

# Reconstructing Virtual Life as Sultans: a Study of 4 Indonesian YouTubers

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**Abstract.** The term "sultan" has undergone a change in meaning in popular culture. It is not just referring to a special nobility title for someone who rules the sultanate, but the identity is widely held by someone who has fantastic wealth. In the new media, individuals labeled as "sultans" mainly refer to well-known YouTubers. Using a qualitative method and psychosocial approach, this study aims to describe the materialistic, consumptive, and hedonic lifestyles and practices of 4 Indonesian YouTubers represented through new media in constructing their identity as 'Sultan'. Researchers concluded that these YouTubers showed a materialistic, consumptive, and hedonic lifestyle in a structured and massive manner on YouTube with distinctive signs and patterns. The practices are their way of constructing social identity as 'sultan' which is classified into the upper class in the social stratification of materialistic society.

**Keywords:** sultan, YouTubers, new media, social identity, social stratification

## 1 Introduction

The term sultan/*sul-tan*/ means king; thus the ruler of a kingdom or sultanate <sup>[1]</sup>. It refers to the title of nobility, such as Sultan Hamengku Buwono X, Sultan Pakubuwono IX, or Sultan of Johor. The title also deals specifically with the head of a muslim monarchy ruling over an islamic state or region. However, in Indonesian pop culture, the word "sultan" has undergone an expansion of meaning. It happens because etymologically, the word 'sultan' means "power", "authority", or "leadership", derived from the verb *sulṭah* (سلطة) meaning "authority" or "power". With reference to this root, the specific term 'sultan' which was originally always associated with the islamic monarchy, actually shifted. It is now broadly used to name someone who has fantastic wealth demonstrated through a materialistic, consumptive, and hedonistic lifestyle. This lifestyle emphasizes the possession of luxury goods, excessive consumption, and the fulfillment of pleasures which are closely related to the lifestyle of a king or sultan. It is always associated with power, wealth, and privilege so that one can do, possess, enjoy or buy whatever

he wants, even if it does not make sense. As an example, in 2017, according to an article in the news portal Line Today published on February 19, 2020, there was one incident that went viral when a Saudi prince ordered 80 seats in the cabin of a plane for his eagles to sit on. Each bird got its seat on a Qatar Airways plane. This is irrational behavior that is led by hedonism.

According to social stratification, members of society are classified into the upper class, middle class, and lower class <sup>[2]</sup>. This hierarchical classification is mainly viewed from the ownership of something valued in society, for example, power, wealth, educational background, social status, and heredity. Hence, the 'sultan' belongs to the upper class. In Indonesian pop culture, some A list public figures have numerous assets, fantastic wealth, and luxurious lifestyles which are labeled as "sultans". They often flaunt their wealth and lavish lifestyle through their social media. This then gave rise to netizens' comments 'Sultan mah bebas' , which means a sultan can do whatever he wants).

The social processes that shape social classes also occur in cyberspace such as on YouTube. Based on observations of a popular cultural phenomenon in the new media, individuals labeled as "sultans" mostly refer to several famous YouTubers such as Raffi Ahmad and Nagita Slavina (Sultan of Andara), Indra Kesuma (Sultan of Medan), Atta Halilintar, and Andre Taulany (Sultan of Bintaro). Their YouTube channels have 23.2 million, 1.32 million, 29.5 million, and 5.9 million subscribers, respectively, where their YouTube content is filled with images of consumptive and hedonistic behavior, asset ownership, and a luxurious lifestyle that are shown to the audience. Researchers assume that through their contents, there are certain patterns in the practice of materialistic, consumptive, and hedonistic lifestyles resulting in a social attribute called 'sultans'.

Researchers find it important to examine the sociocultural phenomenon related to this new kind of 'sultan' which is highly praised in contemporary society. This popular culture phenomenon has two side effects : on one hand it emphasizes the existence of social inequality and triggers a hedonistic and consumptive lifestyle, on the other hand it inspires people that wealth can be achieved by anyone who works hard even if not of noble descent. Therefore, this fundamental research was conducted to analyze how some famous YouTubers perform materialistic, consumptive, and hedonic lifestyles through YouTube. Are there specific patterns in their practices that result in their social identity as 'sultans'? Once it is answered, further research may study the positive and negative impacts of these new media influencers' materialistic, consumptive, and hedonistic lifestyles, especially in prosumer society.

## 2 Research focus and method

Research on lifestyle related to social identity and social class that is represented in the *new media* has been done a lot before. However, the wide diversity of perspectives and areas on this topic provides an opportunity for researchers to fill the gaps that have not been studied by previous researchers.

Primadini and Budiani <sup>[3]</sup> have studied the relationship between lifestyle and social class with consumptive behavior in adolescents. They managed to reveal the correlation between lifestyle, social class, and consumptive behavior in which the relative contribution of lifestyle coefficients and social class to consumptive behavior was 2% so 98% were determined by other factors. However, Primadini and Budiani have not explained how the three variables are qualitatively related. In addition, the research setting does not involve a *new media* space, but rather a real space.

Another previous research with a similar topic and different approaches and methods is from Hayati et al. This study aims to analyze the role of YouTube in constructing the identity of its users <sup>[4]</sup>. The results of the study stated that YouTube's function has changed from a platform for exchanging information through video to a platform for constructing user identities based on the content they watch. The construction of identity formed by YouTube viewers leads to false identities and creates inappropriate values or social norms of society.

Nisa's research entitled *Construction of cultural identity in the Video blog of the Kimbab Family YouTube channel: a semiotic analysis Roland Barthes* seeks to decipher and interpret the signs of cultural identity that exist in YouTube vlogs <sup>[5]</sup>. The results showed that there are several meanings of cultural identity that can be found, including the actualization of Islam, cultural religiosity, social integration in religious teachings, and the self-existence of minority people in Korea.

Both Hayati and Nisa's research has shown the role of *new media*, especially YouTube, in the construction of identity, but the objects observed are different. In Hayati et al., the identity construction process is carried out by the audience in its consumption practice of new media that produces false identities. Meanwhile, Nisa describes YouTube Vlogs as a medium for YouTubers to construct their cultural identity as a minority in Korean society. In this view, researchers found a gap that has not been studied in previous studies, namely the materialistic,

consumptive, and hedonic lifestyle represented on YouTube to form personal branding and construct the social identity of the YouTubers.

According to Solomon (2002), lifestyle refers to a pattern of consumption reflecting a person's choices of how he or she spends time and money <sup>[6]</sup>. In general, this statement can be interpreted as lifestyle referring to consumption patterns that reflect a person's choices in the way he spends time and money. Solomon's opinion is complemented by Kotler (2001), that a person's lifestyle can be seen from the behaviors such as activities to obtain or use goods and services <sup>[7]</sup>. Lifestyle exerts an influence on a person's behavior and ultimately determines his consumption choices (Kasali, 2005.) <sup>[8]</sup>.

This research used a descriptive qualitative method with psychosocial approach and the theory of lifestyles. They were chosen to qualitatively describe the patterns and practices of the materialistic, consumptive, and hedonic lifestyle of 4 Indonesian YouTubers in the process of constructing identity as the upper class called 'sultan' represented through new media YouTube. The collected and classified data were analyzed by interpreting and synthesizing data and theories to produce an in-depth, precise, and comprehensive analysis. To justify argumentation, researchers also added other relevant supporting theories. Thus, it is hoped that researchers can draw a clear conclusion.

### **3 Result and Findings**

#### **3.1 Materialistic lifestyle**

Materialistic societies tend to believe that possession of goods and money is the main criterion in assessing a person's success. Symptoms of materialism in Indonesian society afflict all levels of society ranging from the lower, middle, and upper classes. The most significant representation to see materialistic practices and lifestyles is that mediated through the content of these famous YouTubers namely Raffi Ahmad and Nagita Slavina (Rans Entertainment), Andre Taulany (Taulany TV), Indra Kenz (Indra Kesuma) and Atta Halilintar (AH).

According to experts, a person's lifestyle can be seen from his behaviors such as activities to obtain or use goods and services (Kotler, 2001) <sup>[9]</sup> and influence in determining the person's consumption choices (Kasali, 2005) <sup>[10]</sup>. Through the YouTube channels of RANS Entertainment, Taulany TV, Indra Kesuma, and AH, people can observe the materialistic

lifestyle of 4 YouTubers in various video contents featuring material ownership of money, houses, and luxury cars worth billions as well as branded goods at high prices, as illustrated in the following figures.



Fig 1 and 2. Raffi and Nagita shower each other with the gift of a *limited-edition* luxury car  
Source: YouTube Rans Entertainment

In some of their YouTube content, Raffi Ahmad and Nagita Slavina often show dozens of vehicles, both *supercars* and *luxury cars* parked in their garage. No matter how many vehicles they possess, they continue to make new purchases, for example, as shown in Figures 1 and 2 above when the two buy each other luxury cars as birthday gifts. The showroom even held a special ceremony titled Prestige Handover Ceremony Rolls-Royce Phantom Raffi Ahmad-Nagita Slavina which was attended by fellow enthusiasts and owners of luxury cars. The acquisition of the luxury car was shown to the audience through a YouTube video. This kind of consumption practice illustrates the high appreciation of the YouTuber for luxury goods that they can afford and it also becomes a source of satisfaction and happiness.

For a materialistic person, possession of property dictates their behavior, and way of life, and also determines their happiness as shown in the video of Raffi Ahmad and Nagita Slavina above. According to Richins and Dawson (1992), this is an aspect of materialism referred to as *Acquisition as the Pursuit of happiness*, a belief that goods and money are the main paths to achieving personal happiness, a better life, and a more positive self-identity<sup>[11]</sup>. The reason why property and its acquisition become important to materialistic people is that they view this as essential to their life satisfaction and *well-being* while building their self-image in society. Meanwhile, the causal factors of materialistic orientation in Raffi and Nagita are likely due to social factors and materialistic environmental influences, as well as social comparisons with friends or figures in the media (Banerjee & Dittmar, 2008; Chan & Prendergast, 2007)<sup>[12]</sup>. This

is quite reasonable considering that both of them lived from a young age in a celebrity environment that was very attached to materialism and consumerism and became the center of attention of a society that prioritized self-image as *a public figure*.

One of the characteristics of materialism that is also similar among the four YouTubers is the ownership of luxury houses that are highly correlated to their status as 'sultan'.



GOKIL! PERLUAS LAGI RUMAH BARU INAGITA BIKIN ROOFTOP UTK KAMAR RAFATHAR, RAFFI BANGUN TEMPAT KARAOKE



Rumah dikunjungi Bunda dan Pipi, Arsy gabisa lepas dari Auret !!



D'SIGN- Inspirasi Hunian Mewah Milik Andre Taulany (1/3)



BANGUN RUMAH 30 MILIAR?! ISTANA BARU SULTAN MEDAN INDRAKENZ DAN VANESSA KHONG BUAT NIKAH!!

Fig 3.4.5.6 Luxury houses of 4 YouTubers 'Sultan'  
(Source: YouTube)

The four YouTubers with materialistic behavior often upload video content that shows the splendor and luxury of their homes. Even some YouTubers deliberately create titles for their videos that mention fantastic prices of the houses, home facilities that are equivalent to five-star hotels, or add the adjective 'luxury', refer to it as a palace, etc.

In Figures 3,4,5,6 showing the houses of each YouTuber above, it can be seen that ownership of luxury property is the most tangible manifestation of their materialistic lifestyle. A house is the primary need of every human being for shelter. However, materialistic people think that ownership of a house can be used as a tool to symbolize their social status, especially luxury ones with all furniture and facilities that complement them. This is due to the materialistic view

that always measures success with material possession. The bigger and the more luxurious a house, the higher prestige and social status of the owner as an *upper class*. In its development, materialistic aspirations have two other types besides financial aspirations, namely fame (*fame*) and image (Kasser, 2002) [13]. Apart from being a symbol of financial success, a luxury house is also a way of shaping the fame and image of these YouTubers as 'sultans'.

### 3.2 Consumptive lifestyle

In addition to showing a materialistic lifestyle, 4 YouTubers 'sultans' in this study are also extremely consumptive. Consumerism is the tendency to consume goods excessively without any considerations, only looking for pleasure and attaching importance to the impulse of desires rather than needs. This practice is closely related to materialism, especially in the aspect of purchasing goods. The difference lies in the aspect of adequacy. Materialistic people attach importance to the ownership of the desired goods and when they have owned it they tend to want other different goods. Meanwhile, consumptive people have the ambition to consume or own as much as possible to cause waste.

Similar to Raffi and Nagita, Andre Taulany also does excessive buying by constantly purchasing new cars, both classic and sportscars that fill his garage. He even has 2 separate large garages to accommodate dozens of cars in his collection as shown in the following figure 7.

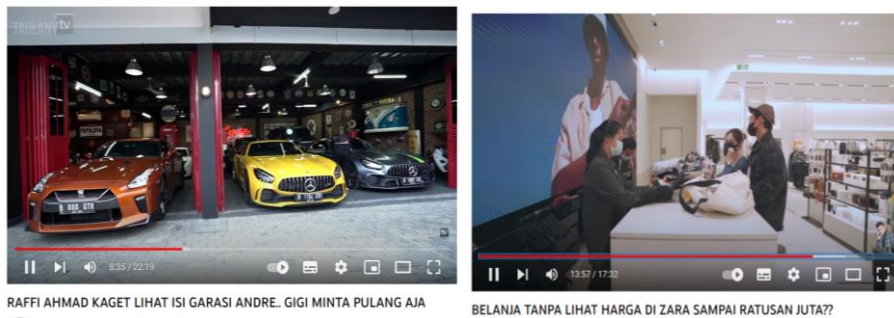


Fig 7. Andre continued to fill his garage with his collectible cars. (Source : Taulany TV)  
Fig 8. Indra Kenz was shopping for clothes regardless the price or quantity of items purchased (Source: Indra Kesuma)

Andre's consumptive behavior is classified as wasteful buying because he spends a lot of money to buy cars excessively beyond the basic needs of himself and his family for the sake of his

satisfaction as a collector. These luxury cars are not even used as they should and are only displayed.

In Figure 8, Indra Kenz was shopping at mid-end retail regardless of the price and quantity of goods he bought. This behavior is also known as impulsive buying because he immediately enters the store to shop, tends to buy products even though he doesn't need them, and chooses without thinking. According to Hausman (2000), impulsive buying behavior is inseparable from the individual as a perpetrator, which is also related to his psychological aspects, namely the need for self-esteem and self-actualization <sup>[14]</sup>. A person tends to express self-esteem to gain recognition from others. This need is related to appreciation from others as well as to obtaining social status.

### 3.3 Hedonistic lifestyle

According to Salam (2000), hedonism is defined as pleasure <sup>[15]</sup>. The principle of hedonism is to assume that something is considered good if it corresponds to the pleasure it gets. On the contrary, something that brings difficulties, suffering, or unpleasantness is judged to be bad. Individuals who adhere to the hedonistic tradition put pleasure in their life goals. Sudiantara (2003) defines hedonism as an understanding or tradition that has the assumption that there is only one thing that is best for humans, namely pleasure or enjoyment <sup>[16]</sup>. This definition becomes the anchor of the hedonist in living his life, that is, all actions are taken to achieve enjoyment and to avoid everything unpleasant or painful.

The hedonistic individual does not mind spending a large amount of money as long as it can bring him satisfaction and happiness. The hedonistic behavior of YouTubers and their families to go on a luxurious vacation is described in the 4 figures as follows.



NAGITA BOYONG CIPUNG KE AMERIKA TANPA NCUS, DI PERJALANAN BERMASALAH TIM GA BISA CHECK IN?!



LIBURAN KE JOGJA SEWA KERETA WISATA SATU GERBONG. MEWAH & NYAMAN BANGET



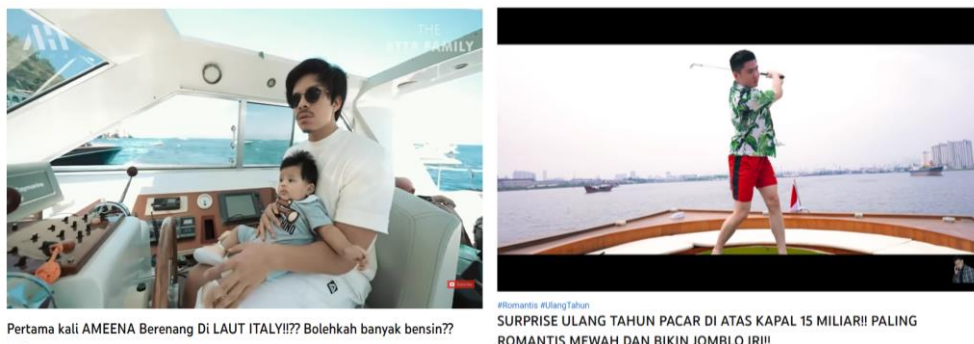


Fig 9. Raffi-Nagita boarded the first-class plane to go to USA

Fig 10. Andre and his family were on a luxury train

Fig 11. Atta was on a yacht in the Italian sea

Fig 12. Indra Kenz rented a yacht to celebrate her lover's birthday

(Source: YouTube)

Through the figures above, Raffi and Nagita can be seen traveling to USA using the first-class plane with their whole family and assistants; Andre rented a luxurious and comfortable tourist train for the whole family; Atta and Aurel were on vacation and cruised on a yacht in the Italian ocean; Indra Kenz celebrated his lover's birthday by renting a 15 billion yacht. Based on the observation, the hedonistic practices of the four YouTubers have particular patterns and symbols that are very similar to each other. In addition, these symbols can also simultaneously indicate a high level of social status. Syafaati, Lestari, and Asyanti (2008) stated that the majority of hedonistic people are those who are in the middle class and upper class <sup>[17]</sup>. This can be seen from the financial needs that sustain the activities of hedonistic individuals who need a large amount of money that they sacrifice to achieve pleasure and avoid grief. A hedonist puts pleasure at the center of his life, therefore he holds on to the principle that only money can buy happiness.

### 3.4 Reconstructing identity as Sultans on new media

Based on the descriptions in the previous 3 sub-chapters regarding the materialistic, consumptive, and hedonistic lifestyle of the four YouTubers 'sultans' namely Raffi Ahmad-Nagita Slavina, Andre Taulany, Atta Halilintar, and Indra Kenz, researchers concluded that there are similar consumption patterns that become symbols of their social identity as 'sultans'. The same practice and pattern among the four YouTubers are illustrated in (1) materialistic

behavior in terms of ownership of various types of luxury cars and luxury houses, (2) consumptive behavior in terms of spending huge amounts of money for buying luxury bags of various types and colors, collecting luxury cars and buying clothes or accessories excessively without rational considerations, (3) hedonistic behavior in terms of spending a lot of money to own limited items from well-known fashion houses and going on luxury vacations which aimed to declaring status, obtaining pleasure and enjoyment.

In addition, through the practice of materialism, consumerism, and hedonism, the four YouTubers are constructing their image as the upper class, which in Indonesian popular culture is known as the 'Sultans' as well as establishing their social position in society. If social identity as a sultan in a closed social system such as a kingdom or sultanate is only given to a specific individual based on kinship, the social system of contemporary Indonesian society is more democratic and open. The term 'sultan' attached to the 4 YouTubers is a popular term to refer to individuals who have characteristics similar to the real sultan, who is generally seen as wealthy, has various privileges, and is glamorous, materialistic, consumptive, and hedonistic. In other words, the basis of the distinction between the lower and middle social classes and the upper social class lies in wealth differences, social status, occupation, and power. Whoever has the most wealth (in the form of ownership of valuable goods or assets) will occupy the top class in social stratification. With open social class mobility in Indonesian democratic society, new 'sultans' are likely in the making without having to have royal blood.

#### **4 Conclusion**

As a consequence of living in a capitalist world, people tend to be more vulnerable to being exposed to a lifestyle oriented towards the values of materialism, consumerism, and hedonism, including in Indonesian society. The representation of this lifestyle is most clearly illustrated through content in *the new media* by Indonesian YouTubers called 'Sultan'. Equipped with the ease of access, openness, and massive and simultaneous nature of the internet, the lifestyle of these YouTubers is commodified through their respective YouTube channels for media audiences to consume. Through their video content, these YouTubers show materialistic, consumptive, and hedonistic lifestyle and practices in the new media space with distinctive symbols and similar patterns including the ownership of dozens of luxury cars, luxury houses equipped with expensive furniture, luxury vacations and the wearing of clothes, bags, and

accessories from world-renowned fashion houses. The practice is their way of constructing social identity so that they are attached to the label 'sultan' which is classified into the upper class in the stratification of a materialistic society.

To reflect, a materialist and hedonist can view himself positively if he has factors that support his outlook and lifestyle such as money, goods, power, and self-image that are constantly constructed by him and justified by others (Kashdan & Breen, 2007) <sup>[18]</sup>. Goods for materialists and hedonists have a symbolic meaning instead of a utilitarian meaning. When viewed from the positive side, materialism, consumerism, and hedonism are signs that society is prosperous and at the same time the consequences of an increase in income and an increase in consumption. However, from another perspective, materialism is also considered a negative result of a society that is consumption-oriented and therefore unhealthy for the psychology of society itself, therefore needing to be watched out for.

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