture. Featherstone (1991) emphasizes the point made by Bauman (1990): “one of the state’s central aims since its formation has been to produce a common culture in which local differences have been homogenized and strangers within the state boundaries have been assimilated” (p. 147). For example, within emerging economies within which a strong ideological tension exists between consumerism and citizenship (Johnston 2008) such as China or Vietnam where nationalism and consumption are closely correlated (Gerth 2012).

In this context, both globalisation and nationalism are highly related and significant in understanding how the local consumers negotiate the meanings of their choices and nationalistic attitudes towards particular products or brands. Consumers’ concept of nationalism would influence choice and perceptions of Country of Origin (CO) (Steenkamp 1990). When making purchase decisions, consumers connect CO to personal memories, to national identities and to the feeling of “pride” associated with the possession of products from certain countries (Hirschman 1985). Nationalism in consumption may be expressed

through animosity (Klein et al. 1998) or consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp and Sharma 1987).

Consumer expressions of national identity underlie psychological process that leads individuals to express their national identity in their consumption patterns. Feelings and actions associated with national identity are more varied and complicated. In fact, people have different ways of claiming their national identity (Smith 1991; 1995). Consumer expressions of national identity may be within the active need for the maintenance of a personal, positive self – concept. Because, “Human beings have multiple collective indemnifications, whose scope and intensity will vary with time and place” (Smith 1991, p. 175).

The activation of national identity in the local context can lead to positive/negative attitudes towards products/brands paired with country of association or the consumerism of their domestic brands. A country’s political actions in the international arena may create animosity towards brands associated with that nation (Leong et al 2008, p. 996). For example, Middle Eastern consumers hit the boycotts of Danish products because of a cartoon lack of respect for their Muhammad on a Danish Newspaper. The dominant discourse of consumption within China has been one linking nationalism to Western brand resistance in the past. “Anti-Americanism among Koreans” was cited as one of the reasons why McDonalds decided not to enter Korean market in the 1970s after market research (Sangmee 2004).

The state does not have the whole power, but plays a certain role to monopolize people’s attention to the culture. Because “whether you behave like a peasant or a banker, it is difficult to ignore the political hand in economic life” (Norpoth 1996, p. 786). In the study of ‘*China’s emerging cities*’ examining emerging practices in China’s new urbanism, Fulong Wu (2007) showed neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics at the city level which combined the state intervention and radical market orientation (the nationalism consumption). The awareness of community is fostered by the state to continue its traditional work-unit based governance,

leading the golf gated communities favoured by the new emerging class to present not only income inequalities but also the divide of lifestyle.

Smith (1991 p. 175) convinces that “a growing cosmopolitanism does not itself entail the decline of nationalism. The rise of regional culture areas does not diminish the hold of national identities”. The integration of economies on a national level not only knitted together dispersed individuals and communities, it helped to define the unit of identity (Calhoun 1997, p. 69).

There is space of inter-direction among other – directed people (Riesman 1950), which consumers constantly learn to negotiate with the tradition to comfort themselves in the modernity. Thus, the level of blended practices of consumption would depend on how far and how deep the local, international and transnational consumption patterns are mixed and negotiated by consumers

### ***Media stimulus***

When researching on the practices of consumers, it is important to mention that media has sped up the transnational flow of images of modernity (Featherstone 1991; Oswald 2012). The globalization of media has led to “an intensification of intraregional exchanges” (Cayla and Eckhardt, p. 218) where viewers in emerging markets are able to access ways of life shown in Western media format or content. When consumers in emerging markets live in a world in which products are easily available, they would have new lifestyle demands. Accordingly, the saturation of texts and meanings is recognized as the point of inspiration for the growth of consumerism (Featherstone 1991; Wernick 1991).

McCracken (1989) identifies the role of media as the reference for consumption in the process of meaning transfer model. Within the context of transnational consumption practices, everything can be said to be cultural (Jameson 1984; Featherstone 1991), as cultural meanings become embedded into the products through the promotional role of media. In this model of McCracken, media, especially advertising and celebrity endorsements, works as the function of

“imaging commodities” and is a part of the currency of symbolic exchange (Wernick 1991; Belk and Pollay 1985).

Advertising and media figure centrally in establishing shared banks of perceptions and images from which identities are constructed (McCracken 1989; Shipman 2008, p. 6). Kasser and Kanner (2003, p. 11-12) believe: “where we go, our ears and eyes are bombarded with material messages encouraging us to purchase more and more.” From the study of several cases of promotional messages used to sell products, Wernick (1991) emphasises that advertising is credited for shaping the whole sphere of public communication. Because, ‘living in a culture of consumption means that individuals are exposed to enormous pressures to conform to the beliefs and values of this culture’ (Kasser and Kanner 2003, p. 13). According to Cannon et al (2000) promotional texts make use of concepts of identity in the area which can be broadly denoted by the various senses of the term ‘address’, providing various resources of symbolic associations.

“Advertising in particular is able to exploit this and attach images of romance, exotica, desire, beauty, fulfilment, communality, scientific progress and the good life to mundane consumer goods”(Featherstone 1991, p. 14). In fact, the media plays as the source of reference for audience, in terms of inspirations, providing models or samples for imitation. The messages conveyed by the media have the potential to provoke dreams of fulfilment and aspiration for self-worth. For example, women could use the media as a reference from which to find meaning in order to stylize and conceptualize themselves. Women in Vietnam, it could be argued, want to obtain multiple identities, influenced by seeing these examples in Korean and Hollywood movies: working women, successful women, bright and smart mother and wife. “The manipulation of signs in the media and advertising, means that signs are able to float free from objects and are available for use in a multiplicity of associate relations”(Featherstone 1991, p. 14).

The media conveys certain messages to purchase particular items or consume certain experiences (McCracken 1989; Kasser and Kanner 2003) as advertisements on TV painstakingly crafted to promote consumption. The content

of the TVC (TV commercials), create certain tactics to create associations between products and desirable outcomes. Celebrity endorsement and advertising as the intermediaries, carrying a set of meanings associated with the products and passed to the consumers through marketing tools and means (McCracken 1989).

**The blended consumption practices of younger Vietnamese urban consumers manifest within the complex web of market, state and media**

The terms ‘post-socialist’ or ‘late socialism’ in Vietnam are used by several authors (King et al 2008; Harms 2010; Nguyen – Marshall et al 2012), regarding late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century Vietnam. The Communist Party of Vietnam is the centre of the promotion of economic activities. Recently, studies have suggested that CPV policy aims to accommodate the demands of the younger generation and of larger society for a more market-oriented economy but under “persistent government control” (Pettus 2003; Phuong An Nguyen 2006, 2008). The relationship between youth and the state in Vietnam is “complex, dynamic and interactive” (Nguyen Phuong An 2005. p, 18), in which “the notion of resistance, and the realities of a one-party state and a relatively youthful population, the strength of nationalism and national identity are among the most significant parameters of Vietnamese politics and society” (Salomon and Vu Doan Ket 2007, p. 346).

Vietnam is in a unique position, where the consumption practices are defined through blending strategies (Stearn 2001). While the younger generation of Vietnamese urban consumer embraces the new lifestyles, “the push and pull between modernity and Confucian and communist traditionalism can be felt in every corner of Vietnamese society” (Libby 2011, p. 210). As previous research has argued, this generation is “reimagining their lives in ways that gave precedent to their personal aspirations and desires, and that reduced their subordination to family interests”, but do not totally resist the influence of ‘Asian values’ - Confucianism and family-centeredness (Dutton 2012, p. 22).

Commercialisation intensified sharply in Vietnam after 2007 as a result of its WTO entry. The young urban Vietnamese entered into a ‘pleasure – seeking’ and



‘distraction – oriented’ phase as a society linked to the market economy. Class distinction and the erosion of social values are also accompanying the emerging consumer culture and the state’s focus on market economy development (Shultz 1994). Social status plays an important role for this generation and the ‘new’ rich to express their particular achievements in the new-modern life. The Communist Party of Vietnam focuses on economic growth as well as finding ways to manage its grip on power within this context. The new consumer culture may conflict with many of the values, attitudes, and behaviours associated with traditional Vietnamese culture or the Communist Party doctrine (Shultz 1994). The CPV explains the tension between the Vietnamese market and 'negative' influences in the way that free market and international integration, despite their enormous positive effects, reveal their flip side, which negatively influence our people’s ideology, morality and way of living. (Pierre 2000).

In contrast to Vietnam’s leaders, most of its citizens are generally indifferent to communism. In the current context, politics cannot defeat the people’s primary and often sole concern: “putting sufficient food on the table and making ends meet.....Most Vietnamese dismiss the historic struggle for independence and the ‘American war’ as events before their time that lack the immediacy of daily concerns” (Pierre 2000, p. 75). The younger generation of urban consumer cares more about their individual life rather than all the propaganda campaigns by the government. The weak and passive responses to “the Year of Youth - 2003” campaign by the government is an example (Phuong Nguyen An 2005). The younger generations have not emerged to challenge the State, however. The fact of their still close relations with the state – dependent on it, not independent from it – seems highly significant (Gainsborough 2002, p. 707). There is still a deeply engrained Vietnamese tradition tying the close relation between family and nation within Vietnamese society, which is strongly practiced by the older generation and promoted by the State.

The government imposes censorship to delete all the content that they consider can be harmful to Vietnamese culture. The state continues to “intervene and mould societal expectations and values, albeit to varying degrees in different

contexts” (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas 2004, p. 133). The government call for re-education according to Asian values (Chua 1999), is intended to help the government achieve a certain balance. The Vietnamese government decided to choose the year 2000 as ‘the Year of Youth’ and involve young people in traditional education and cultural activities (Nguyen Phuong Anh 2006). “Asian values” always promoted by the State in ways in which they are considered as the ‘ideal’. Hayton (2010, p. 58) asserts: “the desire of most urban young people seems to be quite compatible with those of their parents”. In the mainstream, the younger generation still follow their parents’ wishes. Traditional values and a sense of community belonging (Riesman 1950) are still strongly inculcated by parents and schools.

Based on the World Values Survey conducted in Vietnam in 2001, 98 percent of people are proud to be Vietnamese. Moreover, 90% declare their confidence in the national government. People are supportive of the current government political system. Vietnamese are more satisfied with their economic conditions than a lot of Eastern European countries, China and others in South America. Vietnam is among the top countries in the world for pride in national identity (World Values Survey, 2001). Thus the traditional values and local elements are somehow maintained and preserved through the face work and conformity in consumption amongst the younger generations under the effective effort of the state. For example, Áo dài – the national costume with modern design remains attractive and relevant to contemporary society and young people wear it on many official occasions.

According to Volkan (2003, 2004), leaders often use 'chosen glories' in order to bolster their group’s identity. Freud (1985) stresses the role of the ‘leader – follower interaction’ over intra-group relations in the construction of group consciousness. Volkan describes the leader as the pole and the followers dance around the pole, and the leader plays an important role in the scenario when a large group is regressed. In Vietnam today, the Ho Chi Minh ideology under the influence of Marxism is still a very visible component in the system of value, the

scale of values, the measure of values and the orientation of values of the society and people.

The government also relies on the media to promote its new economic priorities to the population. Newspapers became the principle narrators of the reform process, describing as well as commenting on the changes in the country's economic and social landscape. In official terms, the media have served as "a vehicle for mobilizing public opinion and human efforts in the service of economic transition" (Pettus 2003, p. 114). A strong nationalist discourse can help the state to maintain the monopoly of the power with one party state. So they would control the formation of national identity. The media under the pressure of market competition manage to achieve a certain balance to serve their audience in modern society to the concerns of social life and support government in fostering a common national identity.

On the one hand, the media plays a role as the propaganda vehicle of the government to promote Asian values, as well as to keep their monopoly of power. On the other hand, media within the loose control of the state and under the pressure of economic development create resources for urban youth to adapt new practices of consumption from the Western world.

Today's women's magazines both tell the stories of exemplary women who make sacrifices for their families, and run articles from the West on how to achieve equality for women, with images of Western models, Western fashion, Western lifestyles, and pages of advertisements for cosmetic products and hair dye lotions. Pettus (2003, p. 118) describes the editor of *Phụ Nữ Thủ Đô* (Capital Woman) who defined her magazine as "a form of education, both moral and practical" to guide people how to live in a new social and economic environment.

The media help to tie together the traditional and the new culture in economic transition under state control. A current game show called "The Voice of Vietnam" is an example. VTV is running it for a second season at the time of writing in 2013. It was the most watched TV program in 2013. However, older audiences complained that participants sang few Vietnamese songs, and they

could not understand English songs. To retain the mass audience, the program encouraged more candidates to perform Vietnamese songs, and accompanied English songs with Vietnamese subtitles.

The government imposes censorship to delete all the content that they consider can be harmful to Vietnamese culture. The state continues to “intervene and mould societal expectations and values, albeit to varying degrees in different contexts” (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas 2004, p. 133). *Sinh Viên* (a student newspaper) was even suspended for three months (2002) as they ran “inappropriate articles, including stories that stimulate young people’s sexual curiosity” (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas, 2004, p. 134). They ran a column called ‘love garden’ that featured stories about premarital sex and kissing in public.

Asserting its control through censorship, the state’s power to define popular culture has a contradictory effect: the state is developing a new relationship with consumers, testing the ground of possibility by simultaneously authorising and disallowing (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas 2004, p. 135). This amounted to a “state–constructed popular culture” in which the masses “were rendered both active and passive” (Harms 2010, p. 20).

### **3.5. Chapter Summary**

The complex web of local factors is reflected through the blended practices of consumption, in which consumers negotiate the tension between the modernity or economic transition and traditional values such as Confucianism. The identity project through consumption and market influences are located in the culture milieu. In particular, the desire for social status (Ahuvia and Wong 1998, Ahuvia 2005), conformity (Riesman 1950) and distinction (Bourdieu 1984) strongly manifest in the identity work among the emerging consumers.

Brand consumption becomes a medium through which individuals in contemporary societies seek meaning by which to construct their desired images among their communities (Fournier 1998). Consumers increasingly use brands as the means to regain or (re)validate one's personal and social role and position (Fournier 1998; Shipman 2008). More and more alternative voices have appeared, drawing attention to consumers' symbolic use of brands in their construction of group identities, meanings of everyday practices and meanings attached to personal self-images (Schroeder 1998). Increasingly, emerging consumers engage in identity construction through social interaction when identity in modern society is being driven by consumerism of brands and desired images of success, wealth, social status.

The flows of Western consumer and popular culture, global brands and the growth of a new aspiring middle-class group presents a particular type of consumerist segment within emerging markets, the urban middle-class youth, which is key to social change. The stream of potential fantasy materials are the active factors and actors. Thus, the factors and characteristic of consumers are in a modified form from culture to culture. The interpenetration of globalisation in the local consumption results in unique outcomes in different geographic areas (Jackson 2004).

The social constitution of brand meaning and the importance of brand narratives for the sociological and social psychological role of brands are no longer taboo for interpretivist consumer researchers (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Additionally, there is limited research on interrogation of the complexities, the social process of consumption past or present, or interpretation from a grounded understanding of contextual effects (Sherry and Fischer 2008). The variations with the different speed and ambition in different societies would decide and influence the level of blended practices of consumption. With regards the tension in negotiating the influence of transnational consumer culture, this study will also examine the ways the younger Vietnamese consumers at different junctures in their nation's history and the state's intervention, draw upon globalising influences via the media,

market and popular culture to transform their identities by rationalizing and negotiating their consumption choices.

The research concerns situating phenomena of interest in historical and socio-spatial context (Jack 2004; Sherry and Fischer 2008). The basic question emerged from the review of the literature to inform the design of the study would be “what is the relationship between brand consumption and identity work among the younger generation of urban consumers (as new cultural intermediaries) in Vietnam?” In particular, the study aims to understand:

1. The specific characteristics of the aspiring younger generation of urban middle class as a transnational consumer culture in Vietnam
2. To what extent the identity of Vietnamese younger generation of urban consumers are constructed through their narratives of brand consumption
3. How these consumers create 'distinction' for themselves through their brand choices

It offers a theoretical contribution by examining the cultural aspects of consumption, from the perspective of an emerging country and post socialist, post war, and post reform Vietnam, in particular as creative and unique context. It also extends the existing literature by indicating the many ways brands are expressed through different processes of significance in the routines and practices of consumption within the contest of modern Vietnam and the ways in which distinction, social status and conformity help shape consumer identities.

## METHODOLOGY

Consumer Culture Theory Research (CCT) focuses on understanding the relationships between the market structure and cultural meaning system (Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 868) to advance the knowledge about consumption and consumer cultures (Wilk 1995; Belk and Pollay 1985; Arnould and Thompson 2005). In particular, CCT researchers have turned attention to the relationship between consumers' identity projects and the influence of the market place (e.g. see Belk 1988; Belk et al 2003; Ahuvia 2005). The methodological innovations become increasingly implicit in a growing number of CCT research projects (e.g. O'Shaughness 1992; Belk 1989; Arnould and Thompson 2005; Dong and Tian 2009), which focus not only on the process of buying, but give equal significance to the meaningful aspects of consumption.

Treating consumers as active agents in the practices of making meanings, the consumer research task should be broadened to investigate the rules, practices, and contexts (Penaloza et al 2012) that make consumption meanings possible. Scholars of CCT continue to apply new techniques and strategies to display multiple refracted realities (Lincoln and Guba 2003a, b) to provide account of meaning interpretations that make senses of our everyday life.

Focussed on the cultural nature of the marketplace in Vietnam, this research aims to explore how brands can tap into and articulate the stories of cultural groups (Holt 2002) in the way consumers express their sense of being in the social world. As qualitative, social research about consumer culture, my study is focused on complex description and explicating "webs of meaning" (Have 2004). Social research is all about finding out "what events mean, how people adapt, and how they view what has happened to them and around them" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 34). The qualitative orientation is important because it is relevant for the exploratory nature of this study (Marshall and Rossman 1999). This chapter will describe how within CCT traditions I sought to achieve the research objectives through an empirical study.

## **Research paradigm**

As stated in Chapter 1, the objectives of my research are fourfold: (1) to describe the socio-cultural context within which the aspirational younger generation of urban consumers emerges in Vietnam; (2) to capture the motivations and aspirations the younger generation in urban Vietnam associate with their consumption practices (3) to provide a detailed account of their identity construction through brand choice; (4) to use these understandings to contribute to a discussion of emerging consumer cultures and consumerism within the Asia region.

To achieve these research objectives, primary questions about the extent to which identities of Vietnamese younger urban consumers are constructed through their narratives of brand consumption and how these consumers create 'distinction' through their brand choices were considered. The research seeks to identify those factors influencing the emergence of transnational consumer culture in Vietnam; focusing, in particular, on the younger generation of aspiring urban middle class. It is concerned with the nature of being, seeking to understand the belief systems and meaning-making practices, consumption practices and brand preferences of this particular consumer group (Chadha and Husband 2006) and the meanings they associate with their consumer choices (Belk et al 1996).

Concerning ontological and epistemological concerns, to know “what is the reality” and “how can we know the reality”, my starting point is the reality is out there, and I will gather the data and find out by making sense of it. Consistent with my desire for understanding the meanings associated with particular practices, I chose interpretivism as the foundation of my research.

## **Interpretivist research**

To understand differences between humans in their role as social actors, interpretivist researchers believe that reality is relative and multiple with more than one way of accessing and making sense of such realities. The goal of the



interpretivist researcher is to understand and interpret human behaviour by analytically identifying meaning-making practices (Elliot and Timulak 2005). Thus, interpretive research as an approach is well suited for gaining consumer insight (Moisander and Valtonen 2012).

Interpretive work examines explicitly the intricate weaving of market agents and activities within global and local cultural domains (Cross and Gilly 2012). In particular, interpretive work can provide “a richly textured understanding of the influence of culture”, to explore how cultural factors such as norms, tradition and values influence our everyday consumption practices or behaviour (Belk 2012, p.16), and to understand consumer’s choice through “a blend of global standardization and local adaptation” (Ger et al 2012, p.31). Interpretive work can also examine explicitly “the intricate weavings of market agents and activities within global and local cultural domains” (Penaloza 2012, p.4).

Interpretive work has consistently developed new research methods and ways of viewing the nature of reality, and of knowing, that have enabled researchers to see problems afresh (Penaloza 2012). The set of methods for interpretive research is broad (Belk 2007), and choosing from them depends on the research problem at hand and the context of the research. As Moisander and Valtonen (2012, p. 248) added: “social action can only be interpreted by contextualizing it in the cultural system of concepts, rules, conventions, and beliefs that give meaning to that action”.

The methods I use encourage the more explicit, simultaneous development of new techniques to transcend the individual unit of analysis, adjudicate multiple dialectics of consumer meanings, and link consumption phenomena with global politics and cultural differences within the context of Vietnam. In this study, I not only conduct interviews but also engage in systematic observation, to interpret how they make sense of their life through specific meanings of consumption practices. I also used projective techniques in surveys as data-driven interpretive research techniques to gain a better qualitative understanding of the fundamental changes that are taking place in the market.

## Case study

The case study method is an in-depth study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units (Gerring 2004). “Unique in comparison to other qualitative approaches, within case study research, investigators can collect and integrate quantitative survey data, which facilitates reaching a holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied” (Baxter and Jack, 2008 p. 554).

A country or a city may function as a case study. The two largest cities (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City) as the political and economic centres for the North and the South of Vietnam are chosen for case studies in my research. Hanoi as the capital of Vietnam was occupied by the French in 1873 and passed to them ten years later. It is now the most important political centre of Vietnam, having a population of nearly 8 million. Ho Chi Minh City (previously called Saigon) was under the control of the U.S in Vietnam War for nearly 30 years. It now has nearly 10 million people. Like other cities in emerging economies, these two are full of bustling shops and rising skyscrapers, inhabited by “Vietnam’s growing middle class and elite group in major cities as well as to the increasing number of international tourists” (Mashayoshi Maruyama and Le Viet Trung 2007, p. 25).

The case for representativeness (Gerring 2004) is as follows. These two cities are home to the majority of the younger urban population in Vietnam. “The increasing importance of international trade in both goods and services has created global cities” (Perky and Wiewel 1994, p. 71) “the shift to cities as centres of consumption have entailed the accumulation of spectacles, mixing of codes and merging of high and low cultures” (Featherstone 1991, p. 105). Moreover, there is less difference between the younger group in these two cities with “no significant differences in impulse buying between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City” (Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai and Tambyah 2011).

This study sought to explore Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City as case studies that offer a level of transferability to the context of the younger generation of urban consumer elsewhere in Vietnam. It is a case study in understanding the

consumption practices of the urban, young, middle-class consumers in relation to the values of Vietnamese culture.

### **Mixed- method approach**

Creswell et al (2006, p.6) suggest several scholars from interpretive communities (e.g. Brannen and Nilsen 2002; Skeggs 1997) have embraced mixed methods in qualitative research to reach a saturation point. Mixed methods can enhance the qualitative explanation about the social world (Ambert et al 1995; Creswell et al 2006). Within any given mixed methods study, the priority or weight can shift to the qualitative component. It is qualitatively driven mixed methods research.

In this study, I used some quantitative tasks in the large-scale survey (e.g. choice of country of origin) as a supplement to the research, by establishing a broader context for the study. The initial statistics help to draw the frame, the basic lines of a painting, which need many colours – the deeper interpretations and explanation for a complete finish. For example, the interpretation of the data from interviews and observation activities explains in more depth about their attitudes toward different brands in my study. The qualitative data with interpretation will confirm the quantitative findings from the start. I used a mixed methods study that employs an interpretive framework.

Multiple relevancies and questions held together in creative tension. My research design gives more space for qualitative than quantitative in the thesis. e.g a large survey followed by interviews or observation. Ambert et al (1995, p. 885) suggested that “the problem with qualitative research is not that of limited data generated from a small sample, but rather the sheer quantity of data that must be analysed and linked to theory or models, either existing or new”. Thus, to reach a saturation point, the combined methods for collecting data from surveys, interviews and notes of observation generated a thick description of who they are and who they want to be seen through meaning making practices of brand consumption. These methods were designed to gather data, appropriate for my

main research question “how does the Vietnamese younger generation construct their identity through brand consumption specific to the Vietnamese urban context?”.

Between November 2012 and January 2013, fieldwork was conducted in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam with 616 individuals. Three kinds of data were collected: data from surveys (what they think), data from in-depth interviews (what they say), and data from participant observations (what they actually do). The combination of survey, interview and participant observation enables to understand each layer in the full picture: the initial ideas about consumption practices among the urban youth through large-scale survey, deep insights about the specific meanings of consumption within middle class group through interview, and details about individuals’ sense of self in a social setting through participant observation.

#### **4.1. The survey**

The survey aims to explore the phenomena in contemporary Vietnam of the desire of aspiring consumers (the urban youth, the middle-class) to build their social identity through brand experiences. The survey would meet research objectives 2 and 3. The data illuminates the nature of consumer culture in contemporary Vietnam, and provides a psychosocial case study in how globalisation is proceeding in emerging markets. The general approach is based on the idea of ‘identity work’ (Goffman 1969; Belk 1989), and the role of consumption in providing resources for individuals to experiment with different self-experiences and to develop their social identities. In designing the survey, I focus on the analysis of their experience of brands, and what this reveals about cultural change in Vietnam.

##### ***4.1.1. Projective techniques***

To understand the motivations of the consumers, open-ended and qualitative data collection techniques play an important role in capturing all the meanings

(Hofstede et al 2007). To undertake this kind of investigation requires CCT scholars to engage in innovative methods to generate more collaborative research strategies for cultural analysis and better contextual fit with the research setting (Penaloza 2012). These methods aim to capture the meanings consumers produce, in an attempt to build up the knowledge of consumption phenomena (Belk 2007). Elicitation materials and projective techniques are specifically designed to invoke specific cultural distinctions, and may help to produce data that is rich and diverse in cultural meanings (Sherry and Fisher 2008, p. 17). Market researchers increasingly use projective techniques to collect rich and meaningful data (Hofstede et al 2007).

Buying the product is a ritual action serving to consume the myth (Rook 1985) and forge a relationship with the brand (Fournier 1998). Rook (1984, 1985) elaborates the construct of ritual definition as a framework to understand the experiential lives of consumers and types of symbolic meanings in the act of consuming products. Projective techniques may help to get valuable information concerning the ritualized behaviour in which consumers are situated (Rook and Levy 1999).

A set of projective techniques created by clinical psychologists in the 1920s was in use by the 1940s to study consumers' motivations in purchase decisions. According to Webb (1992, p. 125), projective techniques are considered as 'a structure – indirect way' of investigating the feelings, beliefs, attitudes and motivation that are not easy for consumers to formulate. Their use in consumer research dates mainly from the emergence of Motivation Research (Dichter 1960) in the 1940s. They are straightforward applications of the psychodynamic concept of 'projection', whereby our perceptions of the world are seen as shaped by our internal preoccupations, especially when the external reality is vague or ambiguous. Consumers are always able to produce "imaginations of a good (or better life), imaginations that motivate them to actions that attempt to flesh out that imagination" (Belk et al., 2003, p. 329).

This technique is particularly relevant in the Vietnamese context in which the local culture is more reserved. Consumers with Confucian values, including those in Vietnam, are less likely to openly admit to aspiring and wanting (Boddy 2007). Thus, pre-structured questionnaire or direct questions may not help in this context. Instead, projective techniques are more acceptable to participants. The techniques are helpful in “overcoming culturally induced social desirability bias” (Bobby 2007, p. 59) and uncovering the meanings of particular consumption rituals (Rook 1985).

#### *Story-telling as a projective tool*

The use of projective techniques is common among consumer researchers who increasingly devise new varieties of projective exercise (Boddy 2007; Hofstede et al 2007; Belk 2013). These can be divided into 5 categories of methods (association, completion, construction, choice ordering and expressive) (Will et al 1996). Story-telling is sometimes also listed as an expressive technique (Hofstede et al 2007, p. 301). This technique uses the process of cognitive elaboration to capture participant’s self-expression.

In my research, story-telling is chosen as the main mode of projective testing with the purpose of mining deeper meaning in consumers’ thoughts and motivations. The specification of story-telling task in this research project takes on the process and procedure associated with projective exercises (Belk et al., 2003). Students were asked to imagine and write their stories about consuming Western brands. The telling of stories is limited in certain time (within 20 minutes).

The nature of imagination is managed by the relationship between imagination and material reality as “the significance of the imagination in material reality, which is made visible not only on the basis of imagining as an activity (or set of activities) but its relationship to everyday life” (Jenkins 2011, p.18). The studies of consumer imagination specifically focus on the object of desire as a way to pursue a desired transformation (Belk and Agaskera 1997; Jenkins 2011)

Given the starting cue of Western brands, respondents had to imagine any story about it, and write it down in limited time. The stories featured a series of significant descriptive, expressive statements about settings, characters, products etc., with hidden feelings and attitudes that were interpreted, described and analysed later in my findings.

The stories were interpreted to contextualise brand consumption experience. This method enables the capture of “fantasies, dreams and visions of desire” (Belk et al., 2003, p.332), which uncovers brand consumption experiences related to their sense of self and communities they belong to.

#### *Sentence completion: Concepts and principles*

Sentence completion is a projective test, which is especially suitable when depth of feeling needs to be revealed within a time limit (Gordon and Langmaid 1988, p. 99); as with most projective techniques, its theory and technique have changed little in recent decades. The task was designed to “explore significant areas of an individual’s adjustment” (Sacks and Levy 1950, p. 357). Questions aim to elicit “feelings and attitudes” in various basic areas of interpersonal relationships. The subjects read the incomplete sentence as quickly as possible without thinking about it and then filled in their thoughts. The content would be interpreted through “emotional quality, intensity, passivity, symbolism” (Sacks and Levy 1950, p.358). The subjects could give positive or negative feelings.

The requirement of sentence completion test (SCT) included several techniques. According to Sacks and Levy, it could allow the subjects to express individual freedom and variability of responses. Sacks and Levy review Tendler’s work to list the criteria to elicit the emotional behaviour: directly evoke emotional response; allow free response, avoid discrimination.

To understand the Self – concept in SCT, Sack’s type of SCT as known as SSCT (Sacks Sentence Completion Test) states that it should involve fears, guilt feelings, goals and attitudes toward one’s own abilities, past and future. This

output helps the psychologist feature “a picture of the subject’s concept of himself as he is” (Sack and Levy 1950, p. 371).

To understand the personality characters of young people, Sacks and Levy (1950) cited Payne’s list of questions to achieve this purpose. Her criteria include: different stimuli broad enough to elicit information related to all phases of personality; the response must be controlled as little as possible to explicit the freedom of expression; the total time must be a period convenient for schedule of schools and institutions.

#### ***4.2.2. Structure of the survey***

Including the projective items, the survey had other questions to investigate: the demographic information, brand experience, brand attitudes and media consumption. The survey was designed to be completed within 35 and 40 minutes, to elicit the answers coming first to the subjects’ mind. The subjects could freely express positive or negative feelings and attitudes.

Question No. 1 (*My top 3 favourite brands are...*) and No. 2 (*To me a good brand should...*) would answer the question of identity: “who they are and who they want to be seen to be”. For top of mind product, the subjects have certain products among their interest, and the brand personality that they themselves would create to associate with their self – image.

For the discussion of identity (self-image, extension of self, conformity), question No.8 (*Fill in the country of association that you think is your best choice for the following products*) profiles the product nationality which the subjects want to be most associated with. The answers described the background of Vietnamese consumers’ attitudes toward the country of association in different categories of products thus indicating the influence of the image of country of origin upon Vietnamese consumers’ perception of brands. In the context of globalization, this question links to the question No. 3 (*When I use Chinese brands, I feel...; When I use Domestic brands, I feel...; When I use Western brands, I feel...*) in the image



of the country they want to associate with their self-identity. In this question, the subjects express their attitudes towards foreign brands or their ethnocentrism toward domestic brands, in the modern society, where consumers are full of symbolic resources.

Consumers are meaning creators. They have their own perceptions towards the brands. They would create certain meanings they want to attach for brands. Thus, question No. 2 defines the brand personality as a set of human characteristics associated with a brand. Brand personality features a bundle of components (Belk 1989), which may present experience, images, information, or feelings. This could be different from person to person. The subjects may choose the brands with their preferred personality. Thus, question No. 2 can uncover the inner characteristics of a brand, as young Vietnamese consumers perceive them.

In the focus of the concept “conformity” (Riesman 1950), questions 4 (*If I have a favourite brand..., and one day my friend shows up with the latest item from said brand, I would feel...*) and 5 (*Compared to most of my friends, my consumption of branded products is...*) could investigate consumers’ sharing of the common emotion with the other group members and how they would feel the need of being different from other members in term of style codes/ style performance or social standing (Campbell 1989) or the “taste culture” (Bourdieu 1984). This would link to the theory of conformity where other directed people may use others as the references for consumption (Riesman, 1950).

Question numbers 2, 3, 4 and 5 create the situation in which the subjects could reveal their hidden emotions, involving fears, jealousy or ability in relation to brand consumption.

Consumers are capable of seeking and maintaining brand relationships that add meanings to their lives. These meanings could be constructed via the consumption experience in the context of participants’ daily life. Question No.6 (*When mentioning brands, my friends and myself often talk about...*) would feature which attributes of brands are most discussed and explored in the subjects’ daily talks.

Question No.7 (*Imagine having a story of consuming Western brands. I would describe as follow*) would support the total analysis in understanding consumers' construction of identity. Through their Western brand experience and imagination, the meaning of brands would be interpreted. This can generate a checklist of brand meanings (Fournier 1998) that consumers want to associate with when constructing their identity.

Media content allows consumers to build their perception of luxury and all other meanings of brands. Thus, question No. 9 (*List three of broadcast programs/channels/newspapers/magazines/websites that you access most frequently in your daily life*) helps to understand the role of certain media in the subjects' daily lives. The information collected from this question together with part of interviews focusing on this theme, would answer to what extent and what types of media (McCracken 1989) inspire the subjects in brand consumption.

Question No. 10 (*Please fill out some information about yourself: Gender; Family location; Personal monthly spending*) investigates the demographic information of participants: the family location would tell about a person's family background, and different levels of previous lifetime exposure to branded products. Gender would explain the different pattern or style of consumption in different categories of products. Personal monthly spending would show how they can afford different kinds of products.

#### **4.2. The interview**

Combined with the survey, the interviews would help to understand more precisely how consumption in contemporary Vietnam is shaped by the historical, political, economic and socio-cultural context. The data will throw light on the way they identify with products to affirm their social identity, and the influence of media on brand choices.

Bryman (2012, p. 399) states the benefit of “face-to-face interaction” as “the fullest condition of participating in the mind of another human being”. I used the

qualitative interview, so that I could create greater interest in the interviewee's point of view to gain rich and detailed information. It is the way I could listen to the interviewee to describe "how they understand the worlds where they live and work" (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 3). The aims of conducting these conversations are to gain a deep view of the way the middle-class group construct their identity around brand consumption practices, and to describe how each individual asserts the meaning of brands in his or her own identity through social interaction. In fact, people seek to be 'seen to be' – something or somebody in a group (Jenkins 1996). In addition, one becomes more aware of what they are doing after being placed in a social situation. Qualitative interview helps to explore these specific topics.

I followed the interpretative approach that Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 38) proposed to prefer to let ideas emerge from the interviews, from the lives and examples of the interviewees, rather than to categorize answers initially. Thus, I let the interviewees respond in their own terms to get "multiple sides of a story" (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 13). Achieving that task required of me enough empathy to encourage the interviewee to elicit their personal stories with in-depth description. I invited them to a comfortable context such as coffee shop and encouraged them to talk about their opinion, experience, and daily life stories.

As a result, the interviews were conducted in the comfortable settings to get the informative answers. I audiotaped to listen for the feeling in their stories and reflected upon them later. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, lasted from 50 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes, with the average duration about one hour. The interviews were transcribed within 16 hours to be available for initial analysis. I listened and tried to find out what was unique and what may be in common while staying close to real examples. I noted down all the possible themes during the nearly four-month fieldwork in Vietnam. I wrote the informal analysis during the fieldwork. I used notes, memoranda, interim reports, papers, tape recordings to draw overall pictures. The results are based on the foundation of carefully collected data.

The media has sped up the transnational flow of images of modernity (Featherstone 1991). Popular culture and narratives are central in the formation of identity in the time of "imagined community". The middle-class plays an active role toward lifestyle (Bourdieu 1984; Featherstone 1991). The transnational experience has an important role in defining brand choices and associations. To understand the complex path the brands can offer to reconstruct the identity of Vietnamese consumers, the interview addressed the dual examination of local everyday life and transnational media, with the focus on understanding the pattern of brand consuming and media consumption.

#### ***4.2.1. The interview guide***

I sent an email incorporating the survey for the participants to fill before the interview, so that I got the background of the respondents and did not need to repeat the personal questions and others. This enabled me to prepare the follow up questions.

I used a flexible interview structure, with non – direct questions to stimulate the subjects into talking about a particular broad area of interest. This approach could “identify what people share, the configuration of cognition, emotion, and behaviour that constituted the intersection of configurations unique in their details to individuals” (Handwerker 2002, p. 112). The information gathered could document what people know, feel and do in a way that could identify some patterns of behaviour in brand consumption.

One of the goals of interview design is to ensure that the results are deep, detailed, vivid and nuanced (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 76). Bryman lists the basic elements in the preparation of interview guide (Bryman 2012, p. 472).

- Create a certain amount of order on the topic areas, so that your questions about them flow reasonably well, but be prepared to alter the order of questions during the actual interview

- Formulate interview questions or topics in a way that will help you to answer your research questions (but try not to make them too specific);
- Try to use a language that is comprehensible and relevant to the people you are interviewing;
- Do not ask leading questions.

The non – direct questions concerned the following topics:

- Self – image (who they are and who they want to be seen)
- Extension of self
- Brand community and conformity
- Brand attitudes
- Brand experiences
- Brand meaning
- Media consumption
- Perceptions of brands through media

As previously outlined, all of the interview participants completed the survey before participating in the interview, which enabled me to obtain a brief overview of their brand consumption. Then, I simply started by raising the questions about their reasons for preferring their three most favourite brands. For example, “*Why Iphone is in your favourite brand list?*” “*Tell me a story about how you fell in love with Vespa?*” The aim here was to explore how they saw themselves and build their image through brand choices, and how they interpret the meanings of their favourite brands. Similarly, an open question about their attitudes toward Chinese brands, domestic brands and Western brands was intended to enable them to describe their experience, feelings, perception and interpretation when consuming these brands.

In contemporary society, consumers can be more interested in obtaining satisfactions from others admiration rather than from consuming the product itself (Belk and Pollay 1985). To understand fully their self-construction (Belk 1989) and social identity we need to examine how they see themselves different or similar from the others around in relation to brands (Fournier 1998; Aaker et al 2004), and how they think others see them.

Different groups would use different goods to proclaim their position in the social structure (Bourdieu 1984). Thus, to know which group they belong to is by exploring their lens and description about their friends or colleagues, which they often socialize in the daily life. For example, *“How do you compare your brand consuming to your friends or colleagues?”* or *“What kinds of topics related to brands do you and your friends/colleagues often chat about when you are together?”*

I used the laddering technique to uncover the structural aspects of consumer knowledge, by asking subjects to think critically about the attributes of a product and their own personal values. For example, *“you told me you only use Adidas, why is that you only use Adidas?”*.

To a large extent, media are the most influential channel of promotion, and shape a brand’s voyage to consumers. My non-direct questions concern their media choices, their favourite TVCs, their perception of brands through media contents. I would like to illustrate which channel of media they access most, to which extend the media inspires them for brand choices. For example, *“Can you describe one of your favourite TVCs of your favourite brands? How do you feel while watching it?”*

In the study of *learning from strangers*, Weiss (1994 cited by Gubrim and Hostein 2003) expresses that the interviewer should present a caring and concerned attitude, expressed within a well-planned and encouraging format. I considered all interviewees as the ‘conversational partners’. In each interview, I gave at least 15 minutes for the warm – up and introduction part. This task played a very important role in enhancing the quality of my interview as it created a certain

mood for the interviewee to be open-minded and to share with me. I usually did some research on the background of the interviewee, or talked to the persons who introduced her/him to me in order to get first-hand knowledge of my interviewee before going to the site so I could create the most relevant mood and format to impress my interviewees to actively involve our conversation. As Gubrium and Hostein (2003, p. 21) suggest “a modern temper” makes the conversation reasonable and acceptable to a world of individuals.

I called this stage of the interview as the time to ‘kick the hinge’ making the interviewee really join conversation with inspiration, enough empathy from the interviewer, and be comfortable in sharing, so that I would achieve the purpose of the interview without crossing the line of ethics. In the postmodern interview, both interviewer and interviewee are active in the conversation, to advocate the partnership between researcher and subject (Fontana 2001). To achieve this purpose, it would depend on the sensibility of the interviewer to adapt to each situation. When the conversation reached the point of data saturation, and I no longer heard new information, I drew the interview to a close.

How I presented myself, had a significant influence upon the success of the interview. To gain access and to build the trust of each new interviewee, I adapted to the particular situation, sometimes dressing in a similar way to the respondent, or presenting myself as a learner (Spradley 1979; Fontana 2001) to generate an informative discussion – a conversation with a purpose. Early in each interview, I asked interviewees for permission to tape-record, and explained the way I would use the material later. I confirmed with them that they can go off – record whenever they want. In addition, after each interview, I always asked for their agreement to any follow-up questions with them via email or Skype, so that I had an opportunity to add more information after reviewing each interview for further clarifications.

### **4.3. Participant observation**

The participation observation in my research project is the follow-up stage of the in-depth interviews, which aimed to explore how the participants perform their social role in the specific setting (Goffman 1969; Ahuvia 2005) by attaching products to their desired image (Belk et al 2003). This approach was intended to fill any gaps in the data from the survey and the interview.

Drawing on the work of Elliot and Davies (2006, p. 139) I sought to explore the group under study as a collection of heterogeneous people “in terms of age, sex and income who are linked by a common emotion”. I proposed to find out through their sharing of the common emotion with the other middle – class group members and how they would feel the need of being different from other members of their social group in terms of style codes/ style performance, social standing or the “taste culture” to use the term of Thornton (1995). Thus, I used the approach of participant observation after each interview whenever I got the acceptance from the interviewee. The interviewee would inform their social group in advance about my participation in their activities as a researcher. If they agreed, the interviewee would take me to join one of his/her group’s daily activities such as friends or colleagues’ meet, talk, dinner, tea chat or just gym activities with friends. When meeting them, I first gave a clear statement about the purpose of my research to obtain consent from them. Participation observations take me inside the setting to “discover complexity in social settings by being there” (Rossman and Rallis, p. 195), to render the patterns of events and relationships.

It is effective to use participant observation to see how my participants define themselves within the context of their group or communities and which role they play in their group in terms of brand consumption. In addition, this approach helped strengthen my interpretations of the interview data. Moreover, to participate in the interaction, and follow the natural stream of everyday life, I had to find a balance between involvement and detachment. I forged “close and meaningful bonds with setting members” (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, p. 85), but did not misrepresent myself to gain access to the scene. To interact with them in the daily life, I accepted to spend non-structured time with them, asking questions, to naturalistically enter their world. I chose the approach of “observer as



participant stance” to generate more complete understanding of the group’s activities (Adler and Adler 1994). I adjusted to the mood of the group, to help me see how my participants positioned themselves vis-à-vis others. The approach taken in the post-interview observation can be structured or unstructured (Boote and Mathews 1999), depending on familiarities or paradox gained from the conducted interview.

The purpose of the participant observation was to identify and explore any differences between what people actually do and what they say they do. To bridge the gap between claimed and actual behaviour, Crang and Cook (2007) suggest besides conversing with the one(s) studied, the research also goes for: body language, gestures, cues that lend meanings to words, setting of location, other people present.

Conversations, facial expressions, gestures and props (clothing, accessories, gadgets) were combined in my notes of observation to help understand the particular objects and actions – the shared cultural meanings (McCracken 1989; Belk et al 2003) involved in the performance of face work (Goffman 1967) through consumption and to see how deeply they adapt to the consumer elite.. It implies they were not participating in the same lifestyle as middle-class group. For example, in the participant observation with Thuong’s friends, I realized they were each at different levels of restraint in achieving purity and elegance through their ways of presenting the products. Some gestures seemed to be a natural way for the individual to behave (e.g. in presenting objects or drinking), but others appeared to involve the individual in pushing themselves to perform in front of the others.

I took notes after participating in my interviewee’s group activities. I tried to capture as much detail as possible about the physical environment and the activities and interactions among them in that environment. These were added to interview transcripts to “augment and interpret the exact words of the interview” (Rossman and Rallies 2011, p. 196) and to gain a richer, more authentic account of their description of their experiences.

**Table 2 - Reflections on Participation observation**

<b>Locations</b>	<b>Strategies and what to observe</b>	<b>A reflective description of the methodological approach</b>
Office, Hanoi	Structured - Illustrate Phi's actual sense of her identity in the formal setting (working environment). - Identify the influenced factors in the local context	In the setting of the office, Phi and her colleagues tend to be less expressive than expected, so opportunities to collect data were a relatively limited. However, I took notes as much as I can related to the content of the conversation, body languages, clothes, gender, physical appearance and aspects of the social scene, which all provide certain data relevant to the research objectives. I addressed the problems related to the influence of social setting and traditions such as behaviour, habitus and norms in public spaces in Confucian cultures., which Phi did not express when mentioning about her senses of social identity in the interview with me before.
Hotel, HCM City	Structured. - Indicate Thuong's role in her social circle (group of friends), in term of consumption practices. - Explore how she actually swift the dominant faces in reality? (is it different from her saying in the interview)	I focused on the given clues which supported the insights gathered from the interview. I was asking questions to fill the gap, to examine the subconscious influences on the participant's behaviour, to confirm my interpretation of "what Thuong said and now observe what Thuong actually does". Despite limited time allowed by Thuong, I still can see the different social spaces they put on the dominant face, the behaviour influenced by the social relations, interactions among them.
Restaurant, HCM City	Unstructured. - Scan any data coming, anything that Hung did not mention in the	In relaxing context - a restaurant for dinner time, it was quicker for Hung and his friends to accept me into their "setting". I stepped in naturally, and captured anything relevant to my research issues during my spending time with them. With unstructured observation, I cannot always delve straight into all the topics related to my research areas. However, my unlimited time with them is enough for

	interview	a sufficient range of experiences and conversations for needed data. Details “jumped out” to illustrate Hung’s opinions about brand associations and his attitudes towards COs in the interview with me.
Coffee shop, HCM City	Unstructured. - “Radar” screening of initial findings	I got more experience in testing this method to collect the data. I easily got the entrance of the group (Khuong and friends), embedding into a scene with them. This is my last chance to collect data during my fieldwork. All the surfaces of phenomena in the last 4 months somehow intangible scanned in front of me. I take notes of all the specific meanings I can observe in this slot of observation. This helped me to that can help me to connect all the notes I had to work towards a full picture of consumption practices among the younger generation in Vietnam.

#### 4.4. Research sample

The research aims to identify how the younger generation of Vietnamese urban consumers “*Thanh niên*” (aged between 18 and 35) use brand consumption to construct their identity. It is important to gain greater detailed insight into this group as they are the most concerned about employment matters and most exposed to and influenced by the social transformation and economic changes that have taken place since *Doi moi* (Phuong An Nguyen 2002). The urban youth tend to “initiate new thinking and employment trends in the *Doi moi* era” (Phuong An Nguyen 2002, p. 223). The data was collected from 600 participants between 18 and 35 for surveys, and from 16 persons for interviews and participant observations.

It is difficult to assess the number of participants required for theoretical saturation. Onwuegbuzie and Collins say: ‘sample sizes in qualitative research should not be so small as to make it difficult to achieve data saturation, theoretical saturation, or informational redundancy’ (2007, p. 289). Here, the surveys and the interviews were closely coordinated. The contents of the survey are followed in

the interviews to feature the structures proposed from the beginning to see how Vietnamese consumers perceived themselves through consumption practices.

I received 600 complete surveys (610 distributed) from full-time students at both public universities and private-owned universities between 18 and 35 old years, offering a reasonable representation of young Vietnamese consumers living in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. It is important to note that most students at private universities and a minority at public universities come from middle – class families. For example, students from FPT in Hanoi also pay tuition fees similar to those in Singapore.

According the General Office of statistics of Vietnam (2012), approximately 68 % of the Vietnamese population live in the urban areas, where the average household income is between US\$ 300-500. Urban Vietnamese women aged 20 to 45, for example, spend 18 per cent of their monthly income on clothing (GSO), and the purchasing of branded products is growing dramatically (McKinsey 2010). In my survey, 33 % of respondents said that their personal monthly spending is over US\$ 200 per person, promisingly and quickly become the middle and affluent consumers in Vietnam.

For the interview, the strategy for choosing the participants that Dean et al. (1967) suggest was followed: (1) informants who are especially sensitive to the area of concern; (2) the more-willing-to-reveal informants. The participants' characteristics would help to target a narrow group. I approached the potential participants who met the first criteria of 'middle-class', who showed interest in consumption, who cared about consumption information and who had a variety of consumption practices and experiences they would be willing to share with me.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest that qualitative interviewers initially choose interviewees through social networks. The 'gatekeeper' can help the researcher to access a group. Thus, considering these factors, I started with a personal acquaintance who introduced me to the first interviewee in Hanoi. I then asked participants to suggest other participants who might qualify and agree to take part. I used "snowball" sampling as the way to reach other potential informants. I

then tried to diversify the sample of this 'middle – class' group, in terms of education, family, career background and age group, as much as I could. I chose 16 interviewees from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. As King et al (2008) states, it is difficult to define middle-class in Vietnam as well as in South East Asia. In Vietnam, due to the factual reality of traffic situation, luxury scooters are the alternative solution. I did not use income as a category to identify 'middle-class' due to certain limitations within the local context of Vietnam where financial auditing systems are weak. Due to the existence of "the non-official economic area", total income is difficult to estimate precisely. Also, not everyone is prepared to disclose their precise income. Thus, property (possession of a house and a car) and profession would be a more reliable gauge when choosing participants to interview.

The chosen group (16 participants) for the in-depth interviews varied in age (born in 1970s, 1980s, 1990s), education (domestic education, overseas education), family background (extended family, nuclear family), and current occupations and qualifications (student, graduate, professional, doctor, teacher, manager). The variety within the sample helps to provide a closer and detailed description of a breadth of lived experience which, when combined with the survey data, enables the research to reach the goal of saturation and redundancy across emerging categories and themes.

I deliberately chose the combination of extended and nuclear families as the two major models of middle-class families in the two largest cities in Vietnam for the following reasons. Whilst the younger generation participating in this study were born immediately after the end of the Vietnam War, their parents and grandparents were part of the generations who lived through the war. Therefore, approaching middle-class young people in the extended families provided rich and valuable data regarding the legacy of the war and its direct impact upon the Vietnamese people. Extended families included grandparents who were born before 1940 and, therefore, were affected directly by the war. The parents born before 1960 partially lived during the war and it can therefore be assumed were affected by the memory of the war in their childhood. In addition, the third

generation were born after 1975, now living in peacetime but still under the effect of the consequences of war. In the case of the nuclear families, the participants were part of middle-class group born after 1975, with children. They were not under the direct influence of their parents for shaping their lifestyles, being dependent in their modes of consumption. Additionally, the education background and experience variables diversified the sample and enabled the research to address consumption practices on several parameters.

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Education background</b>	<b>Time spent (mins)</b>
1.	Lan	34	Journalist	Married, a child	Journalism	62
2.	Thuong	35	Director	Married, 2 children	Russian language	70
3.	Ninh	33	Editor	Married, 1 child	Vietnamese studies	90
4.	Ngoc	34	Yoga teacher	Divorced, 2 children	Yoga and religion	75
5.	Khuong	31	Office manager	Single	Foreign languages	50
6.	Hung	32	Freelancer	Single, living with father and brother	Communication	50
7.	Hanh	26	Administrator	Married	Project management	55
8.	Huong	25	Project manager	Single, living with parents	Economics	60
9.	The	35	Branch director	Married, 2 children	Culture management	60
10.	Binh	32	Lecturer	Single, living as a couple	Fine art	75
11.	Hieu	27	TV Presenter	Single, living with parents	Broadcasting	45
12.	Anh	26	Ph.D student	Married, a child	Publishing	55
13.	Hien	26	Manager	Single, living with mother and brother	Finance and Banking	47
14.	Quyen	22	Student	Single, living with uncle	Information technology	40
15.	Quang	23	Student	Single, living with parents	International Relations	60

16. Phi	31	Teacher	Married, a son	Public Relations	55
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***Table 3 - List of interview participants***

#### **4.5. Data analysis**

I proposed that both interviewees and survey participants were part of the same 'consumer culture' in terms of brand consumption and conformity. They shared experiences of the same phenomena that they were very desirable to construct their images at different social levels through brand consumption. However, the pattern of consumption would be different in different age groups. Thus, the combination of surveys results and interview data associated with field notes of observation would produce thick and rich data.

Thematic analysis was preferable in my presentation of findings because it helped to “describe data set in rich detail and interpret various aspects of the research topic” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 79). Besides capturing something important about the data, a theme represents “some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 82).

Moreover, it offered “a more accessible form of analysis...not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework, and therefore it can be used within different theoretical frameworks” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 81). I sought to report experiences, symbolic meanings and the perceived realities of participants to explore the varied ways in which these individuals made sense of their consumption experiences as Wolcott (2001, p. 33) suggests “interpreting data invites the examinations the ‘pondering’ of data in terms of what people make of it”.

Thematic analysis provided me with a flexible approach to analysing a breadth of data collected from mixed-methods. The findings from the survey profiled the general brand consumption of the Vietnamese urban youth, while the data from qualitative interview and participation observation pictured a deep view of young middle-class group in brand consumption. A thematic analysis presented the

themes in the discussion of identity, social status, conformity, brand meanings and the role of media to bring a particular interpretation of brand consumption among younger generation in urban Vietnam.

After reading through all results of surveys, interviews and notes of participation observation, I went through each line to note down all the themes that related to the concepts that I discussed in the literature review. Themes were identified by "bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone" (Leininger 1985, p. 60). From the answers in the surveys or the transcribed conversations, patterns of experiences could then be listed. This came from direct answers, quotes or paraphrasing common ideas.

I noted down the most frequent themes mentioned across the data set (semantic themes), or themes occupying underlying ideas, patterns within stories (latent themes). These themes are all related to specific areas of research interest in this study. These themes such as symbolic meanings of Western brands, show-off theme, quiet luxury theme, conformist and others are all related to answer the research objectives in the research. Then I grouped the themes into major different categories. Each category can be traced back to sentences in the surveys and interviews to illustrate it.

The next step I built the analysis based on the structure above by choosing the relevant categories. By referring back to the literature theories with the scheduled structure of analysis, findings presented the particular interpretation of the meanings associated with brand consumption among younger urban consumers in contemporary Vietnam.

#### **4.6. Study Authenticity**

The purpose of the social research is to describe the social world, thus trustworthiness plays an important role in making the value of a social research, influencing public responses to data collection or research purposes. Judging trustworthiness depends on the paradigm informing such judgement. I strongly



believe the aim of a research is to render an account of participants' worldviews as honestly and fully as possible (Rossman and Rallis 2011, p. 65). Guba (1981) proposes four criteria in pursuit of a trustworthy research: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability.

### ***Credibility***

Heather and Martyn (2004, p. 74) asserts: "social reality is only meaningful to the people who participate in that reality." A thick description is an important provision for enhancing credibility in term of conveying the actual situation investigated.

Some provisions were proposed by several authors (Guba 1981; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Lincoln 1995) to ensure the credibility of the research such as development of early familiarly with culture of participating organisations, random sampling of individuals serving as informants, tactics to ensure honesty in informants, description of background and experience of the researcher, thick description of phenomena under scrutiny. I am aware that my findings should have a solid foundation of description and hard-nosed analysis to enhance the credibility.

I personally believe that allocating information to categories requires logical argumentation and interpretation of data. Thus, the logical inferences drawn during execution of a research project also enhance the credibility of the research and the authenticity of the study.

### ***Transferability***

Heather and Martyn (2004) believe that it is not necessary that knowledge generated from the research is generalized beyond the context in which it is meaningful but some transfer of knowledge may be gained. Guba (1981) suggests that providing sufficient detail of the context of the fieldwork may make the findings applicable to the other situations, populations, and convincing presentation and conclusion would make the readers confident enough to transfer to other situations.

Detailed description of phenomena in question may allow comparisons or applications to be made. My findings are understood within the particular characteristics of the Vietnamese urban context. In order to assess the extent to which findings may be representative of people in other settings, similar projects employing the same methods but conducted in different environments could be well of great value. I strongly believe my work provides a valuable ‘baseline understanding’. So the outsider would concur with the results of the study.

### ***Dependability***

The idea of dependability relates to “‘stability after taking into account contextual differences’” (Heather and Martyn 2004, p. 75). Thus, the processes done during the research should be reported in detail, so that a future research could repeat the work, if not necessarily get the same results. In – depth coverage would allow assessing the degree which proper research practices were followed. My research employed ‘overlapping methods’ with detailed description of the methodology to allow study to be repeated within the same context, or elsewhere.

### ***Confirmability***

The concept of confirmability emerges from the researcher’s concern for objectivity. That means a research should be ensured as much as possible that all the findings are reported from the experience and reality of the participants, not from the preferences or subjectivities of the researcher.

The research demonstrates that findings from my research emerged from the data collected and not from my own predispositions. In addition, I combined multiple methods, for example, not relying solely on surveys, but adding in-depth interviews and observation to give complementary views. I enhanced the confirmability of the data by involving efforts to ensure the accuracy of the recording, transcriptions and translation.

## **4.7. Limitations**

There may be criticism associated with a sample of university students in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, in the way in which the findings can be generalized. However, this concern depends on the proper sampling processes of defining 'real people' rather than students (McKenzie 2008). Churchill (1995) further states that student samples have relatively homogenous respondents that help to control random sources of errors. Additionally, the in-depth interviews with a middle class group followed the same content and purpose of the survey as further research efforts needed would solid the overview of the research sample before generalisations can be made. Thus, the university students' evaluations of attitudes towards consumer research is highly appropriate and relevant for this type of research (Ore and Zeren 2011).

Earlier in my research stage, I did a pilot study. I came back to Vietnam and went to speak with people from a wide range of backgrounds to have a precise approach of creating a socio cultural account of the younger generation of urban consumers in Vietnam. I realised all of the respondents in the interview were not quite comfortable talking about any issues related to the politics, especially the ones working for the state, but they were very willing to reveal details about their consumption practices. It should be noted that the interviews were conducted among 16 people living in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, but what I considered as the core group of participants was smaller, totalling eight individuals. This core group included participants who met two basic criteria: (1) Deeper entry in their daily experience. I was able to spend more time with them and touched several topics in all aspects of their lives. (2) More cooperation: I could join their daily activities with their friends or colleagues during my participant observation; I could add the second round of interview, or follow-up questions via email.

With the ones who were more open-minded, my conversations were loosely structured, during which I took detailed notes. However, I changed my strategies in a couple of interviews when the individual appeared to feel pressured in their role as interviewees and produced answers in a general way to avoid questions about consumption practices linked with political views.

During the earlier period of my fieldwork, I sent my interview participants basic questions about backgrounds via email. In two cases, I had limited success in facilitating discussions of this nature. My intent in sending this email to allow them to think over the questions I planned to ask, but they were too much stick to their answers in the emails, losing all the nature and unconscious details, that I want to explore. I put the important and potential interview participants for the later interview in my list, when I am more informed about the topic and give more nuanced questions to anticipate possible responses (Hertel et al 2009).

As a 'native insider', the fact that I was similar in age and shared similar experiences to those of my participants helped a lot for me to obtain access to their group activities, as well as enabling more open communication and conversation. I made every effort to make apparent my own background and experiences in order to gain participants' trust, which is so important when conducting research in a Vietnamese context. When they felt comfortable and trusted me, participants began to reveal more about their thoughts, feelings and experiences; including the negative ideas or deeper thoughts about themselves. They would tell me not just what they liked, but also what they didn't like about themselves and their consumption choices and practices..

As I have emphasised from the beginning of the thesis, defining a middle-class person is not an easy task in Vietnam. I learned several ways individuals in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City define someone as middle-class to participate in my interview. I talked to some of my friends, colleagues to introduce a middle-class person for me to interview. They communicated what they perceived as indicators of 'middle-class'. I came to conclude the three ways I learned and used to approach appropriate middle-class individuals for my in-depth interviews: the visible possession of expensive stuff and property land, house, car, bags, clothes...; the professional career's image...; the leisure activities and education qualifications. These hints would be consciously converted to the financial capacity of the persons, like how much the house in the centre of Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City cost, how much is the average salary working for a foreign company. That family must be rich as they could manage to send their daughter to get

overseas education. For example, a colleague of mine introduced Phi to me as an ideal candidate for the following reasons: she is very trendy in fashion, has a house, a Vespa, a professional job. Huong was told to get an overseas postgraduate education in Australia, and had a job working for a foreign company. She is rich; she could afford to have a European holiday in 5 countries....

Additionally, engaging in part-time work or extra work or having two jobs at the same time is popular among the professional during the last 30 years since the State initiate the market open door policy. First, the salaries of the state employments have been kept at the low levels, but a majority of Vietnamese mind-set, still want to work for the state for the social standing and networking for the extra business and opportunities. In that way, they think 'politics is another way of doing business. Some prefer this way to have both power and money. Meanwhile, those who work for the foreign companies or private companies earn more. Thus in the interview, the question of personal income, or monthly salaries is difficult to approach. In some cases, I asked the indirect question of someone working in the same position or same area.

My research also included gathering information from a variety of media sources. Vietnamese newspapers and TV provided considerably. Early on, I was aware that the statistical data generated by the Vietnamese government would be difficult to acquire. I collected some of the state's census into my primary findings during the fieldtrip in Vietnam and various survey research conducted by local and international scholars that I could approach during my study trip at Yale University. Accordingly, the findings of these projects and reports provide the background for my study.

#### **4.8. Reflections on fieldwork and methods**

The historical background and economic transition in Vietnam produced a younger generation in urban areas in the role of cultural intermediaries promoting their own cultural influence to establish their position in a social world. I entered the field with a level of prior insight into the research topic, and remained open to

new ideas throughout the study, letting it develop with the help of my informants and allowing the concepts emerge from encounters in the field. I was aware of the phenomena that the younger generation of Vietnamese urban consumers embrace the modernity as “the central role in social transformation” (Harm 2011, p. 159) and desire to confirm their identity through brand consuming but what I was seeking to identify was “why does the phenomena come about? How does it unfold over time?” (Elliot and Timulak 2005, p. 147). My task was to develop methods which would get the data needed to explain this.

I used the projective techniques in my surveys as the unique characters of Vietnamese culture or Asian culture in general, they are reserved to express themselves in public. In addition, I wanted to elicit their hidden feelings. I decided to conduct a large – scale survey on the younger generation of Vietnamese urban consumers in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, to profile the general picture as well as to get a comparison of consumption patterns between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. To examine the social interaction (Bourdieu 1984; Marshall-Nguyen et al 2012) embedded in the collective cultures (Ahuvia 2005), participant observation was chosen for my research, in order to study how they position themselves within their social circle. To advance the understanding of the individual in a sociocultural setting (McCracken 1989), and to gain deeper understanding of the identity construction and consumption practices within the middle – class young group, I conducted qualitative interviews. Moreover, observation after the interview enabled a cross-checked interpretation of their reality and experience. The combinations of these three methods generated data on what they think, what they say and what they actually do, enabling a full understanding and analysis of the meaning-making process of consumer behaviour.

Projective methods enabled me to explore an important cultural issues which might have otherwise been difficult to research. To evoke projective responses, I asked respondents to talk about any stories first come to their minds, and allowed respondents “a cloak of assumed anonymity and impersonality” (Bobby 2007, p. 56). This technique enables participants to be freer and less inhibited, in the non-

threatening task of telling stories about people other than themselves. As Hofstede (1998) states, people in countries with uncertainty avoidance are more expressive. This technique helps me to go beyond the surface.

I specifically addressed the importance of establishing an affiliation with a network of contacts in Vietnam. In terms of cultural factors, it would be impossible if you do not have “*quan hệ*” (networking) and contact to conduct fieldwork in Vietnam. I remember, at Hong Bang University in Ho Chi Minh City, to get the permission to conduct the survey with the name of Bournemouth University (UK) in the paper, I had to use my personal network, to explain the officials and staff there that “there is nothing wrong, in term of politics, in my research”. Also, Vietnamese participants, especially ones working for the state organizations, still feel politically sensitive interacting with new foreigners. For example, in the case of Harms’ research on “the margin of Saigon”, he was arranged by an official to interview the participants in a biased way, and then he decided to dismiss the informants’ word and produce his own set of binary truth claims (Harms 2011, p. 222).

The understanding that consumer researchers want to gain is embedded in the participants’ social lives – verbal communication and daily behaviour. Therefore, research methods are more effective with relevant adaptations to the local context, where the researcher could be able to participate in the setting to document the experience of the consumers. I should suggest the most suitable places for conducting interviews in Confucian culture countries including Vietnam should be social places; it should be the place they feel most comfortable to talk about consumption, such as trendy coffee shops, looking at the busy streets, where the world is moving around. I interviewed Thuong in her own office, but it was not until we went to see her friends in a coffee shop that I got all the details making my full and colourful picture of her experience and performance of brand consumption.

As Hertel et al (2009) state, arranging interviews in developing countries can be very time consuming and in some cases frustrating. It is a common to find that

Asians often show up late. The participant may arrive at the site 15 minutes late or more. The researcher needs to be patient and keep the sympathetic and friendly mood to retain a comfortable setting for the interview. My participants would be very happy when they arrived late, but I expressed my understanding of the norm.

With the attitude of learning the daily experience of Vietnamese consumers, I would make my participants the centre of the conversation and try to facilitate the most comfortable way of revealing themselves. As I said in the earlier part of the chapter, to establish great trust and rapport, I often spend 10 minutes for a social chat before going to the introduction part of my project. While the younger like to be asked about study, future plans, dreams, the older group prefer to be asked about their children, travel, leisure activities. Hertel et al (2009) advised that a researcher should dress professionally and appropriately for the observation setting. I would add that, in exploring the practices of brand consumption, researchers should dress professionally but not any more so than the participants; they would not express themselves or their understanding if they perceive that you already know that “an expert wears Prada”.

In the participant observation task, I used both types of structured and unstructured observation (see table3, p.107), which depends on the setting and time allowed. If the observation was to take place within a limited timeframe, I would focus on the source of specific behaviours of interest that I am looking for to complement the responses from surveys and interviews. In more comfortable settings such as restaurants and coffee shops, I would rely on my unstructured observation by capturing data in context.

To understand consumer behaviour in the local context, the researcher needs to master the local cultural factors and choose relevant methods to elicit the rich and deep information while doing the fieldwork. Each research setting has a certain set of unique characteristics, which requires relevant methods to elicit the best results. I believe that surveys including projective techniques, and qualitative interviews associated with observation, worked in my research, based on my real experience, knowledge, and background. My advice would be that researchers



undertaking fieldwork in emerging market countries such as Vietnam should pilot and adapt their methods as appropriate to the cultural context. Choosing the appropriate methodology is essential for the effectiveness of any research. Moreover, 'trustworthy' research should have a possibility of being applicable outside the research setting such as South East Asian context with implications.

## DATA ANALYSIS

As outlined in the Chapter 1, this research aims to understand the relationship between brand consumption and identity construction among *giới trẻ*, by addressing the following research objectives:

- To consider how the consumption practices of younger generation of urban consumers in contemporary Vietnam are specifically shaped by the historical, political, economic and socio-cultural context
- To develop in-depth insight into the attitudes, motivations and aspirations of the younger generation of urban middle-class in Vietnam in relation to their consumption practices
- To identify and critically analyse the symbolic meanings these consumers associate with particular global and local brands and their significance
- To make an empirical contribution to existing knowledge regarding the consumption practices of the younger generation of urban consumers as a transnational consumer culture within both emerging market contexts more generally, and post-socialist societies, in particular.

*Giới trẻ* reflect the increased importance placed on the acquisition of material, which calls for "new hedonistic values" (Freire 2009, p. 68). Aspiring groups look for the concept of pleasure (Belk et al 2003). "Mass production and the capitalist economy have profoundly changed needs, perceptions and attitudes towards consumption practices" (Freire 2009, p. 71). The groups (middle-class, new cultural intermediaries) active as transnational consumers enthusiastically interact with global markets, and inspired by the media, adapt to new consumption practices.

Economic transition and globalisation have elicited a positive reaction toward cosmopolitanism by the Vietnamese people, as a reflection of the emergence of transnational consumer culture (Featherstone 1991). The desire to feel integrated

and civilised, and to experience foreign products (Ger et al 2012) from developed countries are encouraged by the media (McCracken 1989) and by the influential and urban elite, creating a cosmopolitan and frequently sexualised narrative of newness.

*"It's time to see masses of Vietnamese girls in miniskirts walking down the street, and farmers spraying D&G."* (20, male, Hanoi, survey)

Consumption provides an opportunity for the expression of particular cosmopolitan values. In the case of this research study, participants used adjectives such as *worldly, urbane, civilised, integrated, and international* to describe the visible change in their material conditions when consuming Western products. The period *Hội nhập* (integration into globalisation) is tangible in Vietnam today, where Vietnamese people quickly interact with global markets and adapt to changes within their communities. Buying and consuming foreign brands enhances their sense of personal integration into globalisation (O'Shaughnessy 1987). Consumers in this study quickly embraced the availability of Western brands.

*Right here in Saigon, you can buy an LV bag, eat Italian food by a famous Italian chef, receive healthcare delivered by an American specialist, sip Johnny Black in a bar, and purchase kiwi fruit in the supermarket: "the world is in your hand".* (19, Female, HCM City, Survey)

Vietnamese consumers enjoy the feeling of appearing civilised to those living in what they often regard as the more sophisticated part of the world. Vietnamese expatriates are considered to be one of the sources bridging new consumption practices to the homeland. Gift-giving is also a means of interpersonal communication and saving face (Wong and Ahuvia 1998), and brand-name products are often regarded as the best gifts in East Asian collectivist societies (Belk 1996; Wong and Ahuvai 1998).

The main feature of the transnational perspective is the interaction between the global and the local, the compromise at the local level, and related contextual

factors (Featherstone 1991; Sirkeci, 2013). Vietnamese urban consumers put much belief and effort in the display of social status and conformity (Reisman 1950) in an effort to distinguish themselves from other social groups, which somehow alters their *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984). They have strong beliefs about what it means to be 'middle-class', and the role of brand display within that context. Given the significant influence of Confucian values (Ahuvia 2005), Vietnamese consumers are very conscious about public display and appearance, which can be judged by the others.

### **5.1. Highlights of consumption practices in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City as emergent global cities**

In the rapid and acute socio-economic transformation of the past 40 years, Vietnamese society has witnessed a gradual change in valued symbolic capital, from association with the revolutionary and peasant class to association with the modern, entrepreneurial, and urbane. The cities, particularly Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, have once again become the setting for consumption (Jayne 2006), for the display and practice of middle class-ness (Belanger et al 2012, p. 13) and for aspiring urban youth. In chapter 2, I argue the definition of middle class-ness in modern Vietnam implies some coherence in King, Veblen or Bourdieu's sense, due to the political, economic and socio-cultural context of Vietnam. However, common elements of lifestyle are what circumscribe the urban group under this study. The understanding of consumption practices among Vietnamese urban consumers is central to an exploration of social life in contemporary Vietnam.

Lockard (1994, p 30) describes differences in the demographic context of Vietnam after the war ended in 1975:

Vietnamese society retained many of its essential characteristics as it moved south because the family and village were incorporated into the method of colonization; at the same time religious beliefs, dietary habits, and psychological disposition did diverge between northerners and southern migrants. As the Vietnamese encountered the indigenous peoples they absorbed them, pushed them out or subdued them. The major groups already living there, the Chams in central Vietnam and the Khmer in the south, were incorporated into the Vietnamese state in a subordinate

position, their independent political existence terminated. Given the new geographical reality of two heavily populated river delta linked by a thin coastal thread. Vietnamese describe their country as being ‘like two rice baskets at the opposite end of their carrying pole’ (Fall, 1958:2)

The narratives of storytelling and interviews with the group born in the 1990s and late 1980s indicate that there are fewer differences among the younger groups in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. What they have in common is that they all happily indulge in consumer lifestyles. The younger people in the new Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City follow the same common trend, with "no significant differences in impulse buying between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City" (Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai and Tambyah 2011). This may be explained by decreasing cultural differences between them over time due to integration in many areas of the country, mobility, and modern external influences on consumers in both cities. Another possible explanation refers to the sample including "nonoriginal southerners" in Ho Chi Minh City (Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai et al 2003, p. 29). All of those who were highly fashionable and brand-conscious were dramatically influenced by foreign lifestyles and aspirations.

There is continuity in the experiences of and displays by groups from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in contemporary Vietnam. Parents and old traditions have less influence as compared to the previous generation; they are also more linked to the global media. Vann (2012, p 159) asserts:

“Vietnam’s transition to socialism was intended and experienced as a radical break with the past, in which ideologies, institutions, practices, persons, and things associated, variously, with "traditional" Vietnamese culture, colonialism, capitalism, bourgeois society, and other ways of organizing life that were deemed backwards or foreign were to be abandoned in the pursuit of a new Vietnamese socialist modernity.”

"In both cities, new middle classness was no longer expressed by central urban living but rather by suburban apartment ownership" (Belanger et al 2012, p. 11). The changes in transportation in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh over the last twenty

years which can be succinctly summarised as leaping from "bikes to motorbikes to cars in one generation" (Drummond 2012, p. 89) also reshaped the consumption patterns, lifestyles.

The spontaneous migration between the North and the South, the emigration from Ho Chi Minh City to the U.S after 1975, and recent rapid urbanisation represents a huge change in the demographic landscape of the two cities. "With the devastating disruption of two wars and radical socialist reconstruction in the North (the latter over a shorter period in the South), it is inevitable that differences also exist in the practices of the middle class through time and between regions" (Belanger et al 2012, p. 1-2). The differences between Hanoi and Saigon are more easily found in the older groups, although consumers in both cities tend to embrace the values of modernity and materialism.

During French colonialism, Hanoi comprised the street layout now referred to as the "Old Quarter", which also used to be the commercial centre of Indochina (Labbe 2010, p. 14). In 2008, the boundaries of Hanoi were again extended to include the neighbouring province of Ha Tay Province as well as several other districts and communes formerly belonging to provinces of Vinh Phuc and Hoa Binh. This expansion led to a doubling of the official population of Hanoi.

Today, people in Hanoi are very serious about displaying a "show-off face" and are inspired to purchase brands. The old Hanoians also care about external appearance, social face (Wong 2011), but in a more complicated way (e.g., to reflect aristocracy, quiet romance, elegance).

*Hanoians (the original) have a very traditional way of thinking, i.e., even when you are hungry, you must look clean. Even if you are poor, when you leave the house, you must look clean and tidy.*

(Lan, 33, Female, HCM City, Interview)

*That's the tradition of old Hanoians. Thus when wearing brands, it does not really mean they want to show off. They are influenced by traditional values. They are also very shy. Hanoians always know how to dress*

*suitably in different contexts or situations. My husband's brother wore a pair of glasses. He never told me or showed off about the brand of the glasses. One day I saw a Hollywood star in a movie wearing them. And then I realised my brother-in-law also had them. I was a bit shocked, and since then I have paid more attention to his things, and I see that my husband's family also wear the same types of things. They all use branded products, but they never show off about that. They just use them – kind of quiet luxury. I prefer to stay in the dark, to not show anyone what brand I am wearing, but if suddenly, somebody discovered it, I would be extremely happy.*

(Thuong, 33, Female, HCM City, Interview)

The middle class in Hanoi are still influenced by the effects of French colonial rule. The culture is characterised by some as being more stand-offish, traditional, and formal. In urban areas of North Vietnam, former connections to the colonial regime, which were often associated with a partially French-European habitus, became a symbol of connivance and collaboration with the oppressing colonial power. "People belonging to this group experienced dramatic downward social mobility and their habitus not only lost its relevance and usefulness but was also harmful to the extent that family strategies were deployed to make up for such a 'shameful past and origins'" (Belanger et al 2012, p. 11). The emphasis in consumption is on trendiness and novelty, but not necessarily individuality. When something new appears, people want to try it and to be seen to try it. They want, in the other words, to show themselves as people who know what proper consumption is. Thus, these sites of consumption are particularly important to the display of lifestyle knowledge.

People with roots in Hanoi would prefer to demonstrate that they are in the elite of the consumer culture, and that they possess "taste" as tool of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) in consumption and lifestyle inherited from the French colonial period. They like to show and be known for their complex knowledge about how to consume, and are afraid of being called 'nouveaux riches'. People in Hanoi today

(including ones with ties to old Hanoi) pay attention to others' judgement about consumption. It is easy to be misled by people's appearance in Hanoi:

*From my understanding, people in Hanoi really care about their 'external' appearance; I mean how they are seen by others. It is interesting to note that when going out in Hanoi, people dress very well, such as short skirts, the professional look, and look very elegant, or fancy, compared to how people in Saigon look. But there is another story here: Some people are much too serious about it, and spend all of earnings on things like new motorbikes, luxury iPhones and laptops to show off a certain identity, and it's very difficult for you to guess what their actual income level or social identity are.*

(Ninh, 33, Male, HCM City, Interview)

The original residents of Saigon (currently Ho Chi Minh City), with nearly 30 years of American involvement during the war were "forced to endorse and embody a new habitus that would confer them a certain legitimacy in the new social order created by communism" (Belanger et al 2012, p. 11). It has a mixing of origin groups, which creates certain differences and fragmentation in consumption practices, especially for the older groups. Although in the common trend, people in Saigon have started to spend more on visible possessions and appearance. People looked to their families for pride and prosperity, whereas nowadays people seek social status, certificates, material comforts, houses, and vehicles (Tran Thi Phuong 2007, p. 287).

*In Saigon, people have generally started to care more about their appearance, and you see more scooters in the streets, or more luxury cars, but they are not yet as serious as people in Hanoi. People in Saigon plan more for housing, eating or travelling.*

(Ninh, 33, Male, HCM City, Interview)

The division of Vietnam following the Geneva Conference in 1954 led to the migration of approximately 810,000 people to South Vietnam (Hansen, 2008). Of



this group of migrants, about one-third was Roman Catholic and about 90,000 were from the professional class (Hess, 1977). The new migrants, many of whom settled in Saigon and the surrounding areas, joined Saigon's middle class, already developed and active since the French colonial period. While the economic and social structure for the middle class predated 1954, the new political situation foisted on Vietnam meant new challenges and changes for social classes in South Vietnam. The war, American intervention, and the establishment of a new polity and political identity presented challenges as well as opportunities for the middle class (Belanger et al 2012, p. 4). Consumers do draw on consumption behaviour and lifestyle to distinguish those coming from different cities.

*Hanoians who moved to Saigon after 1975 are very stylish and understand a lot about brands, while people in Saigon who come from Nam Bo (the provinces around Saigon) are not elegant. They are just 'so so'.*

(Thuong, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview).

Growth in GDP has been swift, rising from US\$ 1,524 per capita in 2002 to about US\$ 2,800 per capita in 2009 (Forbes.com)—11 per cent annually. At the economic heart and the core of Vietnam's largest urban area, on average, Saigon consumers spend more and save less on a daily basis and for entertainment.

*The standard of living in Saigon is now higher, and Saigon people are more generous in their spending. Saigon people still spend on clothes or eating out, even though they do not have their own house, or have to rent a house. All brands want to enter the Vietnamese market, they go for Saigon first, then Hanoi. The only exception is Hermes, I know a guy who opened a shop in Hanoi first, as he was living in Hanoi at that time. All other brands went to Saigon first. You know after 1975, a lot of Saigon people moved abroad. Then they sent back hard currency, so their families in Saigon have more money now.*

(Thuong, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview).

The new immigrants from the southern provinces and those moving from the North are becoming the dominant group of middle-class consumers in Ho Chi Minh City. The population of Ho Chi Minh City now totals 7.3 million (2012). Compared to northern and central Vietnam, the South was influenced less by Confucianism than by Buddhism (Tran Thi Phuong 2007), as such the South shares more traits with South East Asian cultures, where a bilateral kinship system is dominant (Tran Thi Phuong 2007, p. 286). But as I discussed in chapter 3, Confucianism mainly influences people's behaviour in social communities and affects the consumption practices among Vietnamese urban consumers.

In Tran Thi Phuong's (2007) survey, living arrangements in Ho Chi Minh City were very flexible and not so much influenced by the traditional patrilocal pattern as by economic and sentimental factors. The group with Saigon ties remaining in Ho Chi Minh City are not so prominent now.

*My husband and I are really Saigonian. We are well known for 'spending money like water'; we never know how much we have in our pockets. We never budget, and never save like the people in Hanoi; they are always thinking about saving and planning. We simply want, and then buy, without careful thinking. People in Hanoi have certain plans, for example, how much they plan to have, and what they plan to buy. We just like, and spend. (Thuong, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview).*

Thrift and conspicuous consumption are also not opposites. According to Hofstede and Bond's cultural dimensions (1988), collectivist cultures will more likely be positively correlated with a country's economic growth. The value of 'thrift' leading to savings is found among Vietnamese consumers in Hanoi, who have more awareness about how to use money, and handle money more responsibly. The habit of saving is known to be more associated with the character of Northerners, who are far more likely to spend and save in line with their long-term economic well-being.

Further, indulgence and restraint are found among consumers in Hanoi where the Confucian value of "restraint" has the advantage over the other enjoyable type of

consumption, "indulgence". Hanh (26 years old, female, Ho Chi Minh City, Interview) grew up in Saigon, but admitted that her way of thinking in anything is strongly influenced by her parents of Northern origin:

*My father wanted to buy a new Sony TV with a bigger screen, but then he thought, there was a TV in every room already, if he bought a new one, there would be an extra one. When one of our TVs was out of order, we moved the TV in my parents' living room to the dining room, and then they bought a Sony with bigger screen. They carefully consider the need and the suitable time for making a purchase. As another example, we do not have a habit of dining out, we usually dine at home as is the old Northern tradition. We only went out for dinner on rare special occasions. My parents thought dining at home would save money and be more hygienic.*

After 1975, women in Ho Chi Minh City took on production as well as reproduction roles, which has continued since. However, the husband-wife relationship in the South arguably displayed more patriarchal traits than in the North, especially in the household division of labour. Although most families in both regions have become nuclear, the practice of filial duties towards parents and in-laws in the South differs from the North, with more flexible living arrangements after marriage in the South (Tran Thi Phuong 2007, p. 291). Thus, women in Saigon actively adapted to the modern lifestyle, and embrace cosmopolitan looks.

*The majority of women in Saigon get out of the house, and have independent work and income. They love themselves more and take care of themselves more. They spend on themselves more, enjoying more, and living like other women in global cities.*

(19, Female, HCM city, Survey)

In sum, to talk about a middle class in contemporary Vietnam in this context of 'market socialism' is to talk about a group whose conditions of existence have been possible for less than 15–20 years (Belanger et al 2012, p. 13). More than 60

per cent of the Vietnamese population is under the age of 30, representing a powerful new consumer force. It is clear that a modern way of living has emerged, with mobile phones, costly motorbikes and credit cards now a part of everyday life (Mashayoshi Maruyama and Le Viet Trung 2007, p. 29). After *doi moi*, Vietnamese society opened up to a global flow of information and influences. Trade and social exchanges with the rest of the world have grown (Dollar et al., 1998) and consumerism has become a lifestyle of the urban population.

However, the group with Hanoi or Saigon heritage find ways to be different from the other groups of new inhabitants in both cities through distinct consumption patterns. They tend to consume products in a different way, which they call the "taste of the middle class". The emerging middle-class groups in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City both strive to display the social status through consumption to avoid the image of "countryside" (Nhà quê<sup>2</sup> or Hai lúa<sup>3</sup>).

In many ways, participants in my interviews tried to convince me that they wanted to differentiate themselves from those who have migrated from the countryside. The strategies they employed to do this were by claiming the "cultural capital" defined by Bourdieu (1984). My participants in Hanoi or with Hanoi roots repeated the word "thảm mĩ" (taste) or "gu" (borrowed from French), to avoid the description: "*She has no taste, looks like a country girl. Whatever expensive stuff she puts on, doesn't change the spirit of her image*" (Female, 21, Survey, Hanoi). They also use the habitus, especially the consumers in Hanoi, to describe "*thần thái*" – the spirit expressed through habitus. Consumers culturally communicate with branded products. "*Only people with high standards and good taste know how to match Nike shoes with clothes, and walk in the perfect way with their outfit*" (Hien, 26, Female, Hanoi, Interview). It is clear that consumers in Hanoi are more serious about this point. Meanwhile, the participants with Saigon

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2 Local Northern dialect

3 Local Southern dialect

heritage claim the right choice of relevant setting to express their high level of education and Saigon style, in the way you are well educated and keep up with the style of the world. "*Saigon modern people know to keep with up the fashion trend*" (Participant No. 5, 33, Male, HCM City, Interview).

Among participants in the interview, Lan and Ninh (originally from Hanoi) and Thuong (originally from Saigon) have all spent a period of their life living in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and could therefore offer a certain insight into the differences in consumption practices of people in these two cities. For example, Lan (Interview) who lived in Hanoi until he was 16 described the difference as follows:

*I think people in Hanoi are more romantic, and live more for "spirit", while Saigonians are more materialistic and realistic.....When Hanoians really like a brand, they don't care so much about the price. They want to have it. They will find a way to buy it eventually. Meanwhile, Saigonians are more realistic; they would compare and consider the price and background. Actually, Hanoians are more strongly inspired when buying fashion, or transport than Saigonians. People in Saigon carefully make decisions and when they feel something is not needed, they won't buy it, while Hanoians only need inspiration for purchasing decisions.*

The contemporary Vietnamese middle class has therefore moved cautiously toward displaying and identifying class status through brand consumption. People in Ho Chi Minh City are more business-minded and market oriented than people from Hanoi. People from Hanoi are more academically oriented and more solid to make a decision and a move, which has significant influence upon their choice of brands, as well as their purchasing decisions and consumption practices. Consumers in both of these cities generally define Vietnam's transnational consumer culture, with more brand consciousness, social class and conformity, which is examined in the following sections.

## 5.2. Overview of consumption practices

Vietnamese consumers are likely to be involved in growing status consumption and conformity (Reisman 1950; Campbell 1978) through face work (Goffman 1967) as the habitus (Bourdieu 1984). The outcome of consumerism and traditional heritage – the negotiation between the *show-off face* and the *quiet luxury face* has become second nature in the habitus of Vietnamese urban consumers. Vietnamese urban consumers (middle-class, new cultural intermediaries) are more inspired by the tastes, sensibilities, and practices of Western lifestyles (Ger et al 2012), all be they produced in the local cultural context (Belk and Polland 1996; Penaloza et al 2012).

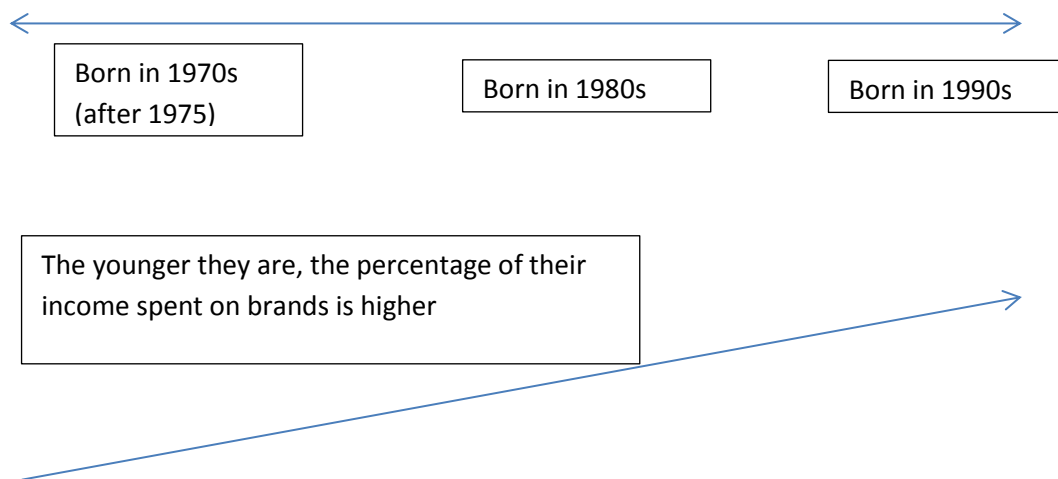
Urban consumers in Vietnam quickly and actively embrace the themes of globalisation and modernity following a decade (1975-1985) of suffering from the lack of material availability. They tend to pay more attention to "the immediacy of daily concerns" (Pierre 2000, p. 76). "More than half of Vietnamese have been born since 1975 and do not remember the hard times" (Salomon and Vu Doan Ket 2007, p. 358). Vietnam is now largely governed by young people (Phuong An Nguyen 2007), and the middle-class (King et al 2008) is presenting as an emerging consumer force.

"As being the only core values of the Doi Moi society, consumerism values have implicitly emerged as being key in contemporary Vietnam" (Freire 2009, p. 72). Vietnam is now in the era of "*materialism is the priority*" (Khuong, HCM City, Interview). The Economic Renovation (1986) has greatly changed Vietnamese society, bringing people more opportunities for information and entertainment exchange, with the literacy rate at 96.7% in 2001 (CPV2005). Vietnamese have more opportunities to enjoy the pleasure of product availability as a mechanism of an economy in the transitional phrase. With the global flow of products (Featherstone 1991), Vietnamese consumers now are put at the forefront of the business process and consumption choices.

Consumers in Vietnam tend to spend more as they develop strongly materialist values. The more they adopt such hedonic values, the more they are preoccupied

with material wealth and spending. In my study, the younger generation was found to be more likely to spend conspicuously and save less.

*I (born in the 1990s) have more needs to be satisfied, and enjoy life more than my sister's generation (born in 1980s). My sister of course spends more than our parents (born in the 1960s) (Quyên, 22, Male, Hanoi, Interview).*



**Figure 2 - Spending trend among the younger generation of urban consumers in Vietnam**

### 5.2.1. Social Status

A market-led economy leads to quickly accelerated urbanisation (Phuong An Nguyen 2002, p.224) and availability of products. More than 60 per cent of the population of Vietnam is under 30 years old (Mashayoshi Maruyama and Le Viet Trung 2007) and the emergence of the 'new' rich presents a captive consumer market as people have overcome the haunted subsidy period (1975-1986) and now actively enjoy the pleasure of consuming products (Shultz 2012). Goods are purchased not only for personal use, but also for social display (Starr 2008). "Economic renovation has created a new middle class and an increasingly complex and diverse social order, oriented to the acquisition of education and in pursuit of consumerist lifestyles" (King et al 2008, p. 808).

The enhancement of social status is increasingly one of the first and most important reasons for Vietnamese consumers to purchase expensive brands.

*That really improves the quality of the person who uses it.*

(20, Male, HCM City, Survey)

They seek "the upward status passage" (O'Shaughnessy 1987, p. 139), to create a dream self-image in order to succeed in the status competition and the goods must be visible, or public, in their use and ownership. Thus, personal transport, phones and clothes become important status symbols for Vietnamese consumers, as they are visible in the 'front region' (Goffman 1969) and the extended part of self (Belk 1989).

*Lan sexily entered the class with her iPhone 5 in her hand. She pretended to answer the phone while nobody called her. She was successful in attracting other classmates' attention. All quickly came to admire it, try it and use it. They competed fiercely with each other to see and use it.*

(21, female, Hanoi, Survey)

Consumers openly display brands in the expectation that they will be treated differently by others as a consequence.

*I went out with a man in all Gucci attire, Tony. He got a lot of attention, and even when we entered a restaurant, he was treated differently. I concluded that clothes and brands can make you more respected by others.* (19, Male, HCM City, Survey)

*Giới trẻ* tend to imitate or follow a "leader" within their community or social group, in an attempt to climb the social ladder, which easily leads them to conform to others as a form of 'other-direction' (Riesman 1950) or to 'culturally conform' (Wong and Ahuva 1998) as per the model of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1925). Such inspirational leaders can come from among the elite of urban middle-class, or celebrities who are the quickest in updating trends and in experiencing Western products. This emulative model of consumption (Veblen



1925) is then 'pumped out' to the consuming masses (Chadha and Husband 2006, p. 250).

*My teacher likes using branded products to show his social standing. Each time he goes to the classroom to give a lecture, he uses a mobile phone with the icon of a bitten apple, has Adidas or Sennheiser headphones, and signs documents with a Waterman ball pen. Looking at his consumption of brands, we poor students are very envious. So we will try to be rich in the future in order to have the same style of consumption.*

(22, Female, Hanoi, Survey)

Attention-seeking performances based on brand ownership are another way of demonstrating status.

*All of my friends in my football team would admire me. Maybe they would even call me a nickname related to Adidas. Nothing could be better.*

(21, Male, Hanoi, Survey)

Products become free to take on a wide range of cultural associations or meanings (Featherstone 1991). Believing that social status can be had from material goods, Vietnamese consumers purchase high-end and prestigious products to project the image of "success" and "wealth".

*Apple becomes the ruler of measuring the rich and the poor.*

(21, Male, Hanoi, Survey)

*With a Western car, I got a girl who likes this type of middle-class guy.*

(20, Male, Hanoi, Survey)

*I have some - enough to show my social standing*

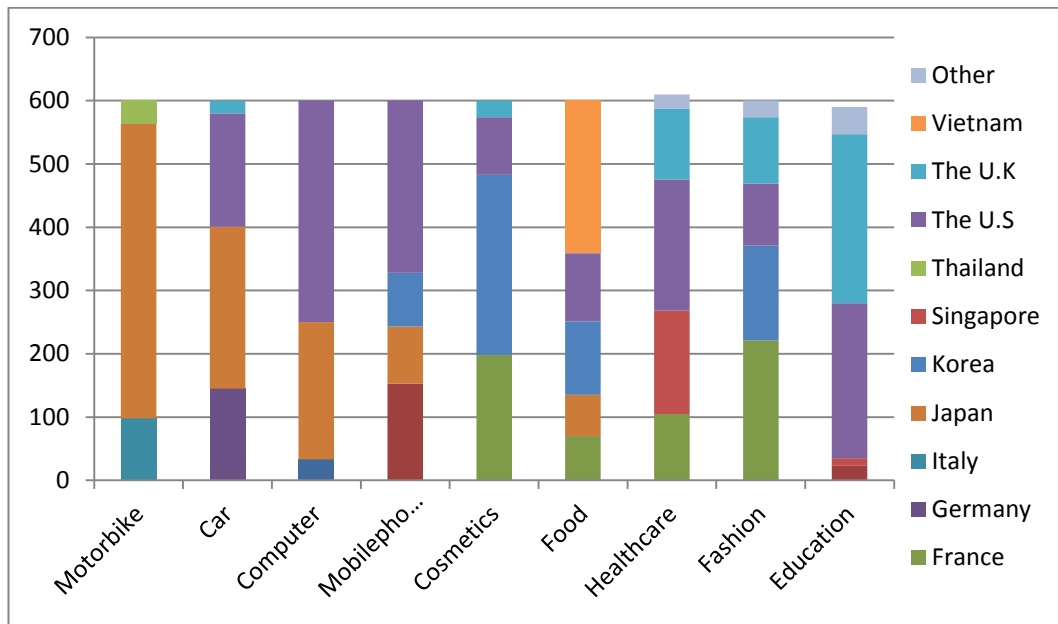
(Thuong, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview)

Products are not judged on functionality, but by the symbolic associations they deliver. Brand names such as LV and Gucci become common terms for the brand-obsessed consumers in urban Vietnam.

### ***5.2.2. Country of Origin (CO)***

The relationship between the cue of Country of Origin (CO) and the attributes of a product is largely conducted by product-country image and quality as a presentation of a country's production (Steenkamp 1990). Consumers have certain criteria for choosing products in each category in terms of what defines the best choice (Samiee et al 2005). There is a close relation between nationalism and consumption among Vietnamese urban consumers. They retain a preference for brands or products based on the product's CO, including affinity and animosity.

When asked which CO of products in different categories are preferred, the respondents in my survey suggested a preference for transportation products (motorbikes and cars) and technology (computers and mobile phones) with CO of Japan, the US, Germany, Korea and Finland. Perceptions are that France and Korea remain the best among Vietnamese consumers in terms of making products of fashion and cosmetics. For example, approximately 77% of respondents chose Japan as the best CO to purchase a motorbike, with the US as the best CO to buy a computer accounting for 58% of the respondents. Respondents believe the UK and the US offer the world's best quality of education.



**Table 4 – Vietnamese urban consumers’ choice for the best CO of a product**

This table above shows that *giới trẻ* in Vietnam tend to prefer foreign brands. They are likely to be more brand conscious. Respondents are more inspired to consume goods in technology, transportation and fashion, which claim new values and promote the lifestyle of a young urban generation. They are entering into a ‘pleasure-seeking’ and ‘distraction-oriented’ phase as a society linked to the market economy (Friere 2009, p. 84).

*Nowadays, people cannot work, cannot socialise, cannot love without a mobile (20, Male, HCM City, Survey)*

Nokia entered the Vietnamese market eight years ago when the need for technology in everyday life started booming. It appeared as the perfect brand through its slogan "connecting people", at a time when the Vietnamese strongly desired to integrate with the world and interact with communities through technological advances. Consumers rank Nokia as having the highest quality and durability within a reasonable budget. As indicated in the table, its popularity remains strong in Vietnam. Meanwhile, the US (iPhone) is the most desirable and stylish for Guru, holding the first position in the minds of consumers, and the

aspiration of owning a Korean phone (Samsung) has also risen. Nowadays, urban consumers display mobile phones for different purposes and meanings.

*Two of my friends use mobile phones. One uses a common Nokia, the other uses an iPhone 5. I can tell the difference. If two of them go to a remote area, the one with the cosmopolitan iPhone could not communicate due to weak network service, but the one with the Nokia can. That is clearly the purpose of using things.* (19, Male, Hanoi, Survey)

In terms of transport, the relative affordability of the vehicles and unparalleled development of narrow roads, together with the growing urbanisation and increasing population in Vietnam means motorbikes or scooters are the most practical choice of transportation. Car ownership is very low in Vietnam, at 1/142, while the forecast figure is 35 million motorbikes in 2015 (Advertising Agency Directory Vietnam, Volume 1 2010). The aspiring younger generations desire Vespas and other Japanese brand scooters, while the older middle class want luxury brand cars. As indicated in the table, Japanese brands (Honda) remain the most popular overall while the most desired one in term of fashion and social status is the Vespa (Piaggio). Friere (2009, p. 78) described in his study of motorbikes in Vietnam:

If motorbikes remain an object of social classification, an 'investment of economic value' for some, a simple fashion item for others, the forms of social distinction and the consumerism significations have also evolved in urban areas. For sure, the price, the brand and the model count.

To emphasise social status and social distinction (Campbell 1987; Bourdieu 1984), Vespa reinforces this image for urban consumers. "*A Vespa means a lot to me and improves my image a lot.*" (19, Male, Hanoi, Survey).

National and cultural stereotypes may be defined "as beliefs that various traits are predominantly present and therefore characteristic of a particular nation or culture" (Brioschi 2005, p. 183). It is the stereotype of the Italian – the belief among Vietnamese people that the Italian design is distinguished from many other

nations by their aesthetic sensibility and perfect taste. "*In term of perfect taste, I prefer stuff made by the Italians or the French*" (20, Male, Hanoi, Survey)

Japan entered the Vietnamese market right after the Vietnam War ended, and the later Korean wave (popular culture) spread to Vietnam when the country was still under the embargo and suffered from its consequences. From 2001 to 2006, Japan was Vietnam's biggest trading partner (Ha Thi Hong Van 2010). Japanese exports to Vietnam were largely chemicals, textiles, machinery, and transportation equipment, which established the bias of consumers for so long that Japanese made products still have the reputation for quality in terms of transportation and technology. The word "*Honda*" was used for motorbikes until recently in central and northern Vietnam, and has remained number one in term of quality and durability for consumers. This was demonstrated in several surveys of the project.

The findings suggest that Western transport, cosmetics, healthcare and fashion products with origins in the US, UK, France and Italy are more familiar to participants. Western brands are defined as being of higher quality and technologically superior to domestic brands, but compared to the Korean or Japanese have greater added value in terms of face work (Goffman 1969; Ahuvia 2005); thus, making Western brands the most desirable foreign products amongst the younger generation of urban consumers.

Although Vietnamese consumers still suffer from the consequences of the Vietnam War with the US involvement, which caused over 2 million Vietnamese deaths, there was no evidence of participants actively boycotting American products. On the contrary, it is apparent from the table that US products remain the best choice in several categories, as explained by the following: The younger generation of urban Vietnamese want to forget the war (Hayton 2010) through the maintenance of chosen glories (Volkan 2006); the main benefit of the normalised relationship between the US and Vietnam is trade (Lockard 1994); the products of the US are commonly associated with "the particularity and a utilitarian orientation" (Peabody 1985). From the narratives of participants in my study, the

main reason emphasised was the pleasure of enjoying "the superior quality and particularity" of the brands of the US.

In terms of education, the majority of participants preferred the opportunity to be educated in the US, UK or Australia. Vietnamese society places a high value on education. Parents and young people see education as a priority, a worthwhile investment for the future. Obtaining a degree from a developed country means a lot for young people's careers in the densely populated, and therefore competitive, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City of Vietnam today.

*A chance of studying in the US or Europe would open more doors for me for my future, and for everything else in this increasingly competitive labour market. (22, Male, Hanoi, Survey).*

### **5.2.3. Perception of Chinese, Domestic and Western brands**

"Vietnam is one of the most rapidly developing countries in the world and strives to participate in the global marketplace with heavyweight players like China, Japan, the United States and Europe" (Libby 2011, p. 211). While enjoying the global flow of products in the Vietnamese market, consumers maintain different attitudes towards domestic brands, Chinese brands and foreign brands, influenced by specific factors in the historical and socio-economic background of Vietnam. Nationalism and consumption are somehow interrelated (Shimp and Sharma 1987; Smith 1991) among *giới trẻ* in Vietnam, with the state (Volkan 2001; Sirkeci 2013) playing a role of in promoting the narratives of nationalism. Consumer ethnocentrism and animosity is found in the context of Vietnam and among the consumption practices of Vietnamese consumers.

They tend to lose a great deal of faith in brands in domestic market. They are searching for truths and clamouring for transparency (TNS Media 2012). Alternatively, they are actively looking for and spend more on Western brands and hand-imported items for quality, and try to avoid Chinese brands. They prefer to be like Westerners rather than the Chinese.

### 5.2.3.1. Chinese brands

When making purchasing decisions, consumers connect CO to personal memories, to national identities and to the feeling of "pride" associated with the possession of products from certain countries (Hirschman 1985). The feeling of pride when consuming a brand, among Vietnam urban consumers, closely links to satisfactory performance of "face work" (Goffman 1969) in creating their desired image (Belk 1989). Animosity is anger directed at a particular country due to political, economic, diplomatic or military events (Klein et al. 1998). Klein et al. (1998) also suggested that animosity affected the willingness to purchase separate from judgements about product quality. Both the survey and the interviews found animosity and negative perception of quality toward Chinese brands among Vietnamese attitudes.

*"I don't like Chinese things in terms of quality and politics".* (Binh, 32, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

The feeling of nationalism is still strong in Vietnam, with a sense of pride in one's heritage and traditions. There is deep feeling of threat related to Chinese brands in Vietnamese consumers' mind. In general, Vietnamese consumers are afraid of Chinese brands, especially food or anything that might affect their health. The words "*poisonous*", "*unsafe*", "*dangerous*" are often repeated in the survey responses about feelings when consuming Chinese brands. The word "*Hàng lởm*" is used to describe the worst quality of product, and often attached to Chinese products. According to 2013 research by GfK, when it comes to food safety, 76 percent of Vietnamese respondents said they worry about how safe the food they buy is, and worry about contaminated food and drinks. Vietnamese consumers have started to become seriously aware of issues related to the safety of products they consume, which mainly relate to the Chinese products, and which affects consumption behaviours and choice.

The Vietnamese relationship with China is characterised by "invented ones" (memories) (Hayton 2010, p. 199). This partially makes Vietnamese consumers connect with a more favourable attitude toward Western brands.

*We are so near China, we have a bad influence from them. I do not feel safe using Chinese things, and due to my politics I don't favour China. When there is political tension between the two countries, we can be harmful to each other in terms of consumption. I love Western brands, without any concern. I think what a pity for poor people in this country, suffering from having to use low-end, harmful Chinese items . If I were rich, there would be no product in my house with the label "Made in China".*

(28, Male, Hanoi, Survey)

For the middle-class group, they try to avoid consuming Chinese brands as much as they can afford, and manage to do that. For younger groups such as students, in particular, they have less income, so they accept buying Chinese brands in fashion, transport or technology, although they are aware of the perceived lack of safety and poor quality of Chinese brands. There is a trend where Vietnamese people implicitly and automatically stereotype things coming from China, and have negative feelings whenever seeing a Chinese character on packaging, or the phrase "made in China". Anything of Chinese origin is almost facing a time of crisis in terms of brand trust among Vietnamese consumers.

*I think Vietnam is so close, and shares a border with China, thus all inferior products are flown to Vietnam... My parents are most concerned about food; they always have to be clear about the source of food, and good credibility and safety in order to avoid Chinese food. If you Google it, there is a lot of news warning about the safety of Chinese food on media everywhere. Some of my Chinese friends told me that even Chinese people do not trust Chinese products, so I told my parents about this. We try to avoid Chinese food as much as we can. (Huong, 25, Female, HCM City, Interview).*



Vietnamese consumers perceive Chinese products as low quality and unsafe, accompanied by a feeling of resistance related to Chinese influence in the past. In some cases, consumers' attitudes have a strong influence upon their preference for products. Consumers' knowledge or memories related to other countries plays an important role in their purchasing decision processing. In the study of Klein et al (1998), the animosity of older Chinese consumers toward Japan and Japanese products is highlighted when describing the violent history of Japanese colonialism which occurred in China. Vietnamese consumers somehow retain animosity towards Chinese products due to the long history of conflicts related to borders and identity, which gives rise to strong deep-rooted emotions (political animosity). Emotions such as 'dislike the opposed country', 'never forget the conflict with opposed country' still haunt the Vietnamese people. When the opposed country is the neighbour and the conflict is on-going, feelings of animosity continue. *"We are so near China, we have had a bad influence from them"* (Ninh, 33 years old, male, Ho Chi Minh City, Interview). This animosity influences the willingness of Vietnamese consumers to purchase Chinese brands. Although, in reality, they cannot avoid buying them due to budget or unawareness of the source, in their minds, they do not want to face the risk of consuming Chinese brands.

*I avoid using Chinese products, for very practical reasons. All kinds of Chinese products can be poisonous, containing dangerous substances. They themselves do not care about the health of their own people, so why would they care about the health of people from other countries. I would avoid using them at all costs. And I confess I am in love with my country, that's why I am strongly anti-China. I am patriotic. I would be against anything not good for my country or which could invade my country in dangerous ways.* (The, 35, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

#### **5.2.3.2. Domestic brands**

Consumer ethnocentrism (CET) is a phenomenon whereby consumers possess a well-established bias to prefer domestic products (Shimp and Sharma 1987). Shimp and Sharma (1987) suggested a strong positive correlation between: (1) patriotism, politico-economic conservatism, dogmatism and (2) consumer ethnocentrism. To create ethnocentrism - a 'we group' feeling exists where the 'in-group' is the centre, and all 'out-groups' are judged in relation to it (George 2001, p. 159). However, among the Vietnamese consumers I spoke to, they were very clear in separating patriotism and love of consumption (consumer ethnocentrism). The majority of consumers admitted that the love of consumption was the first priority in their choice of products.

*I love my country, but Vietnamese products are not good enough in term of quality. Love and consumption are separate and different to me....I'd say, 'love, use and protect' mean three totally different things. (The, 35, Male, Hanoi, Interview)*

In the survey, when asked their feelings about consuming Vietnamese brands, the top three emotions mentioned were "safe", "patriotic" and "satisfied". However, I learned that in reality there are certain reasons for Vietnamese consumers showing very low preference for domestic products. *"Being fond of consumption comes first"*. (Thuong, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview)

First, the low quality market management system has caused consumers to become confused and to lose trust in the authenticity of Vietnamese products; they are afraid that certain Vietnamese products are being replaced with Chinese products .

*Vietnamese products are good, and of course, I want to buy and support the economy of the country, but who can guarantee they are genuine Vietnamese-made products, rather than Chinese. (The, 35, Male, Hanoi, Interview)*

*I think I am patriotic even in terms of consumption, but you cannot fight the truth, and risk your own safety. (Huong, 25, Female, HCM City, Interview)*

Both Ninh (Ho Chi Minh City) and The (Hanoi) expressed their disappointment with domestic brands and the market management system. Consumers in developing countries tend to believe that local products are not as good quality as imported items (Wang and Chen 2004; Tho. D. Nguyen., and Trang, T, M, Nguyen 2011).

*The crisis of economics leads to a crisis of ethics...I am very patriotic. Everyone faces the dilemma of distinguishing between authentic Vietnamese-made products and Chinese items. You know, my mother told me I should not even trust the food in the supermarket; there are items with mixed origins, mainly from China. I told her that I don't know what to do. My house does not have enough land around it for growing my own vegetables to ensure I have safe food. Regarding fashion, I also want to use Vietnamese products, but Chinese products are also mixed in there. Recent news about the quality of Chinese bras<sup>4</sup> is an example. What about other things? There is no double if they put poisonous material in your clothes. (Ninh, 33, Male, HCM City, Interview)*

Second is the issue of whether they can find domestic brands. They are the alternative to Chinese products for Vietnamese consumers in terms of price, quality and safety, especially for the ones who want but cannot afford Western brands. For the majority, the quality is good, and safer than Chinese products, but the design is still very limited.

It has produced a mind-set among Vietnamese retailers and manufacturers that it is better to imitate (and sometimes to infringe upon trademarks) than to innovate. Still, Vietnamese are intensely brand loyal and foreign companies that have

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4 Vietnam puzzled over cancer threat in dubious Chinese bras (Thanhniennews)

production processes, technologies or product formulae that are difficult to imitate, have competitive advantages and command premium prices. This leads to low consumer confidence in Vietnamese products.

It could explain the phenomena that Vietnamese people are foreign brand conscious (TNS 2009), as they do not find satisfaction in domestic brands.

*People start to question domestic brands. In Vietnam, there is no other reference apart from price, not even quality. When we see the higher price, we feel more confident in the brand's trustworthiness and quality. We do not have very much information about the products, and so we have to use our common sense. (The, 35, Male, Hanoi, Interview)*

*Vietnamese products just copy others. For example, some Vietnamese-made crocodile leather wallets are very good in terms of quality, the same as Hermes, but the dyes are not as good as Hermes, and the designs are not creative. I still spend thousands of dollars buying these products to give to friends abroad, just to introduce them to Vietnamese products. The wallets are OK. As for shoes, I cannot buy Vietnamese products, as they prove so painful to wear. (Thuong, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview)*

*A girl bought a dress from a shopping mall in the US. She was very proud of owning an American brand and she showed it off to her friends. All of her friends were very excited and liked it very much. Later, one noticed a small tag in the garment which said 'Made in Vietnam'. She was shocked and angry, and all the others turned to make fun of her. (20, Male, HCM City, Survey)*

Third, the cultural polity and knowledge of consumers is limited, encouraging them to place their trust in Western brands as the optimum way of reducing risk compared to the other choices. The findings indicate that ethnocentrism is somehow weaker among the younger group. Consumers with a high level of cultural sensitivity such as the Vietnamese tend to evaluate imported products more favourably (Tho D.Nguyen, Trang T.M.Nguyen and Nigel J.Barrett 2008).

*Vietnamese products lack the criteria of 'regularity', and our country has lost many opportunities for economic development. We do not have a cultural polity for products. In Vietnam, price is the only reference for consumers. Generally, consumers just think the higher price, the better the quality. There is no time for consumers to put the brand and the quality to the test. Due to the consequences of the war, and the limited knowledge of Vietnamese consumers, we do not have any real experience with brands.*  
(The, 35, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

### **5.2.3.3. Western brands**

Vietnamese find both functional quality and symbolic meaning in Western brands. However, there is a mix of positive, negative and ambivalent attitudes toward Western brands. The majority of respondents preferred to consume Western brands as a way to embrace modernity and to enjoy the pleasure of consumption. They happily attach symbolic meanings to Western brands to cultivate their desired identity (Belk 1989).

*One night, I sank deeper and deeper into a dream. The setting was full of pink clouds, of peaceful music from a chorus of all kinds of birds. I just walked and walked, further and further, to a paradise. Suddenly my feet hit things on the way. The things were called "Western brands"; then I looked up, seeing two doors, one with the word "function", and the other.... To continue, I had to choose to enter one of them. Which I should choose? (22, Female, Hanoi, Survey)*

By choosing between such 'doors', Vietnamese consumers imbue Western brands with typical symbolic meanings. I identified these through the analysis of the 600 written stories. They rework the symbolic meanings of brands to forge new identities. I found that brands in certain product sectors - technology, transportation and fashion - are most frequently used to build consumers' self – image as central to their experience of these brands.

Consuming Western brands creates a feeling of not being ignored or isolated in the world. Western brands strongly link to the idea of an international "look" and global participation (Dong and Tian, 2009; Shizhakova et al 2011).

*Typical activities of a happy evening for my generation: iPhone is on for FB notifications and chat box; Ipad displays Miley Cyrus' scandals and fashions from the tabloids; the laptop is ready for writing assignments.*

*Typical evening entertainment activity from my mom's time, the 1980s: a pot of hot green tea would be prepared, and a few friends would be sitting around the table under the light of a dim vintage oil lamp. Conversation about ideology, poetry and neighbourhood gossip would fill the air, and cups were continuously filled with tea until parents interrupted. (22, female, Hanoi, survey)*

### **Beauty**

For a majority of participants, one of the main reasons for purchasing Western brands was "beauty". It is difficult to indicate the exact meaning of the word beauty in Vietnamese consumers' minds, however, as participants tended to define it in terms of style and money, rather than in traditional aesthetic terms.

*"She looks beautiful when she puts on trendy clothes"*

(32, female, Hanoi, Survey)

*"His car is beautiful. It looks perfectly mo-den"*

(21, Male, HCM City, Survey)

*"Definitely, all of the expensive Western stuff must be beautiful and of a high standard"*

(22, Male, HCM City, Survey)

In the narratives of their stories, the combination of qualities frequently linked to beauty is "trendy" and "mo-den" (modern). The idea of beauty as expensive adornment shows "the superior gratification derived from the use and

contemplation of costly and supposed beautiful products is, commonly, in great measure a gratification of our sense of costliness masquerading under the name of beauty" (Veblen 1925, p. 94). The price creates the impression of beauty.

### **Magic**

When consumers cannot find solutions to difficulties in their daily lives, they put their hope in products (Campbell 1987) and their ritualised use (Rook1984), which promises magical solutions. Respondents demonstrated how Western brands could be psychologically converted into 'magical' gratifications.

*I had been flirting with the 'hottest' girl in my undergraduate class for three years. Whatever I did was unsuccessful. One day, an unknown witch changed me into a different guy, with a style similar to David Beckham, who was her icon. She started to pay attention to me, and to admire my things without hesitation. Hope returned of a chance of being with her soon.*

(25, Male, Hanoi, Survey)

*In reality, I don't have a charming face: pale, big, full of acne, low nose with small eyes. On my birthday, I was taken to a salon called "Magical L'oreal". One hour later, a girl (me) proudly pulled back the curtain, and walked out with a smooth white face, with eyes as big as Kim Kardashian's, a nose as small as Audrey Hepburn's, and a chin as sexy as Marilyn Monroe's.*

(18, Female, Hanoi, Survey)

'Magic' elements of a product may motivate and sustain consumers in difficult consumption contexts, such as risky or harmful situations (MacInnis and Mello 2005). While Vietnam is facing rising road traffic deaths, one of the participants dreamt of having a car:

*When I was driving a Aston Martin Vanquis, I got in an accident. The car was badly damaged. I walked out of the crash without a scratch.*

(21, Male, Hanoi, Survey)

Consumers may entertain illusory, brand-based solutions to problems in daily life. This platform provides relief from stress or discomfort in reality (Campbell 1987; Rook 1984).

*I had to get up early the following day for work, but I wanted to stay up for an MU match. I told myself: Don't worry, darling, I have a magic baby with automatic route setting. I can sleep in my comfortable Lamborghini until it wakes me in front of my office, saying "Boss, here you go. Have a nice day at work."*

(22, Male, HCM City, Survey)

### **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**

CSR strategies of multinational companies are considered to be strongly orientated towards the characteristic of "transnational consumer culture" in Vietnam. CSR as global discourse in relation to consumption is recognised by the younger generation of urban consumers. According to Urip Sri, successful entrance to an emerging consumer market must involve the "introduction of socially innovative products combined with efforts to create, condition, and expand the market through community development and education to improve lifestyle" (2010, p. 84). Consumers in transitioning economies believe a good brand must create a good image of CSR, such as doing good things for communities to enhance the credibility of the brand. Ethical messages of a brand also have an impact on the purchasing decisions of emerging consumers due to their increasing awareness of CSR. For Vietnamese consumers, Western brands remain the best at doing this when they enter their market.

*Western brands give me the impression that they are of good quality and do not contain toxic ingredients. Human health and safety is the priority in*



*creating a product. The brands are generally eco-friendly and safe for consumers*

(24, Female, Hanoi, Survey)

Consumers' positive emotions and image of the country of origin effect their evaluation of products (Sue Jin Lee 2011). In Vietnam, multinational companies seek to deliver CSR adapted to local traditions and culture (Stiftung 2007). For this, they need to understand the main issues in Vietnam such as air pollution, poverty reduction, human rights, HIV awareness, and wearing helmets. They can then enter Vietnam with an image of creating more employment, and bringing the ethical and environmental practices of their home countries. For example, the campaign of the Asia Injury Prevention Foundation (funded by the Protec brand) helped to change the situation in which 97% of 21 million Vietnamese riding motorcycles did not wear helmets before 2009. The campaign has ensured a 99% compliance rate with the new law (Vietnamnet, 2008). Unilever is another example, in their effort to raise funds to build a new school in one of the poorest communes in one province in Vietnam, and to conduct some education campaigns with simple but useful messages regarding waste sorting, and washing with soap before meals.

Western companies have proved to be better than domestic companies in projecting CSR to local consumers, because they have usually adopted CSR beliefs and strategy in their home countries.

*They are eco – friendly, made of natural materials. They think of social responsibility more, to contribute a portion of their profits to help disadvantaged people in society. That would constitute a strong brand and of course be welcome in the Vietnamese market. As I am writing this, I think of how commercial local companies are. Their pockets weigh more than their ethics and social responsibility.*

(20, Female, Hanoi, Survey)

*Western countries have strict laws to protect people's health, thus consumption in those countries is very different from Vietnam. In Vietnam, I do not know anything about the ISO 9100-2000 standard.*

(21, Male, Hanoi, Survey)

*My uncle was back from the US, and gave me a present. I liked the taste very much, as well as the idea of recycling bottles by this brand. The packaging of this brand usually says that if you send 20 bottles back to their factory or to the company, you would get a bottle of chocolate drink for free. For me, not just quality is important to be a good brand, but being eco-friendly and environmentally responsible are also appreciated.*

(20, Male, HCM City, Survey)

Middle-class youth have become increasingly aware of the CSR associated with Western brands and are one of the priorities in assessing the reputation and prestige of using the brands.

*I love to use Adidas and Nike products and appreciate that they are operating factories in Vietnam and other developing countries to create more jobs and to alleviate poverty. However, if they were not doing what they say they are doing ethically, I would boycott them.*

(Khuong, 31, Male, HCM City, Interview)

### **Safety**

Several researchers (Bilkey and Nes 1982; Elliott and Cameron 1994; Steenkamp et al 2003) emphasise the importance of country of origin as a factor not only in perceived quality, but also in social symbolic values. A growing awareness of the relative safety and risks of different products introduces a 'risk' factor into consumer choices (Imran and Sarin 1984, p. 543). Vietnamese consumers come to prefer Western brands for safety in their perceived quality, and as an alternative to Chinese products.

The term '*hàng xịn*' (which in Vietnamese slang has a combined meaning of original, good, beautiful, luxurious and expensive) was used by several subjects to describe the highest level of product standard and quality found in Western brands. Food and health are the sectors most discussed in terms of safety among the subjects' stories. A favourable country-of-origin image has a positive effect on perceived quality. People would prefer the country of origin with less perceived risk in terms of consumption.

*Considering my sister, my neighbours, or my teachers today, they are very keen to find reliable shops, or ask any Vietnamese expatriates to buy Australian, US or UK milk for their babies. I asked myself, why? In my childhood, we did not have foreign milk and nappies. Then I sympathised with them. Where can we find safer milk for kids these days if it is not from these countries? In developing countries, who is responsible if the milk is mixed commercially with plaster?*

(23, Male, HCM City, Survey)

*I never for a second thought of an airplane crash when flying with Lufthansa (a German airline), although I went to Germany only once.*

(20, Female, HCM City, Survey)

*For my child's toys, I never buy plastic stuff in Vietnam, I buy them in foreign countries such as Germany on business trips; even though they are more expensive, my child can play with them for a few years, and they are safe.*

(Ninh, 33, Male, HCM City, Interview)

The stereotype of unsafe and cheap Chinese products currently reinforces safety concerns among Vietnamese consumers, while Western companies always manage to distinguish themselves in terms of social responsibility and long-term development when targeting consumers in emerging economies.

*Let's do a maths exercise, you can answer this yourself. Eating food processed in China, you can save one-third of your total food cost, but your life expectancy will decrease by 10 years. In consuming food processed in Europe, your costs will double, but you'll spend an additional 10 years with your loved ones.*

(29, female, Hanoi, Survey)

While none of the interview participants displayed negative attitudes toward Western brands, in contrast, a few survey respondents expressed negative and ambivalent attitudes, with complaints of over-pricing, fears for the loss of Vietnamese identity, and being 'looked down upon' by others.

*Here is my observation. A stylish girl covered in Western brands such as LV, Gucci, Apple...she was noticed by other people in the street. When she was having coffee with a friend, a beggar came by asking her for money. Her reaction made others surprised and shocked, as she scolded and shouted at the poor boy as if he were an animal. Therefore I have concluded that expensive things do not create a good personality.*

(19, Female, Hanoi, Survey)

*One day in the near future, Western brands will be found everywhere and replace all the Chinese brands. However, not everyone can afford Western brands, so the gap between the rich and the poor will get bigger and bigger. On Facebook there are groups who are in love with Western brands, and vice versa. The group favouring the Western brands always wants to choose the most expensive items, and the latest items, even if they don't use them. Then when they become 'shopaholics' and bankrupt, they will swiftly start using unbranded products – and switch to the other group*

(21, Male, Hanoi, Survey)

According to Tran Bach Dang (2008), elderly revolutionaries routinely express worries about today's youth losing their roots "*mất gốc*", complaining that young

people show little or no interest in the nation's proud history, to the extent that Vietnam's existence may be threatened once again by a national inferiority complex and a tendency to "rent ourselves out to others", rather than self-strengthening, as illustrated in the following quotes:

*One female student shopped online for European clothes. She got attention from everyone when wearing them. She felt confident and happy to be admired by others. However, one day she realised she was most beautiful when she wore the traditional costume - ao dai Vietnam. Now she consumes Western brands less in order to be herself again, and uses more Vietnamese brands.*

(20, Female, Hanoi, Survey)

*In a prom, and people are busy chatting and dancing. A lot of beautiful women in Western dresses and expensive stuff are there, but they all look similar to each other. Then you appear dressed in a very simple way, and you would be different just by wearing Vietnamese brands. You would appear from a different angle, and attract others' attention. The point is how to make yourself look different from others, not just look good, and the same as others.*

(19, Female, Hanoi, Survey)

Those who maintain a high level of ethnocentrism would resist the practice of consuming Western brands, which they would consider a threat to domestic markets and be tainted by materialism. The linkage of consumer nationalism results in refusing Western brands.

*When these items are out of fashion, they are ready to be dumb and follow the new trend. This affects the economy, society and the family. That means Vietnamese products cannot get into the domestic market. This phenomenon results in young people becoming bad, and possessing bad characters, focused on finding a way to get money to be up-to-date with new trends.*

(22, Male, HCM City, Survey)

*Let's imagine if everyone consumed Western brands, then national identity and nationalism would not exist anymore.*

(20, Female, Hanoi, Survey)

*Nowadays, you never see a Vietnamese girl in the street in the Vietnamese style of dress. All of them have changed their style to become more westernised, and they behave differently, with no traditional values anymore. That would be sad if one day the Vietnamese culture and identity disappeared. You could not distinguish Vietnamese girls from other Asian girls. All would appear the same; same clothes, same make-up. I do not want my girlfriend, wife or sisters to change in that way.*

(22, Male, HCM City, Survey)

Patriots are more likely to see it as part of their duty to their country to protect its economy and support domestic producers. However, while consumer ethnocentrism exists among Vietnamese consumers, it is not strong. Dong (2009) concludes the connection between nationalism and Western brand resistance is a little pause and "self-evident" from his case study of Chinese consumers, which shares the same phenomena in context of Vietnam.

### **5.3. Identity work: Self, face and conformity**

*Thuong, a 35-year-old director appeared simply in black with light makeup. I got the impression that I still could recognise her elegance even without being in her luxury office with its extraordinary view of the Saigon River. From her shiny black hair in low bun style, and her fair skin, you could tell she made frequent visits to professional beauty salons in hot-year-round Saigon.*

*Every afternoon, after work, she drives her Audi to Park Hyatt – a five star hotel in downtown Saigon, where she meets a group of five ladies for a "chat and fashion update". I joined their catch-up one afternoon after my interview with her.*

*They are all successful and born in the 1970s, working as professionals, directors, managers and doctors. The first appeared in a customised branded dress that Thuong whispered was the latest model in a limited collection by Chanel. She quickly responded to my questions, but emphasised that I should maintain her anonymity. The second showed up with two teenagers who I could hardly tell were her children without being introduced. Her skin and body shape would easily mislead people into thinking there is a small age gap between her and her children. She told me she was often asked for ID at the bar when in Europe on holiday. She proudly introduced her children to me, who are now studying at a boarding school in the UK and who are going to enter well known universities soon.*

*I was a bit distracted by an older woman carrying two Hermes bags. I had the silly thought, 'why two?'. Her friendly northern accent appealed to me, while showing me the smaller bag that they had discussed last month. She had bought it, and was excited to show it to the others. While giving the others some traditional cooking ingredients from a Hanoi business trip, she revealed that all of the female staff in her Hanoi office had admired her new bag and asked for the price. She wrinkled her brows in an irritated manner, saying one or two staff could later afford to buy the same version. She was not sure of the authenticity of their items, and joking that others should buy them in different colours from hers.*

*Everyone wore different versions of certain common brands such as LV, Chanel or Hermes. In the non-stop chit chat about fashion, a light-hearted and cheerful mood was evident. (Notes taken from a participant observation, HCM, December 2013)*

One of the objectives in my research on *giới trẻ* in Vietnam was to re-examine social status, conformity and distinction through consumption practices. It is a case that the main drivers of consumption practices in the post-socialist Vietnam result both from the recent development of affluence, and traditional collectivism under the influence of Confucian values.

Each individual performs different roles within specific social setting (Goffman 1969; Elliott 2001) and actively switches between different images to fit into a certain group or social interaction (Reisman 1960; Campbell 1987). Thuong and her friends displayed their social image as 'stylish' middle-class in the way they appeared, the place they socialised (a luxury hotel), and through conversation implying "success" and "wealth" (Husband and Chudha 2006; Ger et al 2012). This group actively used, displayed and talked about the same brands as common symbolic mediators to fit in with their social circle. A friend of Thuong appeared to be the leader, inspiring others, and updating others about her latest consumption experience. Her performance created a feeling of competition (Riesman 1950) which motivated her staff to climb a 'social ladder', or inspired others in her group of friends to 'keep up' by conforming and buying the same version of her bag. When consumers are conformist and want to maintain or improve their place in society, there is a market demand for conspicuous goods for a marginalised segment of the society.

The degree of conformity differs from culture to culture, and country to country (Solomon 2011). Relatively speaking, in collectivist countries such as Vietnam, individuals often encounter *cultural pressures* to keep up with the image and identity of the group; henceforth, they are involved in a greater degree of conformity (Bernheim, 1994). There is a close relation between the collectivist culture of Vietnam and conformity themes (Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai et al 2003). Thus, the face work of each individual tends to be linked with social relationships (Goffman 1969; Hofstede and De Mooji, 2011), to fulfil the needs of others and to safeguard the value of harmony (Reynolds and Valentine 2011).

Rapid economic development has accelerated urbanisation, including urban migration and the transformation of previously rural areas into urban centres (Phuong An Nguyen 2002, p. 224). "[I]n Vietnam, the movement toward a market-driven economy has created many changes in social values" (Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai 2003, p. 18). Vietnamese consumers tend to judge others based on their possessions and look to the consumption practices of people around them for guidance. The younger generations of urban consumers, in particular, actively



embrace trends and set "the tone for culture as a whole" (Featherstone 1991, p. 110).

Brands serve as signals for how one perceives oneself and wants to be perceived by others. Consumption can therefore facilitate access to certain social circles. The 'herd' would lead each individual to prefer certain brands for the purpose of social acceptance. People would 'follow the pack' regarding norms and brand choices, to avoid being left out of the community. People feel proud to own the same brand, or the brand most talked about or desired by others in their community.

New adaptations of practices and experiences in consumption make young people more realistic and materialistic. "Within the wider global frame of post-industrial capitalism, the individual self turns increasingly to consumption" (Elliott 2002). That explains why people like to judge one another based on material things, and creates the phenomenon of Vietnamese consumers ranking in the world's top three in terms of spending on designer goods (TNS 2013).

The marked collectivism in Vietnam is closely correlated to strong conformity tendencies (Vinh-Bao Do et al 2009, p. 254). Having been friends for a long time, Khuong and his friends tend to conform in brand consuming as one of the social ties between them.

*Khuong is now a project manager of a Non – profit organisation based in the US. I went out with three of his friends who now all have permanent jobs in Saigon. We went out for a dinner in the city centre. They have certain things in common that are noticeable on first impression. Four have scooters, and two of them drive an SH<sup>5</sup>. All appear in a sporty style of dress: Nike and Adidas shoes, and middle – range jeans and T-shirt brands. When they take their mobile phones out of their pockets, they are all iPhone 4 and 4S. (Notes taken from participant observation, HCM City, December 2013)*

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5 A Japanese scooter brand

Among the younger group born in the 1990s, most of whom are students or who just started working one or two years ago, certain brand names are often referred to and consumed. Interestingly, it is the mind-set of Vietnamese urban consumers to automatically possess criteria upon which to judge others related to certain branded products such as mobile phones, scooters or cars. Quang, a fourth year student at the Vietnam National University in Hanoi reveals that he and most of his friends judge each other or any graduate based more on their phone or their scooter than about their life and work. There is a phenomenon that the two things that students most frequently mention in their storytelling or in the survey are *iPhone* or *Vespa*. Quang said in the interview he spent the first payment of his part time work buying an iPhone 4, just because others in his group of friends had one.

Those within this group of similar age, culture, religion or educational status (Riesman 1950; Thomson 1992) are other-directed to conform for security. Each would create the acceptable boundary within the group and would be afraid of being judged by the others.

*When I was in secondary school, my family and the neighbour on the right had a very good relationship. We shared many things. When my family got rich, they were still comfortable with us on a day to day basis and in conversation. However, when a new family who was rich moved into the house on the left, the family on the right felt out of place. They retreated, and did not want to be friends with the two of us anymore. They felt poorer, and did not want to be judged. In addition, the rich family on the left seemed to look down on them.*

(Quang, 23, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

Quang recounted the difficulties of the family when he was small and observed how older people around him reacted when their living conditions improved. He said people started enjoying spending their money as soon as they had a chance to make up for the bad days where they suffered from the consequences of the war.

*When I was very small, everyone was at the same level of poverty due to the country's economic conditions. When the distinction between rich and poor started to become clear, we could see a gap. We saw envy, and the change in attitude toward each other. Families in the same condition and level would find it easy to make friends and interact with each other. Even now, it's still very clear.*

(Quang, 23, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

From my point of view, conformity could be explained from the real situation of Vietnam after the war. After 1975, people suffered from the consequences of the war, everyone was in the same bad living conditions. At that time, they did not compare or judge each other on material things; however after 1990 society shifted from living in constant hunger after the war and lacking in everything, to a society both at odds with and integrated with new things. People began to have opportunities to make money or to start a business. "The transition from a socialist to a market economy has entailed the dislocation of a class structure and the formation of a new one" (Belanger et al 2012). The judgements of taste (Freire 2009; Drummond 2012) and consumption (Reisman 1950) as "the new layers of distinction" (Belanger et al 2012, p. 11) become redefined within a rapidly transforming social context. The growing group of the new rich leads to a clash of social values. People want to own products and look at each other for inspiration or comparison. As the economy advances resulting in mass production of material goods, the increasing population puts those who indulge in conspicuous leisure in danger of being unnoticed (Veblen 1925; Paul, 2005). They want to place themselves in certain groups who are similar to themselves on several dimensions.

*I remember, in the past, if you are a worker, that's good, that's the standard of socialism. People did not care about making much money. But nowadays it's different, you must change, you must be a businessman, you must own land, you must buy a house, you must drive an Audi or BMW. That's the target, and the standard by which others judge your life. For these reasons, values and the way they are assessed has completely*

*changed. Society's system of values is very different. It may take several more decades for the system of values to stabilise. When the crisis period is over, everything will be stable. People are now frightened to define values. Sometimes, people are blinded by money. These days, people will judge you based on the amount of money you have. Nobody cares how you earn it, whether it's 'clean' or not, whether it's good or 'dirty' money.*

(The, 35, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

The transition to a market-led economy has brought about the formation of inspirational groups who encourage striving for greater achievements in material lifestyle. Active consumers would look to the concept of desire (Belk 1989). In Vietnamese urban life, "where appearance is very significant, wine becomes an 'exterior sign of wealth....Social recognition was identified as one of the most important of traditional Vietnamese core values" (Vinh-Bao Do et al 2009, p. 161).

Consumers in collectivist cultures such as Vietnam cherish the values of personal dignity, and they are judged on their relationships with family, peer groups or in the workplace; as reflected in the Vietnamese proverb: *"If you want me to know about you, tell me who your friends are"*. Thus, self-esteem tends to be linked with one's social relationships rather than to the individual. This is reflected in the survey findings, as 80 per cent of the respondents used adjectives to describe the similar brand consumption practices they share with their friends. The Vietnamese identify highly with the group or community. Therefore, they desire to gain social status, reputation and prestige to signal wealth by acquiring and consuming as many possessions as possible, without the intention of having a practical use for these. When asked about a situation where friends had purchased the latest model of their favourite brands, survey respondents expressed ambivalence as illustrated by the following quote: *envious; excited and want to have it; desire to have it; happy for a friend, but want to have it; out of date; want to have it as quickly as possible; would ask how much it is, and start to save money; whether it's good or not, I will save to buy it; annoyed, but still want to try it; if I like it, I may buy it;*

*wait and buy a newer released model; curious....* The younger generation of urban consumer in Vietnam wants to keep up with others and fit in with their everyday circle or social networks and conform to such groups' standards. Their preference in the consumption of goods and their perceived values for goods are often shaped and influenced in accordance with the group's preferences and norms. Naturally, their consumption practices interact with acts of conformity. Among the many factors that explain why people conform and adapt their consumption behaviour to be like others is "susceptibility to interpersonal influence", "fear of deviance", "group unanimity, size and expertise" and "cultural pressures" (Solomon 2011, p. 417).

### ***5.3.1. Show-off face and quiet luxury face***

*On a windy, cold late December day in Hanoi, Phi (a 30 year old lecturer) entered the office in a coat, high heels and carrying a handbag. All of her colleagues were talking about the incentives at the end of the coming lunar New Year holiday. She ostentatiously called peoples' attention, while everyone was busy, calculating, checking the cash in envelopes they had received. She acted as an attention-seeker or loudmouth, tapping on the shoulder of one woman, showing her new handbag and dress, saying "They are new, are they beautiful; Do they look good on me?". Others turned to join her show with politeness, by flirting, or through words of admiration or by showing jealousy through different facial expressions. "You are rich and wear new things everyday"; "Where did you get it?"....She waited for reactions as she expected to continue her show: "This is the new arrival from Zara, this is hand-imported... a present from an auntie...."*

(Notes taken from participant observation, Hanoi, December 2012)

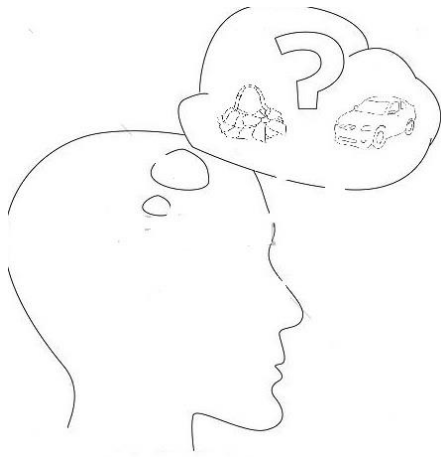
*I only need myself to understand the value of the things I buy...it's relevant and describes my personality (The, 35, Male, Hanoi, Interview)....Don't like to be screamed at by others about my stuff (Lan, 33, Female, HCM City, Interview).....I love the simplicity, the elegance*

*that is not so easily recognised by others (20, male, Hanoi, survey)...It has a perfect cut and is not ostentatious luxury, and people would not describe me as trashy nouveau-riche (22, Female, HCM City, Survey)... I dreamt of it for so long...when I get it, I will be on leave for two days, to experience the feeling of driving it myself. (Hieu, 27, male, Hanoi, Interview)*

Consumption is an effective method for the presentation of the self (Goffman 1969) and can have desirable effects (Belk 1989) upon the intended audience. The way one approaches and attaches different associations to brands or products is influenced by the meanings socially constructed within the community. These are the expressions and reactions individuals expect to present and receive when consuming particular products. The same Hermes bag might be carried by two women for two different purposes, but would spark off similar reactions from other people in the social setting. It is the perception and expression between who I want to be and how I want to be seen, which is activated through the way of a product is consumed.

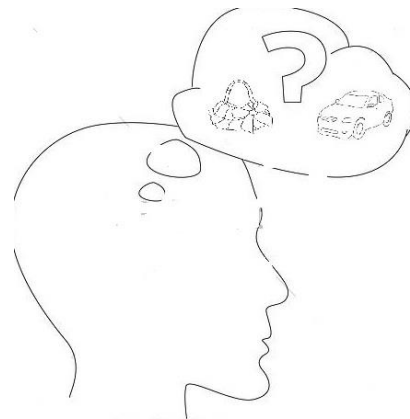
The concept of "face" work is extremely important in East Asian social relationships (Powell 1990; Wong and Ahuvia 1998). The concept of 'face' is particularly salient for people of Confucian culture and is claimed to be a key to explaining much of their behaviour (Redding & Ng, 1983) in specific settings. Thus, to build a desired image (Belk 1989) within one's social circle or to obtain relatively favourable reactions from one's peers (Reisman 1950), each individual would be conscious about their purpose in consuming items to achieve it (Campbell 1987). Local cultural tastes define consumption practices as socially appropriate in a large number of situations, and so consumers tend to behave in a situationally appropriate manner (Miller, 1984). The way of consuming an item among Vietnamese consumers is like an act of wearing a 'mask', which can be loudly or quietly displayed to fit in favourably. There is a greater tendency for people in Vietnam to behave the way they feel they *have* to. For example, if a person wanted to demonstrate he or she was rich among her friends, he or she would try to put on visible, luxury items to call the attention of others if

necessary. To avoid the negative image of being called *bourgeoisie*, and to meet "the expectations of others to preserve 'face' (Wong and Ahuvia 1998, p. 6) at his girlfriend's party, a young man might appear in something very simple. Thus the desired image and relatively favourable reaction are key motivations among respondents in the study, making each individual want her/his "surface of self" to be seen, or hidden, (Goffman 1964; 1969) by displaying relevant materials that are socially or individually shared.



- Do you notice me? I want to be recognised
- Let my visible things remind you of something about me
- Say and react what I want to hear and receive
- Showy interaction
- I want to maintain the corresponding front

- I am just a natural component of the setting
- Salient reaction to my visible things
- It was bought out of my own interest
- I myself quietly know the value, the history, background of products I am consuming
- Just relevant to my personality



**Table 5 - Show - off face and quiet luxury face**

### *The show-off face*

Any society dependent on other-direction seems to present people with a higher level of conformity (Riesman 1950), and Vietnamese consumers are more guided in behaviour and practices by societal standards or group norms. In a collectivist culture such as Vietnam, when interacting with others, most are concerned about what those others think of them (Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai 2003), thus consumers place more importance on symbolic values (Wong and Ahuvia 1998;). The emerging consumers in urban Vietnam pay more attention to the front region, referring to the "screening – off aspects of identity", where the performance is given (Goffman 1969).

When the surface of self or the front region is expected to be seen by others (Goffman 1969), individuals may consume visible products or brands, telling others of their social status or desired images. It is the expression the individual wants: 'I want to show my stuff'. It is the reaction the individual wants to receive: 'I want a noisy chat about my stuff'. They allow themselves to be seen, they want to publically display, and become visible. To some extent, it is apt to attract attention and convey a message about the existence of the product. Economic socialisation orients people towards a favourable view of social inequality and materialist values. The more each individual believes in the values of materialism, the more show-off face one would exhibit. The transition towards more materialistic values within Vietnam urban society results in the urban consumer culture becoming more governed by behaviour (Bourdieu 1984) and standards of others as being more other-directed (Riesman 1950).

The transition to a market-driven economy in Vietnam has stimulated many changes in social values (Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai 2003, p. 18), leading consumers to quickly embrace the themes of modernity. The 'new' rich want to distinguish their social position from the working class, and establish their position in urban society (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Mandy 2004; Vann 2012). Materials can help "differentiate them from a certain socio-economic category and marks their social status" (Freire 2009, p. 70).



*Nobody wants to be called "thợ" (working labour). The way you behave and understand the world tells which position on the social map is assigned to you (22, Male, Hanoi, Survey).*

"Social recognition was identified as one of the most important of traditional Vietnamese core values" (Vinh-Bao Do, Bruno Patris and Dominique Valentin 2009, p. 161). This can lead to extravagant spending that has no real purpose other than to show off someone's wealth, enhancing social status. In the Vietnamese urban setting, people spend more on presenting their visible products such as improving their house, flat, purchasing cars, smartphones, fashion, technology...in order to decorate the front region well (Goffman 1969). These are socially shared in order to function as symbols.

*In fact, when I meet someone for the first time, my eyes scan them. If that person consumes easily recognised branded products, I would assume that person is of a high social standing.*

(Quang, 23, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

In the interview, Quang gave me an example to illustrate what is called "taste" as commonly recognised among his group of friends: *"among us, if you have a Vertu mobile phone, we would still prefer an iPhone, and everyone agrees that an iPhone displays taste in personality and design"*.

They are afraid others might underestimate them and are, therefore, 'showy' to prove the opposite. To protect themselves from being criticised and be safe in the round of consumption competition, these aspiring consumers choose to consume certain brands to protect themselves and to define themselves at a certain level within their community. They collect relevant products to communicate in a visible way.

*For a woman, her handbag is the most visibly important thing, the second is jewellery, and the third is clothes.*

(Thuong, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview)

Social inequality can be meaningfully described in terms of consumption patterns and the ways goods are used (Douglas and Isherwood 1979), thus it may not matter to the individual if the product purchased has little or no practical value (Shipman 2008). What matters is that status symbols moderate the choice. Consumers want to climb the social ladder very quickly by way of visible possessions. "All values were translatable, at least in principle, into the personal standard of money" (Riesman 1950, p. 78). Consumers strongly engage with the model of conspicuous consumption and lust after possessions and display, especially the allure of Western brands. The motivation behind the show-off face is the process of engaging in the model of conspicuous consumption. In order to keep up with the competition, the goods must be visible, or public in their use and ownership. Consumers prefer something that is often talked about or mentioned in their communities or groups to express their social identity and secure their position in society. Consumers could have 'blind choice' with respect to brands in following the 'herd' mentality. In order to avoid losing status, or to gain social acceptance (Riesman 1950), one must be other directed by buying the same brand to be perceived as expected among the group or community.

*Piaggio is just a scooter for a mail carrier or for working class people in Western Europe, but in Vietnam the middle-class rush to use it just because it's popular and expensive here, and to show their social standing.*

(The, 35, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

Face work in *Quan hệ* (*networking*) is essential to be successful in Vietnam (Phuong An Nguyen 2002). Everyone in Vietnam is aware of the importance of having a network in any aspect of life. Thus, it is important for them to invest in and impress through face work in social relations, where people tend to judge each other through material display, showing financial ability and success. In a study of interim relationships in Vietnam, Nguyen Viet Thang et al (2005 p, 216) described a current trend in Vietnamese economy. The government merged about 2000 state owned enterprises into 18 general and 64 specialised corporations,

which "wield significant power in input and output markets. That power will be enhanced even further by the current favourable incentives to the state sector." This trend causes the managers of new business to develop new relationships based on trusted-third-party channels, business interactions, and personal interactions (Nguyen Viet Thang et al 2005). To create the image of financial ability as the first element of trust in building business relationships and in their careers, people are more concerned with first impressions, the social face, and would seek to communicate their financial ability through possessions.

*"Quan hệ (networking) is ahead of money, I care about my appearance as much as about the possibility of success in my career, you need to show off a bit to confirm your ability "chịu chơi" – (dare to play) and your financial capacity.*

(Hung, 32, Male, HCM City, Interview)

Many Vietnamese young people share the belief that 'the power of wealth is the key to success in the market economy' (Phuong An Nguyen 2002, p. 242). It is the psychological mind-set of young consumers in contemporary Vietnam that at a certain age, each is supposed to target certain images in their lives. Owning an iPhone or smartphone and a scooter, along with a permanent job after university graduation would tell others about their first step of having a reliable social image and stable income. By their late twenties and with certain achievements at work, they want to consume high-priced Western brands to build a professional and successful image. Women are supposed to settle down before 30 and before 35 for men, and have a house, a car, and children. Ambitious young parents start saving to send their children overseas to developed countries for education. Ngoc proudly described her philosophy of living:

*There is a Vietnamese proverb: 'when you go out, you must be as good as the other friends'. I will do my best, so my children will be "sung sướng" (happy) and proud of me. I sent my first daughter to a French primary school in Saigon to prepare for her later education in France. (Ngoc, 34, Female, HCM City, Interview)*

In Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the elite groups of consumers are now popularly defined by their urban uniform, i.e., iPhone, Ipad, Vespa, SH; these are the must-have items. In the city, people would tend to occupy the show-off face more, carrying material to engage with the act of conformity and to reach a desired image to be seen by others in society wherever possible.

### *The quiet luxury face*

Quiet luxury face is more related to the quiet display of the product. As performers, consumers employ the side of the performance that does not call for attention from others. It is the part that the individual wants to hide. It is the expression the individual who wants to communicate "Let my consumption invisibly adapt to the situation or the setting" or "Don't pay attention to me and my stuff". In this way, products are presented without expecting the responsive reaction from the others as being the centre of attention.

The purpose is to be intangible in some way, to please themselves, and to achieve a normal look, to be different from the show-off face or others. That is, to conform to others in relevant situations and to interact with others in suitable situations. Lan (HCM City, Interview) spent a vast amount of money purchasing Burberry, just to satisfy her own interest, which was nurtured during her childhood reading English literature. Burberry's classic style reminds her of her love for the British royal family. She does not expect colleagues in her office to admire her whenever she carries her Burberry bag. She knows that copies of her Burberry bag are widely seen around Ho Chi Minh City, and maybe her colleagues will never know if hers is genuine.

They are more sophisticated and create layers of display, which distract others' attention from their products. Shipman (2008, p. 8) asserted: "even where cultural products become available and affordable to all, sophisticated users can maintain their exclusivity by getting a better view or claiming to appreciate on a deeper level". If they are deep in the elite of consumer culture, considering objects as values of entertainment and socialisation, they perform or display it very quietly in their communities. They don't need to scream about having material

possessions in their communities. The balance between individual and group needs in Confucian values and the influence of collectivism on consumption (Wong and Ahuvia 1998) may call for situational appropriation of quiet presentation of products or brands.

*I am a fan of some fancy brands, but I am afraid of calling attention to myself. I would not like to dress in certain luxury brands with obvious logos when going out with a group of friends. When it's so easily recognised, people automatically assign some labels to your personality and character.*

(Binh, 32, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

Although they have their eyes on the Joneses, they do not place as much value upon keeping up with others as much as in the quality of their inner experience, as The (Hanoi, Interview), who used to be a marketing manager in a large hotel in Hanoi, and who now is a manager of a big company, expressed. He always bore in mind the need to pick the most suitable brands to show the 'right personality' at work, and he did not want to mislead others or exaggerate his image or profession. He carefully chose suitable brands relevant to his personality and which were pleasing to his own taste.

*Montblanc is just for successful businessmen or CEOs, and I don't see myself in that category now. I just want others to see myself as a manager, although I can afford that brand.*

(The, 35, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

In a study of artists in Hanoi, Taylor (2012) argued that as consumers, they could distinguish themselves from the nouveaux riches. Taste was used as a class 'distinction' and the performance of taste was not necessary to call others' attention. Instead, these artists longed to perpetuate their intellectual class status. They appreciated the middle-class values of individuality and independence of spirit and creativity as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Taylor 2012)

*I have experience and feel that many Vietnamese people who really have good knowledge of brands prefer quiet luxury... Consuming brands is like art in life for them, to enjoy a better life. Some do not really need to show off their social standing to say they are good, or middle-class. (Lan, 33, female, HCM City, Interview)*

In a study of three cities (Hanoi, Shanghai and Taipei), Gao et al (2011) concluded that the traditional Confucian cultural norms were not weakening evenly, with more entrenchment in Hanoi than the other two cities. The heritage of Confucian values in the Vietnamese tradition was still significant among the younger generation through education and the role of parents. To a certain extent, they still respected traditional values and values of self-cultivation (Gao et al 2011, p.12). There is a trend for some consumers to choose custom-made products, or handcrafted items, which are not easily recognised and evaluated by others as signifiers of quiet luxury combined with Vietnamese traditional elements.

*I must look very womanly and creative by all means. Just be creative, for example, I had a tailor make a typical and traditional Vietnamese costume "áo bà ba" appear very modern yet still elegant.*

(Thuong, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview)

Confucianism is a set of ethical teachings that still have an influence on people's everyday behaviours and practices. In certain settings, people would occupy the quiet luxury face, in the status of ambivalence between the traditions of being modest and the freedom of modern dressing. Huong (25, Female, HCM City, Interview) revealed in an interview, how one morning, she chose a dress for an important party.

*I wanted to look modern, trendy and loved by the others in the party, and to show my modernity identity. I picked a short dress in black with Western brand. However, I wondered if it was a bit short, being above my knees. Then I thought "Does it matter, as a lot of old people have been*

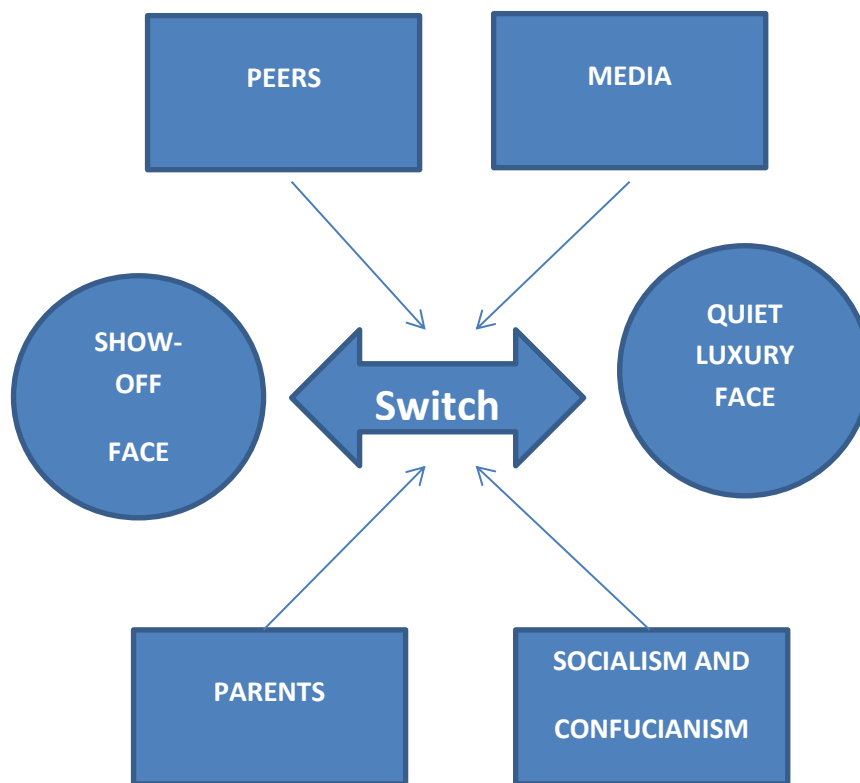
*invited to the party?". Finally, I put on another Western brand, but not such a short skirt.*

### ***5.3.2. The negotiation between show-off face and quiet luxury face***

One could have multiple identities by occupying several roles in life. Each identity is based on different social identifications (Smith 1991). Individuals express their personal and social identity through material possessions, both to themselves and to others. Depending on the factual nature of the situation, one would adjust to the suitable situation (Fournier 1998; Avery 2012). People transfer the symbolic meanings of material goods to themselves by various social practices (McCracken 1989) as a way of learning "the type of habitus valued under the new social structure" (Marshall-Nguyen et al 2012, p. 11)

In contemporary Vietnam, people appropriately prefer the taste for things such as European clothes, motorbikes, and expatriate friends with Western or global styles (To Xuan Phuc, 2012), but they also appreciate having traditional Vietnamese antiques and artefacts in the manner of cosmopolitan modernity, and as an expression of nationalism in consumption. Lan (HCM City, Interview) explained how she loved to use silk to reflect her Vietnamese heritage, along with some Western design elements in her custom-made clothes, to present herself in a quiet modern manner at traditional parties.

The findings from this study suggest there are four underlying factors (peers, parents, socialism and Confucianism, and the media) influencing consumers in their method of self-presentation, and in shifting between the show-off face and the quiet luxury face in a particular social context. Consumers negotiate (switch) among these factors to convey aspects of their identity.



**Table 6 - Negotiation between show-off face and quiet luxury face**

### **Peers**

*Others would come up to ask me where I bought this or that....I would put on something, and then I would see it become popular in the office. (Ngoc, 34, Female, HCM City, Interview)*

*When going shopping with friends, they are completely influenced by me and depend on me...I think that among my friends I have more expertise. (Lan, 33, Female, HCM City, Interview)*

*Thanh Loc (Vietnamese comedian) is a very talented performer with an amazing sense of humour, but he is very modest. He often appears in a simple, friendly way, but still looks very professional. I love his personality, and his way of presenting things.*

*(Huong, 25, Female, HCM City, Interview)*



*Presenting things is a kind of art. I like the way the Beckhams look . It says they are rich, but know how to spend money.*

(21, Male, Hanoi, Survey)

The identification of peers can be linked to the concept of opinion leaders (Weimann 1991, p. 275). Peers are "keepers of the flame for the ideas" in consumption (Keller and Berry 2003, p. 82). They can be the group leaders, a celebrity, or anyone who has power to influence others' consumption patterns and choices. They are "active consumers who set standards in their community" (Weimann 1991, p.268). They have stronger and sufficient breadth and depth of expertise about others' decisions (Keller and Berry 2003, p. 129).

In their research into the influential, Keller and Berry indicated that 83% of respondents believed that 'how my life turns out is pretty much within my personal control and depends mostly on what I do or don't do' (2003, p. 93). In my study, peers have the ability to sort through information and select the trend reflected in their appearance or the way to convince and persuade others. They have great impact on others' consumption. They enjoy travel and get away often, with annual trips to Europe or other Western countries for shopping and tourism. They have active minds, and even "take on the risk of a new identity". They are ready to take a risk, and attempt some new and interesting ways to stimulate change. In modern society, the influential are considered to be the active consumers in a project of self-creation. 'Folklore' and 'high art' are quickly confounded in the consumption of tradition and indigenous identities (Canclini 1995). They also appreciate the hybrid product, which is perceived to be the best of the local, with a global influence (Stearn 2001).

*I can make a typical and traditional Vietnamese costume 'áo bà ba' become very modern. If someone wears one, people sometimes think, 'oh that's very countryside', but when I design and wear one people think 'that's very cute and stylish'. All the foreigners I ever met said, 'ah that is beautiful'.*

(Thuong, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview)

The status of peers is measured by the weight of personal traits and social characteristics (Weimann 1991). Peers are ahead of others in experiencing products. They lead the group and give the impression they are smarter or 'more trendy' consumers due to their own experience, or to frequent access to media. Peers in one group would initially increase their status by raising their relative position. The most up-to-date groups with access to media are inspired by it, observing and aspiring to the standards set by the middle-class and the rich in films, or by style in advertising (McCracken ; Campbell 1987; Wernick 1991). Peers are channelled relentlessly into consumption.

*I wore a violet shirt of bisi bisi made of silk, which I bought in the US. My friend bought the same one in Canada. When she saw me wearing that, she screamed: Oh my god, I have the same one, I will donate it soon. Definitely, no one wants to have an item of the same design or colour.*

(Thuong, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview)

When the peers put on the show- off image or the quiet luxury image, followers still keep that as the model or reference to imitate. Peers have a prevalent influence on shaping their followers' values, attitudes and behaviours (Shultz et al., 1991). Consumers develop materialistic value orientation through experience through social learning from peers.

*Going out with friends, I showed them the way to get a bargain or discount....sometimes they follow me to see what I am able to buy.*

(Ninh, 33, Male, HCM City, Interview)

Volkan (2004) describes the leader as the pole and the followers as dancing around the pole, and the leader plays an important role in the scenario. Peers initiate or inspire the idea of new concepts, new things, new consumption practices in conversation or in social interaction.

### ***Parents***

*My parents lived in Hanoi, but they were the working class and joined the resistance war against America, fighting for unification. As a result of hard work, education and my own effort, I fasten my living condition 10 or 20 years ahead and have achieved a different level of social standing that I describe as middle-class. But due to the influence of my family's background (and my parents' teaching), I really consider money carefully whenever I spend it.*

(The, 35, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

"The source of direction for the individual is 'inner' in the sense that it is implanted early in life by the elders and directed toward generalized but nonetheless inescapably destined goals" (Riesman 1950, p. 15). Parents use the tool of the psychosocial gyroscope, to keep their inner-directed child on course although tradition no longer dictates his moves (Riesman 1950).

*I was influenced a lot from things my dad taught me, but my style is not a result of being taught by anyone. However, my mom taught me to be quiet in the public; I should use my eyes for observation, and speak softly.*

(Hieu, 27, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

Strong family ties are unique to the context of Vietnam and to other Asian countries as part of Confucian-based culture. Parents are now the main force in practicing it, and in teaching the younger generation about it. Under traditional parenting, the child grows up desperately trying to live up to the given model or to rebelling in solitude against it. There would be fluctuating tastes and changes in the scale of consumption preference. To some extent, parents' perception of face work through consumption practices would have an influence on the younger generation's choice in switching between different images or faces. For some young people, family bonds (Ahuvia and Wong 1991; Ahuvia 2005) are still stronger than other kind of social bonds as they obediently conform to the social acceptance their parents want.

*I am not yet married, still living with my parents. Whenever I get ready to go out, if I wear my dress too short, my mom would scream at me, and pressure me to change. Gradually, I started to unconsciously put on clothes in accordance with her wishes, although I want my own way of dressing. Because my generation thinks differently from her time. But I do not have the courage to go against her wishes.*

(Huong, 25, Female, HCM City, Interview)

Family is considered to be a social unit of society, and relationships between family members are very close. In modern society, the younger generation are ambivalent, and torn between the parent's influence and the themes of modernity. They try to do things either differently or similarly, but still blend the influence.

*My life is very simple; I was born in a family with parents working as state officers. They are army doctors, so I was educated in the army way. You know at that time – the pre-doimoi (pre-economic reform) period, there were not many clothes for children. When I went to school, we did not have much money, I wore my parents' clothes, such as rubber sandals, modified army clothes, army bell, hats and everything. I only lacked the stars or ranks to look like an officer. At that time, I had no definition of fashion or what I should wear. I put on whatever I had, and everybody around me was in the same situation. Later when I first started working, I did not pay much attention to my appearance. But then I got married, and my wife wanted me to change, and also requirements at work made me change. I think I got the point of simplicity from my parents and childhood, and when life got better I realised I should create the right image in the right situation in a simple way.*

(Khuong, 33, Male, HCM City, Interview)

Parents are the first to engage young consumers with material culture, and in learning to consume, and in lifestyle and identity formation. Parents and interrelated social groups may influence how children negotiate experience and

construct identity and consumption practices. Even later, when children become adults they pay more attention to identity formation, in response to the social changes of globalisation and economic restructuring. However, the way they want to present themselves through consumption, and the desired identity and social image was manipulated during childhood and so their parents' influence may remain.

*My parents haven't influenced my product or brand choices since I knew how to spend money and go shopping by myself at the age of 15, but they still influence my identity, and the image I want to create, and my personality. Of course, I don't deny there would be many other factors from education and social learning in the formation of character. However, I cannot refute what my mom taught me about how to spend money: "always think of tomorrow and never let others know or show how much money you have". Thus, if I have something very expensive, I only talk or boast about it with my close friends, not in public or with colleagues.*

(Anh, 26, Female, Hanoi, Interview)

In societies like Vietnam parents emphasise the criteria of a good child "*Đứa con có hiếu*" to try to ensure their child pursues the life they would like them to have and behaves as they would like them to behave. The perception of a good child in Vietnam is to expect to obey the parents' orders, make the family proud of their educational achievements or success, and take care of one's parents when they are old. This conduct of social practices associated with an individual's behaviour and other social factors has an influence on his/her orientation of consumption. Anh (Hanoi, Interview) explained why he would have to spend all of his first month's salary after graduation buying presents for his parents and grandmother, which is closely associated with the theme of conformity in consumption choices and practices.

*It's the tradition of the family; all of my cousins do the same. My parents taught me when I can be independent and make money; I must remember*

*to express gratitude to parents and grandparents as a good child (Đứa con có hiếu).*

In Vietnamese tradition, parents are always "the leading influence and direct impact on the character building of children" (Nguyen Thanh Binh 2012, p. 175). Each individual can be inspired or imitate the symbolic representation of their parents' cultural orientations and attitudes. The father takes the responsibility as the model for prestige (Nguyen Thanh Binh 2012), which may inspire children to adopt this identity and personality (desired image). The children may display an image more of quiet luxury or the habit of showing-off or boasting.

### ***Socialism and Confucianism***

Vietnamese cultural diversity is influenced by Confucianism, which is characterised by Collectivism and the power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001). Inside each, there is a contradictory negotiation between the show-off face and the quiet luxury face when they interpret themselves through material presentation. People would negotiate between "to have" and "want to be" to achieve certain purposes and involve certain social interactions. Consumers teach themselves to negotiate and re-negotiate between modernity, globalisation themes and cultural values of tradition and obedience to political dictates (Sirkeci 2013), to pick a suitable mask in the relevant setting. Lockard (1991) asserts that Nguyen Khac Vien, a Marxist scholar, noted there were many parallels between Confucianism and communism that would aid the spread of the latter ideology in the twentieth century, a confirmation of continuity and change. They are essentially philosophies of social relations that stress obedience, discipline, selflessness, and government by an educated elite trained in political philosophy (whether mandarins or cadres). Thus, the meaning of materials is continuously and socially created and recreated (Fisher and Sherry 2006) in the current context of Vietnam.

*I am not against the point that Minh Thu (the most popular dancer and singer in Vietnam) wore a dress too short during her performance, got fined by the Ministry of Communication and Information. She may be too*

*westernised but being influential, she must set a good moral example for others". (24, Female, HCM City, Survey)*

In Phuong An Nguyen's (2002) case study of people who chose to work for the state, one man described quitting a job in a private company to work for the government as he could not see the chance 'to be promoted and develop a real career, and hence no possibility of a position of power in the wider society'. This would confer him "a certain legitimacy in the new social order created by communism" (Marshall-Nguyen 2012, p. 11).

When material can serve as "sign of political values" (Dittmar 1992, p. 79), the quiet luxury face would be favourably occupied in Vietnamese society. Power distance (Hofstede 1991, 2001) refers to the value of hierarchy in a society which attributes importance to formal difference and respect for people of higher status. When people work for the state, they would care more about their socialist image and public image. Ninh, with a senior position at the Vietnam Press agency, did not forget to put on normal jeans and a T-shirt with a friendly image of a Vietnam youth volunteer when joining charity activities in a remote area.

In contrast, people in self-employment or in foreign companies feel more comfortable occupying the show-off face, to reveal more about their internal and self-image based on their own desire. They feel comfortable spending, and show off their success by setting up their own businesses. Thuong (35, Female, HCM City, Interview) was quite open in showing me her several Hermes bags, and talking about her European trips. However, some of her friends who worked for the state refused to talk much about them, despite having two Hermes bags themselves and dressing in fancy clothes.

Confucian terms of domestic femininity are closely linked with obedience and 'proper roles' as dutiful daughters, devoted wives and sacrificing mothers (Brickell 2012, p. 211). The Vietnamese proverb 'men build the house, women build the home' ( *Đàn ông xây nhà, đàn bà xây tổ ấm*) emphasises a notional commitment to domestic presence and participation by men as well as women (Brickell 2012, p. 213). The gender issue is still one of the factors making middle-

class women sacrifice too much individualism and the pleasures of material consumption. Even middle-class women in Vietnam hold a high position in public, but still expect to ensure a space of warmth for men to return to. Anh (Hanoi, Interview) who considered herself very fashionable and up-to-date in her work place, but gently explained that she looks very simple at home, and prefers the image of a housewife to please her husband and maintain happiness at home.

*I am a simple feminine wife and mother at home. The boundary between home and workplace is very clear for my image - very different images. I tried to balance the image of Vietnamese traditional woman at home and a modern, professional at work. Maybe it is the secret of my family happiness. I remove all make up, and put on 'home clothes'. My husband wants to see me as "Ngoan" wife (obedient, behaved well and traditional).*

As detailed, in consumption, the Vietnamese aspect is still very strong in the identity construction and material presentation of urban consumers. Certain values, traditions and attitudes are ingrained and, therefore far more difficult to change, and to do so would take a lot of time. Thus, consumption practices among Vietnamese urban consumers would combine with global and local influence at different levels (Stearn 2001; Ger et al 2012). The adaptability of local forces (re)emerges with modernity or new actors in order to be familiar to the standards and needs of local consumers (Wai-Chung Ho 2003; Jackson 2004). The fusions or hybrid practices of consumption (Fisher and Sherry 2006) are preferred and more highly valued because they enable certain values and traditions to be maintained (Libby 2011).

*My style of dressing is still a bit traditional in the Vietnamese way (not showing a lot of my body) and I care a lot about what other people are thinking. This is not true in Western world. Thus, I choose Burberry and Polo because they are both classic. The style of design is a bit like a uniform, not revolutionary in design like other brands. I mean vintage. If a person is so Westernised that they don't like it, they may like other brands.* (Lan, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview)



In sum, tension and conflict exists in the minds of these urban consumers in negotiating and transforming the connection between the self and society when moving from the culture of principle to the culture of material pleasure. They are learning and adapting to the new consumer culture blended in with a local context. The way Vietnamese consumers perform in certain settings depends on social relations and social norms.

### *Media*

Although in modern society, audiences actively select media content, it does not mean the power of the media is erased. Media has a certain role in promoting the culture of consumption (Campbell 1987; Wernick 1991) which involves advertising images in magazines, newspapers, and above all on television, as well as in shop windows through images, by attracting the eyes (Bocock 1993, p. 89). The dominance of advertising and promotional messages may be viewed as culture itself (Wernick 1991), where the meanings of signs are produced, and reproduced, manipulated, reconstructed. In contemporary Vietnam, the media is importantly visible in people's daily life by providing them a wide range of content from local media to global media, creating one of the important platforms in inspiring them in their consumption practices.

The media creates the 'cool' factor about products consumers feel they need (McCracken 1989). "Where we go, our ears and eyes are bombarded with material messages encouraging us to purchase more and more" (Kasser et al 2003, p. 11-12).

The open door policies and the rise of media and technology caused Vietnam to quickly enter the transition phase to become a consumer society. Product promotion on all kinds of media is widely seen by Vietnamese consumers in cities. Products of European and American origin in particular portray 'modernity, progress and freedom' (Thomas, 2004) and easily sway consumers onto the path of consumerism.

The country opened up to a global flow of information and influence in the 1990s. As a result, Vietnamese consumers in cities nowadays are increasingly acclimated to life around media. According to TNS Media (2011), 78.3 % of Vietnamese people (15-54 years old) watch TV every day and the percentages of household subscribers to TV cable in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi are 88% and 86% respectively. Urban consumers have access to magazines featuring modern lifestyle and themes of modernity. For example, *Hạnh Phúc Gia Đình (Family happiness)*, *Hoa học trò (Student)*, *Thời trang trẻ (Youth Fashion)* are most read by consumers in Hanoi while *Tiếp thị và Gia đình (Marketing and Family)*, *Mực tím*, *Thế giới phụ nữ (Women)* are more preferred in Ho Chi Minh City. Also 65 % of internet users in cities are under 30 year old. In Hanoi, internet usage is 57%, while in Ho Chi Minh City it is 43%. Vietnamese society is today in the process of profound mutation.

To explore the uses of media in relation to the younger generations of urban consumers in Vietnam, the research sought to explore how participants perceived the symbolic meanings of certain brands through advertisements, films or other media in Vietnam, and to what extent they used media as a source of reference for brand consumption. Participants were asked questions about brands and media consumption during both the qualitative research and during follow-up emails. The findings that emerged were primarily focused on the concept of modern and Western lifestyle widely manipulated on media, and the rise of celebrity endorsement.

### **Advertising**

Promotional messages flooding the media create associations between products and desirable outcomes. Money is poured into advertising and promotional media programmes to secure a top place on the prime time TV game shows, prominent pages of glossy magazines and the most-accessed websites and networks. Media (advertising) exploits by attaching desire images, and meanings to the products in a "multiplicity of associative relations" (Featherstone 1991, p. 15). It seeds and

propagates these associations in the mind of consumers, in which they become fascinated with the projected images to purchase items and experiences.

*"I am aware I am overly influenced spined by the media, but I have to admit the message and images dissolve in my mind without being conscious of it. One good example is a story about Heineken. It happened eight or nine years ago when there were a huge number of commercials about this beer on TV. I don't know when exactly it became the special brand at the top of my mind, and then I started to drink beer. Then as now, whenever I ordered a drink, I would say 'Ken please' (a slang or shortened word for Heineken among Vietnamese 'Guru')."*

(Huong, 25, Female, HCM City, Interview)

Advertising cultivates and transfers symbolic meanings between a product brand and the cultural world to the consumers (McCracken 1988) (see Saowaphak 1995). It provides the necessary interpretation to endorse the materialistic messages frequently found in popular culture (Kasser and Kanner 2003, p. 16). In Vietnam, the mass media stimulates consumer interest in new products by evoking the modern, Western lifestyle as a very rich popular image (Marr 1998; Feuche 2004)

*While eating KFC, and watching sexy Adam Levine on TV, I looked at my fat body. I decided to go on a diet to be able to wear Victoria's Secret, and become the type of thin Cosmo woman he likes.*

(Huong, 25, Female, HCM City, Interview)

As the instruments of meaning transfer (McCracken 1988), the media stimulates the culturally constituted world of objects, persons, and contexts that already contain and give voice to these meanings. Because consumers turn to goods not only to serve certain functions and to satisfy, but also for the bundles of meanings in which they exist (Belk 1988). Lan who prefers to put on a quite luxury face searched for an appealing brand, which evoked memories, admiration for royal family and giving an edge to her character formed in English literature.

*The stories about the royal family in the UK were deeply embedded in my mind during childhood through books, novels and films...This made me fall in love with Burberry, a classic brand, as a symbol of the UK.*

(Lan, 33, Female, HCM City, Interview)

Vietnamese consumers are becoming "self-image buyers". The trend to the other-directed person was a fact of deep interest to every persuader interested in more effective manipulation of human behaviour (Riesman 1950; Packard 2007). After the economic renovation in Vietnam in 1986, economic growth created new spaces for consumerism and investment and development in the advertising landscape: "It provides of the more base forms of human behaviour such as greed and materialism" (Richards et al 2000, p. 33).

What the media tells us about has deep significance in the construction and maintenance of personal identities and works as a reference for our choice, ideas to craft our identity and consumption patterns. "Global pop culture reflects the changing relationship between popular youth culture and media in Vietnam" (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Mandy 2004, p. 136) where popular narratives and cultural icons are helping to shape consumer tastes and values. The circulation of words and images plays a significant part in the constant negotiation of face work, which comprises popular culture (Richards et al 2000, p. 4).

*There are four reasons making me like the Ken commercials and to become loyal to Ken and a new drinker of beer: the music is amazingly cool; the content of the commercial is funny and civilised, not callous; there is a series of commercials with several different stories - not a kind of boring repetition of stories; it reflects the current lifestyle of modern people, with a bit of reality, and clumsy.*

(Huong, 25, Female, HCM City, Interview)

Themes of modernity are for and about the young and product advertisements constantly underscore this pursuit of youth and pleasure (Dutton 2012, p. 30). "Advertising has on the individual...the reliefs, hopes and pleasures that may be

offered" (Richards et al 2000). Hung remembered he was very slim ten years ago, which made him feel he was not attractive enough to girls. It was after watching the Total Gym commercial in a TV show he explained that "*Looking at the muscles of the guy in the advert, I just wanted to buy it immediately*" (Hung, 32, Male, HCM City, Interview).

The important role of the media and the advertising industries, as well as global popular culture and brands cannot be ignored, as they encourage Vietnamese consumers to embrace new concepts and patterns of consumption, after a decade of suffering from lack of product availability. Foreign-invested advertising agencies such as Optel Media, Ogilvy & Mather, McCann-Erickson and JWT were respectively granted licenses for representative offices in Vietnam, then later joined by Saatchi and Saatchi, Chuo Senko, Lowe limited, Y&R, BBDO (Advertising Agency Directory Vietnam, 2010) right after the US lifted the embargo. According to the Vietnam Advertising Association (VAA), there are currently 3,000 advertising agencies, and advertising earns nearly 1 billion USD annual revenue. Vietnam hosts over 30 representative offices of the world's leading advertising companies and they account for 80 percent of the total advertising revenue (Vietnamnet, 2007). Advertising expenditure and demand have grown in response to the economic growth at the turn of 20th century Vietnam. With growing numbers of new rich and aspiring young consumers, 'the more competition that is present in a market, the greater the need to advertise' (Doyle 2002, p. 41). Western advertising agencies and Western brands entered Vietnam right after the government opened the border and instituted new market policies, and created the concept of bringing modernity and cosmopolitan lifestyle to lure consumers into the new consumer culture through coded messages conveyed in the media.

Promotional industries know how to convey and inspire the meanings that they want to symbolically communicate, including aspects of the self with Western concepts, and Western models. Procter & Gamble, the world's largest consumer-products company, entered the country a year after the embargo was lifted in 1994. They are using everything from good deeds to television advertising to hand

washing demonstrations to win Vietnamese customers (Bloomberg BusinessWeek, 9-15 July 2012). Several respondents in my survey mentioned the fact that they as well as other Vietnamese people learn new habits of daily life or the modern lifestyle or are gradually enlightened by mediated discourse.

*Not our parents, but the media and propaganda campaigns tell us to use OK to maintain happiness.*

(23, Male, HCM City, Survey)

Marketers create symbolic meaning for a product or brand and inject it into a 'culturally constituted world' – products acquire a stable meaning, and consumers accept the meaning 'provided' for them (McCracken 1987; Brioschi 2005), and choose products and brands that suit their identity or values (Holt 1997). This seeds the symbolic meanings desired by Vietnamese consumers through promotional content on media (word and text). It is like biting one by one to the right mind of perceiving the meaning and inspired by the ideas to purchase and experience it (McCracken 1989). It came to the Vietnamese market at the right time, with the right messages.

*A lot of people I know me hate watching advertising. My husband often switches the channels when product placements appear. However, I am the opposite. I prefer to watch Western TV channels, I mean Western models, plots and brands. There must be something you can learn about style, habits or new products in a very interesting way.*

(Anh, 26, Female, Hanoi, Interview)

In general, Vietnamese consumers display high levels of conformity and are easily manipulated by the media. The majority of consumers in this study did not care about the history of the brand, the origin of the brand and consumption knowledge, but they follow the 'herd, and the promotion of the media. Definitely, "People who coalesce into groups, as any general knows, are easier to guide, control, cope with, and herd. The team concept was an aid" (Packard p.165, 1977). "Consumption constitutes the stuff that surrounds us all – advertising,

television, entertainment, shopping – and it is consumption that underpins the images, sounds, smells and sights of the contemporary world" (Jayne 2006, p. 219). Brands are embedded in communication and media to manage identity bundles.

*Most of the time I have to see TV commercials inserted before or after national news or while watching a film, so when going to the supermarket, between two brands, I as well as the other consumers would properly pick up brands which are promoted more in the media.*

(Binh, 32, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

A manifestation of this trend can be seen. The product placements are widely inserted in all the prime time shows, a reality of television in Vietnam. The advertising creates and offers a certain kind of image for the products and as a reference for the buyers to attach to their desired personality in communities. That is why many domestic brands make an absolutely Western TV commercial, which causes the consumer to be confused about the country of origin, as they prefer Western brands and images.

*X-men is a perfect example. First I thought it's a foreign brand from Europe or somewhere. It's an advertisement with a Western model, Western way of advertising and a perfect TV advert. Then later I found out it's domestic product, but I still have a positive connotation of the product.*

(Binh, 32, Male, HCM City, Interview)

Vietnamese youth, in particular, are enamoured by new ideas that they have not experienced. Although cultural interpretations of modern life are vastly different from their living situation, it appeals to young people and is widely promoted by media.

### **Celebrity Endorsement**

Celebrities have been defined by some as 'cultural intermediaries' (Featherstone 1991) and are defined as the influential (Barry and Kerry 2003), involved in the

circulation of symbolic forms. They shape product values, which are connected with consumers through media. Celebrity endorsement appears in most promotional messages for most types of product. It would include individuals from the 'world of sport, politics, business, art and the military' (McCracken 1989, p. 319). Using a celebrity is likely to positively affect consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Celebrities in films are common and a popular reference for young people in term of fashion, cosmetics and style. In Vietnam, Korean and Hong Kong films give them more inspiration for cosmetics and fashion while Hollywood films create certain lifestyles and inspire them with famous worldwide brands. The group born in the 1970s and the 1980s favours Hollywood films, while the young born in 1990s tend to spend more time watching Korean films than Western ones.

We are living in a celebrity-mediated social world, thus celebrities have a significant influence upon consumers' desires and consumption practices. Celebrities are idolised by young consumers who try to imitate them in terms of fashion, or tastes, or style. As the opinion leaders (Weimann 1991), the celebrities' messages shape consumers in the construction of identity (Alperstein et al 1991). Huong (25, Female, HCM City, Interview) admired Thanh Loc as a famous and modest star whose personality influenced her and inspired her to modestly present her quiet luxury face in a friendly way.

*"I like the way Lady Gaga appears and presents herself whenever she is in the public or in front of the camera. People must look at her and be curious about everything she puts on. The news is always active after that. She properly puts a lot of effort in making herself uniquely interesting."*  
(21, Female,, Hanoi, Survey)

Prominently influential, celebrities bring inspiration and information to consumers to construct and cultivate their identity. What the celebrities consume garners the attention of consumers who in turn make use of cultural symbols (celebrities) which are easily recognisable and can reinforce positive qualities of products according to their country of origin. In addition, the image of a celebrity



associated with particular products would make the brand more prestigious and desirable. Hung likes to watch Hong Kong films, all the time paying attention to what actor Kevin Cheng dresses like, as he uses this as the reference for his own style. After all, he wants to be 'elegant, fashionable and stylish'.

*I do not know the exact brands he wears but I try to wear the same style. If I knew the exact the name of his brands, I would try them.*

(Hung, 32, male, HCM City, Interview)

The younger generations often develop powerful emotions toward media celebrities even though they do not have any face-to-face interaction with them. Young admirers consider celebrity idols as their idealised self-images. Admirers want to develop or refine their own personality traits so that they are similar to those of their idols (Caughey 1984).

*I regularly pay attention to Rihanna, Miley and Selena in their clips and in the Billboard chart as the references for my style. My friends do the same. The fashion of having a tattoo as their Western idols do is popular among youth in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City.*

(Anh, 26, Female, Hanoi, Interview)

*"Eyes as big as Kim Kardashian's, nose as small as Audrey Hepburn's, chin as sexy as Marilyn Monroe".*

(Hanoi, Female, 18, survey)

When the celebrity's character, personality and lifestyle satisfy the need and desired images of the consumers, they want to consume the brands of their icon and put effort into following their icon or being similar to them.

*Ryan Reynold is the ambassador for my style – sense of humour, lady killer and smart. I knew him first in the Proposal and Green Lantern. His choice of perfume will influence me. I am switching to Hugo Boss, which Ryan uses.*

(Khuong, 3, Male, HCM City, Interview)

While Hollywood stars have more influence on mature consumers, Korean stars create waves, and have a quick and short-term influence on the adaptation and imitation of the new consumption practices in Vietnamese markets. Films and TV shows provide significant inspiration for consuming brands.

### **Korean dramas**

Korean films recently replaced Chinese films and have infiltrated Vietnam. Korean films have now captured the imagination of the Vietnamese public (Duc Nguyen, 2013). There are one hundred fan groups for Korean actors and actresses in Vietnam. They dress Korean, eat Korean food, and use Korean things out of a desire to follow their idols. One group named 'Super Junior' has 279, 423 fans in Vietnam. Korean celebrities greatly contribute to the popularity of Korean products, economy and culture (Dang Thi Thu Huong 2007; Sue Jin Lee 2011). The root cause of the significant influence of Korean stars upon Vietnamese consumers is that while young people strive to be more 'global' they also regard Korea as being more culturally similar. Not all aspects of Western lifestyle and Western celebrity personalities are easily adaptable to the Vietnamese context or preferred by Vietnamese youth. Thus, an understanding of social life in contemporary Vietnamese society calls for the reinterpretation of both traditional and new consumer culture (Canclini 2001).

According to Ha Thi Hong Van (2010), relations between Vietnam and Korea developed quickly over the period 2000-2008. Vietnam imported materials from Korea for the textile and garment industry, as well as leather, iron, machinery, transportation equipment, gasoline, chemical products, electronics and electricity products. Enjoying Korean television dramas, the new generation of consumers are eagerly adopting and emulating the Korean lifestyle ranging from fashion, food and consumption patterns and even plastic surgery. Young Hanoi couples can sometimes be seen dressed in 'couple T-shirts' as is the vogue in Korea and in Korean drama (Drummond 2012). The wave of Hallyu (Korean wave) among

Vietnamese youth affects their choice of consumption in fashion, mobile phone, cosmetics and food, reflected in the results of the survey, when asked about the best CO.

Around 10 to 20 years ago, it was impossible to find a product made in Korea in Vietnamese markets; however, after a series of advertisements with a famous Korean artist, the shampoo brand "Double Rich" became popular. Vietnamese consumers tend to buy Korean products to feel intimacy with their favourite Korean dramas. "Ohui" products are widely promoted in all beauty salons in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. For the younger generation, the role of Korean celebrities is growing and shaping their consumption, and even behaviour.

*For example, the new habit of buying a dreamcatcher is now popular among people younger than 22. Before the Korean film the Heirs and the wave of Korean culture in Asia in 2013, including Vietnam, nobody knew that the dreamcatcher originated in America. However, the main actor gave a dreamcatcher in the film as a symbol. Young people and fans of Korean films in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City rushed to buy dreamcatchers, creating a small growing market for producers of these items.*

(Huong, 25, female, HCM City, Interview)

The influential in Korea films brings the desired personality, wealth, success and romance, and one dominant aspect is somehow similar to Vietnamese tradition.

*"Korean characters in films are absolutely Asian beautiful, romantic, Mr Perfect or Ms Perfect, and still realise and retain the Confucian traditions similar to Vietnamese culture. That's why whatever brand they project appears very positive to the consumers who are their fans"*

(Quyen, 22, Male, Hanoi, Interview).

McCracken's model of celebrity endorsement is based on the concept of meanings. Each spokesperson provides a set of characters. The meaning transfer

includes three subsequent stages (celebrity, product, consumers). For example, some Vietnamese comedians are perceived as friendly, associated with normal products, such as when presenting a brand of instant noodles.

The messages of Western-style product promotion help socially-construct notions of modernity and communicate images of youth pursuits, which Vietnamese consumers aspire to when consuming a product of European or American origin. In turn, a Korean celebrity would have enough power to push the marketing of a brand in the short-term and during the time of the peak in their career; furthermore, Korean culture shares certain similarities with that of that of the Vietnamese consumer. For example, using an Iphone 5 can make a person have the feeling of having a higher social status while experiencing a Sumsung Galaxy used by several actors and actresses in Korean films brings the gratification of romance. As mentioned in the introduction, the main reason for consuming Korean products amongst those born in the late 1980s or in the 1990s is to get closer to the image of their favourite idols, or, in the case of Japanese products, for quality and financial reasons. For Western brands, consumers can rank cosmetics and fashion in terms of quality or symbolic meanings, yet Korean products are all perceived to be at the same level with brand 'Korea' being a marker of distinction: "*it's Korean stuff. That's all people care about*".

## DISCUSSION OVERVIEW

The emergence of a new transnational consumer culture creates the setting for *giới trẻ* (middle-class, new cultural intermediaries) in Vietnam to distinguish themselves from other groups through judgement about material possessions (Friere 2009) and status consumption (Riesman 1950; Bourdieu 1984; Shipman 2008) as the new layers of distinction (Nguyen-Marshall et al 2012, p. 11). In this chapter, I develop the discussion about the nature of this emerging urban consumer culture further and argue that it is bringing about a shift from a culture of discipline to a culture of pleasure seeking (Featherstone 1991), but is still in the current stage of negotiating with the traditional values (Riesman 1950).

It is difficult to slow the rapid development and transformation of consumer culture among the younger generation of the urban middle-class in Vietnam when the middle and affluent class will double in size to a total of 30 million by 2020, (the Boston Consulting Group, 2013) and while *giới trẻ* increasingly spend more on material purchasing. Consumer culture symbolises the emergence of new hedonistic values, with which the young urban populations not only identify themselves but also call for (Freire 2009, p. 68). The younger aspiring consumers in urban Vietnam are willing to pay for the latest ‘must-have’ brands. With the rise of hedonism (Campbell 1987), the consequence is a social order in large measure involved in the fashioning of daydreams (Rook 1984). The younger generation of urban consumers in Vietnam have an endless desire for material possessions (Belk 1989; Belk et al 2003), driven by the emergence of a transnational consumer culture (Featherstone 1991). They formulate their goals in life partly through purchasing products (Stearn 2001) for their associated brand meanings (Elliot 1994; Elliot and Davies 2005; Schroeder et al 2006; Shipman 2008) and, in doing so, attempt “to create, negotiate and maintain” fragmented and multiple identities in response to the increasingly fragmented and globalised urban society in Vietnam (Dittmar 1992, p. 8). This will happen at different and varying levels. . The dominant face would be transmitted through culture, level of education and other influential factors and how strong each factor manifests in the

blended practices of consumption among consumers. It is not just 'who we are, where we are', it is also about 'where we are going'. The consumption practices of the younger generation of Vietnamese urban consumers tell us about urban social life in the society. It is about pathways. "The discovery of self is the play's motor and the action's inner meaning" (Smith 1991, p. 3). More than half of the respondents indicated in the survey and interviews that they wanted to use the brand label as the signal of wealth, success, and social status to impress others in their social circles or in particular social settings. Thus, within this context, the show-off face dominates.

While social interaction in Vietnam requires little conscious effort, there are complex processes continually at play. People must process a situation, read the contextual cues, present their internal sense of self in a meaningful way (Bourdieu 1984), adjust their presentation depending on others' reactions (Riesman 1950; Goffman 1967), and constantly negotiate what is socially acceptable (Belk 1988; Wong and Ahuva 1998; Elliot 2002; Ger et al 2012). Conformity in consumption is, therefore, predominant among Vietnamese urban consumers under 35 years old, and the values of materialism have been widely adopted among them. They want to show their social status or to achieve a certain identity, and though the level of conformity within the various age groups (born in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s) may differ, they share the same phenomenon of conformity. Younger consumers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have the same attitudes towards Vietnamese and Chinese products and Western brands, which are negotiated between patriotism/nationalism (Balabanis et al 2001) and "distinction" (Bourdieu 1984; Marshall-Nguyen et al 2011). As the findings indicate, Western brands predominate in terms of class distinction and in enhancing social status. Meanwhile, negative attitudes toward Chinese products are not only a matter of concerns about safety, but a reflection of nationalism (Smith 1991; Volkan 2006) and are influenced by the long-term conflict with China. If the dynamics of consumption have led to greater individualism in the West, then the development of the consumer society in Vietnam is more complicated. While the Vietnamese

embrace new values of materialism, they do not pull against a sense of nationhood.

There has been significant change in women's lives after Doi moi as "[u]rban young women have a variety of spaces in which to shop, socialise and meet new people" (Drummond 2006, p. 248). Both men and women in urban areas are overconfident in their success, and tend to attach the symbolic meanings of products to these associations. There is not a clear level of gender difference in brand commitment in the context of Vietnam. However, among the respondents, due to differences in gender roles, urban women tended to construct their identity through brands of handbags, clothes, and jewellery, while men preferred cars and technology. In this research, they did not differ significantly in terms of gender performance in brand consumption. The way they presented themselves or sought attention was quite similar between the two genders. That said, cultural factors did influence the setting for performance among female consumers. Women find themselves in "a position of reconciling their proletarian class position" (Drummond 2006, p. 249), and are pulled between paid work and domestic chores. Social places would be where women could express their images of modernity and other desired images. In the family space, women want to be viewed as good homemakers, responsible for the housework and maintaining the image of a good wife. However, social spaces are where women dare to take the risks in expressing themselves "*outside I can be a modern women with Western styles, but at home, I become very simple, a good Vietnamese mom, taking care of my husband and children.*" (Ninh, 35, Female, HCM City, Interview).

The case of Vietnam offers particularly rich set of examples of how changes in political and economic structures have redefined the value of symbolic capital and have therefore resulted in the experience of hysteresis for large segments of society (Marshall Nguyen 2012, p. 10). Hysteresis explains the phenomenon of how material has become a magnet for consumers in the new social order created by the communism. Each individual finds ways to acquire new dispositions in society as "[e]conomic renovation has created a new middle-class and an increasingly complex and diverse social order, oriented to the acquisition of

education and in pursuit of consumerist lifestyles" (King et al 2008, p. 808). Consumers borrow material to gain entrance to social circles, to change their social identity, and to seek the culture of pleasure (values of materialism) in negotiation with the culture of discipline (based on Confucian values) during the emergence of a consumer culture influenced by globalisation.

### 6.1. Taste

From a sociological perspective, distribution of tastes is not random across the population but corresponds to a definite structure, among whose defining characteristics are social and economic class (Slater 1997; Holt 1998). People of a similar class or background, it is anticipated, will share common tastes and consumption patterns (Bourdieu 1984). Consumption choices are closely associated with taste. Nguyen Bich Thuan and Mandy (2004, p. 141) mention one woman using the French loan word "gu" (French: goût) to refer to her perception of indigenous "tastes"

In this study, among Vietnamese consumers, taste is used as a means of distinction between classes or groups (Bourdieu 1984; Peterson 1983) and is commonly defined and recognised among a group favourably. In the context of Vietnam, consumers see class position as equivalent to taste, or use taste as a distinction to challenge the lines of class: "Not everyone with money knows how to choose things, even if they are rich. Some are just *Trưởng giả học làm sang, nouveau riches* trying to become aristocrats." (25, Male, HCM City, Survey). The choices of brand as defined by the word 'taste' become a surer mark of class distinction.

In a society with a greater level of conformity, the taste of the groups, or the crowd, with their collective pressure would influence one's performance of consumption. The middle-classes find social interaction within their group through the communication of shared lifestyles or tastes, which shape the group identity and sense of belonging. When people conform and assign themselves to one group, they claim taste as one of the main common reasons. It can become the



link which connects them. They consume common brands as a ‘group uniform’. They look for personal relationships that reinforce their views and consumption choices, and to ensure their feelings and tastes are symbolically understood and socially shared. Urban consumers use taste to distinguish their consumption from other groups.

*The uniform of urban youth is an iPhone and an SH or a Vespa. Those a bit older than us would be judged based on the car ownership, but similar to us, for students or graduates it would be an iPhone, an LX or an SH.*

(Quyen, 22, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

They categorise taste as one of the primary criteria to connect them and reinforce group membership, and the group may gradually alter and influence one’s performance. One of the main reasons Thuong (Female, 35, HCM City, Interview) had for connecting with her friends to gossip about things after work was their shared taste. This was performed visibly by sharing similar favourite brands, trends, styles, and even by common consumption stories. She told me that when meeting this group of friends she wears luxury items to show off her stylish taste and financial means, as do the others, to inform the standard and reputation of her group. When a new Western brand enters the Vietnamese market, her group is often invited to the opening ceremony; although, she could equally go out with her husband and children at the weekend in a casual unbranded dress.

At the individual level, cultural capital shapes taste (Bourdieu 1984). In Vietnam, the taste of the new rich would be different among the middle-class group, and the tastes of the youth would be different from the older generation. Taste helps to signify them as civilised and respectable (Leshkovich 2012). There still is a space of inner-direction in the other-directed individual (Riesman 1960). The (Hanoi, Interview) mainly chooses to consume products in a quiet manner, claiming he belonged to a group of consumers who could distinguish themselves by taste.

*Look at D (a well-known Vietnamese singer), he is rich, but the way he shows off his house, cars, and piles of LV products proves one thing: he is trashy in his consumption patterns. (21, Male, Hanoi, Survey)*

Most of the middle-class use the word 'taste' as the alternative to claiming they have achieved more in consumer culture than the others, and they are quite sure in their choices; so taste becomes an expression of social position (Schor 1999, p. 39). As Leshkowitz (2012, p. 97) described: "the quotidian relationship between people and the things they own and use, as well as the value judgements and social relationships that propel these consumption practices and justify them as normal or appropriate". Taste tends to become a social weapon (Bourdieu 1984), to separate high from low in terms of the show-off performance or the quiet luxury manner, and which each individual seeks to maintain at the individual or group level.

## **6.2. From class consciousness to brand consciousness**

Throughout the Vietnam War and the decade following, and during the transition to socialism, the socialist image designated the working class as the leadership class in society, coinciding with the rise of the communist party. Then not long after, daily concerns and themes of modernity are more relevant in daily conversations (Harms 2011), especially among the younger generation of urban consumers, although the post-socialist values are still visible in state propaganda campaigns. The working class images of leadership gradually become vague and started disappearing after the government initiated the economic renovation (1986) and the open-door policy, and the gap between rich and poor started to widen.

As the findings in Chapter 5 indicate, the younger generation of urban consumers draw upon status consumption (Reisman 1950; Shipman 2008), where consumption practice becomes central in conveying social status (Bourdieu 1984; Featherstone 1991); the more their desire to shift the lines of class, the more they

borrow material to gain entrance, and to change the social identity. Vietnamese urban consumers spend increasing amounts on the visible items to improve their social status. It's not possible to simply translate Western-derived concepts of social structure to a non-Western context, however. Vietnam is an example of locally-adapted transnational consumer culture, in which a class becomes conscious of its interest, and consumers are divided into groupings and strata with distinctive life-styles and views of the world. They are symbolically linked with each other by the notion of lifestyle (Bourdieu 1984; Marshall-Nguyen et al 2011) and by shared experience and history.

These aspiring groups are attracted to the perceptions of the newly-middle class that emerged elsewhere and have been communicated through media content (words and texts) offering them symbolic resources (Packard 1977; Kasser and Kanner 2003; Wernick 2008). Western lifestyle images come as a standard or idealised portrayal of the Western concept of social status when people think of the aristocracy "*quý tộc*" or "*thượng lưu*", featuring social dignity, a modern lifestyle and social respect as the highest reflections of "face work". 'Western' is a widely used word assigning the highest value to a person's appearance, i.e., admired by others, and a respected, noble image. When emerging consumers need a clear model to identify with and to follow, they think of the Western image as having a long, established history – as described in films and other products of popular culture, and having been widely discussed over several centuries. They want to shift the lines of class through brand consumption following the model of Western lifestyles.

*Given a certain amount of money, I would prefer to have onl;e expensive Western outfit rather than 20 cheap, low-end outfits. Your things signify your position in society. Do not hesitate to make this kind of wise investment.*

(21, Female, HCM City, Survey)

The new rich in Vietnam with the motive of pecuniary emulation rush to spend their newly acquired money to signal status through conspicuous consumption

(Bagwell and Bernhem 1996); People judge status on what an individual buys. Being middle-class is linked to the purchase and ownership of particular brands and the material display of goods.

### 6.3. Materials bring happiness

In contemporary Vietnam, "core social practices and cultural values, ideas, aspirations and identities are defined and oriented in relation to consumption rather than to other social dimensions" (Slater 1997, p. 24). People turn their efforts toward personal achievements and constructing their modern identity through consumption, while also negotiating socialist morality and cultural heritage. Western brands provide the tools for this modern project. Of course, people have to work hard to achieve the goal of possessing material goods.

*There is no Western stuff dropping from the sky for me. I would have to get an international education such as an MBA, or open my own company. After 20 years working as a slave for money as Warren, I will buy myself a Ferrari. How good it would be, driving it, enjoying and thinking of all the achievements, after all those miserable days.*

(27, Male, HCM City, Survey)

*All of my friends have iPhones; they are from wealthy families who can buy them for them, with just a click of a finger. My family is not that rich. I had to work part-time, saving for six months to buy this iPhone, just to feel I am as good as the others around me. C'est la vie.*

(19, Female, Hanoi, Survey)

Vietnamese consumers' interpretation of Western brands' symbolic meanings probably have much in common with consumers in other emerging economies, where a new rich class is also adopting models of status consumption as the layer of distinction. However, there are distinctive factors in the case of Vietnam. The intermingling of socialist influences and capitalist forces is visible in the daily life

of Vietnamese people. What people were taught in school about principles and ideologies is contradictory to what they experience in daily life (Doan 2005). In reality, people care more about what is on the dinner table at home, than giving their full commitment to the success of socialism. There is no actual equality in distribution as the doctrine of socialism requires, as in Vietnam "inequalities are growing and becoming more visible". Doan adds:

"not only had young people become anxious about getting rich, but the dream of getting rich had also become a common goal. In this context, young people, and university graduates in particular, seem to realise that achieving individual success by way of becoming wealthy professionals fits well with the overall national objective" (2005, p. 458)

The seductive appeal of the market economy has had a deep impact on individual values (Doan 2005; Harms 2010). The strong preference for Western brands among this sample of Vietnamese consumers is evidence of their real wishes and desires. The value of consumption has spread to younger urban consumers, and become the central focus of social life (Featherstone 1991; Slater 1997; Rosenblatt 1999) in the emergence of global cities (Jayne 2006).

#### **6.4. Blended consumption practices among Vietnamese consumers; a new global-local practice**

Ho Chi Minh's ideology remains a very important component in the values of Vietnamese society. In one of his letters addressing Vietnamese pupils and students in 1945, he emphasised the role of the young generation in learning and helping the country to become wealthier and stronger, to step forward, to keep up with "the super powers" in the world.

"Today we have to restore the country inherited from our ancestors and catch up with other countries in the globe. In this reconstruction process, our country expects great contributions from you. Whether the Vietnamese country will become beautiful and whether the Vietnamese nation will be glorious and well-matched with the super powers in the five continents mostly depends on your learning."

The importance of learning and obtaining knowledge is strongly promoted in his thought, and hence the obsession of many Vietnamese youth to obtain education

for their future. His prescription was for them to learn not to become "mandarins" as in the old society, but to "serve their homeland and their people, and to make the people rich and the country strong, to fulfil the task of becoming the master of the country" (Ho Chi Minh 1995, p. 399). He taught that it is important to build a prosperous people and improve the country's status because of "increasing education on national history, traditions, pride and self-respect."

A few decades later, the demands of the market economy made education a more urgent priority. Young Vietnamese needed to catch up with the world (Hayton 2010) and embrace themes of modernity (Shultz 2012). People rushed to develop all the chances they had to get more education, and improve their lives in the competitive market. The phrases "*I have to study hard if I want to get...*" and "*if I had the chance, I would....*" were repeated very frequently in participants' stories. However, the drive for self-improvement is now more related to fulfilling an individual's material desires and expressing the values of consumerist materialism (tempered by the global spread of ethical and risk-averse sensibilities), rather than embodying the values of socialist nationalism.

Despite not being central to people's daily concerns, socialism and the power of the state are still visible in Vietnam today. Youth have not emerged to challenge the state (Gainsborough 2002, p. 707), but they clarify and draw the boundary between politics and economics, socialism and capitalism, the government and daily concerns, propaganda and their own interest. Thus a Westernised version of modernity spreads across Vietnam through the active urban group (new cultural intermediaries, middle-class) who would embrace the road to modernity and build a modern nation. They do not refuse all the old traditional values and the influence of education, but they negotiate them to blend the collective version of Vietnamese traditions (socialism) with the Western-derived (capitalism) to satisfy their individual desire of material consumption and, therefore, contribute to the emergence of a transnational consumer culture with its own distinct Vietnamese flavour.

***Love of consumption and reflection of nationalism through choice of Country of Origin (CO)***

As stated in the findings in the previous chapter, Vietnamese consumers have developed strong nationalist feelings, partly leading to negative feelings about Chinese brands, but they retain mainly positive feelings toward Western brands, and prefer Western brands to domestic brands.

In this study, Vietnamese urban consumers showed a clear preference for products from developed countries (Western countries) as confirmation of a higher level of material achievement and to make a positive impression on others (Belk 1999; Wong and Ahuvia 1998). As in the other emerging markets, CO is not just another cognitive cue but also has symbolic and emotional meaning for consumers (Sharma 2011, p. 287). For consumers, it is associated with status and pride in the construction of social identity.

Materials determine interpretation of the face strategies regarding their face implications (Cocroft and Ting-Toomey 1994; Wong and Ahuvia 1998). The habitus from the previous (parents) generations' Confucian values indicates that one must look good and be judged by possessions (Wong and Ahuvia 1998), which provides inspiration for status consumption among the new consumers of Vietnam, borrowing the model of the Western lifestyle and, consequently, Western brands. These consumers are serious and concerned with their credibility, which makes them label-conscious. "Face" is understood as a desire to gain favourable social self-worth and to be valued in relation to others (Belk 1996). Thus, the younger generation of Vietnamese urban consumers would buy brand names to publicly display their wealth and position within particular social circles. They are extremely class conscious in shifting the social boundaries.

"Consumer culture in the developing world followed suit: 'the West' soon came to be reframed in terms of the 'good life' to be had through consumerism" (Ustuner and Holt 2010, p. 40). Thus goods originating from Western countries are preferred among the consuming class, as "such goods can be read and used to

classify the status of their bearer" (Featherstone 1991, p. 27), and because Asians tend to follow the trend of saving their own face (Belk 1996; Wong and Ahuvai 1998).

As there is increasing mutual acceptance within a society of the status consumption through high-priced Western brands, then each individual becomes "stuck with it" (Goffman 1967, p. 11). For Chinese consumers, for example, possessing luxury goods is a symbol of a successful life and having good taste (Zhang and Kim 2012). Consumers easily become involved with conformity in consumption, because in the modern society, consumers are more interested in getting and spending, obtaining satisfaction from others' admiration than consuming the product itself (Belk and Pollay 1985). Vietnam's aspiring urban consumers (the younger generation of middle-class, and the new cultural intermediaries) identify with and seek to emulate the Western lifestyle (Ustuner and Holt 2010, p. 37). Leading to the phenomena that can be seen in Vietnam today that even the new consumers mimic Western brands to convey that they are "high class, modern and civilized" (Wilk 2006, p. 22).

The case of Vietnam also provides further evidence for the argument that "those who have benefited from the recent economic development are less ethnocentric than those marginalized as a result of globalization" (Sharma 2011, p.288-289). The government of Vietnam decided to launch the "**Vietnamese Use Vietnamese Goods**" campaign in 2009 to encourage consumers to have a better view of locally made products with patriotic appeals, to promote ethnocentric consumer behaviour by Vietnamese consumers. The national products movement aimed to halt the influx of imported goods and an inability to secure direct state intervention. All the campaigns suggested consumers should honour domestic products (according to Vneconomy). Despite such appeals, however, the "Vietnamese consumers showed a relatively low level of consumer ethnocentrism, and they showed a clear preference for purchasing foreign products" (Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai and Tambyah, 2011, p. 90).



*I cannot distinguish between Heineken and Tiger without looking at the label, but I can, between Heineken and Hanoi beer, because of the smell and taste.*

(Hieu, 27, Male, Hanoi, Interview)

There may be more market opportunities for Vietnamese domestic brands by targeting the older generation, who have higher levels of ethnocentrism. Alternatively, domestic brands might find ways to improve feelings and symbolic associations for consumers. Domestic brands who want to target Vietnamese consumers must boast about the superior aspects their products. The X-men brand is an example. It is promoted in commercials with Western actors, and depicting Western lifestyles, to create transnational images of cultural consumption among younger generation of urban consumers.

Although nationalism and ethnocentrism are not always interrelated, nationalism and animosity are somehow interrelated amongst Vietnamese consumers within the context of Chinese brands. At the same time, the home-country bias creates a negative image of products from certain countries. In this case, political factors would make a difference.

Vietnam has cause for celebration; in view of the sacrifices made and chosen glories following the Vietnam War and its economic development efforts. However, the threat of border conflict and land losses makes the chosen trauma tension with China more important in contemporary Vietnam. "History has become the unavoidable element in our thought" (Foucault 1970, p. 238) and under the change of history we can redefine our collective identity. The state plays an important role in selecting, shaping and reactivating the threads most relevant to the current historical situation as well as the collective identity.

Politics become intrinsically connected to lifestyles, which comes to uphold the consumption choices in the case of Chinese brands among Vietnam's younger generations of consumers.

My research revealed that *giới trẻ* choose Western brands to enhance their social status and desired image, and as a priority their daily life. Western brands play a central role in their consumption choices, but negative attitudes towards Chinese products persist due to poor quality and entrenched political attitudes. The construction of local and global consumption fields is dynamic, shifting historically (Wilk 2006; Ustuner and Holt 2010). Vietnamese younger generation of urban consumers embrace Western lifestyles but they articulate them with local ideologies and practices.

McHale (2004) argues that the influence of socialist values on public life was ambiguous. However, there was a link between luxury and corruption that has been discussed in public and in the media in Vietnam. According to Bloomberg (2013), Vietnamese courts held 278 corruption trials that year, while the state inspectorate uncovered 80 new fraud cases involving state funds. Bloomberg (2013) also reported that Duong Tri Dung, the former chair of Vinalines, was found to have committed corruption resulting in losses to the state totalling \$17.3 million. The Straits Times often reported on the ostentatious illegally imported luxury cars in Vietnam. Whether Bentleys, Rolls Royces, or Lamborghinis, they may only be a small part of a larger picture, reflecting the challenge of combating corruption. Government officers and businesspeople with financial ties to government departments try to avoid appearing as though they are involved in taking of bribes or are corrupt. To do this, they prefer to wear the quiet luxury face, and to display their possessions quietly.

Additionally, the state has the power to monopolise the people's attention to culture (Sirkeci 2013) or 'leading to a blockage in the industrial or commercial dimension of mass cultural production' (Mattelart et al.1984, p. 27). Tomlinson (1999, p. 271) describes the role of the state with more specificity:

It is the product of deliberate cultural construction and maintenance via both the regulatory and the socializing institutions of the state: in particular, the law, the education system and the media.

Initially, meaning is inferred from observing the conduct of others towards an object. By imaginatively adopting their perspective, an individual gradually comes to understand and thus internalise their attitudes or, in other words, to learn the meaning of that particular symbol or object (Dittmar 1992, p. 78). Through its gradual exposure to international brands (through media such as the internet and cable television or through contact with tourists), as well as increased income, the middle class fully entered into the mass consumption society" (Freire 2009, p. 69). However, Vietnam is strained by its attempt to balance a Confucian-based and socialist model with a capitalist market economy (Harm 2010; Libby 2011). Because consumption practices in the local context are continuously challenged by the "rival forces of markets and culture" (Trentmann 2004, p. 379). "It does not necessarily mean a complete surrender to 'Western values'" (Trentmann 2004, p. 380). Consumption practices may be measured by a rise in material standards, and cease to add happiness (the culture of pleasure seeking) in established consumer societies.

### **6.5. Media under a loose tie in economic transition**

The government relies on the media to promote its new economic priorities to the public. Newspapers became the principle narrators of the reform process, describing as well as commenting on the changes in the country's economic and social landscape. In official terms, the media have served as "a vehicle for mobilizing public opinion and human efforts in the service of economic transition" (Pettus 2003, p. 114). A strong nationalist discourse can help the state to maintain the monopoly of the power of a one-party state. In this way, the government would control and shape the formation of national identity. The media, under the pressure of market competition, manage to achieve a certain balance, to meet the needs of a modern audience and also support government in fostering a 'shared' national identity.

On the one hand, the media play a role as the propaganda vehicle of the government in promoting Asian values, as well as helping to maintain the

government's power monopoly. On the other hand, under the loose control of the state and given the pressure of economic development, the media create resources for the younger generation of urban middle-class consumers to adopt new consumption practices from the West.

Hayton (2010, p. 148) described the website most read among *giới trẻ* as providing news and lifestyle information rather than ideological comment (vnexpress.net):

As it has evolved, the parent company of vnexpress.net, FPT has grown far away from its roots. Just eight per cent of its stock is still owned by the state, around 80 percent by its employees and foreign investors (including the venture capital arm of the U.S chip-maker Intel), with the remainder held by investment houses based in Vietnam....FPT which has become one of Vietnam's biggest companies and its connections run deep into the Party leadership and into the boardrooms of some of the biggest global corporation.

The loose control space, the media is sufficient to escalate the rise of consumerism in Vietnam. The role of the media cannot be denied in instilling new concepts or images of products within Vietnamese consumers' minds.

## CONCLUSION AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

The economic progress and greater global integration influenced the nature of the social cultural project of creating consumer culture in Vietnam. This research aims to understand the relationship between identity construction and brand consumption among the younger generation of Vietnamese urban consumers. As stated in the chapter 1, my research has four distinct aims:

- To consider how the consumption practices of the younger generation of urban consumers in contemporary Vietnam are specifically shaped by the historical, political, economic and socio-cultural context.

The economic transition reorders Vietnamese society and presents it as a stage for consumption. This study has explored how the younger generation of Vietnamese urban middle-class consumer negotiates their identities through brand consumption under the tension between globalisation and established traditions strongly preserved by the state. As consumers, this generation both desires to construct and communicate a ‘modern’ identity in order to enhance their social standing, whilst also adapting to particular social norms or acceptance defined by the traditions and socialist past. The existence of socialism and capitalism side-by-side can be seen everywhere in Vietnam, and is illustrated in the blended consumption habits of this emerging consumer culture.

- To develop in-depth insight into the attitudes, motivations and aspirations of *giới trẻ* in Vietnam in relation to their consumption practices

The study offers insights into the symbolic significance and pleasures associated with material goods and the contemporary consumption experience (Riesman 1950; Hayton 2010) in Vietnam. The legacy of the war, as well as the collectivist traditions which underpin Vietnamese culture (Wang and Ahuvia 1998; Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai 2003), serve as the possible roots of conformity and status consumption which characterises the *giới trẻ* in Vietnam. Brands increasingly

serve as indicators of class and distinction amongst these consumers (Bourdieu 1984).

- To identify and critically analyse the symbolic meanings these consumers associate with particular global and local brands and their significance.

The study focuses on cultural dimensions of consumption (Bourdieu 1984; Belk 1984) within the particular socio-cultural context of Vietnam. Findings suggest that the cultural capital Bourdieu refers to is continuously being reproduced and reinterpreted amongst the local cultural elites in Vietnam. The Western lifestyle myth is what offers cultural capital in this context. Vietnamese consumers prefer brands from Western countries, which serve as public displays of wealth and social status – face work. Meanwhile, nationalism and animosity are somehow interrelated within Vietnamese consumers' attitudes toward Chinese brands.

- To make a contextual and empirical contribution to existing knowledge regarding the consumption practices of the younger generations of urban middle-class as a transnational consumer (culture/class) within both emerging market contexts more generally, and post-socialist societies, in particular; to contribute some implications for international marketers in Vietnam

This detailed study of the younger generation of urban consumer in Vietnam contributes to specific theoretical and contextual understanding of consumer culture, and offers implications for marketers in Vietnam as the purpose achievements of the first three research objectives, while the approach of the study can be applied in the other Confucian or post socialist emerging market contexts.

### **7.1. Consumption and identity in Vietnam**

There are several factors specific to the unique context of Vietnam that suggest urban consumers establish their own local practices of consumption influenced by the wider discourses of globalisation. My research provided a **contextual understanding of** the Vietnamese consumers' life worlds by understanding the

socio-historical context in which they emerge. In particular, the socioeconomic, cultural and historical forces are strongly combined, influence on the pattern of consumption and identity projects among Vietnamese urban consumers.

As a consequence of economic transition after the Vietnam War The first generation of urban consumers quickly turned their focus to consumption by imitation i.e. following the herd in the model of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1925; Shipman 2008). Being a strongly collectivist culture (Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai 2003), social interaction in consumption practices according to group norms (Belk 1996; Wang and Ahuvia 1998; Hofstede and Mooij 2011) is emphasised. Accordingly, the significance of ‘face work’ and, in particular, ‘face saving’ (Goffman 1967; 1968; Ahuvia 2005) and extension of self (Belk 1989) has meant that consumers conform to each other’s expectations. Thus, these two reasons make conformity the key characteristic of this emerging consumer culture, in which the younger urban consumers increasingly purchase brands (Fournier 1998); especially the Western brands, as providers of symbolic resources (Featherstone 1991; Ger et al 2012) necessary to create their desired social image (Belk 2003; Slater 1995; Elliot and Davies 2005) rather than simply as a way to satisfy a biological need or to perform a particular function.

The influence of politics and cultural heritage in the social construction of consumption practices among consumers in Vietnam cannot be denied. There is a close interrelation between family, village and nation in the Vietnamese social structure (Nguyen Van Huyen 1944) and “whether you behave like a peasant or a banker, it is difficult to ignore the political hand in economic life” (Norpoth 1996, 786). The role of the state and the reflections of nationalism is very strongly visible in the life of Vietnamese people in promoting traditional values through the education system and through propaganda campaigns which have certain influence on the consumption patterns and choices of brands among the Vietnamese youth.

In this research, consideration has also been given to the analysis of historical forces which have shaped the marketplace and which strongly influence

contemporary consumption practices. The Vietnamese people have been in conflict with China and the U.S and France in the past. It remains controversial that they maintain feelings of animosity towards Chinese products, whilst communicating a clear preference for consuming American brands or Western brands. To help make sense of this, I have proposed two concepts, which can be applied to a consumption context – those of ‘chosen glories’ and ‘chosen traumas’, that are among seven ‘threads’ developed by Volkan to explain the establishment of a social narrative in connecting “the group with the past” (Volkan 2004, p. 47). These two ‘threads’ can provide a way to understand the social ‘feeling’ and situation in Vietnam following the Vietnam War in terms of ‘glory’, as well as the ways in which the ‘trauma’ continues to live on long after the year’s conflict on the border between Vietnam and China (Ang Chen Guan 1998) - as reflected in the differing attitudes of those who participated in the research towards Chinese brands and Western brands. Max Weber defines a nation as “a common unity of memories” (1978, p. 903). The national identity of Vietnamese people, therefore, is constructed through the collective memory which can be shaped, redefined and transformed (Volkan 2004).

According to Volkan (2004, p. 47) the feelings of success and triumph among group members are the mental representation of events and mythologized as the element of large group identity. This phenomenon is called ‘chosen glory’ that needs to be repeated continuously in support for a group’s self – esteem. In this case, ‘chosen glory’ helps people to more easily live on in the damages of the war and lead the shift of victims ‘feeling from pity to forgiving’. The Vietnamese collective memory of the Vietnam War helps to define the post-war Vietnamese identity in terms of a shift from forgiving to peace. Not only are there ritualistic recollections of events but also ‘heroes’ are selected for a mental representation by the large groups. Volkan describes the leader as the pole and the followers dance around the pole and the leader plays an important role in the scenario when a large group is regressed. The state continuously reminds the Vietnamese people of the triumph and the pride asserted in the victory by using the media to convey the desired message. The aim is the (re)orientation of society from the collective



realities of the war. Thus, Vietnamese consumers do not hold on to negative feelings towards Western brands. The ‘chosen glories’ have led to the forgiving consumerism among Vietnamese *giới trẻ* who easily embrace the Western lifestyle and adapt to the culture of pleasure seeking through their consumption practices.

In contrast, Ang Cheng Quan (1998) highlights four primary issues affecting the Vietnam – China relationship since the normalization in 1991. Each relates to shared land and sea borders between the two countries. The first two pertain to the demarcation of the land borders and the Tonkin Gulf. The third and the fourth is with the sovereignty dispute over the Paracel islands and Spatly islands. Collective memory is a part of collective identity. It is the cultural trauma with China among Vietnamese people. The majority of trauma survivors keep the details of their past as a painful secret (Danieli 1998). That is group intra - relation creates group consciousness, resulting in collective group identity. The tension remains high between Vietnam and China over disputed territory in the South China Sea, which resulting in less than harmonious relations between these two countries since early 2011. The negative attitudes of younger Vietnamese urban consumers towards country of origin (CO) and the quality of Chinese products is reflective of this.

The research also offers an important **empirical contribution** by examining the cultural aspects of the consumption, from the perspective of an emerging country; specifically, post socialist, post war, and post reform Vietnam. The findings bring empirical understanding by indicating many ways brands are expressed through different processes of significance in the routines of consumption. It also provides insights into the ways in which social structures such as class and distinction help to shape their identity in the discourse of globalisation in Vietnam.

The study broadens our understanding of consumer diversity by explaining how values and symbolic meanings are (re)produced among Vietnamese consumers influenced by global processes. It provides a better understanding of the interplay between alluring foreign and comforting local influences (Ger et al 2012); thus,

contributing to a more detailed understanding of brand literacy among Vietnamese consumers. Brand literacy refers to consumers' ability to read, understand and engage the cultural agreed meanings of brands to make him/her effective in the cultural context (Schroeder et al 2014). This study recognizes and identifies with meanings culturally associated with brands (Fournier 1998), related to specific experiences of the younger generation of Vietnamese urban consumers. It reveals how brand literacy is embedded in cultural context and contributes to brand culture of Vietnam.

The first four themes identified as shaping the symbolic meanings of Western brands can all be seen as core values of a self-centred phenomenon of conformity and hedonistic consumer culture. With the exception of cosmopolitanism, they are all strikingly similar to values observed to prevail in the first phase of the post-WW2 consumer societies of the US and Western Europe, in their conformity with naïve idealisation of goods. At the same time, they are conforming in a collective culture with the impact of Confucian values. The themes of CSR and safety are underpinned by the principles of ethical consumption and risk-management, neither of which was influential in the highly conformist consumerism of the 1950s/1960s. Therefore, the culture observed through the findings combines both regressions across fifty years and an orientation to some contemporary concerns.

The cultural dimensions associated with consumption tend to influence long – term brand engagement and loyalty (Fournier 1998). The brand relationships grow based on identification with some aspect of cultural context associated with the brand. In its exploration of this, the research offers certain **implications for international marketers:**

As Ger et al stated: “the transnational companies are likely to win by understanding and responding to the global/local cultural forces and tensions, rather than imposing a global uniformity” (2012, p.40). Global brands should look at the local through the lens of the global and at the global through the lens of the local. Vietnamese consumers embrace the rise of Western lifestyle and Western brands, but interpret them through the lens of their traditional values. The study

identifies how the meanings of Western brands manifest in the complex web of market, state and media in the context of Vietnam. Marketers should try to appraise and comprehend the local history, beliefs, expectations and norms to successfully approach local consumers. Thus, companies which find ways to reflect various possible resolutions of the alluring globalism-authentic localism tension through their positioning and differentiation strategies are likely to win the hearts and minds of consumers (Penaloza et al 2012; Ger et al 2012).

The study suggests there is strong growth in the desire of Western brands among younger generations in Vietnam. It forms the basis for understanding how Vietnamese consumers in cities develop particular preferences and emotional attachments to some brands rather than others. It provides an account of reading brand identity as culture-specific for practitioners of brand marketing.

With the availability of global brands, the ideology of consumption had to undergo rapid change. Vietnamese urban consumers use brand names to build up confidence, and extend their self (Belk 1988) or enhance their self – presentations (Goffman, 1956). Also they may use brands to mark their identification with particular social groups and subcultures in the negotiation of the traditions. From the cultural perspective, the findings suggest marketers should look at the contextual base and specific configurations of the global and local. Vietnamese urban consumers are strained to balance a Confucian-based culture and socialist model with market capitalism. They show preference for Western brands for their ‘show-off Face’, characterized by Confucianism.

To grow long-term value and consumer loyalty, marketers should focus on building brand literacy by innovative research and communication strategies. Thus, those companies trying to establish a presence in the Vietnamese market should employ adaptive strategies which recognise the specific nature of Vietnamese embracing modernity while negotiating with their traditions and norms. Global brands should be aware that products promoted bearing the mark of ‘foreignness’, especially Western origin, will likely be appealing to Vietnamese consumers.

Vietnamese consumers demand promotional communication that matches their own cultural priorities and even filter brand messages through the lens of local value and ideology such as Ho Chi Minh Ideology and socialism values. Consumers in Vietnam do not easily assimilate to the code and values of Western brands, but would be able to manipulate these codes to express their extended self (Belk 1988). The understanding of brand literacy among Vietnamese consumers can be applied in targeting consumers in advertising. For example, Western brand advertisements created for Vietnamese consumers such as Heineken's advertisements plays up difference, exoticism, and the Western origins of the brand.

The role of advertising is important in winning new markets such as Vietnam. Advertising on mass media stimulates Vietnamese consumers' interest in new products by introducing new consumption habits and evoking Western lifestyle. The media content (Wernick 1991) and celebrity endorsement (McCracken 1989) easily promote brand associations among the younger generation in Vietnam. Marketers should consider the ways of retaining the relevant core message of the promotional campaign in reaching out to the Vietnamese market.

## **7.2. Transferability of knowledge**

Cities are significant spaces that will become ever more important in the developing world, not only for demographic reasons but also because cities are the gateways to the global world (Hansen and Dalgaard 2008, p. 4). Aspiring consumers in emerging cities desire to display global brands and embrace the, so-called, 'modern' lifestyle. Such emerging cultures of consumption may retain many distinctive elements in the globalisation discourse, marked by hybridity. For example, one of the participants in this study, 'Huong', regards herself as a modern, trendy woman in Ho Chi Minh City with Western lifestyles, but often obeys the social acceptance and Confucian teaching as her mother wants (see p.178). Local culture norms and expectations blended with the foreign influences guide consumer behaviour. This study of the younger generation of Vietnamese

urban consumer reveals significant insights about locally specific interpretation of the consumer goods in the modern society. The purchase of high-priced brands is important part of *giới trẻ*'s engagement with global flows. Similar patterns were taking place in other emerging markets in Asia (Stearn 2001).

According to McKinsey Global, since 1990s, the world's centre of economic gravity has gradually shifted from the U.S and Europe towards Asia. Luxury brands are feeding luxe-hunger consumers in Asia (Chadha and Husband 2006), where we can see a growing appetite for high-priced brands among Asian emerging consumers for status consumption.

Vietnam is a case study of a specific post-socialist, post-war, post-reform context where the perspectives of Riesman (1950), Goffman (1967) and Bourdieu (1984) might be taken together to identify the salient characteristics of a particular transnational consumer culture – that of the younger generation of urban consumers. In the process of restructuring its economy and political pattern, Vietnam, like China, did not discard socialism completely by choosing the model of “market socialism”. Extending Bourdieu's term of “distinction”, middle-classness in market socialism of Vietnam is instantly articulated through the display of material possession. Consumers strive for valued symbolic capital and for social status while negotiating with traditional values and norms promoted by the state.

Defining the urban middle-class in contemporary Vietnam is not an easy task (King et al 2008). There is little evidence to support the idea of a cohesive middle-class grouping; although, there have been several studies during the last decade which have explored this concept in Vietnam. I would argue there are two types of assets which can be converted and translated in the gains combined of being called middle-class in modern Vietnam: Possession assets such as luxury cars or expensive motorbikes (Freire 2008; Vann 2011), housing (Drummond 2012; To Xuan Phuc 2012); and cultural assets: professional titles (King et al 2008), taste and lifestyle (Taylor 2012) and educational qualifications. The concept of middle-class culture holds much potential for explaining the middle-stratum in

various locales; as middle-class culture displays considerable regional and local distinction in Asia. This thesis illuminates some of the unique elements of Vietnamese urban middle-class culture in relation to consumption, whilst also bringing to the fore indicators which help define the somewhat complex and slippery concept of middle-class in emerging markets.

In the rapid socio-economic transformation that has taken place during the last two decades, the global cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have become the setting for modern cosmopolitan consumer experiences (Marshall-Nguyen et al 2012). The middle classes are encouraged to embody a new habitus that confers upon them a new social order (Belanger et al 2012). The symbol of middle-class is produced through individuals' participation in building class status and constructing appropriate habitus through growing status-based consumption, and class distinction through face work (Goffman 1967; Bourdieu 1984). The negotiation of show-off face and quiet luxury face has become second nature for Vietnamese urban consumers.

### **7.3. Reflection on methods**

Choosing the appropriate methods is essential for the effectiveness of any research study. Mixed methods can enhance a more complete interpretation of the social world from two databases. Within any given mixed methods study, the priority can shift to the qualitative component, which can be qualitatively driven mixed methods research. Combination of surveys, interviews and participation observation generate a better understanding of the phenomena in unbiased way via both numeric data and text data. Qualitative data helps to explain quantitative results that need further exploration.

In addition, projective techniques are not used to measure but to uncover feelings and motivations in a structure-indirect way (Webb 1992). The use of projective techniques in consumer research has for a long time been regarded as a method to enable the researcher to enter the daily lived experiences and unconscious thoughts of the research participants. Instead of talking directly to the researchers,

the participants reveal their thoughts through other, less direct, means. In consumer and marketing research, projective techniques, help to “constitute relatively ambiguous stimuli to permit the subjects to interpret the stimuli in terms of their own perceptions and in their own words” (Donoghue 2000, p. 48). Other authors have used this method successfully to investigate hidden motives linked with people’s purchasing decisions (Dong 2008); for example, when exploring the symbolic meanings of brands in relation to the identity work of consumers in post-socialist Vietnam. In my research, projective methods are enhanced and combined with the interview data to obtain a more rounded picture of consumption in contemporary urban Vietnam. The empirical study is specific to Vietnam, but its methods might be applicable within other emerging economies; particularly those within similar cultural, socio-historical and political experience.

The appropriate adaptability of methods within a particular cultural context influences the success of research and data collection and interpretation. The understanding of cultural factors or the diversity of cultures (Hofstede 2001; 2002) should be taken account of in the study design and implementation process, which ensures the research is applicable to the various sample populations and can be adapted to meet research aims. The cultural competence includes understanding the dynamics of difference (Hertel et al 2009), accessing cultural knowledge (Hofstede 2001), and adapting to diversity. For example, “the quality of the relationships between researchers and between re-searchers and informants was crucial to the successful implementation of the project “(Easterby-Smith and Malina 1999, p. 76). This understanding is critical for researcher to ensure (1) appropriate research design and relevant research methods; (2) effective communication and approaching participants during the fieldwork; (3) precise analysis or interpretation of the data.

#### **7.4. Personal reflections**

In “the hitherto neglected case of Vietnam” (King 2008), I came to realise how the cultural heritage (the socialist values and Confucian teaching) and the typical

consumer beliefs are paralleled and embedded in Vietnamese market when the new emerging class embrace the modern lifestyle to deposition themselves socially in contemporary Vietnam through brand consumption. Whilst cultural heritage and national identity might not promote ethnocentrism, it can create animosity.

To the world of more blocked and closed past, people used to lack material goods, as well as information and entertainment. After the subsidy period, one generation of Vietnamese population became the first-buyers of everything from bikes to house appliances. Individuals in Vietnam today learn to adapt themselves to the new consumption-oriented environment, incorporating values of materialism and social status into their everyday lives and performances of identity. Vietnamese consumers prefer the Western brands, not for “the reason of be yourself again”, but to enhance their image and as a tool to achieve success, expectation, wealth in the community.

At the beginning of conducting the fieldwork, I was very confident as a native Vietnamese student doing research on Vietnam, but the journey turned out to be ‘up’ and ‘down’. I remembered my first interview with a male subject who was not really stimulated and revealed little during the interview. Although I carefully considered his profile and background to ensure he met the criteria of my research sample, it turned out that he was not comfortable in opening up to me. I felt exhausted and let down after transcribing the interview that evening. In contrast, my first day of collecting surveys was exciting. I could not wait to read all the interesting stories and different thoughts from this student group, which actually motivated me to go more to the universities in windy Hanoi and dry season of Ho Chi Minh City, patiently waiting for the time slot or a class break to deliver the survey sheets.

I found the PhD journey really tough, but nevertheless an interesting experience. Shifting from a professional position to student life in another country for three years, with huge load of reading, was not easy. I have always thought, even until now, that I have moved from “zero to a bit better”. I felt motivated and



encouraged whenever I had my fortnightly discussions and progress review with Professor Barry Richards, who ever so patiently interviewed me for nearly one hour on the phone on a summer's day in 2011 before my departure to U.K. He usually gave me open directions with expert advice to challenge me to produce better work. In turn, Dr Carrie Hodges gave detailed and precise comments to help me perfect my work. I owe a big thank you to Professor Barry Richards and Dr. Carrie Hodges who have guided my journey so far. Through this experience, I have had the opportunity to share my ideas with others and to present my work, and also to learn and exchange with scholars some of whom are admired legends in my research area.

Thanks to the generosity of Santander Grant, Professor Barry Richards' recommendation and the approval of Professor Ben Kiernan – the SEAS council chair at Yale University, I had an effective time of updating myself on the latest research on modern Vietnam during my visiting trip at Yale University. I was honoured to have a chat with Professor Harms an expert on modern Vietnam about the dilemma and the current situation in Vietnam to fulfil some gaps in my research.

In 2007, with a background in Journalism, I thought of writing a non-fiction book as a Vietnamese citizen of the post wartime generation, witnessing, first-hand, the challenges facing, and the changes taking place in, the country. However, a chance to do a Ph.D enabled me to construct a narrative of modern Vietnam in an academic way, where the interpretation from more Vietnamese respondents and reflections of more reports from the other authors would bring a solid picture of the current situation. Professor Barry Richards and Dr Carrie Hodges accompanied me on this journey to tell, I hope, a fair and authentic story that is “full of dreams and unspeakable silence” (Harms 2011, p. 221).

## **7.5. Final thought**

The Ph.D journey has been a period during which I have built the concrete foundations for my house of knowledge, which is endless and continuously decorated by adding more new ideas and perfection works afterward. As a Vietnamese saying: “*knowledge is like an ocean*”, it is the on-going task of learning and receiving.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Pilot study**

The researcher conducted a pilot study in June, 2012 to measure the awareness of brands among the younger generation of Vietnamese urban consumers and what the Western brands means to them. According to Keller (2003), brand knowledge expresses the personal meaning about a brand that consumers have stored in memory, including all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information.

A Vietnamese questionnaire was designed with several task to know their attitudes toward brands, including their experience of Western brand consumption, the choice of best country of origin for products in different categories, main reasons for purchasing domestic, Chinese and Western brands. The meaning of Western brands are explicit through a dream elicitation task in the questionnaire.

Hanoi is chosen for conducting the research due to the researcher's network of connection with the lecturers working in different universities. Also, it's the capital of Vietnam, the most important political cultural centre and second largest economic city of Vietnam, having a population of nearly 8 million.

Through an extensive literature review, the researcher distributed a Vietnamese survey containing several tasks to university students in Hanoi (n=252 of 260 distributed). Below are the initial findings from the data collection.

U.S maintain the best choice in several categories as well as when asked about the 3 top favourite brands, 97 respondents say Apple. Also, among nearly 100 brands are mentioned, there are majority of the U.S brands. Tran Bach Dang (2008) mentions that even Communist Party members loyal to the reform strategy

sometimes wonder if Vietnam is losing its soul to Coca Cola, Madonna and Hollywood.

The symbolic meaning becomes very important as it transforms our lived experiences and is a part of the way consumers communicate their social and cultural identities. Majority of the subjects obtain very positive attitudes toward Western brands. Thus, I came back to U.K to revise the survey and decide my main project is to focus on symbolic meanings of Western brands as playing the central role in the daily life of Vietnamese urban consumers.

## Appendix B

*My name is Pham Hai Chung, a doctoral researcher at Media School of Bournemouth University. I am conducting a study of consumers' relationship to brands. I have developed a comprehensive survey. All of your responses will be completely confidential and the results published will be anonymous.*

*Thank you very much in advance for helping with this valuable research project. It will take you between 35 and 40 minutes to complete it.*

*Pham Hai Chung*

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### SECTION 1

INSTRUCTION: Read each one and finish it by writing the first thing that comes to your mind. For question No 7, it can be a positive or negative story, please describe as much detailed as you can.

1. *My top 3 favourite brands are*

---

2. *To me a good brand should*

---

- 3.

*When I use Chinese brands, I feel* \_\_\_\_\_

*When I use Domestic brands, I feel* \_\_\_\_\_

*When I use Western (European or American) brands, I feel* \_\_\_\_\_

4. *If I have a favourite brand \_\_\_\_\_ (give a brand name), and one day my friend shows up with the latest item from said brand, I would feel*

\_\_\_\_\_

5. *Compared to most of my friends, my consumption of branded products is*

\_\_\_\_\_

6. *When mentioning brands, my friends and myself often talk about (Please tick the 2 most appropriate)*

a. Price                      b. Physical features                      c. Design

d. Brand personality    e. User/usage imagery

f. Other (please specific) \_\_\_\_\_

7. *I imagine having a story of consuming Western (European or American) brands. I would describe as follow:*

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## SECTION 2

8. *Fill in the country of association that you think is your best choice for the following products*

a. Motorbike \_\_\_\_\_ b. Car \_\_\_\_\_

c. Computer \_\_\_\_\_ d. Mobile phone \_\_\_\_\_

- e. Cosmetics\_\_\_\_\_
- f. Food\_\_\_\_\_
- g. Healthcare\_\_\_\_\_
- h. Fashion\_\_\_\_\_
- i. Education\_\_\_\_\_

**9. List three of broadcast programs/channels/newspapers/magazines/websites that you access most frequently in your daily life**

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Please fill out some information about yourself**

**Gender:** a. Male b. Female

**Family location:** a. City b. Town c. Village

**Personal monthly spending**

- a. Under 200 USD
- b. 200-500 USD
- c. Over 500 USD

## Appendix C

### A sample of survey

*My name is Pham Hai Chung, a doctoral researcher at Media School of Bournemouth University. I am conducting a study of consumers' relationship to brands. I have developed a comprehensive survey. All of your responses will be completely confidential and the results published will be anonymous.*

*Thank you very much in advance for helping with this valuable research project. It will take you between 35 and 40 minutes to complete it.*

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### SECTION 1

INSTRUCTION: Read each one and finish it by writing the first thing that comes to your mind. For question No 7, it can be a positive or negative story, please describe as much detailed as you can.

11. *My top 3 favourite brands are*

\_\_\_\_\_ Victoria secret, Zara, Iphone \_\_\_\_\_

12. *To me a good brand should*

\_\_\_\_\_ Quality, Brand – trust, well-known \_\_\_\_\_

13.



*When I use Chinese brands, I feel* \_\_\_not satisfied\_\_\_\_\_

*When I use Domestic brands, I feel* \_\_\_fairly satisfied

*When I use Western (European or American) brands, I feel* \_\_\_proud

14. *If I have a favourite brand* APPLE (give a brand name), and one day my friend shows up with the latest item from said brand, I would feel

\_\_\_\_\_ a bit envious \_\_\_\_\_

15. *Compared to most of my friends, my consumption of branded products is*

\_\_\_\_\_ less experienced \_\_\_\_\_

16. *When mentioning brands, my friends and myself often talk about (Please tick the 2 most appropriate)*

*b. Price*                      *b. Physical features*                      *c. Design*

*d. Brand personality*    *e. User/usage imagery*

*f. Other (please specific)* \_\_\_\_\_

17. *I imagine having a story of consuming Western (European or American) brands. I would describe as follow:*

One man went on business in the U.S. When he came back, he wanted to buy some branded products for his wife and children. He went to some luxury shops to buy the best items. Finally, he chose three clothes introduced by the sale girls who said they were the best design and quality. They are GUCCI and cost him a lot. He felt so confident they would be the great presents for family. When he came home, he was excited to give but the wife claimed he spent a lot. They were so

expensive and exactly similar to her clothes in the wardrobe with the labels ‘made in China’..

## SECTION 2

**18. Fill in the country of association that you think is your best choice for the following products**

- b. Motorbike \_\_\_\_\_ *Japan* \_\_\_\_\_ b. Car \_\_\_\_\_ *Germany* \_\_\_\_\_
- d. Computer \_\_\_\_\_ *Japan* \_\_\_\_\_ d. Mobile phone \_\_\_\_\_ *U.S* \_\_\_\_\_
- j. Cosmetics \_\_\_\_\_ *France* \_\_\_\_\_
- k. Food \_\_\_\_\_ *Vietnam* \_\_\_\_\_
- l. Healthcare \_\_\_\_\_ *U.K* \_\_\_\_\_
- m. Fashion \_\_\_\_\_ *France* \_\_\_\_\_
- n. Education \_\_\_\_\_ *U.S* \_\_\_\_\_

**19. List *three* of *broadcast* programs/channels/newspapers/magazines/websites that you access most frequently in your daily life**

- d. \_\_\_\_\_ *Vnexpress* \_\_\_\_\_
- e. \_\_\_\_\_ *Facebook* \_\_\_\_\_
- f. \_\_\_\_\_ *Youtube* \_\_\_\_\_

**20. Please fill out some information about yourself**

**Gender:** a. Male b. Female

**Family location:** a. City b. Town c. Village

**Personal monthly spending**

- d. Under 200 USD
- e. 200-500 USD
- f. Over 500 USD

## Appendix D

### The interview guide

The interviews are designed to develop further discussion based on the survey. Below is a sample of some of the structured questions that the participants were asked to shape the conversation during the interviews. As the conversation progress, I also asked non-structured questions/follow-up questions to interpret their stories or experiences of consumption practices.

#### *Self-image and experience of brand consumption*

- How can you prove that you are a middle-class?
- What are your top three favourite brands?
- Can you tell me stories/reasons leading you to favour these brands?
- What is the most valuable experience when you consume Western brands/Chinese brands/ Domestic brands?

#### *Brand consumption in relation to others*

- What kind of social group you most socialize with?
- How do you perceive yourself, compared to them, in term of consumption?
- Do you feel pressure to consume ?
- What kind of content you and your group often talk when mentioning brands?

#### *The economic, historical, cultural factors*

- What is the most important difference between society as it is now and 10 years ago?
- How do you see you are different from people in Hanoi/Ho Chi Minh City in term of consumption?
- How brands help you to create modern/successful/wealthy image in modern society?
- When, where and why you want to show or hide the brands you consume?

*Media as shaper of taste*

- How media is important to your life and consumption practices?
- Can you describe a celebrity or media character which influence your lifestyle and brand choice?
- Could you share a story that you buy a brand because of its advertisement or promotional content on media?

## Appendix E

Background: Lan lived in Hanoi until 16, then she moved to Saigon with her parents. She took B.A in Vietnamese language at National university of Vietnam in Saigon and a diploma in English linguistics in Australia for 2 years. She has been working for Vietnamese News since then. She is married and has a child.

*Could you tell me stories that make Burberry, FC and Polo become your favourite brands?*

**Lan:** First, they are from Western countries. Second, the prices are acceptable for middle-class persons like me. Third, they are suitable for my daily style, very flexible for work, going out, party and business purpose or any other events. The most important thing is reasonable for my income. For Polo, I use cosmetics. Honestly, I followed my husband, he uses a lot of Polo products. I use Polo for bath foam, cream, also I like Polo T-shirts which are very suitable for weather in Saigon and in good quality. I also like the logo, the history of Polo. It's the representative brand for the U.S - very dynamic - a country that I like in term of development. For Burberry, it's the story related to my childhood, the factor of culture and all of my dreams. For Burberry, I feel I really consume a brand, having a passion for brand. For the other two, I just think I use mainly because they are good. For Burberry, I only buy it when something happily come to me or when I get a gift from my husband. I appreciate using it, use it on special occasions to show that I am a fan of brand. I chose Burberry as it comes from U.K. You know we are the generation born in 1970s, when the literature of England and Europe was published and came to us first in Vietnam. I love the royal history of Queen, King. England has a longer history of culture than the U.S. Also, this brand expresses all characters of England and English people, very closely. I also like it because of the cultural factor, its quality and brand trust. I prefer it to others, also because the reputation and recognition of this brand is very strong in Vietnamese market. For example, FC, Cartier is not familiar to Vietnamese people. Using these brands cannot satisfy the feeling of ownership within Vietnamese consumers. While this brand may do a good job in marketing in Vietnam or the trademark, logo is so popular here.

*Could you tell me more about the feeling of ownership with Burberry?*

**Lan:** I don't think much of the moment when people admire. Honestly, It has a bit but that would be the last factor. The first is to satisfy myself. I feel comfortable, happy to have something that I always dream of. And you know I also feel in a higher position, in term of money, and knowledge. However, I don't care if normal persons know the value of the brands I use or not. I just need that from the

persons at the same level with me...I mean the same social standing. If they look at me and properly they would know my kind of brand and its value. A stylish person would know whether it's real or fake. I don't care others, normal persons. That's enough for me.

In developed countries, people don't care so much about brands these days, except the world of showbiz and the point is the brands have to depend on these celebrities to develop. In Vietnam, the situation is different. The trend of using brands esp luxury brands among young middle – class is popular.

*Do you consider yourself very experienced in using brands ?*

**Lan:** Sure, I have knowledge about that. In Vietnam, 80 percents of brand consumers do not have very high income, not in high class but very brand conscious and they are very careful in choosing brands, while 20 percents (with a lot of money) don't care so much about prices. Among these 20 percent, 90 percent of which do not have knowledge about brands. They don't buy a branded product without a legal code, bill. That's why the case of Gucci in Metropole happened. These just follow the trend and buy the brand name, they even don't know which collection is now released and how much. They are easily cheated. Only 10 percents out of 80 percents mentioned above, including me who use brands to satisfy myself, while the rest want to show off their social identity. Their reality is not like what they show through brands. That's why they need brands.

For me, a brand is like a friend. I can use it for 10 years, I only dumb it when it's damaged. I like the spirit of it like a friend and I must be comfortable with it. I must feel confident and it must be suitable for Vietnamese condition and situation. Then a bit factor of luxury, elegance and the last one is the social standing. The desire of expressing social standing exist, but for me, that would be the last one. I also think of that. Now I really like a pair of shoes of Burberry. I want to add more to my collection with black color, I would buy them in coming Hong Kong trip. In Asia, Hong Kong is number one for shopping. I have to admit the fashion in Hong Kong is very update and faster than Singapore. I am always in love with shoes. I think the shoes can tell everything about the characters of a woman. From my early childhood, I read a lot of stories about shoes like Cinderella or Tam Cam or girl with red shoes. And all women care about shoes. And I can tell you normally people consume branded products or in love with brands are very loyal or faithful persons in daily life, work and love. ....why...when you like a brand, you would like it forever, if you change a lot of brands, you do not really understand about brands. You should only have 3 or 4 favourite brands. I presume that a person loyal to brands is a person very loyal and faithful in life, I don't know. It's like the spirit of something, or lifestyle, a bit related to the art, culture. And I really like this topic.

*How could you improve your knowledge about brands?*

**Lan:** I don't know the current situation, maybe the younger are better than me in accessing and understanding brands. People born in 70s are often influenced by parents in consumption. My parents are the state officers and very well – educated. Thus, my first experience with brands come from my family and relatives. My father was a teacher and did business later, my mother worked for Vietnamese News Agency. My parents did not participate in war resistance, but my parent –in-law did. My husband is also strongly influenced by his parents who were very high position officers in the past. They went abroad, and told a lot of stories to their children about brands, they also bought some products abroad for them. In case of my family, my parents did not go abroad, but my uncles and aunts went abroad to study in Russia and Germany. My uncles and aunts bought products for me and gave me very early education about Western brands. From early childhood, I also knew about brands and its history. Later when I grew up, I got more education about that, but the basic knowledge was already thick since I was small. I just improve my knowledge naturally. And you know now we live in a flat world - a digital world, it's so easy to access information about whatever you want to know.

For Burberry, first I was given a present, gradually, through education, self learning, and movie that makes me really in love with this brand. FC has later history, and I become fond of that through my experience of shopping. I gradually like it through my experience with it, I feel it is good. I think there are two ways for me to come to a brand. First, someone inspires me, and the second from my own experience. But I can tell you the influence or inspiration from others is not kind of 'blind influence' to me, as I also put myself to understand and experience it, I give my own thought and decision. I first know them through others, but I discover myself. I don't like a brand just because he or she likes it.

*Do you think you are Westernized in consumption?*

**Lan:** Yes, both of us, my husband and I ever got education abroad. Both were born after the war ended and in the period of economic renovation. We started to be allowed to express our opinion stronger and opener. I can cross the border and the control of the traditional values. All persons born after 1974 were strongly influenced by this trend. Anybody who like freedom life would grab this chance very quickly. I admit that, the education from my family is strong and but then the working environment is strong too, that I had a lot of chances working with foreigners and a chance of studying abroad. Then I feel that I wanted to consume only Western brands since I have my own money.



*So what is Vietnamese feature in your style of your consumption?*

**Lan:** Very easy, in detailed, in consumption, the part of Vietnamese is still very strong. The style of dressing is still a bit traditional - Vietnamese way (not showing a lot part of body) and care much about what people around are thinking. This point is not true in Western world. Thus, you can see I choose Burberry and Polo because they are both classic. The style of design is a bit like uniform, not strong revolution in design like other brands. I mean a bit vintage. If a person so much Westernized would not like it, he or she may like other brands. The second feature is the Vietnamese ways of buying or purchasing. Something always reminds me is that our parents came from and lived in a very poor country, thus when we consume branded products, our way of buying must be very smart and careful, not so much generous.

*Not so much generous and have a careful choice. So why did you choose price as index of status if you just said like that ?*

**Lan:** I chose price as index of status because I admit that in the world of brands: 'how much the price is' means 'how high the level of status is'. Real brand consumers never think that only brand name makes the prices. I am a real fan of brands, I could say that the price deserves the quality. For example, my husband's sister and brother always consume products with higher standard than me, even with the same brands. Their income is much higher, so they would choose the better and higher version or models. The collection and limited products are much better in term of quality. I can not deny, for branded products, prices is as index of status. Ten years ago, my husband and I chose products with lower prices of the same brands, I mean suitable for our budget, but now we have more money, still Polo, but I would choose better collection and models. I carefully think of prices but definitely prices as index of status is always right.

*Thanks, I see your point. You said that among your friends, you are smarter in consumption. Could you explain more about that?*

**Lan:** Compared to my close friends and family members, I don't think I am better than them in consumption. I am similar to them. We have the same habit, the same choice of brands. Nobody influence each other, they also have knowledge, certain income, all of us have the same habit, same feelings, so we come together. The real fan of brands do not influence each other. I only go shopping with my husband or alone, I sometimes go with one or two friends. But they are totally influenced by me and depend on me. Thus I think among my friends I have more knowledge and smarter than them in term of brand consumption.

*I just wonder you said you like Polo and your husband liked it first, Does he inspire you in love with Polo?*

**Lan:** A bit, if I see my husband likes it, but I don't see it's suitable for me, I would not choose it. I think persons are fond of brands, have strong personality, they don't like to be influenced by others. Don't want to be similar to anyone.

*Do you think of someone else who inspire your style or pattern of consumption*

**Lan:** I can tell you I am very confident and kind of narcissism, love myself very much. Nobody can be called someone who really inspire me. But if you want to know my icon, a bit funny, but I can tell you that's Ho Chi Minh. When I go abroad for study, and I ever thought If I have to choose an icon for myself, that would be Vietnamese, I would not accept foreign citizen although I can be Westernized in the lifestyle. Ho Chi Minh is very experienced in life and excellent in his philosophy. When I studied overseas to improve my English for 2 years, I was one of the first Vietnamese who studied abroad with my family support not the scholarship. At that time, the trend of going out for education is popular in Vietnam, a lot of education centre appeared in Vietnam. I used the private service in Hanoi – the Quoc Anh company to help me find education university in Australia. On arrival, I was shocked in a developed country with all the new things. We were not well – prepared for that shock, everybody got lost, their families in Vietnam were so worried. We had to support ourselves. I thought of how confident I was who were born in a county under the slave and colony for so long, went abroad myself for education. I linked to all the lessons about Ho Chi Minh philosophy that I ever thought silly. That's part of my Vietnamese identity.

Where we are now. Oh.. I like the style of Hanoian people in Hanoi and Hanoian people moved to live in Saigon, and someone who ever lived and worked for a while in foreign countries. Their styles are very similar to me. For example, my husband, I love him from his first appearance when we first met. I admit that I also like the style of Victoria Beckham. But It doesn't mean I would follow her style They are the real sample, that I should make my choice right in consumption. When people are well educated, they just get some inspiration reference for their style of brand consumption. I love Teen Vote magazine, OK magazine, and Hollywood Reporters that my husband ordered for long term. All these magazines would update me about the trend of this season or this year. A person in love with brands, can not forget the trend of the season or year. If I like a dress or stuff I can be loyal to use it for even 10 years. But I also have to admit that if the trend of this season is sparkling, I would have to own a stuff with this trend at least. I would think of it and the budget and the time to buy it.

I don't think my style is similar to anyone around, with the same shirts, but when you put on each one, with different personality, characters, or the way of matching with other stuff would make each look different. I think even with the same brands, I would make it in my own way. In Vietnam, it's not easy to see the same products with me. But sometimes, I don't like the trend that one have a bag and the 'whole village' have the same. But it happens to Vietnamese showbiz now, all the celebrities have the same. I think the spirit each person put inside the products would be different and you know each person has their own spirit. No one is similar to anyone. You can have the same bag with me, welcome, but my way of using it would be different from you.

*You lived in Hanoi until 16 years old. Could you compare the difference between the young middle-class in Hanoi and Saigon in their way of consumption?*

**Lan:** I think they are totally different.

*Please tell me more about your opinion*

**Lan:** When Hanoi people really like a brand, they don't care so much about prices. They desire to have it by all means. They would find the way to buy it sooner or later. Meanwhile, people in Saigon are more realistic, they would compare and consider more about the price and their background. Actually, Hanoi people have an stronger inspiration in buying fashion, transportation than Saigon people. Saigon people carefully make decision and when they feel it's not in need, they would not buy, while Hanoi people just need inspiration for purchasing decision.

*why do you think so, what kind of inspirations do you mean?*

**Lan:** I think Hanoi people are more romantic, and live more for the part called "spirit", while Saigonian are more materialistic and realistic.

*Do you consider yourself as Hanoian or Saigonian, which part is stronger inside yourself?*

**Lan:** I take both. I was born in Hanoi and lived for a while, but the period I grown up was in Saigon and I am very adaptive, so I take all good parts of Hanoi and Saigon Identity. I mean the romance and inspiration plus a bit risky from Hanoi and the smart way in consumption from Saigon

*So which part would be the main point in your decision of choosing a brand to buy?*

**Lan:** Depending on the situation, usually I must defend myself a lot, when I really like a product. Although I like it so much and it is expensive, I may think,

for this time of the year, I don't have plan for that. I have to struggle in my mind a lot. However, the romantic part finally wins, and I have to take money out of my pocket for that.

*So Hanoian part is stronger?*

**Lan:** Yes, when struggling, Hanoi part wins.

*How about your parents, do they follow the style of Saigon consumption when they moved to Saigon?*

**Lan:** No no no, my parents are still purely Hanoian style and old – fashioned

*Is that the reason that makes part of your Hanoian stronger?*

**Lan:** Exactly. I want to tell you there is a funny saying “if you want to find original Hanoian, you must go to Saigon to find, majority of them moved to Saigon after 1975, if you want to find original Saigonian, you have to go to the U.S’’. Hanoi is now so mixed. Hanoian have a very traditional way of thinking like this: “even when you are hungry, you must look clean...Even you are poor, but when you get out of the house, you must looks clean and tidy’’. That’s the tradition of old Hanoian. Thus when wearing brands doesn’t not really mean they want to show off. They are influenced by this tradition value. They are also very shy. Hanoian people always know how to dress suitable in different context or situations. They never put on the clothes not fit for certain situation. I don’t agree with some opinions saying that they want to show off through brands.

I can give an example from my own witness. My husband’s brother wore a pair of glasses. He never told me or showed off with me about the brand of the glasses. One day I saw in a movie, there was a Hollywood star wearing them. And then I realised my husband’s brother also had them. I was a bit shocked, since then I paid more attention to his stuff and I see my husband’s family also are in the same. They use all branded products, but the never show about that. They just use them – kind of quiet luxury. I prefer to stay in dark, not show anyone, but suddenly, somebody discover that, I would be very very very happy.

*What in your mind about the whole picture of Vietnamese young consumers generally?*

**Lan:** I think people in the world now thinking Vietnamese young people consume branded products in the same way with Chinese people. Chinese people are so crazy in buying, and rush for the brand name. I think the Western people in Western countries are in the thought that Vietnamese urban youth are so crazy for

brand without knowledge and are ‘blind’. I can be sure that’s the small numbers and just the surface of the phenomena easily seen. I have experience that a lot of Vietnamese people really have good knowledge about brands and prefer quiet luxury. When I went abroad, I talked to sales persons, they were very surprised to know that I am Vietnamese. They were shocked that a Vietnamese person really understand about the brand so much like me. I said that I am just the normal one and a lot of others are much better than me and have more money than me and their education is very good. From my experience with my brother and sisters, they are very brand conscious but have very good knowledge of brands. Vietnamese people come to buy brands just to satisfy themselves to please the time when the life is better, to enjoy the moment of material life after the Vietnam war, with all the consequences, they had to suffer from living in poverty. Just to satisfy themselves and move from the period of basic needs: “enough food and clothes” and to the period of “good meal and beautiful clothes”. Consuming brands is like the art in life for them, to enjoy a better life. Some do not really need to show off their social standing

*Can you give me some reasons why you noted down in the survey that you don’t use Vietnamese products?*

**Lan:** I consume only Vietnamese food. For other kinds of products, I did not use them when I started having money. From quality, design to function doesn’t satisfy me. For Vietnamese high end quality, the good point is quality but the design is so ugly, old fashion, little choice, not good colour, not good functional. Also I want to say, for Chinese unbranded products, I never touch. For Burberry I would never buy stuff made in China. I prefer to buy stuff made in France or Italy. I even ever chose the products I am not really satisfied with design but not made in China. For casual items, I really don’t care about country of association, just the brand name is fine for my reference.

*Which media do you access most to update about brands?*

**Lan:** Actually I go direct to the website of the brands. I order online and then they often send me a newsletter for coming products. First, when Vietnam was not opened, I had to go abroad to buy them. So travelling is just the small thing, buying stuff is the main thing. I gave them email, they exchanged information very well. Also, I read [kenh14.vn](http://kenh14.vn), which is for Vietnamese teenagers and I follow the trend of Vietnamese youth.

**Appendix F**

A note of participant observation (December 2013, Ho Chi Minh City)

After the interview in district 3, the participant No.8 took me to tea stand gossip in district 1 to meet her three friends later in the evening. Green tea stand gossip originally coming from Hanoi is now the new trend in urban lifestyle among the youth in Ho Chi Minh City. As the popular saying “tea stall keeps gossip alive”. As the same trend in Hanoi, young Saigon people perch on tiny plastic stools on pavements, drinking iced bitter green tea, sharing gossip, rumor and chat about modern lifestyles, technologies, celebrities and news.

We arrived the site first. sitting on the two plastic stool on the pavement, looking the busy light streets in the evening of Ho Chi Minh City. During the daytime, under the strong sunshine, women often wear masks to protect the skin while driving the transport vehicles. It was always enjoyable for me to observe Hanoi in Summer or Ho Chi Minh in the evening, where the urban younger women are in shorts, mini skirts, male are in jeans, casual, driving trendy scooters, heading to restaurants, coffee shops, bars until the dawn.

15 minutes later, her friends (A, B and C) showed up, driving the three scooters , saying hi to us. They quickly parked the vehicles on the opposite side of the road and joined us. They appeared in quite similar style (jeans, T-shirts and shoes with Nike and Addidas logos). I assumed my imitation of Southern accent in a first joke about their sporty style supported their very welcome mood to the reason I was there.

Quickly, five glasses of iced green tea with a disk of roast nuts were served on a very small table. The three did not forget to pull out their smartphones (3 Iphones) to record this moment to prove on FB that they are cool urban elite. The sound of barking the horns of vehicles interacted with conversation is a common thing in any city in Vietnam. My participant was using Blackberry, and was teased by the rest that her family was wealthy and she was out of date not to use

Iphone. She softly replied that she thought of buying an Iphone in her coming business trip to Hong Kong in the following month.

Coming to know I was back from U.K, B expressed he was a fan of Adele since he knew "someone like you" and "Rolling in the deep "and he wished to enjoy her concert in Royal Albert Hall in London one day. Looking at the busy night traffic in the street, they started to talk about their future travel plan for the coming year, the trendy lifestyle in Saigon, and how to earn more money to please their habit of travelling and purchasing new stuff, instead of discussing about the plan of getting married or settle down at their age as my parent generation used to do.

My participant expressed her sad mood that she really wanted to travel with them, but except the business trips, she was not allowed by her parents to go on holiday with them. As she described in my interview before, she still lived with them, and she needed to behave well before marriage by not staying overnight outside or with male friends. They claimed they were highly educated family. She turned to me, saying that “even everyday I must be back home before 10 P.M”. Besides this restricted point from their parents, they all kept update with all latest releases of gameshow, Pop-music, movies and fashion brands in the world in their stories. My participant raised a question to B and C about the ideal image of male urban elite nowadays.

B with Northern accent influenced by his parents with Northern origin clearly expressed that a trendy male Saigon person must know all the trendy places to please his girl when going out on a date. He must know to get a good and permanent job. Each year he should manage to travel to one country and own all the basic technology stuff. Definitely that guy must look fashionable.

C added the importance of getting at least one university degree, and even would be better to have an overseas master degree to get a good job in this crowded and competitive Ho Chi Minh City. Their way of talking and using language proved to

me that they had parents with money, seeding this idea to them. They shifted the topic when A saw a girl walking in the street with a nice white bag