Engaging local market actors in collective market work :

The case of Korean music agency in Vietnam

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Résumé :

Le processus de prise de décision des firmes, et la performance de la stratégie d'adaptation attirent régulièrement l'attention des chercheurs en Management International. Néanmoins, la recherche s'intéresse peu à la coévolution entre la stratégie d'adaptation, les institutions locales et les pratiques d'engagement des acteurs locaux. Ce papier vise à étudier ce phénomène à travers une étude qualitative de la formation de la musique pop sud-coréenne (K-pop) comme une catégorie de produit au Vietnam. Nous montrons que l'adaptation est un processus itératif dans lequel les firmes internationales orchestrent l'engagement des acteurs locaux dans le travail institutionnel afin de cocréer les nouvelles significations symboliques d'une catégorie de produit. Plus la catégorie de produit est spécialisée, plus les acteurs locaux intensifient leur engagement dans la stratégie d'adaptation lancée par les firmes internationales.

Mots-clés : Stratégie d'adaptation, Coévolution, Catégorie de marché, Travail institutionnel, K-pop

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1. INTRODUCTION

Discretionary adaptation refers to a type of collective market work that internationalizing firms engage local actors in shaping *informal* local institutions such as consumers' tastes and lifestyles and market categories (Kaartemo & Pelto, 2017; Sasaki, Nummela, & Ravasi, 2021). Local employees and local customers (Griffith & Lee, 2016; Leung, Tse, & Kim), and cultural intermediaries such as local distributors and designers (Sasaki, Nummela, & Ravasi, 2021) are often mobilized in firms' discretionary adaptation work. Research in international management (IM) and international business (IB) studies discretionary adaptation in two ways. Some prior work has taken a decision-based approach to study the impacts of local market characteristics, firms' international experiences, and product specificities on firms' adaptation performance (Mandler et al., 2021; Westjohn & Magnusson, 2017). Other studies have adopted a practices-based approach to shed light on the institutional entrepreneurship of internationalizing firms in shaping local market institutions (Garcia-Cabrera & Duran-Herrera, 2016; Sasaki, Nummela, & Ravasi, 2021). Scholars have given a hint that throughout their market-shaping practices, internationalizing firms learn to adjust their resources and co-evolve with market institutions (Cantwell, Dunning, & Lundan, 2010; Liu et al., 2021). Although these two research streams have acknowledged the complexity of local markets that internationalizing firms have to face when implementing discretionary adaption, they have paid less attention to different practices that other market actors (e.g. media, local consumers, etc.) mobilize to react to firms' adaptation work. Moreover, IM scholars have often grounded their research in well-established market category. They have underexplored the plasticity of local market category that could pose a c

challenge for internationalizing firms' discretionary adaptation, as well as the interaction between internationalizing firms and local actors.

We believe that black-boxing the dynamic interplay between internationalizing firms' discretionary adaptation, local market category, and local actors' engagement practices hampers the performance of international adaptation/standardization strategy, as various scholars have observed (see Mandler et al., 2021; Schmid & Kotulla, 2011; Theodosiu & Leonidou, 2003 for reviews). Moreover, it prevents knowing when and how internationalizing firms should engage local market actors in their discretionary adaptation. Taking the above-mentioned observation into consideration, our study seeks to address the shortcomings of previous work. We therefore raise the following research question:

RQ: How and when internationalizing firms, for their discretionary adaptation, engage local market actors in shaping local market category?

To capture the dynamic interplay between internationalizing firms' discretionary adaptation, local market category that plays as *informal* market institutions, and local actors' engagement practices we adopt process thinking in this study. We shift our attention from the performance of internationalizing firms' adaptation decisions to the co-evolution of their discretionary adaptation and *informal* local market institutions. Thus, different from prior work, we conceptualize discretionary adaptation is a market-shaping process through which internationalizing firms iteratively orchestrate collective market works practiced by local actors.

We address the research question through an in-depth case study of the emergence of Korean pop-music (K-pop) as a specific music category in Vietnam from 1998 to 2019. In this study, we focus on the dynamic interplay between the emergence of the K-pop music category, Korean firms' marketing adaptation practices, and Vietnamese actors' engagement practices. We examine articles published by Vietnamese newspapers, magazines for young consumers, television reports and documentaries, and interviews with young Vietnamese consumers who have engaged with K-pop music since it was first introduced into Vietnam.

We show that the discretionary adaptation process adopted by Korean music agencies (KMA) co-evolves with the different degrees of speciation of the East Asian music category that gives rise to K-pop category in the Vietnamese market. The more the East Asian music category becomes fragmented and K-pop music becomes a specific subcategory, the more KMA and Vietnamese actors intensify and adjust their practices in collective market work. Our study makes contributions to discretionary marketing literature by revealing when and how internationalizing firms should engage local market actors to shape the local market.

In the following section, we discuss the relevant literature on market-shaping and market categorization. We then describe our research setting and methodology. In conclusion, we discuss our findings and elaborate on their theoretical and managerial implications.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: DISCRETIONARY ADAPTATION AS COLLECTIVE MARKET WORK IN SHAPING THE LOCAL MARKET CATEGORY

In dealing with the complexity of the context of local export market and reinforcing their competitiveness, internationalizing firms often adapt either entire or some elements of their

market strategy (Mandler et al., 2021; Sasaki, Nummela, & Ravasi, 2021). Two types of adaptation have been identified: discretionary adaptation and mandatory adaptation (Westjohn & Magnusson, 2017). Contrasting with mandatory adaptation where internationalizing firms modify their marketing program to compliance with *formal* local institutions such as regulations and laws, discretionary adaptation reflects the willingness of firms to deal with *informal* institutions by making their products appeal to local customers' tastes and lifestyles (Westjohn & Magnusson, 2017) and to better fit with localmarket category (Sasaki, Nummela, & Ravasi, 2021). As have observed Sasaki, Nummela, & Ravasi (2021), internationalizing firms often engage local cultural intermediaries such as distributors and designers in their discretionary adaptation. Those local actors play an important role in bridging cultural differences between firms' products and local meaning systems through their market work such as educating local consumers about the product's meanings or broadening the symbolic boundary of local market category. The work of Sasaki, Nummela, & Ravasi (2021) has given a hint that through discretionary adaptation, internationalizing firms and local cultural intermediaries intentionally and collectively (re)shape local markets for their own ends. Baker & Nenonen (2021: 249) would call discretionary adaptation as collective market work - "orchestrated strategies, initiatives and deliberate actions that collaborating market actors engage in to shape the rules, taken-for-granted expectations, assumptions, and practices in a market". According to these authors, through collective market work, collective identity is formed among market actors, and their sense of authority is enhanced and formalized. This forces them to actively engage in disrupting, maintaining (Baker & Nenonen, 2021) or resisting existing market institutional arrangements (Ghaffari, Jafari, & Sandikçi, 2019), or creating new ones.

One of the market elements that market actors most use in their collective market work is market category.market category can be conceptualized as an *informal* market institution (Scheinberg & Berk, 2010) that shapes market actors' shared meanings about the product or service marketed (Rosa et al., 1999; Rosa & Spanjol, 2005) and their behaviors (Zuckerman, 1999), and enables exchange practices between producers and consumers who engage with that product or service (Vergne & Wry, 2014). For Navis and Glynn (2010: 440), a market category has two basic properties: "(1) constituent members, whose inclusion is defined by rules or boundaries pertaining to a common type of product or service, and (2) a concept, label, or identity that reflects the commonalities that link together the members of the category". By means of market category, consumers make their judgments about the value of the product or service (Zuckerman, 1999), distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate entities (Jensen, 2010), classify and evaluate global and local brands and justify their brand choices or avoidances (Davvetas & Diamantopoulos, 2016) in performing their social roles and group affiliations (Solomon, 1983; Muniz & Schau, 2005). For instance, yoga has been traditionally classified by Indian consumers as a philosophical and religious practice "designed to facilitate spiritual enlightenment" (Strauss, 2005: 5). However, the introduction of yoga in the workplace by MNEs and in international fitness centers has shifted Indian consumers' shared understandings of yoga. It becomes (1) a stress-relieving technique to enhance self-productivity and consumer well-being; (2) an upper-class lifestyle practice; and (3) a sign of contemporary Indian national and cultural identity. The intersection of those three shared meanings give rise to the symbolic boundary separating traditional yoga and commercial yoga (Askegaard & Eckhardt, 2012). In his work on the wine industry, Zhao (2005) shows that American consumers' wine purchase decisions are based on wine categorization in which wines imported

from France are classified by geographic origin, whereas local wines are identified by grape variety.

Market categories also function as cultural reservoirs patterning consumers' consumption practices, identity construction, and taste regimes. The latter refers to a mechanism that regulates consumers' reflexive engagement with the reproduction of social class distinction based on aesthetic expertise developed to enable them to adapt to the hierarchical orderings of the market category (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2017). When it comes to producers, the market category generates shared understanding about their organizational identities and product identities (DiMaggio, 1987; Hsu & Hannan, 2005; Zhao, 2005).market category gives internationalizing firms signals on when to enter a new market (Barlow, Verhaal, & Angus, 2019), and enhances their competitive positioning (Cattani, Porac, & Thomas, 2017; Porac et al., 1995) by balancing the need to adapt to consumers' expectations and the need to maintain their distinctiveness vis-à-vis competitors (Zuckerman, 2017). The market category is stable when there is a consensus regarding the definition of the product and the role and exchange practices between producers and other market actors (Kennedy, & Lounsbury, 2010; Rosa et al., 1999) and between market actors (Koçak, Hannan, & Hsu, 2014). This categorical imperative (Zuckerman, 1999) requires firms and their products to fit into the norms and expectations of the stabilized market category if they are to win social approval and obtain material resources (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). In contrast, firms will be socially penalized for any deviation (Zuckerman, 1999).

As an *informal* market institution, market category does not arise in a vacuum, but is intentionally or unintentionally created, (re)-shaped, and collectively stabilized by market actors embedded in market networks (Blanchet, 2018). A market category evolves along with

(1) the interaction between market actors, (2) the power dynamics among market participants and within the discourse, and (3) the cultural and material context in which the market category is embedded (Grodal & Kahl, 2017). While some scholars began studying the internationalization and evolution of market category in an international context (e.g. Askegaard & Eckhardt, 2012; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015; Kaartemo & Pelto, 2017), these studies fail to examine the dynamic interplay between internationalizing firms' international strategy, actor engagement practices and the evolution of market category. In this paper we address this shortcoming through the study of the formation of Korean pop music (K-pop) as a new market category in Vietnam.

3. METHODOLOGY

Because we focus on the dynamic interplay between foreign firms' discretionary adaptation, the market category and local actor engagement practices, we adopt a discursive approach for our study. For Grodal and Kahl (2017), a discursive approach helps researchers to unpack the evolution of a market category that is embedded in the web of interaction between market actors and the power dynamics among them. Here, discourse is manifested not only in textual forms, but also in visual forms, full-motion videos, music and sound effects, etc., that are produced, disseminated, communicated, and consumed by market actors (Fairclough, 1992; Phillips and Hardy, 2002).

We began the data collection by identifying articles published in Vietnamese public and private newspapers reporting on K-pop music from 1998 to 2019. We chose this period because: (1) it marks the new wave of K-pop music-making focused on building up international fandom through social media (Jung, 2015); (2) it is also the beginning of the second phase of the Doi

Moi policy adopted by the Vietnamese government to liberalize the Vietnamese economy and give rise to new types of consumers, media and entrepreneurs (see Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen & Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2021). Our dataset comes from the online versions of Vietnamese state-controlled newspapers: tuoitre.vn, thanhnien.vn, dantri.com.vn, nld.com.vn, vnexpress.vn, nhandan.com.vn, and vietnamnet.vn. Using keywords such as "K-pop", "nhac Han Quoc" (Korean pop music), "Hallyu" (Korean Wave), and "nhac phim Han Quoc" (Korean drama OST) we identified 151 articles (31 in English and 120 in Vietnamese).

Following Spradley (1979) and Hsu and Grodal (2021), we conducted our initial analysis during our data collection. In our initial reading of articles collected online, we observed that those published from 1998 to 2010 portrayed K-pop music favorably, while those published from 2011 to 2019 criticized it for its negative impact on Vietnamese teenagers' and young consumers' behaviors. This observation led us to expand our dataset by collecting articles about K-pop music published in Hoa Hoc Tro (School Flowers), hereafter HHT, the official magazine for Vietnamese youth. The aim of our dataset expansion was to enhance our understanding of when and how K-pop music was linked to young consumers' culture. In addition, we collected 100 K-pop related articles in the printed version of HHT.

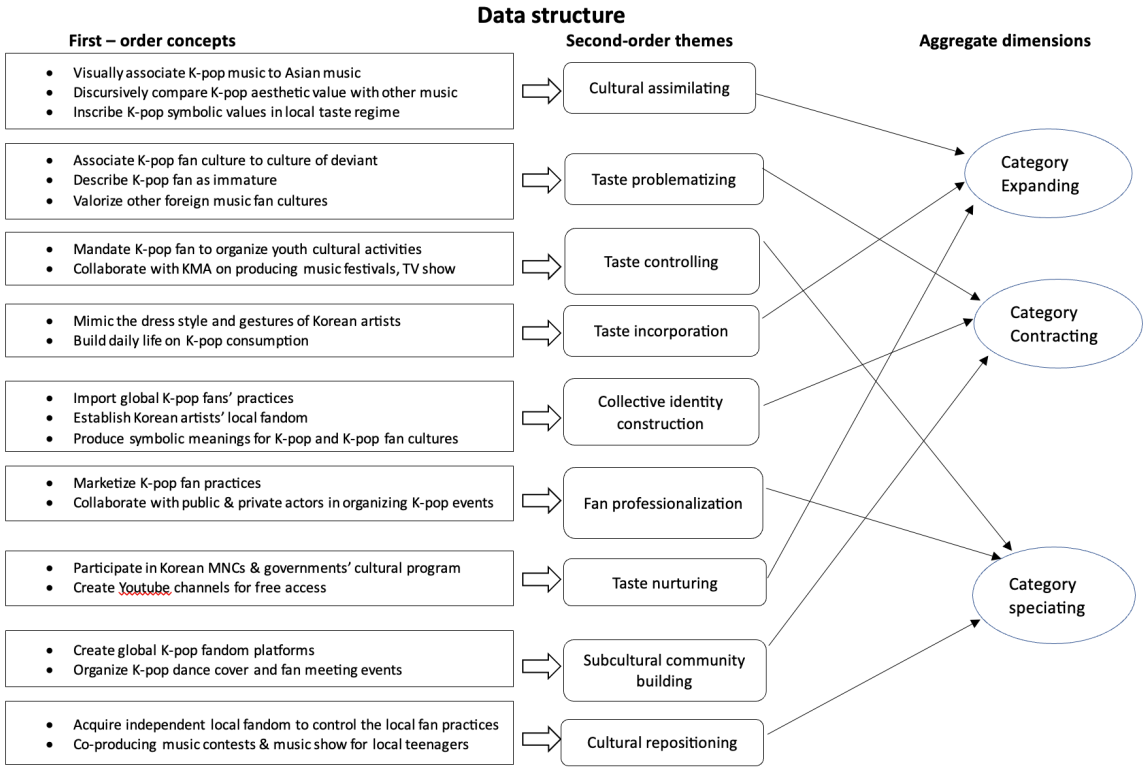
Our initial reading of these documents also reveals that Vietnamese media depicted young consumers who engage with K-pop music as "trend setters" and "crazy K-pop fans". To understand the (re)actions of young Vietnamese consumers to these mediated images as well as the impact of them on their engagement styles and practices with K-pop, we conducted 40 in-depth interviews with young Vietnamese consumers aged 18 to 28 who had engaged with K-pop music since 2006. All interviews were conducted by the first author, who is Vietnamese and is familiar with the research context. The interviews began with general questions about

informants' personal background and daily life activities (McCracken, 1988). Informants were also encouraged to talk about their "life stories", such as their past experience and their vision for future life projects (see also Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2009; Shankar & Goulding, 2001). The informants were then asked to share information about their first-hand experiences with K-pop music, their daily consumption practices relating to K-pop and their feelings and thoughts about K-pop music, K-pop idol groups, K-pop fans and non-K-pop consumers. They were asked about the role of K-pop music in their relationships with their parents, peer group and classmates/colleagues. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, and recorded and transcribed later. Table 1 provides the summary our data set.

Table 1. Data source

DATA SOURCE		
Types of sources	**EXEMPLARY SOURCE**	**NUMBER OF ARTICLES COLLECTED AND INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED**
Online newspapers	Tuoitre.vn; thanhnien.vn; dantri.com.vn; nld.com.vn; vnexpress.vn; nhandan.com.vn; vietnamnet.vn	151
Printed magazine	Hoa Hoc Tro	100
In-depth interviews		40

We adopted the open and axial coding processes suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008) to analyze our collected data. We used the suggestions of Grodal and Kahl (2017) for classifying and structuring our open codes and identified themes (see figure 1 Data structure)



4. FINDINGS

As our study objective is the dynamic interplay between the formation of the K-pop music category, Korean music agencies' discretionary adaptation and local actors' engagement practices, we followed Langley (1999) in identifying three key phases of K-pop category formation in the Vietnamese market (East Asian music category creation, contraction, and speciation) that correspond to three Korean music agency practices (cultural sponsorship; music concerts and the exporting of fan meetings; joint ventures with local actors). In the next section, we detail these three key phases.

4.1. PHASE 1: TASTE NURTURING AND THE CREATION OF THE EAST ASIAN MUSIC CATEGORY IN VIETNAM (LATE 1990s - 2006)

Although diplomatic relations between Vietnam and South Korea were established in 1992, Korean cultural products such as TV soap operas, music and games only began arriving in the Vietnamese market in late 1990s, in response to intensive diplomatic activity between the two

governments (Park, 2017). As the Vietnamese media market was owned and tightly controlled by the Vietnamese government, foreign cultural products were only imported and distributed by state-controlled broadcasters. In this period, Vietnamese state-controlled journals and broadcasters played a dual role: gatekeeper to filter the flow of foreign cultural products and vanguard to shape public tastes and interests (Thomas & Heng, 2000). To introduce K-pop music in the Vietnamese market and make it familiar to Vietnamese consumers, Korean music agencies adapted their marketing mix strategy. They inserted their musical products with K-drama (i.e. mini soap operas) that are provided free-of-charge to Vietnamese state-controlled broadcasters by the Korean government and organized free music concerts to the Vietnamese public as part of diplomatic events between Korea and Vietnam (see also Nguyen & Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2021). Thus access to K-pop music was largely limited to the public sphere. On rare occasions, consumers could obtain pirated CDs and DVDs from illegal CD stores (see also Olsen, 2008).

Before the arrival of K-pop music, music from foreign markets was ideologically classified in the foreign music category, in contrast to Vietnamese music (Olsen, 2008). When K-pop music entered Vietnam in the late 1990s as a vanguard in the form of original soundtracks of TV films and dramas, Vietnamese media assimilated it to Cantonese pop music and Japanese pop music and allocated them all to the East Asian music category (Thomas, 2002). Foreign music became the umbrella music category, of which the East Asian music category formed part. The creation of the East Asian music category was consistent with the Vietnamese Communist Party's cultural and economic policy of consolidating the Vietnamese state on the basis of the East Asian developmental state model, in which the state uses its power to participate directly as a

key leader and planner in establishing markets (Beeson & Pham, 2012; Nguyen & Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2021).

The assimilation of K-pop to the East Asian music category was carried out in two overlapping stages: (1) visually linking K-pop music to other East Asian music; and (2) discursively inscribing aesthetic and symbolic values of K-pop into the youth taste regime. First, all news related to K-pop music, ranging from advertisements for new albums, announcement of musical concerts and music charts through to the artists' personal life stories, were grouped into Asian music threads. These threads were arranged on a separate page than threads on Western popular music and Vietnamese popular music. For example, a one-page thread "Asian Music Artists 2005" (HHT 528, 58) showed at the top of the page a photo of Jang Nara (Korean singer and actress) along with a journalist's brief review of the concept of her new album, while the bottom of the page was given over to Bi (Rain)'s (Korean singer and actor) profile and life story. Similarly, the thread "Hot hifi 100°C – Around the world of Pop 2.0" (HHT 550, 74), informing readers about popular music news worldwide, presented K-pop artists, events and new albums on the same page as C-pop news, while Western music artists were featured on the opposite page. Interestingly, although K-pop news has a content structure (i.e. a short news item translated from the foreign press accompanied by a photo of the artist) and narrative style similar to Western music news, the two-page layout of this thread revealed a contrast between Korean and Western artists. The former were presented as baby-faced artists in a frivolous style, while the latter featured young adults in a sophisticated style. This kind of page layout, which was prominent in Vietnamese youth magazines visually highlights the similarities between K-pop music and other East Asian music. But it also creates a symbolic boundary separating K-pop music from Western music, despite their similarities in rhythms and melodies (Shim, 2006).

Blanchet (2018) characterizes this page layout practice as visual inscription – a process through which market actors use material representations to make an object visible (i.e. graphics, tables, indicators, etc., depict an economic reality).

Visual inscription is also manifested in Vietnamese public media's interpretive work for aligning aesthetic and symbolic values with Vietnamese youth's taste regime without challenging the cultural norms imposed by the VCP. To frame young Vietnamese consumers' understanding of the aesthetic values of K-pop, the Vietnamese media highlighted and translated visual performances of Korean artists into "trendy dress styles for [Vietnamese] teenagers" (HHT 2/2006: 24) or "[Vietnamese] teenagers' styles" (HHT 4/2006). For instance, the thread reviewing the hottest dress styles in 2005 features a cutely dressed baby-faced girl to illustrate the "Full House style" – a dress style promoted in the Korean TV drama *Full House*. There follows an extract from the style description in the thread:

> "Full House style
>
> You can easily recognize this style from your classmates! Girls, wherever they have a candy dress style or a gypsy style, share a common color palette which is mostly bold: yellow, orange, red… They are noticeable in public wearing a jacket accompanied by a floral miniskirt. Not only girls, but boys too are influenced by the *Full House* dress style, mostly from Bi (Rain)…All of them want to improve their appearance (they conscientiously practice sport to have a good body like Bi), their skills (they want to learn music and IT), and their personality, so as to make a good impression on girls in the same way as Bi." (HHT 2/2006:24)

As the above extract shows, Vietnamese public media assemble the visual appearances of K-pop artists to create a prototype about an Asian boy/girl that young consumers can emulate in their style construction. Such visual inscription links K-pop aesthetic values to young consumers' style construction by orchestrating the objects (color, dress type), actions (dress combinations), and meanings (Full House style). For our informants, the magazine was essential for young Vietnamese consumers in learning how to assemble a dress style and to judge a music artist's style and performance. In other words, young Vietnamese consumers' engagement with K-pop was mediated.

The assimilation strategy adopted by the Vietnamese media was twofold. On one hand, it defined the symbolic boundary for the East Asian music category and shifted from language-based to geographically based categorizing. Country-of-origin became the core meaning for music categorization (i.e. K-pop is Korean pop music). On other hand, it gave rise to a peripheral meaning for K-pop as a visual culture.

4.2. PHASE 2: FAN COMMUNITY BUILDING AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE EAST ASIAN MUSIC CATEGORY (2006 - 2014)

Since its inscription in the youth taste regime, K-pop music not only entered into young Vietnamese consumers' daily music consumption, but also expanded into other consumption practices such as the construction of dress styles, food, sport, etc. A new niche market emerged (Nguyen and Özçaglar-Toulouse 2021). Between 2006 and 2014, Korean music agencies regularly chose the Vietnamese market as a destination for their business. The high point of their business activities was in 2012 when five musical events ran consecutively (K-pop Festival; M Live Mo.A.; Soundfest; Music Bank; T-ara's Fan Meeting and Kim Jaejoong's fan

meeting). Entry tickets for these events were no longer free of charge. For example, for the Super Show of Super Junior in 2011, young consumers had to pay up to 3.5 million VND ($160)[1] for a ticket, a price that was beyond the reach of most of them. A ticket for a T-ara fan meeting in 2014 ranged from 450,000 to 2.8 million VND ($20-$150)[2]. However, despite the high prices, K-pop concerts and fan meetings were often sold out. As well as exporting their music concerts, Korean music agencies also organized cultural events such as "K-pop dance cover contests" and "K-pop FC festivals" in order to create a K-pop fan culture in Vietnam. Whereas in Phase 1, Korean music agencies emphasized physical albums and music concerts as the core of their business, in this phase they began to digitalize their music so as to reach wider audiences and deal with the illegal downloading of music and with piracy (Oh & Park, 2012). While state-controlled media were still their main local distributors in the Vietnamese market, Korean music agencies expanded their distribution networks by integrating private cable channels. The latter had sprung up following Vietnam's accession to the WTO in 2007. In terms of promotion strategy, Korean music agencies collaborated with independent K-pop fan clubs for all musical events organized in Vietnam (Nguyen 2016). Although those fan clubs were not managed and funded by Korean music agencies, they become an alternative cultural intermediary that Korean music agencies worked with to export K-pop fan culture to the Vietnamese market.

Independent K-pop fan clubs function as communities of practices that are formed naturally without the intervention of Korean agencies. In these fan clubs, young consumers help each other to learn new skills and cultural competences that go beyond the set of skills articulated by

[1] https://tuoitre.vn/chuyen-tu-phong-ve-suju-433346.htm
[2] http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/giai-tri/fan-meeting-cua-t-ara-gia-ve-cao-ngat-nguong-184153.html

the media. If in the first period, young Vietnamese consumers used the media's interpretive work to identify and build an understanding of K-pop, in this period they collectively created for themselves the interpretive framework and disseminated it in mainstream and niche media. For example, one of main activities of these communities is dubbing all the music videos of their favorite K-pop idol bands and distributing them free of charge on social video platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. "This dubbing practice helps us to promote our favorite K-pop idol group in Vietnam and to attract new members for our fan club. The better the quality of our subtitles, the more our groups gain in reputation and the more people want to join our club. As a result, the better our reputation, the more people get to know our favorite idol group" (Tam, male, 25 years old). For young Vietnamese consumers like Tam who engage with K-pop, joining independent K-pop fan clubs helps them collectively acquire knowledge and cultural competences for promoting their favorite K-pop idol group. In turn, with the knowledge and cultural competences acquired from the fan clubs, young Vietnamese consumers pursue their personal fulfillment and self-development in other fields such as professional work. For Tam, dubbing K-pop music videos enables his IT and language skills to improve too. He also learns how to work with others and how to manage time.

The linking of independent K-pop fan clubs in the network of Korean music agencies' cultural intermediaries led to tension between the state-run media and engaged K-pop consumers with regard to shaping the youth taste regime. In an effort to maintain their authority, the Vietnamese media began to problematize K-pop music, as a way of discrediting the taste-shaper role of independent K-pop fan clubs and their K-pop engagement practices. The latter were deemed to be problematic because they deviated from the standard practices elaborated by the state-controlled media. Images and critical stories on young consumers' K-pop engagement practices

flooded online and offline newspapers whenever K-pop music concerts were held in Vietnam, either for diplomatic events involving Korea and Vietnam or for commercial purposes (see Nguyen & Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2021). The first public debate about K-pop was opened when Super Junior (a K-pop idol boy band) came to Vietnam in 2010 in a music festival sponsored by the MTV channel. Many tabloids reporting this event featured images of uniformly dressed young female consumers waiting for the boy band at the airport with balloons and banners and displaying uninhibited emotion and behavior (tuoitre.vn 12/05/2011). Some newspapers were critical of the music festival, highlighting the boy band's performance quality and the out-of-control behavior of the young female fans attending the festival. These reports gave rise to public debate about the aesthetic value of K-pop music and the appropriateness of young consumers' K-pop engagement practices. An academic seminar was also organized by a Vietnamese university on these themes (tuoitre.vn 27/06/2012).

There follows an extract from a Vietnamese whose daughter is an engaged K-pop consumer.

> […] To be honest, apart from their appearance and their pleasing dance choreography, these Korean girls are not very good singers. This disappointed me. A lot of youngsters threatened to commit suicide just to attend performances like this. I asked many of the youngsters waiting outside why they idolized K-pop singers. They all replied that it was because they liked it […]"
>
> (Vnexpress.net 12/3/2012)

The above quote illustrates the general opinion of older Vietnamese on the aesthetic value of K-pop music, linking K-pop to young consumers' poor taste. For such critics, young consumers

engage with K-pop more for the visual effects in the artists' performance than for the quality of the music. For some, because of their "lack of experience and cultural competence, young consumers who engage with K-pop cannot distinguish good music from bad music" (tuoitre.vn, 12/05/211). Interestingly, critics of K-pop valorize Western and Japanese music. In an article titled "I do not like K-pop music because it is not good music" published by Vnexpress.net (the most popular Vietnamese commercial newspaper), the author writes:

> What I dislike about K-pop is the quality of the music. The music trend today is for soloists, not bands, as in K-pop. If there are still some soloists in K-pop, they are not as good as Western or Japanese singers. This counter-trend sets K-pop apart from the standard of world music…And fans of Western music or Japanese music are much more straightforward than fans of K-pop. What is important for the former is the recorded quality of the music. And they are able to control their emotions when they attend a live show.
>
> (vnexpress.net 12/07/2012)

This quote captures the problematization of the change in the taste regime linked to K-pop engagement practices. The author contrasts Western and Japanese music with K-pop in two respects. First, the K-pop music model centered on group performance makes it 'out-of-category' and at odds with the standard music evaluation system based on the artists' skills. Second, as Western music conforms to the standard music category, consumers who engage with Western music know how to behave correctly in terms of the norms set by the category. Thus, K-pop engagement practices are regarded as problematic. Such a viewpoint was also taken by professional journalists in their analysis of Vietnamese youth culture and in TV

documentaries. For instance, in one documentary broadcast on the national TV channel, the journalist saw K-pop engaged consumers as immature teenagers, whereas consumers engaged with Western music were depicted as mature young adults (VTV1, 9/6/2012). Some of our informants share this opinion.

> People who engage with Western or Japanese music are mostly mature adults. They do not practice the same activities that we do. When I try to debate with my classmates about K-pop, they often say that K-pop is music for teenage girls who are not interested in the quality of the music, but only in how the performers look. For them, engaging with K-pop is a waste of time.
>
> (Ky, male 16 years old)

Debates about K-pop's aesthetic value and its impact on young Vietnamese consumers not only emphasize the symbolic boundary between K-pop music and Western music in the opinion of Vietnamese market actors, but also contribute to the contraction of the Asian music category that K-pop belongs to. Indeed, by treating K-pop engaged consumers as deviant and their consumption practices as problematic, Vietnamese media make a sharp distinction between K-pop and other (East) Asian music. Furthermore, they bring to the fore the peripheral meaning (i.e. K-pop as a visual culture) that they developed in Phase 1.

4.3. PHASE 3: CULTURAL REPOSITIONING AND SPECIATION OF THE EAST ASIAN MUSIC CATEGORY (2014 TO PRESENT)

The public debate about K-pop aesthetic value and its negative impact on Vietnamese youth cultures put constraints on K-pop engaged consumers. For example, Hong (female, 25 years

old) and her younger sister, who is also a K-pop engaged consumer, are forced by their parents to disengage from K-pop music. For their parents, "K-pop music is low quality music which makes us vulgar. They do not want [Hong and her sister] to be regarded as deviant, vulgar girls by [their] neighbors or [their] relatives." Similarly, Nu (female, 17 years old) has to "control [her] behavior in public because [she] does not want to be labeled as a K-pop crazy fan." As K-pop music is associated with bad taste and music for teenage girls, some K-pop engaged consumers are obliged to change their behavior in private and public in order to distance themselves from the negative image of K-pop music, while others take another strategic direction by professionalizing their engagement practices.

Consider, for instance, the case of Saint 319 (or stylized St.319), one of Vietnam's well-known K-pop dance cover groups from Hanoi. The group was founded in 2011 with two members, Aiden and Zoe, both aficionados of K-pop cover dances. The group opened its own YouTube channel in 2011, where they uploaded homemade videos of their cover dances of various K-pop music songs. Their homemade videos soon became popular, with their YouTube channel attracting over 820,000 subscribers after seven years. They became one of the most popular Vietnamese K-pop dance cover groups, and have won awards on several occasions from Korean entertainment houses (kenh14.vn 05/10/2018). They also have a fan club called IOWA. Since 2015, the group has changed into an entertainment corporation producing professional singers and dancers. They have collaborated with other media producers in making Vietnamese music videos and TV commercials in which they integrate cultural elements inspired by K-pop music (such as dance moves and clothing styles). Zoe, one of founders of St.319, justifies the professionalization of her K-pop engagement practices.

> Initially, I covered K-pop idols' performances just for fun. I filmed my performance and put it on YouTube as a souvenir. One day Aiden, our team leader, found my vid on YouTube. He contacted me and asked me to join him to practice K-pop dance. We practiced K-pop dance every time we were available. We filmed our performance and put it on YouTube. Our homemade videos have attracted several thousand views. We were excited and decided to recruit other young people to form St.319. Our initial goals were to build a group of K-pop dance aficionados and publish our homemade videos on YouTube.
>
> (Zoe, female, 26 years old)

By remaking K-pop dance choreography enlivened with their own story creation, Zoe and her group transformed original K-pop music videos into products of their creative activities. The dissemination of their homemade videos on their group channel is a technique they promote themselves as well as making their engagement with K-pop visible in public space without being criticized by others. In reproducing dance choreographies of various K-pop idol groups, St.319 diversifies and professionalizes its creative work and gets closer to other young K-pop consumers who have to keep at a distance in public areas. Doing so enables it to get other young consumers interested in their group and its activities. While Zoe and her group were having fun with their K-pop music, promoting their creative work on YouTube became a way for them to benefit economically through YouTube's reward policy. It was also the initial step for St.319's transition from lovers of K-pop music to professional artists or "tribal entrepreneurs" (Cova & Guercini, 2016) with their own fan club.

Some K-pop engaged young consumers seek to transform their engagement practices into social activities. In the following excerpt, Bo (23-year-old female) describes the transformation in her K-pop engagement practices.

> We often do charitable work in the name of our idol group. We fundraise for poor people in Vietnam, we do beach cleaning and participate in social activities organized by the local government. In each social activity, we use the name of the local fandom of our K-pop idol group. It is the best way to promote our idol groups in my city as well as improve the image of K-pop fans in Vietnam. We want to show other people that K-pop music fans are not immature consumers, as depicted by national media.
>
> (Bo, a 23-year-old female from Nha Trang)

As Bo's excerpt reveals, Bo and other members of her K-pop fandom are seeking to change the stereotype of K-pop engaged consumers in their local context through charity work and social activities. Through this social work, they distance themselves from self-oriented and hedonistic practices while attaching themselves to social practices organized and managed by local government. This work also helps to promote the positive image of their admired idol group in a local context.

The professionalization of K-pop fan cultures and persistence of anti-K-pop discourses generated by the Vietnamese media strengthen the peripheral meaning of K-pop as a visual culture and make K-pop music a distinct Asian music sub-category. The speciation of K-pop in the Vietnamese market gives Korean music agencies opportunities to deal with the risk of

rejection as a result of anti-K-pop discourses, and to capitalize on the Vietnamese youth market. Since 2014, Korean music agencies have formed joint ventures with Vietnamese media agencies to recruit and train young Vietnamese singing talents to become international K-pop idols (Park, 2017). The K-pop audition and singing contest *VK Lotte Pop Super Star 2014* was broadcast nationally by state-controlled media and had an audience of more than 45% of the Vietnamese population for the final competition (Park, 2017). Along with their joint ventures in Vietnamese market, Korean agencies have acquired and transformed Vietnamese independent fan clubs into their local official K-pop fandom. They have recruited fan club leaders as brand community managers. These official fan clubs work hand in hand with mainstream media and local government in recruiting new members, organizing K-pop music events and/or social activities (as illustrated by the case of Bo). For instance, when JYJ (a K-pop boy band) held a music concert in Vietnam in 2014, the official fandom of JYJ collaborated with youth magazines (such as HHT and Kenh14.vn) and youth television channels (such as YeahOneTV) to launch a marketing campaign for the concert. Another event marking the collaboration between K-pop engaged consumers and mainstream media was the publication of a travel guidebook for young consumers in which K-pop engaged consumers share their experiences with K-pop music in particular and with South Korea in general (HHT 1298).

These collaborative activities that K-pop engaged consumers carry out with Korean music agencies, state-controlled media and other market actors (such as government institutions and foreign and private firms) help to co-shape the taste regime and to reach a new consensus on K-pop music. First, through collaboration with these market actors, K-pop engaged consumers select and adopt certain engagement practices that conform to market actors' expectations,

while ceasing other practices that might be subject to public criticism. The practices adopted are, in turn, linked to mainstream youth culture through popularization and marketization.

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of our paper is to examine the dynamic interplay between the discretionary adaptation process of internationalizing firms on the one hand and the local market category on the other. According to Akaka, Vargo, and Lusch (2013), the complexity of international contexts lies in the dynamic interplay between market actors' practices, formal and informal market institutions, and resources. Being embedded in a market, the actions and interactions in which internationalizing firms and local market actors engage are shaped by a multitude of market institutions and by the availability and density of resources. In dealing with the institutional context to facilitate their actions and interactions, internationalizing firms and market actors, in turn, shape market institutions and reallocate market resources. This iterative process leads to the co-evolution of markets and cultures that can be captured by a service ecosystem approach focusing on the dynamics of internationalizing firms and local market actors' exchange and value co-creation in markets on three levels: micro (actor engagement), meso (sets of actors and their resources), and macro (institutional system) (Akaka, Vargo, & Lusch, 2013; Storbacka et al., 2016). In responding to the suggestion of Akaka, Vargo, & Lusch (2013), we conceptualize discretionary adaptation as an iterative process to which internationalizing firms adjust their strategic practices along with the development of *informal* market institutions shaped by practices of firms and local actors. We focus on the engagement practices of internationalizing firms and local actors and in particular we ground our study in the context ofmarket category formation. For Durand & Khaire (2016: 89), market category formation is "a process that challenges the status ordering of actors in an ecosystem" and "requires

rearranging, reinterpretation, and revaluation of existing elements and attributes" (Durand & Khaire, 2016: 89).

Our study reveals three phases of (East) Asian market category formation in the Vietnamese market: category creation, category contraction, and category speciation. As defined by Durand & Khaire (2017: 88), "category creation refers to a situation where a new category consists in redesigning cognitive boundaries around a subset of elements within a preexisting category system". In our study, the introduction of K-pop music by Korean firms into the Vietnamese market is taken by state-controlled media as an opportunity, following the VCP's cultural policy, to create the (East) Asian music category based on the geographical proximity between countries where the music comes from. By assimilating K-pop to other East Asian music, Vietnamese state-controlled media draw a symbolic boundary that separates it from other foreign music (such as French music, Western music). The detachment of (East) Asian music from the foreign music category makes the differences between them more visible and fosters the formation of communities of practice centered around the two music categories. This phase is not dissimilar to the case of e-cigarettes, when firms, during the product introduction phase, assimilated the e-cigarette category to traditional cigarettes in order to familiarize other market actors with the new product and to incorporate it into their cigarette consumption practices (Hsu & Grodal, 2021). As the Vietnamese state-controlled media's objective is elaborating a prototype of (East) Asian youth culture for the local market, the creation of the (East) Asian music category gives rise to a peripheral meaning through which K-pop music becomes a visual culture.

The incorporation of K-pop's peripheral meaning into young consumers' daily consumption practices fosters the transformation of the social role of K-pop engaged consumers. They become a new category of cultural intermediary who engage with Korean music agencies in shaping Vietnamese youth's taste regime. The problematization of the new role of K-pop engaged consumers entails a shift in K-pop's shared meanings. The peripheral meaning (i.e. K-pop as visual culture) moves to the core, while the initial core meaning (i.e. K-pop is Korean pop music) is pushed to the periphery. This movement of K-pop shared meanings highlights the dissimilarities between K-pop and other (East) Asian music and contributes to redefining the (East) Asian music category. The contraction of the (East) Asian music category occurs when K-pop engaged consumers and their practices are discursively excluded from other communities of practice centered around music consumption.

Category speciation happens when young consumers select and professionalize certain engagement practices by infusing them with entrepreneurial market rationality (e.g. St.319 use marketing tools and mainstream media to promote and commercialize K-pop dance cover practices). They are then transformed into tribal entrepreneurs who seek to engage in their passion by professionalizing their ludic consumption activities (Cova & Guercini, 2016). Unlike the first and second phases, in this phase young consumers take their engagement with K-pop seriously. They not only refine their skills and knowledge but also use their social capital in mobilizing other mainstream market actors (e.g. media, local government) and Korean music agencies in co-producing and co-shaping the local taste regime. The professionalization of K-pop engaged consumers' practices reinforces the core meaning "K-pop as visual culture". It also strengthens the symbolic differentiation of K-pop within (East) Asian music category. This

in turn opens up opportunities for Korean music agencies to reposition their products and services in the Vietnamese market.

Our study supplements prior work on international marketing adaptation in several respects. First, unlike previous research that adopts a decision-making perspective to study whether internationalizing firms standardize or adapt their international marketing and performance (Mandler et al,. 2022; Schmid & Kotulla, 2011), we apply a process perspective for our study. This process perspective, which looks at how and why things (people, environment, strategies, etc.) change, act and evolve over time (Langley, 2007: 271), helps us answer the question of when and how internationalizing firms realize discretionary adaptation and when they should engage local actors for implementing that strategy. While prior research suggests that discretionary adaptation is likely adopted by internationalizing firms following their local market entry (Cavusgil, Zou, & Naidu, 1993; Westjohn & Magnusson, 2017), we argue that internationalizing firms could implement discretionary adaptation during their initial entry into the local market by engaging with local distributors and facilitating their role of cultural intermediary. In our study, we show that Korean music agencies adjusted their distribution and promotion strategies when they first entered the Vietnamese market. The gatekeeper and vanguard roles taken naturally by state-controlled media provide Korean music agencies with opportunities to familiarize consumers with K-pop music, a culturally specific market category. By showing this, our study is aligned with Sasaki, Nummela, & Ravasi (2021), who argue that "product adaptation as an ongoing process that unfolds with a firm's international expansion, as producers and intermediaries explore ways to bridge cultural differences." (p. 245). Yet in contrast to Sasaki et al. (2021), we observe that Korean music agencies do not wait until their products are accepted by local consumers to engage with state-controlled media in their

discretionary adaptation, as Japanese firms do. Rather, they engage state-controlled media (as their local distributors) and implement discretionary adaptation at once.

Second, we extend the study by Sasaki et al. (2021) by revealing how internationalizing firms engage and manage different local cultural intermediaries in implementing their discretionary adaptation. Whereas Sasaki et al. (2021) focused on one type of cultural intermediary (e.g. local export intermediaries and local designers), we show that internationalizing firms build their network of cultural intermediaries that unfolds with the formation of the market category to which the firms' offerings belong. Indeed, the creation, contraction and speciation phases of the local market category entail variation in local actors' degree of engagement, and the inclusion and exclusion of market actors in the network, while lessening the power of some of them and strengthening that of others. In our case, along with the formation of the K-pop category, the state-controlled media lose their authority in shaping young consumers' taste regime, while young consumers who are deeply engaged with K-pop move to the core of the network of cultural intermediaries built by Korean music agencies. This dynamic movement occurs in accordance with the movement of K-pop category meanings between the core and periphery. That is to say, the formation of the K-pop category opens up a space where the dynamic movement of category' meanings fuel the degree of local actors' engagement practices with Korean music agencies (i.e., Vietnamese market actors intensify their engagement along with the speciation of K-pop category), and the suppression and retention of appropriate practices. The movement also reinforces or weakens the actors' role in the network, which in turn makes Korean music agencies adjust their practices.

Third, our study also contributes to the research stream on global customer engagement in international marketing (Gupta, Pansari, & Kumar, 2018; Hollebeek, 2018), showing that the engagement styles of an individual or a group of individuals with a global brand or a global brand community is not affected solely by their individual cultural values, but also by the degree of their embeddedness in the local market network. The more customers are embedded in the local market, the more they take their engagement practices seriously. As our data analysis illustrates, Vietnamese state-controlled media and young consumers progressively integrated their resources in their engagement with K-pop music, along with their embeddedness in relation to other market actors. In this regard we agree with the argument put forward by de Almeida et al. (2018) according to which the intersection of contextual triggers (i.e. market-specific practices, marketplace shifts, and sociotechnical advances) and individual drivers encourages or constrains the deepening of customer engagement with a global brand and/or global brand community.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Our study has managerial implications for firms which want to introduce new offerings in foreign markets, especially culturally specific offerings whose values and meanings are little known outside their original market. First, we argue that firms should seriously take into account the dynamic local market category when deciding at what moment and how to engage local actors in implementing discretionary adaptation. Introducing their offerings in the phase of category problematization when local market actors disagree about market category meanings could risk firms being viewed less favorably and negatively evaluated by the market actors targeted. For example, despite their high quality and sophisticated performance, K-pop

music concerts held in Vietnam from 2006 -2014 received negative evaluations from the majority of Vietnamese market actors (e.g. K-pop non-engaged consumers, media, analysts, government) because K-pop engaged consumers were not appreciated by other market actors. Korean music agencies suffered financial losses during this period. Another example concerns eBay in France. As an internet-based business often negatively evaluated by the French state, eBay's entry into that category got the firm into trouble with the French regulatory authorities (Curchod, Patriotta, & Wright, 2020). To avoid this risk, firms should pay more attention to the dynamic and complexity of local markets that bound the hierarchical ordering of market category and taste-based actor engagement practices.

However, in the case where firms' offerings are interpreted by local market actors as a low-status category, thereby affecting their performance in the local market, firms can adopt a strategy of category detachment through narratives or visual inscription, subject to having sufficient resources to support the implementation of that strategy. Otherwise, firms can engage mainstream market actors in recategorizing the entire market category that their offerings belong to. Firms can also provide engagement platforms (e.g. an ICT-enabled environment such as interfaces and artifacts, or physical resources such as retail stores) to less-favorable market actors and help them to align their engagement practices with conventional norms (see Fehrer et al., 2021). For example, annual K-pop dance cover contests organized by Korean entertainment houses encourage transnational K-pop engaged consumers to become involved. Consumers are invited to reproduce dance moves and choreography on K-pop beat music videos. Information and dance instructions are disseminated through local official K-pop fan clubs managed by Korean entertainment houses, local mainstream media, and global social platforms. By enabling K-pop engaged consumers to reproduce K-pop music videos, such

contests contribute to the institutionalization of K-pop engagement practices (i.e. K-pop dance covers) that in turn helps K-pop engaged consumers change their social status. The video streaming service Viki Entertainment provides another example of how a community-based firm categorizes itself through professionalizing Asian TV shows' fan engagement practices.

6.2. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study's findings and theoretical contributions need to be viewed in the light of its limitations. First, our study is grounded only in the Vietnamese market, as a representative context to examine the co-evolution of a culturally specific market category and market actor engagement practices. Although our findings are partially relevant to other market categories and cultural contexts (e.g. the emergence of the gin category in England or the US/Denmark craft beer category), our findings should be generalized with caution. As Pedeliento, Andreini, and Dalli (2019) contend, market category is embedded in market structures that are tied to a specific taste regime. As a taste regime changes in accordance with social, historical, and cultural contexts and market structures are organized differently from one locality to another, the evolutionary path of a market category may have its own specificity. It would be fruitful for future research to make its account of the evolution of a market category generalizable by using a multi-country design.

Second, since our study focuses mainly on the engagement practices of local media and young consumers, we do not examine the (re)actions of other market actors such as local and multinational entrepreneurs, governments and political authorities – a category of market actors who possess power and market capabilities that could change an entire market category without involving a taste regime. This is crucial even for markets governed by developmental states such as those in East Asia (see Nguyen & Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2021). The role of government

and its interrelationships with other market actors variously on a local, regional or global scale (e.g. other countries) in making a market category evolve would be an promising avenue for future research.

Third, in order to reconstruct the evolutionary path of the K-pop music category, our study draws on archival data and interviews with young Vietnamese consumers who have witnessed and progressively engaged with K-pop music since it was first introduced in Vietnam. However, we pay less attention to consumers who disengaged from K-pop music when it was associated with a youth subculture or when it went mainstream. The literature on status recategorization would benefit if future studies were to explore the subculture disengagement trajectory of young consumers.

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