

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Being Vietnamese in a Cosmopolitan World**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I will deal with how contemporary Vietnamese struggle to define themselves in the days of globalization, what it is like having both a Vietnamese national and cultural identity, and what role K-pop covers plays in this process. I will consider the reasons why Korean popular culture has been able to penetrate the Vietnamese music market, and look at various identity issues related to the reasons behind the popularity of Korean popular culture in Vietnam. This chapter is primarily based on interviews with my Vietnamese respondents, and it covers Vietnamese views on the characteristics of Korean popular music, and also the level of competitiveness among Vietnamese fans. Then, I will answer the question as to how the groups' performances signify a change in the identity of Vietnamese young people in Vietnam today, and investigate the process of change within Vietnamese youth culture, as identified by the consumption of K-pop music and dancing.

#### **5.2 Youth Culture Studies**

According to the laws: “Law of Caring for and Protecting Children”, “Vietnam’s Labor Law” and “the Law of Criminal Affairs of Vietnam”, the category ‘young Vietnamese people’ refers to those who are between 15 and 34 years-old, and this group comprises over one-third of the total population (My 2005: 259).

In this section, I will argue that youth culture in my study is neither seen as a subordinate, nor a threat to the established social norms. Among youth researches in the UK dating back to the early 1970s, “subcultures” such as “hippies”, “skinheads”, “punks”, were seen as resisting or opposing the agency of the parent culture through fashion, dance, music and other cultural forms (Buckingham 2008: 4). In my case study, I look at K-pop cover acts as representative of many young groups who are trying to do

something new for themselves, and also contribute to a society in which they have more choices and better opportunities than the older generation; to do what they want with the rise of technologies.

Dating back to studies on Vietnamese youth and youth culture in Vietnam after Doi Moi in 1986, which focused on urban areas such as Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City regarding the consumption of cultural products, electronic goods, mobile phones, motorbikes, brand-name apparel, and ideologies from both the global media and new education (young people with an overseas education), scholars on Vietnamese studies have argued that today's Vietnamese young people in urban landscapes such as Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh city no longer respond to emotive political appeals from the leaders of the Communist Party and the state (Marr 1996, Huyen 1998, Nilan 1999, Thomas 2002a and Phuong-An 2005). Instead, young people express a greater interest in matters directly related to their daily lives, such as individualism, an aspiration to act independently and take responsibility for their own actions, as well as conspicuous consumption and a desire to embrace socio-economic and cultural changes in the processes of globalization as a result of generational shift in identity-formation towards global economy integration (Nilan 1999, Nguyen 2005).

Practically, recognizing that globalization and economic liberalization are becoming driving forces among young people, the Party and state have relaxed the level of political indoctrination in recent years and given more space for young people to fulfill their own desires, interests and ideals (Phuong-An 2005). While Western individual values are becoming more widely accepted among Vietnamese young people, they also show a sense of community, an interest in politics, and a youthful idealism (Marr, 1996; Nguyen, 2003). Moreover, the qualities and values of their parents' generation in difficult times, those displayed during their younger years, are still present within them (Nilan 1999). Gen Y is situated in a transition period of contesting spaces. As such, while embracing modernity and cultural globalization, young Vietnamese (Gen Y of Vietnam) do not totally reject all values inherited by their parents and promoted by the Party and state (Phuong-An 2005).



Based on the above literature reviews, as well as my intensive and in-depth field observations in Ha Noi between 2013 and 2014, from the perspective of a Vietnamese researcher, I situate my study on youth culture in Vietnam after Doi Moi in terms of the variety of identical performances young people perform of K-pop dance. Besides K-pop dance covers, young people have been able to perform with their bodies and minds; to develop ideas of who they want to become, and to do so have made use of the internet and YouTube. There are many groups of young people around the country, especially in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh city, which act as very active net-citizens. For instance, there are many groups who make subtitles for foreign music and movies they like, and share their work with others who have the same tastes on websites, including Kites We Fly<sup>1</sup> and Siam movies Channel<sup>2</sup>. They are all made by young students of around 20 to 22. Other activities include making V-Logs (Video blogs) and short films such as on a youth channel called “He always smiles”<sup>3</sup>, which is run by a group of young people born after the 1990s. The major topics discussed are about their emotions, opinions about love and life, and about society and current social issues, and this type of forum has become a popular trend among the young. Coincidentally, the most prominent V-loggers (Video bloggers) are JNevermind<sup>4</sup>, ToanShinoda<sup>5</sup>, duhocsinhmy<sup>6</sup> and An Nguy<sup>7</sup>, and they all come from Ha Noi and studied abroad in the USA. These groups are representative of the active young people living in urban areas and making use of technology today in Vietnam.

Anthony Giddens (1991) discusses the changing nature of identity, in what he terms “late modernity”. Giddens argues that many values and customs were used to define traditional identities, but that these are now less influential in “post-traditional” societies. Giddens sees identity as fluid rather than fixed. People have to make a whole range of choices, not just about aspects such as appearance and lifestyle, but more broadly about their life destinations and relationships. They receive guidance on such matters by being experts of various kinds and through the popular media, although

<sup>1</sup> <http://kitesvn.com/forum> (Accessed 20 July 2014)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.siamovies.vn/> (Accessed 20 July 2014)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/HeAlwaysSmiles> (Accessed 20 July 2014)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/JNevermind> (Accessed 20 July 2014)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/bnnkhardcore> (Accessed 20 July 2014)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/duhocsinhmy> (Accessed 20 July 2014)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/thienan318> (Accessed 20 July 2014)

ultimately individuals are required to make these choices on their own behalf. As a result, Giddens suggests that modern individuals have to be constantly “self-reflexive”, making decisions about what they should do and who they should be.

Cultural concerns are of great importance in the everyday lives of young Vietnamese people nowadays, as evident in the consumption behaviors of such people. Young Vietnamese, like those in other advanced countries, tend to consume in order to acquire social distinction and identity (Lee 2004). They are the major consumers of cultural products which show-off their social and cultural status (Hwang 2004). K-pop in Vietnam is exemplified as middle-class, urban and suburban, involving college-aspiring youths and parents who lived in a socialist-influenced world, but also in poverty and with little entertainment to draw on K-pop in this sense satisfies the emergent regional taste and sensibility, though it would be remiss to focus only on the Asian region, as its appeal easily extends beyond it (Lie 2012: 355). As such, in my case study I argue that K-pop brings to young Vietnamese (both male and female) a sense of “individuality” and of being “trendy”.

The young’s consumption behavior through media is not only passive by consuming cultural products through media, but also acts to create their own products by and through media; for example, using YouTube (Buckingham 2008). “As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce” (Marx 1970: 42).

“Without social networking, there is nothing to share; without social networking, dancers could not meet, could not form a dance group. We would not be able to share what we know, our knowledge, to others. Actually, social networks are a good invention for everyone. If social networks didn’t exist, all of the movements now would not exist. YT and FB have helped develop everything. You can share your opinions, what you have done and what you know. If you have clips, you can share with others and share your passion; what you’re doing, what you have had to sweat for, make effort to do. Everyone will know about that” (Interview with Minh, male, born in 1995, a member of YGLC 2013).

The emergence of a teenage audience has expanded the size of the market, and young people now have the greatest purchasing power in the music industry. For this reason, the industry first began making changes to suit their tastes in South Korea in



around the early 1980s (Lee 2013). More recently in Vietnam, during the early 2000s, the lifestyles of young people also began to be influenced by popular music. As well as the music itself, there are also but the stylistic images associated with the artists, including their fashion and distinctive expressions: affects and attitudes. It is not new for music and style to be important as cultural resources; it is common for young people across the world. However, the relationship between youth culture and popular music has become much more visible and interdependent. As the consumption of K-pop has increased among Vietnamese teenagers, so their cultural tastes have become more important than ever.

Like rock music, which was produced using digital technology and which was new, trendy and cool among the “Baby Boomer” generation from the 1960s, K-pop and V-pop has also developed as a global musical genre. Due to it being seen as part of a global trend for peripheral social landscapes, it is considered highbrow, as distinguished from traditional music and culture (Lee 2013). However, in the eyes of many Vietnamese adults, K-pop is unpatriotic and reflects a materialistic world. Also, Vietnamese society has criticized it as an agent of cultural imperialism from South Korea. In fact, Vietnamese young people have embraced global music trends in general, and this has allowed them to think of themselves as highbrow when compared to older audiences in Vietnam, which listen to out-of-date, ordinary pop ballads, or old patriotic “red music” songs.

Young Vietnamese people yearn to be a part of global culture, on the basis of economics and information development; they want to consume new, modern and global cultural products, those significantly influenced by Western pop music and K-pop. In South Korea, the key change that took place in the South Korean music industry in the early 1990s was that electronic dance music became the most popular and influential genre (Lee 2013). Musically, the verses and choruses of such songs consisted of simple, catchy and beat-inspired melodies, and were influenced by contemporary British and European electronic dance music and the latest trends in US dance music, such as hip-hop (Lee 2013). As well as these elements, K-pop tends to add rap during the songs, in the pre-chorus sections (Lee 2013).

Just as with V-pop music nowadays, many K-pop generation songwriters in the past were accused of serious plagiarism, and as a result, such music in Korea can be seen as the music of a transition period; a period when the Korean music industry and its audiences tried to become a part of the global music scene (Lee 2013). This can also be leveled at the K-pop dance cover music scene in Vietnam nowadays, which is also in a transition. It has succeeded in becoming “saturated” by globalization in some ways, but has not yet reached “maturation” (Hannerz 1989). A lot of music groups and songs have also been influenced by K-pop bands and artists, and K-pop dance cover music is just one of many forms that have been influenced.

Vietnamese government policy plays an important role in controlling pop culture among the youth. Officially and on the surface, the government has tried to protect Vietnamese popular culture by controlling cultural imports from foreign countries. Moreover, there is a fear of consumerism and Western-style trends to Vietnamese culture, and in line with Communist ideology, the Party launched a campaign in early 1996, identifying a number of phenomena threatening Vietnamese traditional culture, such as superstition, the spread of “poisonous” cultural products, tendencies towards anti-revolution and anti-heroism, the commercialisation of culture, and the rejection of party leadership in cultural management (Vasavakul 1997:350). At the same time, Vietnamese authorities found, like governments everywhere, that the internet was notoriously difficult, time-consuming and expensive to monitor and control (Pam Nilan 1999). Therefore, unofficially and on a deeper level, the government has connived to leave it to the underground youth culture to decide. Moreover, there are few rules or punishments in place for music products which plagiarize foreign music, those which have melodies similar to Hong Kong songs or styles similar to K-pop. The Vietnamese government’s regulations, which have been strong in terms of political spheres, are quite loose in terms of pop music which is dominated by young audiences and musicians.

### **5.3 K-pop Cover Dance as a Young Vietnamese Fan Culture**

In this section, I will argue that we cannot equate dance reproduction - which is one of the new, emerging cultures among the urban Vietnamese youth (in Ha Noi) -



with the original products from South Korea. While the members of the group are doing covers, they are at the same time producing something new out of the original element. They have also created their own fan clubs, their own audiences and fans.

### 5.3.1 Online Fans of St.319 and YGLC

Here I will show the viewers' perspectives on dance cover MVs made by Vietnamese teenagers. The positive response generally made was that young Vietnamese consumers are now recognized as one of the game changers on the pop culture map. They are not only seen as "cool" and "talented" among the Vietnamese, but in other countries also.

Both the study groups have had hit dance cover MVs on YouTube, receiving comments from viewers. One popular cover MV by St.319, "Lovey Dovey - T-Ara" (티아라)<sup>8</sup>, received 2,978,672 views, while "Like This - Wonder Girls" (원더걸스), a dance cover flashmob by St.319 from Vietnam received 1,182,551 views<sup>9</sup>. The most popular MVs by YGLC are Official MV "Fantastic baby - Big Bang" which received 933,326 views<sup>10</sup>, and "Gangnam Style - Psy" which received 82,317 views<sup>11</sup> (accessed in 2013). The common comments from the viewers included that they were proud of Vietnam as Vietnamese teenagers. Some verbatim examples of comments made by Vietnamese viewers on YouTube are given below:

"the best cover dance of this song by far. I liked it better than the original. I watched it all the way through...which I've never done to any cover, or the real one"

"Vietnamese but dancing so well"

"And wear tight jeans without looking lanky"

"VietNam No.1"

"I am Viet Nam style! Sexy Nicky \(>w<)/"

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EuaAlkYmvs> (Accessed 14 December 2013)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIJTcsbRLSA> (Accessed 14 December 2013)

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xk\\_UjyOP1B8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xk_UjyOP1B8) (Accessed 14 December 2013)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxr-EeFCrXg> (Accessed 14 December 2013)

“I love you Vietnam”

“i feel so proud ! Vietnam is the best !~><”

“it's so goodddddddddd!!!!!!!♥~i'm from VN and i'm so proud!”

“I love viet nam”

“St.319 always got a better dance than any other groups. Why Vietnam So MUCH talent at dancing?”

“St.319 from Vietnam??? Oh, so proud!!! Dace so beautifully! Like strongly!!!!!!”

“proud to be a Vietnamese”

“so proud to be vietnamese!”

“you are the best... I can see the future of Viet Nam...”

“Viet Nam is proud of having St.319, haha”

“YEAH YEAH VIETNAMESE^^! SO PROUD OF HEHEHHEE. CONGRATZ U GUYS”

“Viet Pride :D”

“VIETNAM HAS A LOT OF TALENTS...FEEL PROUD OF IT FRIENDS!!!!!!! Like”

As can be seen, the viewers feel proud and excited when they see Vietnamese teenagers and the Vietnamese landscape on the cover videos, as compared to watching the original MVs. Here are some more examples:

“THIS MV BELONGS TO VIET NAM, FRIENDS. THIS PARKSON IS IN KEANG NAM TOWER, THE HIGHEST BUILDING IN VIETNAM IN MY DINH...”

“Very good. VN also can do like this so nothing is impossible...!”

“looks better than the original!”

“i can't stop watching this,it's too cool and wow !! love it ♥better then the original :P”



Moreover, viewers of St.319 seem to feel more positive after watching St.319 clips, sharing their feelings on having Vietnamese groups who can make music as “cool” and “modern” as K-pop, or sharing their wishes that V-pop could become as competitive, popular and maybe even more attractive than K-pop in the future:

“Imagine that St.319 with a V-pop song in English & dance, it's amazing.”

“damn good dancing u guys can stand up against koreans i think”;

The viewers of St.319 also express their desire to become group members of St.319. To have a good image, good clothes and talent like them is a dream among some young Vietnamese:

“I wish I was a member in this group”.

“Oh my god this is f\*\*\*ing AWESOME. I wish I could dance. And speak korean and vietnamese.”

“You guys have a lot of money to get these clothing o.o”

“wow how did you get that clothes?!!!!”

“What will i do if i want to be one of them?#Go to Vietnam #Change name # Take a dance class #Register to be ST.39 # Be famous #awesome!”;

“amazing how they could speak three languages (Vietnamese, Korea, English)”

They even have fans from oversea countries and in the case of St.319, they have fans not only for their cover dance clips but also for their own new song debuts in Vietnamese.

“I AM UR FANS FROM HONG KONG~SUPPORT ALL OF U!!! ST. 319~REALLY LOVE UR DANCE AND ACTING~ESPECIALLY LOVEY DOVEY~”;

“I love your covers Hello I'm from Mexico”.

“I can see why you guys won. You just had to win. cheers from Korea”

“amazing really guys you are amazing im going to open a channel on viki.com for you soon all the arabian people will know you , BTW im Arabian”

“I want a dance academy in my country as this and learn K-pop dance ^,^ ... please visit PERU”

“St.319 Love you so much.I'm your's fan from Thailand.”

“I am starting to really like Vietnamese music. I don't recall hearing this type of music a few years back but now things are really looking up for Vietnam since ST. 319 got into the music industry. I really like what you're doing ST. 319 and I see the art that is involved with all of your video with the Choreograph, Acting, Camera, Settings etc. I am very impressed how super professional everything that you guys do look, especially with your own budget! Amazing, you guys are truly amazing! Your handwork is paying off! You have over 400,000 fans and growing! I hope you guys will approach motion picture drama field because (just like) the lovey dovey and ice cream video you guys had fans that came just to watch that. Keep up the good work! Keep growing! Support as always from Canada!”

Online fans of St.319 and YGLC are quite diverse in terms of their countries of origin, ages, sexes and ethnicities. However, because it is carried out online, the actual identities of the fan groups are invisible and beyond control. Here, I give two examples of online fans of St.319 who are my friends and not teenagers anymore; both are in fact 26 years-old (born in 1988)

**Nguyen Vu Phuong Thao: Female, 26, a ten-year loyal K-pop fan, a new fan of St.319 and keen on gender equality**

Thao has been a big fan of both K-pop and Western Rock for more than 14 years. She has good cultural capital in term of knowledge on K-pop, artists and acts. She got to know about St.319 due to their popularity on You Tube, where they have a channel. Thao graduated from a university in Ha Noi, then worked for an English center in Ha Noi as an academic assistant. After a while, she moved to Finland to work as a cook, then moved back to Ho Chi Minh city to learn formally to become a chef. Her family's story is not a happy one. She was living with her mother and two younger brothers, and only found happiness by listening to music such as Western rock and K-pop. She has been a fan of both K-pop and Western rock for more than 14 years. The



first reason she likes St.319 (for more than one year) is because they invest a lot in their clips, in the costumes, photography, storylines and clip angles, which are very beautiful. Unlike other cover MVs on You Tube, which are only focused on dance and do not pay much attention to backgrounds, clothing or storylines, St. 319 include a different story for each video clip, and do not completely copy the original music video. The group do not simply mirror the original dancing, but pay attention to the distinctions. They build iconic characters, and these characters' personalities come through on the video clips and in the songs. In short, everything fits together to create something new.

Secondly, St.319 attracts a lot of young dance enthusiasts, and they are not awkward in front of the camera; all the band members are very confident. She can see the passion in them; the real passion for dance and especially for K-pop dance. Another reason why she likes St.319 is because they have become large and highly organized. Behind the group are not only dancers, but also choreographers and costume artists, as well as business managers, directors of photography and film-makers. This makes them a very professional crew. Also, they undertake K-pop dance activities, not only on the network but also in real life. They play large and small shows, and open shows so that they can earn more to foster their passion and operate like a professional organization. Initially, there were only two people in the group, but as they put their clips on the network, more people paid attention to them and started participating in their group. Gradually, they have been able to reach a certain level, and have ongoing contracts for advertising and performing. They also have a wider ambition to become an important part of show business in Vietnam and further afield. From starting as a normal dance cover group, they have become a key part of the local showbusiness scene; a professional dance team known across the world, rather than just backup dancers for other singers. As a result, they can appear as the main characters onstage. She said she thinks this highlights the unique identity of St.319, as well as their talent, ambition, passion and youth. She said she is unhappy with the critical reaction from Vietnamese society towards K-pop fans, adding that Vietnamese people are too conservative, and especially the way men look at K-pop women in a negative light. Whilst Vietnamese men can love football aggressively, women cannot love their music (K-pop) as passionately. When a K-pop event takes place, men often criticize it in an offensive, sarcastic way, saying that Vietnamese girls like South Korean men. She thinks the main

problem is the conservative thinking and feudal, patriarchal approach of Vietnamese men, who do not want to change their mindset.

### **Lien, 26, a fan of St.319 and a young-hearted girl**

Like Thao, Lien also has cultural capital based on music taste and through consuming a variety of cultural products. Lien has been a fan of K-pop for a long time. As well as listening to K-pop, US/UK-pop and V-pop, she also watches films from different countries, including Korean films, Hollywood movies and recently Thai films. She came across dance cover videos on YouTube by accident, and thought they were great covers and beautiful, especially those coming out of Vietnam. At first, St.319 only had two members, Aiden and Zoie. She really liked and regularly observed their videos, and they grew in terms of members. The reason she likes St.319 is because they are professional, serious, disciplined and passionate; dare to think, work and express themselves., perseverance and always keep producing and improving their products, gradually. Her opinion also reflects how audiences behave; they need entertainers and new things, new images, to always keep moving on to improved products. This is the harsh reality of the entertainment world.

However, there is a lot of competition among the K-pop cover groups. Comparing St.319's and YGLC's viewers on YouTube and followers on Facebook, there are always more St.319 supporters than for YGLC. For example, for the cover clip "Gangnam Style", St.319 received 1,431,874 views on YouTube, while YGLC only received 82,317 views for the same clip, 1/15<sup>th</sup> that of St.319 (on the same day: 5<sup>th</sup> January 2013). For Facebook, St. 319 on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2014 received 269,511 likes, while YGLC, on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2013, received only 8,978 likes. 1/30<sup>th</sup> that of St.319. These viewers also posted critical comments on YouTube:

"Fans of St.319 come here to comment stupid things, no one care. YG has its own identity not like red underwear superman... =)) And about cover Gangnam Style, St is lower than 99% except view, color, light is so light, irrelevant storyline, here they can see color of different YG members, quality is different ☺"

"skills, actions are not as good as a part of St.319!!!!!!!!!!"



“Please don’t compare St.319 and YGLC anymore why don’t support for both two groups to develop if vietnam is famous with both st and yg lovers crew is better than people know only about St.319. Love both two groups.”

While the cover dance style of St.319 is very pop, covering all the hit songs from Korea, YGLC only focus on some YG Entertainment hits, mostly focused on Hip Hop and R&B.

“There is also a competition among different dance teams...In Vietnam there is only one group, St.319 and they have their own fan club. They hold offline meetings sometimes, when fan club members can meet the dancers” (Interview with Tommy, male, born in 1991, a dance member of YG Lovers Crew 2014).

“The style of YGLC is more Hip Hop dance. I am not really interested in K-pop dancing anymore, but I am into YG entertainment. They are like Americans living in Korea. The style, music, everything does not look like K-pop at all. It is K-pop because they sing in Korean, but their style is not because they don’t sing pop, they just sing Hip Hop, R&B, Jazz and other kinds of really artistic music” (Interview with Nhat-Anh, male, born in 1991, the leader of YG Lovers Crew 2014).

What they consume reflects who they are and what they reproduce. For example, people consume the Apple brand because they like the creative, stylish and trendy image of Apple. The dance styles of YGLC are very Hip Hop, very American, so not very pop like typical K-pop. YGLC like K-pop because they like artistic and Hip Hop music, and have strong personality traits, such as being cool, real, unique, and a strong sense of self-identification. They also want to be different in terms of their characteristics. For Doan Nhat Anh and Ziu, leaders of YGLC, their idols are Lady Gaga (from the US) and Big Bang (from Korea); both of whom have unusual styles, and try to achieve outstanding images. For example, when they dye their hair it should be in very colorful colors such strong yellow, pink or green, but never neutral. The leader Doan Nhat Anh posted this message on his own Facebook page on 12 February 2014, saying that he would not be happy if a YGLC dancer were brown hair, instead encouraging them to dye their hair in a variety of bright colors. By consuming these music styles and fashions, they want to show they are different from other teenagers and are trying to develop their own style. The hidden message is that the music they are listening to and idols they follow reflect who they are. They want to be as unique as



their idols and music. This represents more than those followers who follow without adopting any critical ideas about themselves; it is their attempt at being famous in their own right.



*Figure 5.1 Doan Nhat Anh (on the left) - the leader of YG Lovers Crew, and Ziu (on the right) - a dancer with YG lovers Crew..*

Due to having different strategies, ambitions (the entertainment group and the professional dancers), as well as cultural capital investments (adopting different K-pop cover styles) and varying production quantities and qualities (cultural and economic capital), the groups' devotion to and opinions about K-pop vary. St.319 has become successful because they are stick to the pop style and really follow the marketing and management model set by SM Entertainment (from South Korea). They even aim to become an entertainment company whose fields of work include anything related to entertainment, based on their solid foundation in K-pop dance covers. They frequently develop new products and release clips every month, and their own MVs of ever improving quality, to sustain and assert their brand. While in the beginning both St.319 and YGLC were very competitive in the K-pop dance market in Vietnam, YGLC has left the field for St.319 to take over with its aggressive new visual production styles. This also reflects the consumptive nature of today's audiences, who cannot wait too long for new products, even though they are recycled. Moreover, it also shows the increasing competitiveness of the Vietnamese entertainment market and the nature of capitalism. While in the beginning phase of private companies' establishment, high levels of competitiveness exist, this turns into a more monopolized form of capitalism



over the longer term. When being asked whether they have become famous only because of the Korean artists they follow, St.319 answered:

“So-called followers of the famous Korean artists are not very true, because if we do not spend our time and energy practicing, if we do not invest in our products (cover dance MVs), then actually nobody will care about us and let us become famous. Our goal is not to become famous but to express what we like. If we become famous it is not because of Korean artists, but due to the appreciation of our viewers; if they think the videos are beautiful, they will support us and we will achieve success” (Interview with Zoie, female, born in 1992, a dance leader of St.319 2014).

“When they produce dance clips they become special, because each might have a different; they do not completely copy the original video. The group does not merely imitate the dancing, but makes it distinct; they build iconic characters with personality into the video clips and songs based on it. Everything fits together, so the groups make their own version of it” (Interview with Thao, female, born in 1988, a fan of St.319 2014).

“For me the main reason for following St.319 and invest in their clips is their passion; it has driven them to spend a lot of time and effort to achieve what they want. I think their wish is not only to become popular but to devote themselves to the Vietnamese entertainment industry” (Interview with Kevin, male, born in 1996, the leader of St.319 fan club 2014).

Therefore, it can be said that YGLC and St.319 have not only successfully re-appropriated the scenes of the original music videos, but have also been successful in creating something more out of the original elements. They have created the sense of a modern Vietnam; with a new Vietnamese landscape, and this has created a sense of pride in being Vietnamese among the K-pop fan community. More than that, they have created a new image of Vietnamese K-pop fans among the international K-pop fan community; which now knows that young Vietnamese people are good reproducers, not just reactive consumers. There are no K-pop bands in the music videos, but this does not matter since there is nothing missing; YGLC and St.319 have risen to the status of “cool” and “talented”.

Why does it matter - the Vietnamese cover K-pop bands and “I love Vietnam” quotation? The reason it matters is because in Vietnamese society, young people are

expected to be “good students”, to stay at home and study. Any kind of entertainment or fashion leads to them being labeled as “bad students”, “lazy students” or “*ăn chơi*”, “*đua đòi*”. For such a long time, Vietnamese music and taste, and V-pop, has relied heavily on foreign culture, meaning national music has lagged behind, caused by a lack of change and innovation. With such nostalgic songs (“red music” from 1940s to 1975) dominating in Vietnam for such a long time, the young people are now responding and wishing for change in the future, as well as a change in the mindsets of the younger generation.

“I myself was born in the 1980s, so when comparing life perspectives between the 8x and 9x generations there are already a lot of differences. The 8x generation is biased toward living a traditional lifestyle, a concern for family, a career and academic achievement. But for the 9x generation, then as well as an education, school and a career, this group is more open-minded, more comfortable enjoying life; its members know they are young and want to enjoy what society has to offer them” (Interview with Thao, female, born in 1988 and a fan of St.319, in 2014).

In general, Vietnamese people born in the 1980s are called the 8x generation; people who were born in the 1990s the 9x generation, and people born in the 2000s are called 10x generation, and so on. This definition conflicts with the general terms used globally, whereby Gen X members were born between 1965 and 1979, and Gen Y from 1980 to 1996. Therefore, what the above interviewee refers to is only about Gen Y. However, even among the Gen Y group, there are still many differences and even generation gaps.

It also can be seen through the cases highlighted here that “cultural domination” from Korea is also a discursive construct rather than a reflection of Vietnamese people’s subordination in terms of actual experience. In many ethnographic studies, scholars have shown that audiences actively and creatively consume media texts and cultural products (e.g. Morley 1992; Radway 1984). Something new is often produced due to an unequal cultural encounter; between the foreign and the local (e.g., Hannerz 1989; Lull 1995; Iwabuchi 2002). One can see cover clips of Vietnamese young people in an urban landscape, with new shopping malls such as Ha Dong Me Linh Plaza (“Kangnam style”



of St.319)<sup>12</sup> and Kangnam town in Ha Noi (cover “Kangnam Style” by YGLC)<sup>13</sup>, new buildings in the cover “Blue+Bad Boy” by YGLC<sup>14</sup>, and many stylish coffee shops for teenagers in many of the clips by St.319. One can even see daily office life in the clip “Kangnam style” by St.319, or Vietnamese pop music in the clips, “Ice Cream” and “Lovey Dovey” by St.319. One can also see attractive Vietnamese girls, boys and singers, such as Chipu and Cuong Seven (attractive girls or boys in clips are normally called “hot boys/hot girls”, those well-known among teenagers; their fashions and lifestyles can have a dramatic effect on Vietnamese teenagers, such as in “Only One” by St.319<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, in many clips of St.319, there are always messages at the end of the clips and normally they are very positive messages, encourage young people to live better and try to attain their dreams. For example, at the end of the cover clips “Lovey Dovey” and “Only One” by St.319, the messages given in English are, respectively: “We are all stronger than we think we are. Don’t underestimate yourself”, and “When one door closes, another one opens”. As confirmed by one of the leaders of St.319, the clips always include local and personal identity factors:

“You will see that cover dance is very interesting because in the same dance, different groups, people, local communities and different countries may interpret the dance in different ways” (Interview with Zoie, female, born in 1992, a dance leader of St.319 2014).

“For me, in the dance cover clips, the first and last sentences, “St.319 from Viet Nam”, show that Vietnamese people and St.319 are trying to devote themselves to our country: Vietnam” (Interview with Kevin, male, born in 1996, the leader of St.319 fan club 2014).

By using the same cultural form as K-pop, but using Vietnamese people, music and urban landscapes, St.319 want to express their desires as a group yearning for global culture, which is the dream of many teenagers who watch and follow them. This also partly explains why they are well-known by so many teenagers in Vietnam, because their clips reflect their dreams and realities, now and in the past. In the cover clip “Lovey Dovey” by St.319, this is shown very clearly. The opening story for the dance clip is told in a very American, high school musical series style. The main dancer

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2zb6\\_B0xZk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2zb6_B0xZk) (Accessed 14 December 2013)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxr-EeFCrXg> (Accessed 14 December 2013)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9By3oufRCY> (Accessed 14 December 2013)

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ip3qeU\\_5JyI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ip3qeU_5JyI)

appears in the clip as an “ugly girl” who is isolated by her classmates, but is invited to go to “the Spring Party” by a hot male classmate. The chosen location for the party is a very popular bar named “Taboo”, which is located in West Lake, one of the two most famous lakes in the capital. In reality, this bar is also the meeting place of sophisticated young ladies, playboys and businessmen. For foreigners, including Americans, this detail maybe seem very normal as it happens quite regularly in American teenage movies, when a high school boy invites a girl he likes to a party like this. However, it is still quite rare at high schools in Vietnam, because typically, Vietnamese high schools do not host role playing parties like this, and if they have ceremonies, students are not expected to be the main actors but to watch the music shows from outside, with the main messages coming from the lead teachers on the stage (unless it is an international or high quality school in an urban areas). Also, the American style, and also going to a party at a bar like the one in the clip, costs a lot of money in Vietnam, so only those from rich families can do it. Moreover, the titles, narration and quotations in the clip are in English, an international language. This reflects a continued yearning to enjoy a US/Western style culture and a rich future, among Vietnamese young people in general and the group in particular. While young people are not as rich in reality as the cover videos show, they continue to dream of having a high standard of living, going to good bars, wearing attractive, sexy and colorful clothes, having a wonderful school life and having lives full of entertainment, instead of exams and boredom. K-pop has given these people the chance to express this yearning: to become more interactive and active consumers of the products they choose to consume.





*Figure 5.2 A Group of Vietnamese Youth (St.319) shooting a Cover Video Clip named 'Lovey Dovey' in Taboo Bar, Hanoi, Vietnam.*

Therefore, it can also be said that K-pop as a brand uses a marketing strategy which encourages its audience to experience its own feelings as much as possible through its consumption, and to experience individual identity, which is a very Y-Generation trait closely linked to the use of modern, fast technology. According to Alvin Toffler, fans have become "prosumers" who create when they consume (1980). Jenkins (2006:3) extends Toffler's work to refer to the interactive consumption that is embedded in production, an influential elaboration of media convergence, in which new practices are driven by a participatory culture as participants engage in a dynamic interaction, rather than occupy prescribed, distinct roles as producers or consumers. The notions of the prosumer and of participatory culture are reiterated through the concept of Web 2.0, a term coined by Darcy DiNucci in 1999. This term was given to the concept of the Web as "a space for collaboration and reciprocal communication" (Gere 2009: 212). As the cases presented here illustrate, the processes of producing, consuming, and being consumed or shaped by digital media, are intertwined and often simultaneous.



### 5.3.2. Generation Y Offline Fan Club

Only St.319 has an official offline fan club, and its fan page on Facebook is ‘IOWA’, the name of St.319's fan club (accessed on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2014 on Facebook; it had 20,532 likes at this time). The page was created to support St.319 and help people who like St.319 communicate with each other.



*Figure 5.3 Offline fan meeting of St.319, Ha Noi, Vietnam*

“The St.319 fan club was established during the early days of the group’s activities. A small offline meeting of the group usually has around 50 to 60 people attending, while in a big meeting there may be more than 500 people” (Interview with Kevin, male, born in 1996, the leader of St.319 fan club 2014).

“When I participate in the group's fan club, I also learn a lot from activities organized by the group, and I can facilitate many different things. There are many members of the St.319 fan club, though I don’t know exactly how many globally, but in Vietnam and in Hanoi, the fans are mostly college or high school students; they are very young and also very dynamic, and participate in organized activities outside of the group. A small offline meeting of the group usually has around 50 to 60 people



present. In these offline meetings, about half find out about the meeting on Facebook and register themselves. Last week there was a meeting of the group's fan club with more than 500 people present, many of whom participated actively. They also played games and interacted with the group. The majority of St.319 fans club members are student girls; I know a few have started working already. About 70% of the fans is female, only 30% is male" (Interview with Kevin, male, born in 1996, the leader of St.319 fan club 2014).

The fans of St.319 are also very young, from 13 to 18 years-old, and to be a member of St.319 is a dream among many young people at that age. The reason St.319 has such an influence in these young people's lives is because its members are examples of modern and active Vietnamese young people:

"The benefits I will learn from St.319 are how to organize events as well as learn how to dance; plus its organization and its group work ethic." (Kevin 2014)

Kevin also said that he would like to work with St.319, to organize offline fan parties for them, because:

"I Like feeling of always being busy busy :) ) ) kind of restless time " ) today is the day like that: xxx "( Posted on 13th January 2014 in Kevin's FB)

On his Facebook page (on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2014), Kevin also gave his opinion to follow the fashion styles of the leaders of St.319:

"So I have already fallen in love with them for 2 and a half years! :)))))) Keep going St.319 ""So cool; \_\_\_\_; I will dye my hair as my brother Hipz: XXX "



*Figure 5.4 Hipz/Aiden, leader of St.319 (left) and Kevin, leader of St.319's fan club (right - second from the left) in Ha Noi, Vietnam*

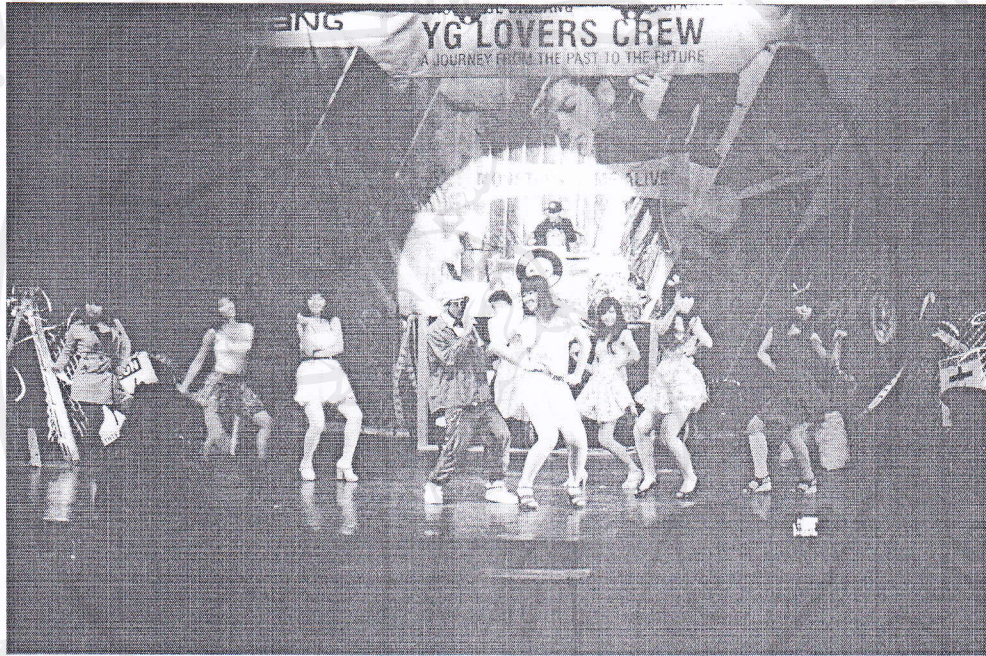
**Kevin: Fan manager for St.319. “Being busy and involved in social activities makes one more fun and mature”**

The first impression of Kevin is that he is a young, stylish, dynamic and mature boy. He is currently a student in grade 12 at Tran Nhan Tong High School, and has been the online and offline fan club leader for St.319 for almost three years, as well as a dancer for Stay Crew (a K-pop dance cover group in Ha Noi). In the very beginning, he got to know St.319 from You Tube, after which he attended at several K-pop dance classes run by the group, then became an offline fan. Being a leader of the fan club, he has learned a lot of soft skills (considered to be cultural capital), such as how to be punctual, polite, speak in front of crowds, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, and how to be more creative regarding social activities. He has also learned how to have good relationships with famous people and those in the entertainment sector. He often listens to K-pop, US/UK-pop and V-pop, but feels closer to K-pop because of its fashion and dance styles. At the moment, he is focusing on his academic performance at school and has not decided what he wants to do in the future yet. However, he is also very interested in working in the entertainment sector or within cultural events management. In his family, no one works in the entertainment industry. At first, his parents did not want him to be too involved in K-pop events, but later realized such activities could make him more assertive and help him earn money for himself and his family.



Therefore, he is also a case of a young person who has been able to create cultural capital for himself, in order to generate both more cultural and economic capital.

Unlike St..319, YGLC does not have an offline fan club. However, they still can meet their online audience by carrying out an offline K-pop party performance every year. In the near future, the group also has plans to become a professional dance crew, instead of just a K-pop dance cover group.



*Figure 5.5 K-pop Offline Show by YG Lovers Crew, in Ha Noi, Vietnam*

“We only manage the group page views, and every year we hold a show, in August, one concert by the group doing cover dance songs. We sell tickets to our audience and also promote the image of the group, focusing on how it is more specialized and stronger than in the past. I've actually never met a fan in real life” (Interview with Tommy, male, born in 1991, a dance member of YG Lovers Crew 2014).

“The young people who dance K-pop have a passion and want to express their passion. They also need a playing field to do this plus want to do something for their idols and fans; to show that how much K-pop means to them, how much they love the K-pop. Sometimes, the effect of K-pop is that you receive attention and become well-known, because you follow the trend. To let other fans know that you also like those groups, you also need to dance well, so others will notice you, then you will become very



popular among the fan community” (Interview with Nhat-Anh, male, born in 1991, the leader of YG Lovers Crew 2014).

Therefore, it can be said that the groups who are fans of K-pop, are quite active consumers; they not only consume and re-appropriate K-pop productions (Kim 2012), but are also themselves seen as “small idols” among the young people who share their tastes and hobbies. They also have a fan base and fan clubs in their own right, and these act as a good foundation for them to develop more within the dance and entertainment sector, in a variety of ways.

#### **5.4 Tastes and Alternative Choices When Creating New V-pop**

In this section, I want to discuss the context of the new consumption era, the choices it offers, and also answer the question as to how changes in music consumption have affected national identity. I will also ask how Korean pop music is perceived by the Vietnamese, and how they develop the distinctive characteristics of V-pop.

In fact, it is argued that cultural globalization is most visible in the young, because young people are the most active recipients of cultural content across national borders. Young Vietnamese are a typical example. A few young Vietnamese who favor foreign cultural products will even learn a foreign language in order to consume foreign popular culture. The cultural products most favored include US/UK-pop music, and K-pop. However, cultural products from Hong Kong and China are also partly rooted in Vietnamese popular culture, though sometimes V-pop music is drawn from Japanese and Thai music also.

One reason why the young Vietnamese have chosen Korean dance music is because they consider it to be fun and exciting when compared to other East Asian music genres. Another distinctive trait of Korean popular music for young Vietnamese people is that the singers have a “trendy image.” In contrast to US/UK musical styles and fashions, Korean pop styles and fashions are more comfortable and easier to follow. These “natural images” and “youthful colors” make Vietnamese audiences feel closer to what they call the “Korean style.”



Also, many of the Vietnamese fans of foreign popular culture perceive relate cultural choice to individual freedom, and so have established, not necessarily knowingly, a new transnational cultural identity. They share their passions with fans from other Asian countries; the same experiences and emotions, and often regard themselves as global citizens or global cultural mediators.

“In fact, there is a new concept around called the ‘global citizen’. This means that wherever you go, it is the same; there are no different ideas of who or what I am from this country, or if you come from another country, in Asia or Europe...in fact, young people everywhere are quite the same due to the development of the internet, the development of cultures, especially Hallyu wave from Korea. As a consequence, young Vietnamese are somewhat are similar to the young people of South Korea or Japan, which is vital to the development of global culture. We cannot avoid it” (Interview with Thao, female, born in 1988, a fan of St.319 2014).

In relation to the issue of identity, Olsson (1999: 6) examines aspects and doubts, as if “established identities are cultural means that their stability and coherence can be challenged prefiguring the establishment of other identities”. He analyses Foucault’s work with regard to the notion “that ‘identities’ are ‘representations’ or ‘fixations’ that are neither fixed nor stable” (1999: 35). These ideas can also connect to multiple discourses and to questions involving the meaning of subjectivity and the construction of identity.

“I myself listen to and can enjoy a lot of different music genres. Before K-pop became popular in Viet Nam, I really liked US/UK music, but when K-pop came along and was headlining in Vietnam, I tried to dance K-pop covers and then joined this team. Working part-time in the entertainment sector, I listen to a lot of music genres: K-pop, US/UK-pop, V-pop music and even “Vietnamese red music” (Vietnamese propaganda music). Before, when we started practicing K-pop cover songs, K-pop music became very close for us, but now we have also moved to self-choreographed dance routines, meaning we have to listen to a lot more music from the US and UK, because we use US/UK music as the background for our dance routines” (Interview with Dung-male-born in 1992-a dancer of St.319 2014).

There are some differences between self-choreographed dance and K-pop dance. First, in the former, the dancers/dance groups have to think of and create the dance movements themselves, and second, the music used is more likely to be US/UK pop or

sometimes V-pop, but not K-pop songs because most K-pop songs have their own dance versions already, while US/UK-pop leaves room for the group to be more creative.

“I listen to a lot more genres of music, from Viet Nam war songs to classical music, symphonic music and American music. So, I have listened to almost all music genres in the world” (Interview with Zoie, female, born in 1992, a dance leader of St.319 2014).

“I have been a fan of K-pop for 14 years, and a fan of St.319 for a year. To be honest, at the time I was finding out about K-pop I was also learning more about rock from the US/UK. At the same time, I became a fan of K-pop and US/UK-pop. Both are equally valid and I do not favor one or the other. But what is ingrained and influential more in my everyday life is K-pop, for indeed Korean showbiz is very diverse; they do not just stop at music or movies, but the shows are entertaining, including the reality TV shows. The K-pop shows have much more diverse content than in the US/UK-pop. So, the first thing I do when I open my email each day is to watch the news about K-pop, and Korean showbiz news” (Interview with Thao, female, born in 1988, a fan of St.319 2014).

Barker (1997) contends that “national identities” are replaced by “hybrid identities”. The “concept of hybrid identities is important” and of relevance here because of the influences “of the process of accelerated globalization and is critical to differential and hybrid ethnic and national identifications” (1997: 191).

When looking at the issue of cross-cultural identities, Born (2000: 32) proposes that “it is precisely music’s extraordinary powers of imaginary evocation of identity and of cross-cultural and intersubjective empathy that render a primary means of both marking and transforming individual and collective identities”.

McRobbie focuses on the cultural sociology of youth and discusses different issues such as youth and subjectivity (1994). She explains that in recent studies on subjectivity and identity, the self is a question which is “never resolved and fixed” and is open to transformations, relocations, shares and changes (1994: 199). In her discussion, she argues that “different, youthful, subjectivities, for all the reasons of generational and institutional powerlessness which are the product of age and dependency require and find in youth cultural forms strong symbolic structures through



which ‘who you are’ and ‘who you want to go put with’ can be explored, not in any finalized way, but rather as an ongoing and reflective social process” (McRobbie 1994: 192). As McDonald states “We are living a period of redefinitions: of changing relationships between public and private, between local and global, between structure and movement, between bodily experience and subjectivity, between self and the other” (1999: 11). Grossberg (1992) contributes to these issues and focuses on cultural identity, emphasizing that “the result is not only that identity is entirely an historical construction but that each of the three planes of individuation is constructed temporally” (1992: 100). He continues, “subjectivity as spatial is perhaps the clearest, for it involves taking literally the statement that people experience the world from a particular position – recognizing that such positions are in space rather than (or at least as much as in) time” (1992: 100).

For several reasons already mentioned, such as the development of the music industry, the emergence of teenagers as the main audience, and the development and globalization of communication media, it has become more important than before that audiences and creators/producers alike want to keep up with the latest trends. However, formal and legal opportunities for Vietnamese audiences to access global music trends are highly restricted, because in Vietnam and in some other Asian countries, pop culture is considered to the domain of middle class teenagers in the big cities. However, hybridity in the West is “further defined when one considers, in particular, ‘high culture’ forms like classical music, which emphasizes the traditional and authentic” (Mori 2009: 219). Moreover, in the mind of the Vietnamese, imported products from developed countries are always seen as being of a good quality, and “Imported” cultural products are no exception to this.

Another case which runs counter to the above argument can be seen in South Korea. Korean teenagers dream about becoming pop stars, and; therefore, the competition increases every day. Popular music is not only a vehicle for escapism among the middle-class kids, but often provides an alternative, both for high school dropouts such as Seo Taiji, and for underprivileged teenagers (Lee 2013). Where the “impossible” once referred to success in exams, it now often refers to making it in the music business. In the case of the very poor in South Korea, the “dancing hero” could

be the teenager who finds success, not through studying but through pop stardom (Morelli 2001: 254-255).

Vietnamese fans' fascination with image has much to do with freedom. Vietnamese is still a suppressed country, and young people still remain conservative and cautious about their public appearance. All members from those K-pop cover dance crews I met embodied the distinctive image of pop stars. They said that the standard of beauty for them is that women should be very sexy or cute (a schoolgirl image), and men should be very masculine, or have a handsome and youthful look. Each of the interviewees I met have a unique image and performance style, all are similar in that they put a lot of effort into their fashions, hair styles and dance routines, just the same as their K-pop idols. All are skillful dancers, and their performances deliver sexy and powerful images. Because their favorite music is "easy listening", danceable music, Vietnamese audiences are willing to listen to and dance to the songs, even though they do not understand the lyrics. According to my interviews with YGLC and St.319, promoters and the media constantly emphasize the entertainments' images rather than the music, in order to fulfill Vietnamese teenagers' desires.

Moreover, the openness of Vietnam nowadays has enabled them to incorporate foreign cultural elements that are fresh and new, without having to consider how these elements will affect the development of their own products. The identity crisis faced by many Vietnamese; however, represents a growing concern, particularly with the quality and quantity of local products being made, though, ironically, locally made Vietnamese products cannot match Vietnamese standards, because the Vietnamese are already accustomed to the high-quality products coming out of both Western and highly modernized Asian countries. Vietnamese people have gradually become used to higher standards in terms of production and taste among popular music, as well as the more modern styles used. This is partly why they are not satisfied with the local singers; these singers cannot keep-up with the audience's taste, and this is the main reason why they are always search for something new and fresh. Or maybe they have seen so much material, that they are no longer attracted to local products. There is probably a reason why young Vietnamese people are attracted so much to Korean pop, and I think it is probably the visual image of Korean singers, as this image fulfills their desires.



Nowadays, to be appreciated by a Vietnamese audience's visual desires, a singer and/or group have to be good-looking, stylish and adept at dancing.

Image presentation plays the most important role in the popularity of pop musicians. What they wear, how they perform and the music videos they produce, greatly influence their popularity. South Korean and Vietnamese fans expect pop singers to be fashion leaders. In South Korea, visual imagery may even be more important than sound. To meet South Korean tastes, singers have to be good-looking and fashionable, with good dancing skills, and they have to have good voices (Lee 2013).

### **5.5 Concluding Remarks**

As mentioned previously in Chapter 3, economic growth and openness in Vietnam has evoked a cultural demand among people for the new, modern and global, and the development of communication media has promoted this tendency. This means that Vietnam could also become an important potential cultural market in the near future, due to its economic growth and newly formed cultural demands.

However, there are many challenges faced by V-pop if it wishes to become competitive. First and foremost, unlike technological developments such as digitalization and communications media, which had a significant influence on the Vietnamese economy in the late 1990s, Vietnamese culture and the associated industry has not been able to keep up with the growth in demand.

K-pop dance is just one of many youth cultures in Vietnam today: as a way for young people to reveal their cultural identities and individualism in a post-Socialist country. Hopefully, and maybe, cultural practices among young people can provide an opportunity for the Vietnamese mass media to compete with foreign cultural products, so that younger people will be motivated to improve their own popular culture. It should be emphasized that, at this time, the capacity and popularity of Vietnamese local popular culture are still limited in terms of the capital needed to satisfy local audiences, let alone international ones.