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# **Youtubers As Micro-Celebrities And New Idols Among The iGeneration**

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## **Abstract**

**This article is the result of a qualitative study that examined the rise of YouTubers as new idols among children as the iGeneration. Participants in this study were elementary school children aged between 9 years old and 12 years old who lived in urban areas. This study also suggested that leisure time or recess was used by children to access YouTube content – which often vary from short films, prank clips, online interviews with celebrities on their lifestyle, and other pop-culture related content. Both YouTubers are considered to be successful and influential as they have produced creative, entertaining, and hilarious content on the platform. Children are no longer idolizing the figures created by the popular culture industries like novels and film, but instead, they are starting to admire and recognize ordinary people who have created unique and interesting online content – or people who are social-media famous.**

**Keywords: Celebrification, iGeneration, New idols, YouTubers**

## **Youtubers Como Micro-Celebridades Y Nuevos Ídolos Entre Igeneration**

### Resumen

Este artículo es el resultado de un estudio cualitativo que examinó el surgimiento de YouTubers como nuevos ídolos entre los niños como la iGeneration. Los participantes en este estudio fueron niños de primaria de entre 9 y 12 años de edad que vivían en áreas urbanas. Este estudio también sugirió que los niños usaban el tiempo libre o el recreo para acceder al contenido de YouTube, que a menudo varía de cortometrajes, clips de broma, entrevistas en línea con celebridades sobre su estilo de vida y otro contenido relacionado con la cultura pop. Ambos YouTubers se consideran exitosos e influyentes, ya que han producido contenido creativo, entretenido e hilarante en la plataforma. Los niños ya no idolatran a las figuras creadas por las industrias de la cultura popular, como las novelas y el cine, sino que comienzan a admirar y reconocer a la gente común que ha creado contenido en línea único e interesante, o personas que son famosas en las redes sociales.

Palabras clave: Celebrificación, iGeneration, Nuevos ídolos, YouTubers.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of ‘celebrification’, which is the process by which ordinary people introduce themselves and turn into micro-celebrities via content produced on social media, has been widely studied. Most of the studies that has been conducted focuses on how micro-celebrities rise and become the idols of many people, especially netizens (ANDÒ 2016; ARAN-RAMSPOTT, FEDELE, and TARRAGÓ 2018; MACISAAC, KELLY, and GRAY 2018; WILLIAMS and KAMALUDEEN 2017). However, studies that discuss how micro-celebrities become idols for children have not been much studied. This paper discusses how the contents produced by Indonesian YouTubers turn out to be extraordinary, become very popular, and are widely accessed by children. This paper addresses the question of how children idolize and admire YouTubers.

Unlike celebrities who have risen to power by television, movie, and print

media and are more admired in terms of beauty, good looks, wealth, and lifestyle, the micro-celebrities of YouTubers are admired for the content they have created. Celebrities from the circles of popular artists and athletes get excessive public attention, usually because of their involvement in entertainment or sports that attractively represent themselves, as if they were ideal figures in all forms of media, from magazines and television to Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube (MORRIS and ANDERSON 2015; BROWN and TIGGEMANN 2016). Meanwhile, micro-celebrity is a concept that refers to people who are not celebrities, actors, actresses, singers, or athletes, but present themselves on social media to attract a lot of followers and fans (SENF 2008; MARWICK 2013).

In this current era of millennials, the opportunity for ordinary people to suddenly rise and become famous is no longer impossible to achieve. When cyberspace offers an open and available place for anyone to produce and share any content, YouTube as an online platform provides endless opportunities for ordinary aspirants to become whatever they desire to be. Anyone who has the talent or creativity to produce engaging video content on YouTube has the chance to maintain an audience of peer users as their fan base, bypassing the gatekeeping role of media and entertainment industries. Hence, achieving a celebrity status is done in a DIY manner. The alluring benefit of making a huge income and becoming famous seems to be the factors that drive a number of young creative aspirants to become YouTubers. These days, a few YouTubers manage to earn more than mainstream celebrities.

From the phenomenon of the rise of micro-celebrities from YouTubers as described above, the problems examined in this paper were:

1. How do YouTubers as micro-celebrities become new idols among children?
2. What is behind the shift in the choice of new idol figures among children?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a generation that has grown up in the era of social media, children's leisure time activities today cannot be separated from accessing YouTube content (ROSEN, CARRIER, and CHEEVER 2010; VERNON 2019). For these iGeneration children, YouTube is one of their favorite options

for surfing the internet and finding interesting content (HOLLAND 2016; TUR-VIÑES, NÚÑEZ-GÓMEZ, and GONZÁLEZ-RÍO 2018). This generation who are familiar with portable technology devices, such as iPods, iTunes, iPhones, and other types of smartphones, uses YouTube to find and enjoy a variety of content, from entertainment information to academic learning (MOGHAVVEMI et al, 2018). YouTube is indeed a platform that provides opportunities for people to enjoy content shared by others. YouTube becomes a platform that is full of content because of the process of information and creativity sharing. It provides abundant information and visualization. It is enriching, full of diversity, and unique (ZILKA, 2018). Not surprisingly, not only adults, but even children also like to access YouTube in their free time. As stated by POTTER and STEEMERS (2017), the internet and YouTube have become part of the development of information technology that is changing the way children enjoy television easily via many platforms to watch various content.

The success of YouTube in gaining fans cannot be separated from the role of YouTubers. The popularity of YouTubers is influenced by the strategy they have developed in producing and creating content, so that many viewers are interested in, liking, and even becoming fans (TÖRHÖNEN, SJÖBLOM, and HAMARI 2018; THOMSON et al. 2018). According to KHAMIS, ANG, and WELLING (2017), one of the keys to YouTubers' success is being an influencer who brings people a self-branding. ASHMAN, PATTERSON, and BROWN (2018) stated that the increase in likes, shares and subscriptions was caused by digital autpreneurship expertise of YouTubers. Meanwhile, ALPERSTEIN (2019) mentioned that micro-celebrities perform self-presentation management to gain fans and followers. Whereas, according to JERSLEV (2016), celebrification of micro-celebrities on social media platforms works for a long a time for permanent updating, of immediacy and authenticity. Performances of ordinary people who become their authentic selves are what are valued in social media celebrification through strategies of connectedness, accessibility, and intimacy.

The motives behind the effort to gain followers and subscriptions, of course, are financial benefits (MCCORMICK 2016; JERSLEV and MORTENSEN 2016; HOU 2019). Apart from the economic interests behind it all, YouTubers have been able to become social media influencers for viewers (HEARN and SCHOENHOFF 2015), a reference for behavior,

lifestyle, and choice of product tastes (SCHWEMMER and ZIEWIECKI 2018), even become idols among social media users (RUIZ-GOMEZ 2019). From a number of studies that have been conducted, data showed that the proliferation of social media and digital mobile devices has contributed to the popularity, fame, and influence of micro-celebrities so that they become inspiration and even a role model for viewers (BAKER and ROJEK 2019; PRINCESS 2018; FARIVAR, WANG , and YUAN 2019). Several studies have found that the rise of idols as role models was usually from hero figures in film work, athletes, and artists (BRICHENO and THORNTON 2007; LINES 2001; BISKUP and PFISTER 1999; FLEMING et al. 2005; FRASER and BROWN 2011).

While times have changed and the opportunities for ordinary people to become micro-celebrities are becoming more achievable, the creation of idols among children will sooner or later

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper was written with reference to the results of a study conducted on the rise of new idols among children from the iGeneration. This study is a qualitative study in which in-depth interviews had been conducted with children from generation Z or the iGeneration.

Participants in this study were elementary school children aged between 9 and 12 years old who live in urban areas. The location of the study was four urban areas in East Java, Indonesia, including Surabaya, Malang, Kediri, and Madiun. Forty-seven participants had been interviewed based on the interview guides that had been prepared. The criteria for children selected as informants are: (1) Being 9-12 years old; (2) Having a smartphone or mobile phone; (3) Frequently accessing YouTube in the last 6 months.

Data about children's idols and why they chose them as idols were extracted from the results of in-depth interviews. Children were given the freedom to say who their favorite idols were, as well as their reasons for choosing the idol. All data obtained had been processed, classified, and then interpreted.

### 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Youtubers: Micro-Celebrities As New Idols

Children from Generation Z are not only a bunch of passive consumers of media, but they are also surfers who are always actively searching for interesting content on social media platforms. Via smartphones, they take the time to surf in cyberspace and open various sites, especially YouTube. For children, YouTube is the most popular platform. As stated by HOLLOWAY, GREEN, and LIVINGSTONE (2013), watching videos has become one of the first activities of children on the internet. They use their spare time to access YouTube channels that provide a lot and variety of latest content. Currently, children are increasingly active in using smartphone technology. They are increasingly intense not only in seeking content, but also posting and sharing it, and interacting via mobile applications (MONTGOMERY, 2015).

In this study, after successfully finding several YouTube channels that were considered to be interesting, the children would usually choose one as their favorite YouTube channel that they would often talk about it with their fellow YouTube fans. Some children really like YouTube that provides K-Pop content or popular culture products, but some are fonder of unique and interesting content. As part of the iGeneration, it turns out that children are not only fanatical or addicted to certain products of the popular culture industry, such as K-Pop, successful athletes, national and Hollywood celebrities, but they are also online fans who have idols whom they knew from what they access on the internet. Many children admire YouTubers who produce funny and unique content that they have never watched before.

Currently, children and adolescents spend their free time using smartphones and accessing social media (SARI, 2019; VERNON, 2019). Unlike the baby boomers as a TV generation (BUCKINGHAM, 2007), who prefer spending time watching soap operas, film series, and other films of long duration, children in the digital age mostly prefer accessing videos on YouTube that are relatively short, but have very diverse content. YouTube and Facebook were the two most favored sites among 8-to-12-year-old children (BLACKWELL et al, 2014). As found in this study, children could spend hours every day accessing various videos uploaded by YouTubers, choosing videos they like, and even becoming fans of new idols who have risen from the internet, the YouTubers. They were not just fans of celebrities in general, children who grew up in the era of social media



turned out to have new idols who became role models. They admired well-known, creative, and successful YouTubers, among who were Atta Halilintar and Ria Ricis.

Girls generally claimed to be fans of Ria Ricis. Ria Ricis is a successful YouTuber and has tens of millions of subscribers. She is touted as one of the most popular female YouTubers in Indonesia. The children considered short videos uploaded by Ria Ricis on YouTube to be good, funny, and interesting to watch. As a new celebrity from the YouTuber circle, Ria Ricis is known to have many subscribers and short videos that she created always get many 'likes' from her fans. A number of informants said that girls loved watching YouTube content of Ria Ricis because she was considered to be creative in uploading a variety of content that was often unpredictable. It was also because she owns a collection of cute squishy toys and often makes interesting reviews. As fans of YouTube content of Ria Ricis, children felt that Ria Ricis was a popular figure who deserved to be a role model.

"I want to be like Ria Ricis. [She is] creative person. [She is also] funny. I like watching her videos. I like watching videos of Ria Ricis covering Gempri, Rafathar, and others. I like [the videos] because [the videos are] funny." Dewi (10 years)

The girls surveyed generally admitted that they enjoyed the video content of Ria Ricis, which was considered to be interesting. Some informants even stated that they hoped to become YouTubers like Ria Ricis. In their eyes, Ria Ricis was rated as a successful, rich, funny, and lucky figure because she could meet with any celebrity, and make YouTube videos along the way. Her videos that showed the lives of children and families of Indonesian celebrities, such as Gempri and Rafathar, have attracted the attention of children because from the videos, they can watch ordinary lives of celebrities, away from the glittering lives that the celebrities often display.

Meanwhile, boys had rather different tastes from girls. When the boys were interviewed, they stated that they liked and often accessed content on the YouTube channel of Atta Halilintar, a YouTuber who is said to be the richest YouTuber in Indonesia. Atta Halilintar is even known as one of the 10 richest YouTubers in the world. Videos created by Atta Halilintar, for example, are videos that review luxury sports cars of his own or of

celebrities, videos that feature the luxury houses of celebrities, and various videos related to celebrities. According to the children, video content of Atta Halilintar is always interesting, entertaining, and often surprising. The children claimed that they most liked watching prank videos created by Atta Halilintar because the videos were funny and surprising. Teasing famous people and laughing at them were elements in the videos by Atta Halilintar that were loved by children. The YouTube content of Atta Halilintar in the form of a video blog that shows Atta's activities going abroad was also loved by children. Subscribers of Atta Halilintar also counted a lot. Atta is a YouTuber known to have more than 18.7 million followers. The number of his subscribers is more than that of Ria Ricis, which is around 16 million.

"I love Atta Halilintar. He is cool. He owns luxury cars. He is wealthy. His videos are cool and unique. I like prank videos the most. Atta likes to play pranks on others, especially celebrities. They are often surprised when they got pranked by Atta. Anyway, Atta is a fun person." Dimas (12 years old)

Many of the boys studied said they wanted to be like Atta Halilintar, who is famous for his subscribers. Although Atta Halilintar is not as handsome as the celebrities they see in movies, but he is a role model for children because of his creativity in the digital age. Children in the millennial era generally want to be like Atta Halilintar or Ria Ricis, because the two YouTubers are symbolic models of creativity in the era of social media. As successful YouTubers, Atta Halilintar and Ria Ricis are favored by children and become idols because both are known to be creative and successful in an unusual way by utilizing YouTube. Children who admired Atta Halilintar and Ria Ricis claimed to want to be like them when they grow up, becoming YouTubers who are very creative and productive in creating content. Atta Halilintar and Ria Ricis has applied digital practices that rely on the content of their creations to get the attention of viewers in a way that is different from the traditional way used by celebrities in gaining fans (NOURI, 2018). As stated by USHER (2018), the rise of micro-celebrities is a phenomenon that represents an effort to build fame and at the same time symbolizes individual emancipation, which challenges the hegemony of corporate media culture.

#### 4.2 From Novel Characters To Youtubers: Shifting Idols

As part of the iGeneration who intensely access YouTube, preferences for admirable characters differ from one child to another. The figures they admire depend on their tastes and the things they can emulate and admire from the figures they adore. The study found that children were broadly divided into two groups of fans who had different idols. The first group was a group of children who were fans of YouTubers. The second group was a group of children who were fans of fictional characters of a novel.

For certain children, characters in a novel have their own charm. This study found that there were two children who claimed to idolize Dilan, a fictional character in a teenage novel that became more popular after the novel was adapted for the screen. Memorable lines of Dilan in the movie became catchphrases that everyone knows, and even became political dictions used as a campaign instrument by a number of candidates competing in the regional and national elections. In the novel, Dilan is portrayed as a bad boy, but was loved by girls because of his carefree attitude, humorous personality, courage to fight and defend his friends, and his love for motor racing. Dilan became a figure who was admired because behind his carefree attitude and his fondness for fighting, it turned out that Dilan was a loyal and romantic, not to mention a handsome young man. Rina (11 years old), a 5th grade student, said:

“... I’m a big fan of Dilan, because he was handsome, humorous, but faithful to his girlfriend. Dilan did not hesitate to fight if there was his friend who was bullied. Anyway, Dilan was faithful friend. I have read the novel ... and I like him more because he was a man of principles....”

A number of informants who liked to read novels and other popular reading claimed to be Dilan fans before the novel was made into movie. Children who have read various novels claimed to be fond of the character of Dilan because he is portrayed as a young man who had an ambivalent character. He was disobedient, but faithful. He was carefree, but at the same time he cared about his friend. He also liked to fight, but always defended his friend who was bullied. When that fictional character they read in novels appeared in a movie, it made children even fonder of him.

Adoration of fictional figures of popular culture industry, such as

novel characters, movie characters, and movie actresses and actors who play certain characters, does indeed occur a lot. RAMASUBRAMANIAN and KORNFIELD (2012) in their study found that young people in the United States created meaningful relationships with hero characters in anime. From the finding, it was concluded that liking a heroine's pro-social traits leads to greater wishful identification and more intense parasocial relationships with the heroine. The global popular culture industry via television, movies, computer games, and novels has indeed provided alternative characters as role models among children and adolescents (NIKO-LAJEVA, 2016; ZEHNDER and CALVERT 2004; MURNEN et al. 2016; VARES and JACKSON 2015).

Unlike children who admired celebrities or fictional characters of a novel, a number of children who admired YouTubers claimed that admiring Dilan was considered to be outdated because it is now the era of YouTube. YouTube is the most popular among children. On the other hand, children who liked Dilan thought that YouTube's contents were tacky and trashy. Differences in tastes indeed make the favorite category of idols different. However, in the last two or three years, this study found that compared to idols from celebrities and fictional figures of novels, real figures, namely YouTubers such as Atta Halilintar and Ria Ricis, were thought to be creative and their names have kept rising as new idols.

"I don't really like reading now. Yeah, [I'm] still reading a little. But now, I like and enjoy watching YouTube more. While I take a break or relax, I usually watch YouTube. I love watching the videos of Atta Halilintar. I like Atta Halilintar. If I could be like him, it would be fun [laughing]. His cars are nice. [He is] rich. Anyway, if I could be like Atta Halilintar, it would be a lot of fun....." Pietra (11 years old)

Idol figures admired by children have a tendency to shift along with the development of digital technology, the internet, and social media. Before the widespread use of the internet and social media, according to ANDERSON and CAVALARRO (2002), when popular culture products were increasingly mass marketed globally through various mass media, children preferred famous people or fictional characters as role models to replace home figures. However, at this time when children are increasingly using social media, the preference for idol figures tends to shift. Indications of a shift in the figures that are admired by children from the iGeneration seem

to be more obvious, especially since they know and often access YouTube. The tendency to admire fictional characters in novels began to fade along with the decline of children's interest in reading books. Compared to reading novels, children now take more time to access YouTube, so that it can be understood if the idols that are popular among children are YouTubers. For children, YouTubers are considered to be creative and successful because they have many subscribers. Aside from only watching short videos created by YouTubers, the children also recognized that the YouTubers were people whose popularity was not less than that of celebrities.

As part of generation Z, children now have many options on how to spend their free time. Among iGeneration children, the average free time they spent reading was no more than 1 hour each day. In fact, a number of children stated that they rarely took time to read. Children, as part of Generation Z, tended to spend more of their free time watching YouTube and browsing the internet. This study found that children spent time watching YouTube for about 3-4 hours a day. It was far more than the time they spent reading. According to a number of informants, they usually used their free time to watch YouTube at night before they go to sleep. In addition, they generally also took other times, such as the times when they waited for food to come, when they had a meal, when they had a short recess, when they relaxed at home, and so forth, to watch YouTube. In short, when they hold a smartphone, as far as possible, they would access YouTube. They also spent their time sending messages to their friends via other social media applications, such as WhatsApp or Line.

“.....I usually watch YouTube when I have free time. But most often, [I watch YouTube] when I am about to sleep. While waiting for a sleepy feeling, I usually watch YouTube, watch Atta Halilintar's prank videos. Sometimes, I also watch other videos. I really like Atta because my friends often tell me that his videos are good. I used to be interested in watching [the videos of] Atta because my friend told me [about the videos of Atta]....”  
Raymond (11 years old)

A number of children said that the number of videos of Atta Halilintar and Ria Ricis on YouTube they had watched was not only in the tens, but a lot. They said that YouTubers like Atta Halilintar and Ria Ricis always created new videos that were all interesting. Those two YouTubers are different from celebrities, who have been deliberately boosting popularity with the

help of media industry via marketing strategies that are packaged in various news coverage and efforts to maintain intimacy with fans (MARWICK and BOYD, 2011). On the other hand, new idols of children, YouTubers such as Atta Halilintar and Ria Ricis, build a reputation and grow into new idols in different way by showing their creativity in the videos they produce, developing the celebrification process by utilizing social media, and posting attractive content of their own work. If celebrities are popular because of their roles in movies and news coverage, then YouTubers become new idols because they are influencers who have many subscribers. At the same time, YouTubers become inspirational figures and role models for children due to creativity and productivity of the YouTubers in producing content. The findings in this paper differ from the findings of studies conducted by ERGEN (2018), which concluded that being a YouTuber is a role model for children for reasons such as having fun, being cool, being recognized and loved by everyone, being popular, and easily making money. Although there are differences in the reasons for making YouTubers a role model, this paper also managed to reveal that children were inspired to become YouTubers when they grew up.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The findings in this paper showed that among children there has been a shift in terms of the figure they admired as an idol and the reasons of children to choose their idol. Some of the children studied indeed still chose idols from their reading, the fictional characters of novels who had attractive personalities. The characters later became more popular because the novel was adapted for the screen. However, the number of children like this seems to decrease. Children who are part of Generation Z seem to prefer new idols, namely YouTubers such as Atta Halilintar and Ria Ricis, who are thought to be symbols of creativity in producing content.

Idols among children from the iGeneration seem to originate from content they access on social media, especially content created by YouTubers who are considered to be creative in producing interesting content. Unlike celebrities or certain people who represent themselves on social media in order to market products that affect consumption behavior of adults, YouTubers are favored by young people because they are symbol of creativity. Reading as a leisure activity that has been rarely chosen by iGeneration causes children to spend more time accessing YouTube and choose You-

Tubers as new idols that intensely produce unique and interesting content.

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