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Celebrity Status in RCTI’s Idola Cilik: The Consumption of the Popular Media by Indonesian Children

(Status Selebritas dalam Idola Cilik: Konsumsi Media Populer oleh Anak-Anak di Indonesia)

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Abstrak

Kata kunci: anak-anak, Idola Cilik, komoditas, media, selebriti

Abstract
This paper aims to discuss the activeness of children in consuming media and the pursuit of celebrity status through media in Indonesia. Children are often seen as pure, innocent, and passive. Some people argue that these values should be maintained to clearly define children. However, since media have become part of child’s everyday life, it is harder to maintain the fixed identities of children. Furthermore, children are not passive consumer of media. They actively consume media by making meaning of programs they consume. In Indonesia, the active consumption of children on media can be seen through participation in Idola Cilik, famous child singing talent show. The program provides opportunities for children to be celebrities. This research utilized textual analysis on Idola Cilik as aired by RCTI in 2010. It is argued that Idola Cilik presents celebrity as the desired by children. As part of commercialization, the contestants must be ready to be sold as the commodity, along with their life stories and pictures. It shows that media commercialize the celebrity status for the children. The paper also shows that children are active consumers. They are not products determined by text (in this case is Idola Cilik), rather they are able to read the messages presented by media and reconstruct them.

Keywords: celebrity, children, commodity, Idola Cilik, media

INTRODUCTION
There have been numerous debates about the concepts of children. The debates cover issues like who belong to the child category, what characteristics of children that differentiate them from other groups or categories of people, what are appropriate
or inappropriate for children (Marsh 2005; Steinberg 2011; Hilton 2012). These issues debated seem to make clear distinction between children and others. The limitation may aim to secure the children from being penetrated by values of non-children groups or to secure the position of adult as the dominant so that their domination will not be intervened. Whatever the reasons, the ongoing distinction of children seems to oversimplify the existence and the dynamics of children as a group in which they are differentiated based on clear and fixed values. Children are considered to be a ‘pure’ group that should avoid or should be helped to avoid any impurity that can change their status as children. If there is any change toward the values of children, then the advocates of this ‘pure’ categorization of children have the well-known scapegoat to blame: the media.

Media are commonly blamed to any changes on child’s characteristics, values, or morality. They are often attacked for broadcasting programs or scenes considered as inappropriate for children. These inappropriate contents are then called as the cause of changes toward ‘pure’ and ‘innocent’ children. However, media do not significantly influence children. They are one of elements that contribute to the construction of childhood. Nowadays, children are quite close to media. It can also be said that media is also part of children’s daily life. Thus, children are no longer passive subjects or victims or media. Children now are also active consumers of media. Children are regarded as active participants in the process of making meaning-as competent social actors, rather than as passive and incompetent victims (Buckingham 2008:227). Children, then, are able to choose and decide which programs or contents from media they want to consume. One of the meaning children gain from media is the celebrity status. If previously children are rare or difficult to be a celebrity, then now media have provided it for them. One of the ways provided is through child reality program. In Indonesia, there is one famous child reality program, Idola Cilik.

_Idola Cilik_ is a child singing talent show produced by RCTI, the first commercial TV station in Indonesia (Sen and Hill 2000: 109). It is also the licensor of the most famous format adaptation TV program _Pop Idol_, which is named _Indonesian Idol_. Different from other child talent shows, this program is more complex. This program can be said as the spin-off of _Indonesian Idol_. _Idola Cilik_ adopts _Indonesian Idol_ system regarding selection process, judgment, and audience participation.

The selection processes are held in five big cities in Indonesia, such commonly as Jakarta, Bandung, Jogjakarta, Surabaya, and Medan as the main cities. Instead of these five cities, producers also hold smaller selection processes in other fifteen smaller cities which are different from each session. The contestants who can through regional selection then will go through another selection in Jakarta to select the best 42. These 42 contestants then must perform their singing ability in front of four judges in order to be selected to top 14. Those who can make to best 14 are the finalists and will perform, be judged, and must gain SMS as much as possible each week to ensure their lasting in the show. Contestants get the least SMS support must leave the show.
There have been various arguments posed by researchers on children and popular culture. While some scholars argue that the children are ‘victims’ of the media (see e.g. Barber 2007), this research aims to question such argument. Selecting this TV program as the main text, this research aims to examine the active consumption of children toward popular culture.

**METHOD**

This research employed textual analysis as the main research method. In order to reveal meanings behind cultural texts, textual analysis could be a powerful tool. As Stokes argues,

> Media texts are part of our world: they are social phenomena and are often part of the debates about society going on in the world outside college or university...Studying texts can improve our understanding of cultural life–of how things mean–and meaning is one of the most important aspects of media use (2003:54).

The primary text analysed was one of the most famous child idol programs in Indonesia, *Idola Cilik*. The program was aired in RCTI from 2007 to 2011. This program adopted the system done in Indonesian Idol. Because this text is a media product, it is also named as media text. Media texts are part of our world: they are social phenomena and are often part of the debates about society. Since they are social phenomena, they are socially relevant to study (Stokes, 2003:54). As stated above, there are debates regarding children and concern of their ‘purity’. Most people concern that media has contributed toward changes on children and blame the media.

This program was observed in term of its structure which included steps passed by the contestants, the judges and their performances, the contestants and how they performed and were presented during the show. Nonetheless, the observation aims to reveal the ideology beyond the broadcasting and presentation of the program to audiences, in particular children. Finding the ideology is claimed to be the purpose of textual analysis. Stokes points out that the root of most forms of textual analysis: the purpose is usually to find the hidden meanings and values which may not be explicit at a first reading (2003:77). Secondary sources were also used to support the analysis. All those techniques were chosen to provide comprehensive analysis about the connection between children, media, and how active children consume media in Indonesia.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

**Children as Active Consumers**

There are many conceptions of children in the world. Some argue based on their biological state, while some other base their opinion on children’s behavior in relation to what is appropriate and inappropriate. The rests argue in the basis of children’s existence in particularity which will lead to a variation in social, cultural, and historical context (Buckingham 2000:6). However, mostly or commonly, people interpret and see children based on their biological state, which means considering...
them as children just because they are children. Therefore, children are commonly seen as innocent, vulnerable, fun, and passive.

But, there are debates regarding this traditional meaning and status of children. It is debated that those traditional meaning and status of childhood have diminished. This puts the idea of children becomes ambiguous. We can see from media about child gangsters in Brazil, child soldiers in Africa, street children in developing countries such as Indonesia, Philippine, Mexico. Meanwhile, in other parts of the world, there are children who play with their parents, have fun with their peers. Therefore, such universal characteristics of children described above are invalid anymore.

However, those traditional concept holders of children have their defense regarding the missing of their children’s characteristics, they blame media. Media are seen as one of parties should be responsible for the changing and missing of the traditional universal characteristics of children. They are now consistently attacked for commercializing childhood, transforming children into voracious consumers, seduced by the unreliable trickeries of advertisers into wanting what they do not need (Buckingham 2000:4). Media are also commonly pronounced as dangerous for children because of the violent video, the displaying of uneducated children’s program, the overt sexuality and sexual content of teenage magazines and the given access to pornography. Therefore, children are recently more familiar to violence, sexuality, and indiscipline. These all are media’s fault that contaminates ‘pure and innocent’ children with programs and contents which are inappropriate for them and considered by adult as theirs. Media are deemed to have influenced children and made them changed. It can be argued then children are still considered as passive, in particular when they are encountered to media.

However, the discussion about children and media also implies that media do not influence children; rather, they are only one of parties which contribute the construction of children. As stated before, particularities have also been taken into consideration when constructing the concept or meaning of children. Those different situation faced by children takes place because there are also differences in social, cultural, and historical contexts surrounding them. Thus, the construction of childhood is questionable, the child can be argued not a natural or universal category, which has stable meaning, or has biological state as the only determining factor. Instead, the meaning of childhood is subject to a constant process of struggle and negotiation, in public discourse (including media, school, and society) and in interpersonal relationships, among peers and in the family (Buckingham 2000:6). The result of those discourses is a definition of children that is agreed by elements involved in such discourses. This also implies that children can be seen as a social category, which has characteristic and limitations embedded to it which are formulated also by those involved in discourses.

It is common for people to accuse media for bringing bad effects or consider them as an element that contributes to the construction of meaning of children. This is because media, in particular television, has become a part of everyday life for most children. Critcher points out that television has been one of common household items since
1950s (2008:96). Thus, it implies that television has also become familiar for most or even all children. As argued by Winn (Buckingham 2000:23) that television is used by too many parents as a ‘babysitter’. Therefore sometimes there is a joke that a child will be closer to television rather than his/her parents. It is not surprising then if television is considered to bring bad effects for children. Critcher also argues that television undermines childhood because it is threatening the process of learning skills and abilities which is supposed to take place during childhood (Critcher 2008:96-97). This implies that children are seen as passive subjects when encountered to television. However, Hodge and Tripp, as quoted by Buckingham, oppose this idea and argues that children are regarded as active participants in the process of making meaning-as competent social actors, rather than as passive and incompetent victims (Buckingham 2008:227). Furthermore, Buckingham himself also regards children not as passive victims. He states that children are increasingly regarded as sophisticated, demanding, media-wise consumers (Buckingham 2000:95). This assumes that children are able to read the text displayed by television programs and decide which program is good for them.

Participation: Indonesian Children Activeness toward Idola Cilik
Idola Cilik has been broadcasted since 2007 and had done its third season on April 28, 2010. It is now preparing for the fourth season. It has been a phenomenon in Indonesian television because of its success. This show is divided into two parts, Pentas Idola Cilik (Kids Idol Concert) on Saturday where finalists must perform their best in front of judges to be evaluated and to attract audiences to support them by SMS, and Rapor Idola Cilik (Kids Idol Raport) on Sunday where the voting result is announced. There are pros and cons regarding Idola Cilik. On the one hand, it is claimed as the best children talent show which does not only present entertainment but also education (Ridho 2009), on the other hand, it will give bad influence since most songs sung are adult song (about love, hatred, broken-hearted) which are considered inappropriate yet for children. However, the encounter between children and adult songs is unavoidable since television in Indonesia has been an important means to access popular music and it also provides children with the opportunity to participate in cultural interaction and exchange which will contribute to the changes of children, as argued by McIntosh referring to popular music and children in Bali (McIntosh 2010:8-9). Such programs like Indonesian Idol and its rival, Fantasy Academy (broadcasted by Indosiar) are claimed to contribute to the encounter of children and popular music. Hence, it is argued that Indonesian children are already familiar with popular music.

However, in Indonesian Idol or Fantasy Academy, children can only be spectators since their age is not enough to register as contestants. They just watch TV or even participating by sending SMS to support their Idol. Being inspired by the success of Indonesian Idol to create and give opportunity to people to be celebrities and catch advertisers (Coutas 2008: 112), thus, RCTI introduced Idola Cilik. This show is aimed for children from 7-12 years old. Idola Cilik is created to explore children’s talent, particularly in singing and to provide an opportunity to be a celebrity. As an audition contestant from Jakarta, a ten-year old Anton said that his motivation to join the competition was to be a singer like Debo, the winner of Idola Cilik 2 (Ridho 2009).
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Anton’s statement above indicates that being celebrity becomes one of children’s dreams. Furthermore, Ryanto, quoted by Coutas, argues that parents used to want their children to be doctors, engineers, lawyers, economists but recently more parents allow their children to be idols, actors, and singers because of the advance of technology (Coutas 2008:114). This shows that being idols are becoming something achievable and possible for children because of the emergence of Idola Cilik. As active audience, children like Anton then read the message brought and offered by Idola Cilik. Since children are familiar with popular music and many of them idolize adult band and singer and also format talent program like Indonesian Idol has become their reference to popular music and celebritiness, such respond like Anton’s above seem common. As stated by Barker, meanings are bounded by the way text is structured and by the domestic and cultural context of viewing (Barker 2004:1). In reading Idola Cilik as a text, children with references they have, have interpret the meaning of it by giving respond regarding its emergence. Therefore, most of Indonesian children are active audiences in reading Idola Cilik.

Becoming Idola Cilik: Celebrity Making for Children

As claimed before, Idola Cilik has an educational value. It is not only about pleasures, as Tania Lewis (Redden 2008:20) but the finalists are taught to socialize with other in an appropriate way and be an achievement-have-child (Sompotan 2009). As Guy Redden argues that television also has pedagogical principle which presents how people should behave (2008:20). This is applied especially in the production of program for children to maintain certain images of the conception of childhood, such as smart, innocent, well-behaved. These images are aimed to propose model forms of behavior that are seen to be socially desirable (Buckingham 2000:12). In Idola Cilik, despite of having good behavior, another presented image as desired by children is to be celebrity. It implies that successfulness of being celebrity also signifies an achievement for children, therefore gaining celebrity status is considered as positive image for children. Since it is among desired images for children, celebrity also becomes a type of status (Moran 2009:61) and identity pursued by children. Furthermore, images of celebritiness as achievement presented by Idola Cilik, and Idola Cilik as a good program, combined with children’s references regarding celebrity and music they are familiar with unite to make a chain of knowledge used by children to interpret Idola Cilik sensibly. As pointed out by Buckingham, the interpretation of text is always surrounded by other texts to which it relates and refers which then unite as symbolic resources readers make sense of it (Buckingham 2008: 224). I can argue then that Idola Cilik has presented image of celebrity to children and they interpret it with references they acquire and consider this program as an achievement, therefore it is proper for them to gain celebrity status.

Idola Cilik has raised awareness and acknowledgement among children that it is not impossible anymore to be celebrity, and Indonesian children respond it by registering the audition. In fact, for Idola Cilik 3, the audition contestants were approximately 12,367 children (Ridho 2009) which is claimed to increase for about 40% (Sompotan 2009) by Harisiwi Achmad, Programming Director of Idola Cilik 3. This figure reaffirms that for many of Indonesian children, celebrity status has become a part of their lives. However, the making of celebrities in such program is more complex.
than ever imagined. It is true that audience voting that decides contestants’ fate, but in order to appear and have the characteristic of celebrity, contestants have to meet the standards of entertainment industries, in this case music industries. Therefore, evaluation from judges who are expert is needed to measure contestants’ fitness to the standards (Redden 2008:20).

Similar to *Indonesian Idol*, there are four judges in *Idola Cilik*, they are Mama Ira (Ira Maya Sopha, former famous kid singer and actress), Om Duta (vocalist), Kak Winda (former Indonesian Idol finalist), and Kak Dave (Dave Hendrik, famous MC and choreographer). All judges are adult, it can be seen from the nick name, *mama* is for mom or mother, *kak* is to call older person, especially among family or relative, and *om* is for uncle. From the nickname, it implies that the producers try to form the relationship between judges and contestants as family so they will feel close. Different from adult talent show, judges in *Idola Cilik* are more supportive and encourage contestants to perform the best. Judges give evaluation not only in term of singing skill but also the whole performance, which includes choreography, clothes, and hairstyle. Contestants are treated as if they are already celebrities. It indicates that *Idola Cilik* is concerned with the professional standards in every aspect of being celebrity (Redden 2008:1). However, rather than giving rave notice, judges in Idola Cilik are more persuasive since children are more amenable to persuasion (Buckingham 2000:150). Hence, judges’ role is not only as expertise but also parents (mom) and family who support and give advice for the personal and skill improvement of contestants.

Besides the evaluation by judges to ensure the fitness to standard of celebrity, prior their performance on the stage contestants’ image of “celebritiness” is also prepared by what so called as what mentioned by Chris Rojek as cultural intermediaries, such as wardrobe staff, hairdresser, fashion designer, producer who have role to create the image of celebrity (Coutas 2006:374). They are responsible in deciding the appearance of contestants. Thus, the concept of celebrity does not comprise singing ability and skill but also physical appearance and attitude. Hence, it can be argued that not only judges who form the professional image and standard of celebrity, but also parties or the whole structures involved in the production of the show.

As a part of commercial TV, it is unavoidable if *Idola Cilik* is not a commercial program. Indeed, according to Huff (2006:129), advertiser product placement is a big deal in reality shows, a kind of program where *Idola Cilik* belongs to. RCTI had proven that Indonesian Idol, the source of Idola Cilik, became the most successful and profitable reality program in Indonesia. In fact, according to Daniel Hartono, advertising revenue had exceeded 150% of expectation during the first half of 2004 season (Coutas 2008:116). This indicates that RCTI has succeeded in creating program that attracts advertiser and audiences. RCTI succeeded selling its program to audience; therefore, advertisers place their ads during the program. Then it can be said that RCTI, and commercial TV in general, sells audiences to advertisers for revenue making. According to June Deery (Coutas 2008:117), the primary purpose of reality television is to sell and every part of the programme is a commodity. Thus,
it is not surprising if generating revenue becomes one of the main reasons or may be the only main reason of producing reality program.

**Idola Cilik as Commodity**

With its successfulness that can last until three seasons and preparing for the fourth one, it can be assumed that *Idola Cilik* has followed its adult version, Indonesian Idol, to successfully generate revenue from advertisers. Since introduced for the first time until now, there are an increasing number of contestants as stated before, which indicates that *Idola Cilik* is well responded by children as audiences which then attract them to participate as contestants. More audiences mean that there is more revenue from advertisers. Children then become the target of marketing of television. Indeed, many programs created from children are commercially driven; therefore they are tied in with the need to engender profit from advertisements (Buckingham 2000: 85, 158). Hence, it can be argued that every part of *Idola Cilik* is utilized as commodity.

Firstly, the finalists themselves and the program are already commodity, affirming Coutas’s argument (2008:117). After being made over prior to their performance, finalists are presented to audiences and to be sold. They perform to gain as much voting as possible which means revenue from SMS fee. In fact, in grand final *Idola Cilik* 2, the voting percentage between two finalists was 51.63% to 48.37% (Pramudito 2009). This gap indicates that audiences, especially fans actively participate in supporting their Idol’s fate. Finalists are also sold to advertisers in which they will be a model for advertisements and *Idola Cilik* is also sold to advertisers by offering ad slot during the show. Additionally, they also make commodities at the same time. One of the most obvious ones is merchandises about them. Posters, books, pen, cellphone ringtone about *Idola Cilik* and finalists will be easily found. All are targeted to fans and supporters of finalists and *Idola Cilik* enthusiasts in general. These commodifications can be also a means to introduce and promote finalists as the next star and to make them closer to their fans. *Idola Cilik* then can be argued to much more decisively bind up with the merchandising (Buckingham 2000:88). Moreover, they also commodities for other media, magazine and newspaper, especially teen magazines cover the newest story and gossip about the show and finalists and also provide merchandise inside it to increase their selling. It is also can be said that finalists and audiences are interactive in term of commodities brought and introduced to them. Finalists realize that they need support from fans if they want to survive since they are already in the system. Audiences, in particular fans, recognize that their idol next their support and respond by buying commodities.

But, commodity that becomes an attention to many studies regarding talent show is the selling of finalists’ life stories as part of the show. During the stage performances, each week *Idola Cilik* will display the story, whether about finalists’ sad story, memory with someone, or their motivations being on the show. Not to mention, week-to-week and outside-show lives of finalists are also parts of commodity (Redden 2008:8). By doing this, producers are trying to create empathy, sympathy to audiences since finalists are also ordinary people, same as audiences. As pointed out by Redden (2008:9) the imposition of contestants’ ordinariness is built through the persistent testimony about their background, friends, families, and themselves.
Therefore, audiences will feel close to finalists and will support them since it is the audience who determines finalists’ success (Coutas 2008:123). And the result is the unpredictability on the show’s voting result. This unpredictability is claimed by Simon Cowell as the key of reality TV that makes it real (Huff 2006:128). Hence, the basis of choosing mainly in singing skill remains questioned. Therefore, it can be argued that in achieving celebrity status, finalists’ fame is achieved and attributed (Coutas 2008:124). The achievement here does not only mean their best performance in singing but also gaining the most SMS. And to be known as the next celebrity, finalists must also be attributed by media, and one of the ways is being commodity for and making commodities for media.

CONCLUSION
As shown in the analysis, children are active consumers. They are not products determined by text (in this case is Idola Cilik), rather they are able to read the messages presented by media and reconstruct them. However, their knowledge as their references cannot be fully released from media as the sources. Therefore, those potentially delimit and to some extent determine the possible interpretation can be made and thus, to be active also means to be more open to influence. Due to time and other constraints, however, this research is limited to some extent. It will be interesting to explore more by interviewing the contestants to further confirm the findings. There are other factors unexplored in this research, for example, the extent to which parents’ intervention influences the children’s decision to join the competition. Since there has been little research on children’s consumption of popular culture, such research needs to be conducted in the future in order to reveal the complex relationship between children and popular culture.

REFERENCES


PANDUAN UNTUK PENULIS MOZAIK

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