



Self-proclaimed divas and performative authority in contemporary Vietnamese popular music

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of self-proclaimed Divas in contemporary Vietnamese popular music as a site for rethinking how artistic authority operates under conditions of institutional instability. Drawing on a mixed-methods study combining survey data and in-depth interviews with artists, cultural administrators, media professionals, and audiences, the analysis shows that Diva status is widely understood not as a settled title but as a provisional position that must be continually enacted and sustained in public view. Self-proclamation does not automatically undermine authority; rather, it initiates a prolonged process of exposure in which claims are tested through performance, scrutiny, and response. Controversy emerges not as a force of erosion but as a condition that keeps authority evaluatively open and socially consequential. Evaluations of Diva status prioritise presence, bearing, and relational dominance over technical competence or formal recognition, while gender intensifies both visibility and vulnerability. The article advances the concept of performative authority to capture this mode of power, arguing that authority in contemporary popular culture can function effectively without institutional conferral. By treating Vietnam as a theoretical vantage point rather than a cultural exception, the study contributes to broader debates on celebrity, performativity, and cultural hierarchy in contexts where mechanisms of consecration are fragmented or absent.

Keywords: Performative authority, diva, celebrity culture, artistic hierarchy, gender and power, popular music, vietnam

Introduction

In most accounts of popular music, artistic titles are treated as outcomes rather than acts. Labels such as “star,” “icon,” or “diva” are commonly understood as designations bestowed after long processes of recognition, evaluation, and institutional confirmation. Whether mediated through recording industries, critical communities, award systems, or historical canonisation, authority is presumed to follow achievement and to stabilise symbolic rank within a recognised field (Bourdieu, 1993; Turner, 2014) [5, 19]. Titles arrive at the end of careers, not at their beginning, and certainly not through self-assertion.

This assumption becomes increasingly difficult to sustain in contexts where such stabilising institutions are weak, fragmented, or unevenly trusted. In contemporary Vietnam, the title “Diva” circulates widely in popular discourse, yet it does so without a recognised body empowered to confer it. No academy authorises the designation. No canonical procedure settles disputes. Instead, the title often appears as a public declaration made by performers themselves, reiterated across media platforms, and negotiated through continuous public reaction. What is striking is not merely the act of self-proclamation, but the fact that such declarations frequently acquire social traction rather than immediate dismissal.

Public debates surrounding these self-proclaimed Divas are intense and persistent. Accusations of arrogance, exaggeration, or illegitimacy coexist with admiration, defence, and selective acceptance. Yet controversy rarely eliminates the title’s force. On the contrary, contestation often sustains its visibility and compels performers to reassert their position through aesthetic display, vocal authority, and symbolic posture. Rather than collapsing under dispute, the title remains operative precisely because it stays evaluatively open, drawing attention, judgment, and response (Lamont, 2012; Schickel, 1985) [14, 16].

Existing scholarship tends to interpret such phenomena as media strategy, narcissistic branding, or market-driven spectacle. While these readings illuminate dynamics of exposure and circulation, they remain analytically thin. They treat self-proclamation as deviation rather than as a social mechanism, and they leave unexamined a more fundamental question: how does artistic authority take shape when recognition is not granted by institutions but generated through public acts that must continuously justify themselves? Approaching celebrity primarily through visibility risks flattening authority into media effect, rather than analysing it as a form of power that organises evaluation and expectation (Marshall, 2014) [15].

This article approaches the Vietnamese “self-proclaimed Diva” as a diagnostic site for rethinking authority in popular culture. Rather than asking whether particular performers deserve the title, the analysis asks how the title works. It shifts attention away from legitimacy as a moral judgment and toward authority as a practical accomplishment. From this perspective, the Diva emerges not as a fixed status but as a condition that must be enacted, defended, and renewed in public space through repeated acts that solicit uptake, resistance, and recalibration (Alexander, 2004) [1].

The article advances the concept of performative authority to capture this process. Performative authority refers to a form of power that does not rely on institutional endorsement, yet acquires social effect through declaration, aesthetic performance, and sustained public negotiation. Authority here is neither inherited nor bestowed. It is claimed, tested, and conditionally recognised through repeated acts that render the claim plausible enough to endure. This understanding builds on theories of performativity that locate agency not in formal sanction but in the capacity of acts to produce effects under conditions of exposure and response (Austin, 1962; Butler, 2010) [2, 8].

Vietnam offers a particularly revealing vantage point for examining this form of authority. The popular music field operates with limited and unstable mechanisms of consecration. Professional hierarchies exist, yet they lack the capacity to conclusively settle symbolic rank. In such settings, authority does not disappear, but it takes on a provisional and relational form, operating without closure and persisting without command (Sennett, 1980; Bourdieu, 1996) ^[6, 17]. Media ecosystems amplify personal claims while simultaneously subjecting them to scrutiny and ridicule, rendering authority visible as an ongoing problem rather than a settled outcome.

Gender is central to this configuration. The title “Diva” is overwhelmingly attached to female performers and is inseparable from intensified scrutiny of comportment, affect, and moral presence. Claims to Diva status expose women to heightened evaluation that extends beyond vocal ability into questions of attitude, respectability, and emotional discipline. Authority is granted conditionally and remains perpetually at risk of withdrawal. This gendered exposure does not negate authority, but it reshapes the labour required to sustain it, making performative endurance both more visible and more precarious (Gill, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Skeggs, 2004) ^[4, 12, 18].

By analysing how the Diva title is claimed, contested, and sustained, this article contributes to broader debates on celebrity, performativity, and cultural power. It challenges the assumption that authority must be institutionally conferred to be effective, showing instead how authority can emerge as a provisional yet consequential arrangement maintained through public acts that never fully stabilise. In doing so, the article positions Vietnam not as an exceptional case, but as a lens through which emerging global transformations in cultural authority become sharply visible.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Research on popular music has long treated artistic titles as stabilising devices within cultural hierarchies. Terms such as “star,” “icon,” or “diva” are commonly framed as outcomes of accumulated achievement, professional validation, and collective recognition. Within this perspective, authority is understood as a derivative property that follows from prior accomplishment and is secured through relatively durable institutions such as recording industries, critical communities, award systems, and historical canons (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu, 1996; Turner, 2014) ^[5, 6, 19]. Titles matter because they signal closure. They mark a position that has already been earned and symbolically settled within the field.

This institutional understanding of artistic authority has proven analytically productive, yet it rests on an assumption that often remains implicit: that the cultural field possesses recognised mechanisms capable of conferring and stabilising symbolic rank. When such mechanisms are weak, fragmented, or contested, the model begins to fray. Authority does not disappear under these conditions, but it no longer arrives as a settled verdict. Instead, it circulates in provisional forms that must be continuously enacted, recognised, and defended in public space (Sennett, 1980; Lamont, 2012) ^[14, 17].

Celebrity studies has addressed this instability primarily through the lens of media visibility and market logics. From this angle, titles are treated as branding devices and strategic performances designed to attract attention within

competitive cultural economies. Self-asserted status claims are thus read as promotional gestures, exaggerated self-fashioning, or narcissistic spectacle, with authority reduced to a function of exposure and circulation (Schickel, 1985; Marshall, 2014; Turner, 2014) ^[15, 16, 19]. While these accounts illuminate important dynamics of visibility and mediation, they tend to flatten authority into strategy. What remains under-theorised is why such claims sometimes succeed in acquiring social force even when they are openly contested and institutionally unsupported.

Performativity theory offers a partial corrective by shifting attention from recognition to enactment. Rather than viewing authority as something one possesses, performativity approaches authority as something one does. Speech acts, embodied gestures, and ritualised displays can bring social realities into being when they are performed under conditions that allow their effects to be taken up by others (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1997) ^[2, 7]. Subsequent work has further emphasised that agency does not depend on formal sanction alone, but on the capacity of acts to generate effects through repetition, exposure, and response (Butler, 2010) ^[8]. However, performativity has most often been theorised in relation to law, gender, or formal ritual. Its application to popular culture remains uneven, particularly with regard to how authority emerges in entertainment fields lacking recognised rites of consecration (Alexander, 2004) ^[1].

The present study draws these strands together by engaging an emerging line of scholarship that treats authority as a practical accomplishment rather than an institutional outcome. From this perspective, titles such as “Diva” do not merely reflect prior status. They operate as claims that seek to generate the very authority they name. Their efficacy does not depend on consensus or closure, but on their capacity to remain operative within public interaction and evaluative circulation (Alexander, 2004; Lamont, 2012) ^[1, 14].

This shift entails moving away from legitimacy as a normative judgment and toward authority as a practical condition. Legitimacy asks whether a claim ought to be recognised. Authority, by contrast, concerns whether a claim continues to shape perception, expectation, and behaviour despite ongoing dispute. From this angle, controversy is not necessarily a threat to authority. It can function as one of its enabling conditions, insofar as contestation sustains attention, demands response, and compels actors to position themselves within an ongoing evaluative field (Schickel, 1985; Marshall, 2014) ^[15, 16].

Gender is central to this dynamic. The figure of the Diva is inseparable from long-standing cultural associations between femininity, excess, emotional intensity, and spectacle. Feminist media scholarship has shown that female performers who claim elevated cultural status are subject to intensified scrutiny that extends beyond artistic competence into affective comportment, moral tone, and respectability (Gill, 2007; Skeggs, 2004) ^[12, 18]. Contemporary analyses further highlight how assertions of agency by women in popular culture are frequently entangled with backlash, ambivalence, and moral recalibration, rendering authority both visible and precarious (Banet-Weiser, 2018) ^[4]. Gender, in this sense, does not simply colour the reception of authority claims. It structures the conditions under which authority can be exercised at all.

Within this framework, the absence of stable institutions does not produce an authority vacuum. Instead, it generates a different mode of cultural ordering. Symbolic hierarchies take on a soft form. They remain visible, consequential, and widely recognised, yet they lack closure. Titles circulate without final settlement. Positions are asserted without permanent consolidation. Authority emerges as a state that can be entered, challenged, and re-entered through public performance rather than formal endorsement (Sennett, 1980; Bourdieu, 1996) ^[6, 17].

The concept of performative authority synthesised in this literature captures this configuration. It refers to a mode of power that acquires effect through repeated public enactment rather than institutional conferral. Such authority is sustained through declaration, aesthetic display, and ongoing negotiation. Its durability lies not in formal backing, but in the failure of contestation to dislodge it from social relevance.

By approaching the self-proclaimed Diva through this theoretical lens, the article reframes a seemingly local controversy as a broader problem in the study of cultural power. Contemporary popular culture increasingly operates under conditions where authority is neither securely bestowed nor conclusively settled, but continuously produced in interaction. Vietnam, in this sense, does not represent an anomaly. It offers a concentrated vantage point from which transformations in cultural authority that are unfolding across global entertainment fields become unusually clear.

Methodology

This study is designed to examine artistic authority not as a fixed attribute but as a social condition that emerges, stabilises, and remains operative through public interaction. Rather than adjudicating who qualifies as a Diva or establishing normative criteria for artistic merit, the research traces how claims to elevated status are articulated, interpreted, contested, and sustained within a cultural field characterised by weak and unstable mechanisms of consecration. This orientation follows approaches that treat authority as relational and situational, observable through practices of evaluation rather than through formal recognition alone (Lamont, 2012; Sennett, 1980) ^[14, 17].

To address this task, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining a structured survey with semi-structured interviews. This design is not intended to produce triangulation in a positivist sense. Instead, it allows patterned tendencies in perception to be read alongside situated reasoning, hesitation, and ambivalence. Authority, understood here as performative and relational, becomes analytically visible precisely at the intersection between aggregate orientations and individual interpretation, where claims acquire or lose traction through interaction rather than through institutional closure (Alexander, 2004) ^[1].

The survey dataset consists of 152 respondents distributed across four groups occupying different positions within the popular music field: professional singers and musicians, cultural administrators and media professionals, and audience members who engage regularly with popular music. The sample was constructed to capture relational differentiation within the field rather than demographic representativeness. Participants were recruited through professional networks, cultural institutions, performance venues, and audience communities connected to both live

and digital music consumption. The survey instrument focused on how the title “Diva” is understood, whether self-proclamation is perceived as illegitimate or conditionally acceptable, and which criteria respondents consider central to Diva status. Responses were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify dominant patterns and points of divergence across field positions.

Qualitative depth was added through 36 semi-structured interviews conducted with singers, cultural administrators and media workers, and audience members from different age groups. Interviews were designed to elicit reflective accounts rather than definitive judgments. Instead of asking participants to define Diva status directly, conversations explored how respondents reacted to public claims of Diva identity, how they interpreted controversy surrounding such claims, and how they understood the relationship between aesthetic performance, public scrutiny, and authority. This indirect approach proved analytically productive, as it foregrounded enactment and response rather than abstract definition, allowing authority to be examined as something done and negotiated rather than possessed (Butler, 2010) ^[8]. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymised. Analysis proceeded through iterative thematic coding. Initial open coding identified recurring motifs related to authority, legitimacy, performance, gender, and controversy. These motifs were then refined into higher-order analytical categories aligned with the study’s theoretical framework. Particular attention was paid to moments of contradiction, uncertainty, or ambivalence in respondents’ narratives. Rather than treating such moments as methodological noise, the analysis approached them as analytically significant sites where the provisional and conditional character of authority became most visible (Lamont, 2012) ^[14].

Survey and interview materials were analysed in dialogue rather than sequentially. Aggregate tendencies identified in the survey informed the selection and interpretation of interview excerpts, while interview narratives were used to explicate the social logic underlying patterned responses. This analytic movement between scale and situation reflects the study’s core assumption that authority cannot be fully captured at a single analytical level, but must be followed across different registers of interaction and evaluation (Alexander, 2004) ^[1].

The positionality of the researcher is integral to this design. The study is conducted by a researcher situated within Vietnamese academic and cultural contexts, with long-term engagement in research on culture, performance, and social authority. This position provides familiarity with local discursive nuances and historical sensibilities surrounding artistic titles. At the same time, it carries the risk of over-familiarity and implicit normative judgment. To mitigate this risk, the analysis adopts a reflexive stance that brackets personal evaluations of artistic worth and avoids alignment with either celebratory or dismissive positions commonly found in public debates (Bourdieu, 1996) ^[6].

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Participation in both the survey and interviews was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Given the sensitivity of public reputation and the potential for reputational harm, the study avoids naming individual performers or linking specific authority claims to identifiable persons. The analytical focus remains on patterns of reasoning and

interaction rather than on individual careers. This choice reflects an ethical commitment to examining cultural mechanisms without amplifying personal exposure.

The study also recognises that controversy itself is a mediated phenomenon. Public debates around Diva status unfold through platforms shaped by commercial and algorithmic logics. Rather than attempting to reconstruct an objective public opinion, the research treats mediated reaction as part of the performative environment within which authority claims operate. This approach is consistent with understandings of celebrity and media as constitutive of social ordering rather than as neutral channels of representation (Marshall, 2014; Couldry, 2012) ^[9, 15].

Methodologically, this research advances an approach to studying cultural authority under conditions of institutional

absence. By combining patterned perception with reflexive interpretation, it demonstrates how mixed methods can be mobilised to analyse authority not as an attribute to be measured, but as a condition that must be followed through its enactment, contestation, and persistence in public life.

Findings

1. Diva as an operative position rather than a closed title

Across respondent groups, no shared or stable definition of the Diva emerged. What did emerge instead was a consistent rejection of the idea that Diva functions as a permanently conferred title. The majority of respondents described Diva status as provisional, contingent, and subject to ongoing verification.

Table 1: Dominant understandings of “Diva” by respondent group (n = 152)

Primary understanding of Diva	Artists (%)	Cultural administrators & media (%)	Audiences (%)	Overall (%)
Official, institutionally conferred title	9.5	7.1	11.0	9.9
Career achievement accumulated over time	31.0	25.0	28.0	28.3
Performative position requiring maintenance	42.9	46.4	40.2	42.8
Flexible media label	16.6	21.5	20.8	19.0

What is notable is that even among professional artists—who might be expected to defend stricter credential-based hierarchies—the dominant understanding framed Diva as a position that must be continuously sustained rather than a status once attained and secured. Authority, in this sense, is widely perceived as something that can be entered and exited, rather than possessed.

As one singer (Interview S07) remarked:

“You don’t become a Diva once and for all. If your performance drops or your attitude shifts, people stop treating you that way very quickly.”

Such statements point to a shared practical understanding of Diva as an ongoing condition of appearance, not a settled rank.

2. Self-proclamation as a risky but not illegitimate act

Survey results indicate that self-proclaiming Diva status is not categorically rejected. Instead, respondents tend to evaluate self-proclamation conditionally, judging its legitimacy retrospectively rather than normatively.

Table 2: Attitudes toward self-proclaimed Diva status

Evaluation of self-proclamation	Percentage (%)
Never acceptable	18.4
Acceptable if supported by performance capacity	44.7
Acceptable if gradually recognised by audiences	26.3
Entirely normal in the current context	10.6

Rather than being treated as an illegitimate shortcut, self-proclamation is commonly understood as an exposure to public testing. It does not secure authority, but neither does it automatically invalidate it.

A cultural journalist (Interview M03) described this dynamic succinctly:

“To call yourself a Diva is to step into the spotlight without protection. If you can’t carry it, the backlash comes fast.”

Here, self-proclamation appears less as an imposition of authority and more as an invitation to scrutiny. Its effectiveness depends on endurance rather than declaration alone.

3. Controversy as a condition of persistence rather than erosion

Contrary to expectations that controversy undermines legitimacy, interview data consistently show that disputes surrounding Diva claims rarely lead to their disappearance from public discourse. Instead, controversy tends to prolong the evaluative process.

An audience member in their late fifties (Interview A11) explained:

“I’m not sure whether she really is a Diva, but every time there’s a debate, I pay more attention to how she performs next.”

In this account, doubt does not terminate interest. It sustains attention and defers judgment. Authority remains unsettled but operative.

Among artists, this dynamic was articulated with greater caution. A composer (Interview S12) observed:

“A title like that doesn’t die because people criticise it. It dies when no one bothers to argue anymore.”

These remarks suggest that controversy functions less as negation than as a mechanism that keeps authority claims in circulation.

4. Evaluative criteria privileging presence over technique

When respondents were asked to identify criteria they considered “very important” for Diva status, aesthetic and behavioural dimensions consistently outweighed technical or institutional markers.

Table 3: Criteria considered “very important” in evaluating Diva status

Criterion	Percentage (%)
Stage presence and bearing	68.4
Command of performance space	61.8
Vocal technique	54.6
Durability of public image	49.3
Public comportment	46.7
Awards and formal recognition	22.4

While vocal ability remains significant, it is clearly insufficient on its own. Respondents repeatedly emphasised posture, presence, and the capacity to dominate attention as defining features.

A younger audience member (Interview A04) expressed this distinction plainly:

“Some singers have excellent voices, but when they step on stage, they don’t make you feel they’re above the crowd. I wouldn’t call that a Diva.”

The recurrent phrase “above the crowd” appeared across multiple interviews, indicating that Diva is perceived relationally rather than technically.

5. Gendered exposure and intensified scrutiny

Findings also show that Diva claims are deeply gendered. Respondents consistently noted that female performers who assert elevated status are subject to scrutiny extending beyond performance quality to attitude, emotional expression, and moral conduct.

A cultural administrator (Interview M07) commented:

“When a woman claims a high position, people watch everything—how she speaks, how she behaves, how she lives. It’s not just about singing.”

This heightened surveillance does not negate authority claims, but it renders them fragile and labour-intensive. Authority must be constantly recalibrated in response to shifting expectations.

Taken together, the findings show that Diva status is not commonly understood as a fixed or conclusively conferred title. It is instead approached as an operative and provisional position whose validity must be continually sustained in public view. Self-proclamation does not automatically undermine this position; rather, it initiates a prolonged period of exposure in which authority is tested through repeated performance and response. Within this process, controversy does not function as a force of erosion but as a condition that keeps authority claims evaluatively open and socially consequential. Assessments of Diva status consistently privilege presence, bearing, and the ability to establish relational dominance over purely technical competence or formal recognition. At the same time, these authority claims are unevenly distributed and differentially scrutinised, with gender intensifying both visibility and vulnerability. Together, these empirical patterns establish a basis for examining how artistic authority operates performatively in contexts marked by institutional instability.

Discussion

The empirical findings reported above allow the research question to be addressed in a grounded and systematic manner. Rather than treating the phenomenon of self-proclaimed Divas as a deviation from established cultural order, the findings indicate that it is better understood as a site where authority is actively produced under conditions of institutional instability. What emerges from the data is not the absence of authority, but a different mode of its operation—one that is provisional, exposed, and sustained through public interaction rather than institutional closure.

1. From empirical patterns to the resolution of the research question

The findings show that Diva status is widely perceived as an operative and provisional position rather than a settled title. This perception cuts across artists, cultural intermediaries,

and audiences, suggesting that it reflects a shared practical understanding within the field rather than a marginal or idiosyncratic view. Authority, in this context, is not something that is possessed once and for all. It must be continually sustained through performance, comportment, and public response.

This resolves the research question posed in the introduction. Artistic authority in contemporary Vietnamese popular music does not depend on formal conferral to become effective. Instead, it functions through a sequence of public tests initiated by declaration and prolonged through evaluation. Self-proclamation does not secure authority, but it renders authority visible as a problem to be worked through. Such a pattern challenges institutional models of cultural hierarchy that presume authority to be the outcome of consecration within a stabilised field (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu, 1996) ^[5, 6].

Crucially, controversy does not dissolve authority. The findings show that contestation sustains the evaluative openness of the claim and keeps it in circulation. Authority persists precisely because it remains unsettled. This directly complicates normative assumptions that stability and consensus are prerequisites for authority to function, and instead aligns with perspectives that treat authority as a relational condition capable of operating without command or closure (Sennett, 1980; Lamont, 2012) ^[14, 17].

2. Repositioning Vietnam in comparative perspective

When situated in a broader international context, the Vietnamese case does not appear anomalous. In cultural fields where academies, canonising institutions, or authoritative ranking systems are well established, titles such as “Diva” tend to be retrospectively stabilised through institutional recognition. Yet even in these contexts, authority increasingly relies on visibility, repetition, and public negotiation rather than on formal closure alone, particularly within celebrity-driven cultural economies (Marshall, 2014; Turner, 2014) ^[15, 19].

What distinguishes the Vietnamese case is not the presence of self-proclamation, but the absence of mechanisms capable of definitively settling it. This absence renders visible a process that is often masked elsewhere by institutional procedures. Vietnam thus functions as a vantage point rather than an exception. It allows the mechanics of authority to be observed in a more exposed form, stripped of the stabilising effects of consecration and canonisation.

From this perspective, the Vietnamese case anticipates dynamics that are becoming increasingly prominent across global popular culture, where authority is less often bestowed than claimed, tested, and conditionally sustained through mediated interaction. In such settings, visibility does not merely amplify authority. It becomes one of the conditions through which authority is continuously negotiated and recalibrated (Couldry, 2012; Schickel, 1985) ^[9, 16].

3. Theoretical implications: unsettling established assumptions

Taken together, the findings unsettle three established assumptions in existing scholarship.

First, they challenge the assumption within celebrity and star studies that authority flows primarily from institutional recognition. The data demonstrate that authority can operate

effectively without such recognition, provided that claims remain publicly operative and capable of organising attention, expectation, and evaluation. Authority, in this sense, is not a settled status but an ongoing relation between claim, performance, and response (Dyer, 1998; Marshall, 2014)^[10, 15].

Second, the findings complicate performativity theory by showing that performative authority does not require ritual closure to function. Authority here does not emerge from formally sanctioned speech acts, nor does it hinge on a binary distinction between success and failure. Instead, it operates through endurance. Claims acquire force insofar as they survive repeated contestation and continue to solicit uptake within public interaction (Austin, 1962; Butler, 2010; Alexander, 2004)^[1, 2, 8].

Third, the findings refine gender-based analyses of cultural authority. Diva claims are shown to be deeply gendered, but gender does not simply constrain authority. It structures the conditions under which authority must be performed, scrutinised, and recalibrated. Female performers face intensified evaluation that extends beyond artistic competence into affective comportment and moral tone, rendering authority more fragile yet also more visible. This pattern resonates with feminist analyses of media, respectability, and symbolic hierarchy while extending them into the domain of performative authority in popular culture (Gill, 2007; Skeggs, 2004; Banet-Weiser, 2018)^[4, 12, 18].

4. Articulating the academic contribution

The contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that artistic authority can be conceptualised as a performative condition rather than an institutional outcome. By grounding this argument in empirical evidence, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of celebrity culture and offers a conceptual tool for analysing authority under conditions of institutional instability.

More broadly, the findings suggest that authority in contemporary cultural fields should be analysed not through its sources of legitimacy, but through its modes of operativity. Authority persists not because it is conclusively granted, but because it continues to matter in practice—organising attention, shaping evaluation, and structuring expectation despite ongoing dispute. This reframing opens a pathway for rethinking authority across domains where formal recognition is increasingly fragmented, contested, or absent.

Conclusion

This article has examined the phenomenon of self-proclaimed Divas in contemporary Vietnamese popular music not as a matter of personal ambition or media excess, but as a window onto the operation of artistic authority under conditions of institutional instability. By shifting attention away from questions of merit and legitimacy toward the conditions under which authority becomes operative, the study reframes a familiar cultural controversy as a theoretically consequential problem.

The analysis shows that Diva status in Vietnam functions neither as a settled title nor as a purely symbolic label. It operates as a provisional position that must be continuously enacted, tested, and sustained in public view. Authority does not precede performance. It emerges through declaration, embodied presence, and the capacity to endure scrutiny over time. In this configuration, controversy does not signal

failure. It constitutes the very terrain on which authority remains socially consequential.

Approaching authority in this way allows the study to move beyond institutional and normative models that continue to dominate research on celebrity and cultural hierarchy. The Vietnamese case demonstrates that authority can persist without formal conferral, closure, or consensus. What matters is not whether a claim is conclusively validated, but whether it continues to organise attention, evaluation, and expectation. Authority, in this sense, is less a status than a condition of ongoing engagement.

By foregrounding performative authority, the article contributes a conceptual lens for analysing cultural power in contexts where mechanisms of consecration are weak, fragmented, or contested. While grounded empirically in Vietnam, the argument does not rest on claims of national exceptionality. Instead, Vietnam serves as a vantage point that renders visible dynamics increasingly present across global cultural fields, where authority is claimed more often than it is bestowed and sustained through exposure rather than endorsement.

The study also highlights the gendered dimensions of this process. Diva claims illuminate how authority becomes simultaneously intensified and precarious when filtered through expectations surrounding femininity, comportment, and moral presence. This does not negate authority, but it reshapes the labour required to maintain it, pointing to the need for further research on how gender conditions performative power across cultural domains.

Several limitations remain. The study focuses on perceptions and interpretive practices rather than longitudinal career trajectories, and it examines authority primarily through discourse rather than through platform-specific dynamics. Future research might extend this framework to comparative settings, digital infrastructures, or other artistic fields where institutional recognition is similarly unsettled.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the question is no longer whether authority exists in the absence of institutions, but how it operates, persists, and reshapes itself when institutions no longer hold the power to conclusively decide. In this sense, the self-proclaimed Diva is not a cultural anomaly. She is a figure through whom the contemporary conditions of cultural authority become unusually clear.

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