

The Portrayal of Material Culture in an Indonesian Webtoon ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’

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ABSTRACT

This study uses an Indonesian Webtoon titled ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’ as an object of research. This Webtoon is particularly interesting as the main female character, *Teh Ga*, is portrayed as someone who consumes a lot of objects which differentiate her from other characters in the Webtoon, and therefore convey a message that objects carry meanings. Using material culture as a theoretical framework, this study finds out that *Teh Ga* utilizes different objects including means of transportation, house decoration and facilities, food, clothes, skincare products, and her social media (i.e., Instagram account) for different purposes which are to show her social status, to shape her identity, and to exercise power over others.

Keywords: Webtoon; objects; material culture

INTRODUCTION

In the early twenty first century, the Korean Wave or *Hallyu* which has been successful in spreading South Korean cultures through music, drama, fashion and even food (Pramadya & Oktaviani, 2016, p. 88), introduce another cultural product which is called Webtoon. The term Webtoon is actually the combination between the word Website and Cartoon, and it refers to the digital version of Korean comics (*Manwha*) of which history can actually be traced back to as early as 1908 as a form of critique towards Japanese colonization in Korea, but *Manwha* was not as popular as its Western and Japanese contemporaries until Webtoon was introduced by two companies namely Daum in 2003 and Naver in 2004 (Zagita & Sukandar, 2021, p. 79). Webtoon quickly becomes so successful as it becomes an answer to technological development. Webtoon platforms enable the comics artists to not only creatively draw vertical comics without the limitation of page size like the one faced by printed comics, but also incorporating varieties of colours, sound and animation effects that has brought completely different levels of experience for its digital readers who usually use smartphones or tablets to read; hence, to no surprise popular Webtoon is adapted into different medias such as dramas, films, novels, games and printed comics, and many businesses have used Webtoon as their alternative medias of promotion (Cho, 2021, p. 79).

The success of Webtoon also spreads to Indonesia through a platform called LINE Webtoon. In fact, the statistics showed that the number of Webtoon’s Indonesians readers was the biggest in the world since Webtoon penetrated the Indonesian market in 2015 (Merawati & Putranto, 2020, p. 86). At first, the platform only offered Korean *manhwa* in Korean and English, but as time goes by, the South Korean Webtoon’s providers gave an opportunity for comics artists in other countries such as in Indonesia to contribute their work through competition or trainings, and interestingly these works of local creators show the characteristic of Webtoon as a product of glocal-culture or glocalization which means that there is hybridity between the characteristics of global culture and local culture which expectantly can result in a new balanced culture (Jang & Song, 2017, p. 171,174).

'*Terlalu Cantik*' is one of the examples of how Webtoon has encouraged glocalization. '*Terlalu Cantik*' is a comedy Webtoon created by two Indonesian comics creators named Mas Okis and Mas Hiro and published in Indonesian LINE Webtoon on 29 June 2019. This is a sequel of '*Terlalu Tampan*', which has been adapted into a movie with the same title in 2019, and the main character from '*Terlalu Cantik*' also appears in the movie. This webtoon is appealing as it combines Indonesian and South Korea's cultures. For instance, the names of the main characters represent Indonesian cultures, such as *Kudu Boga Pikir Kadua Leutik (Teh Ga)*, the name of the female protagonist, which is taken from Sundanese proverb, means that someone needs to have alternative ways of doing things, but the physical appearance of this character is largely inspired by Korean fashion style. Apart from the physical characterization, another factor that attracts the readers of '*Terlalu Cantik*' is probably its entertaining storyline which circles around *Teh Ga*'s effort to win the heart of her very handsome classmate named *Witing Tresno Jalaran Soko Kulino* alias *Kulin* by utilizing many different ways such what her name indicates.

Despite having a simple plot, the Webtoon '*Terlalu Cantik*' portrays the issue of materialistic behaviour which can be observed from *Teh Ga*'s extravagant lifestyle which is depicted through her consumption of different objects. It is shown that the consumption of the objects supports her actions in everyday life. Her choices of consumption also differentiate her from other characters in the Webtoon. Therefore, in this paper, I intend to analyse how the objects that the main character in the Webtoon '*Terlalu Cantik*', *Teh Ga*, and other characters consume or utilize, convey particular meanings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Material Culture

According to Jules David Prown in (Sheumaker & Wajda, 2008, p. xii), an art historian, the term material culture refers to a study for understanding the cultural entity of materials. Materials are any human-made objects that are the manifestations of humans' physical, social, economic, and political endeavour. Interestingly, there is an interdependent relationship between people and materials or objects they use in everyday life since people conceptualize and create these objects, and in turn, the objects bring meanings to people's lives (Grassby, 2005). Ian Woodward in his book *Understanding Material Culture* further develops the cultural capacities of objects that can be divided into three categories as follow (Woodward, 2007, pp. 6–14):

1. *Objects as social marker*

Woodward derives the understanding of objects as social markers from Bourdieu's theory about choices and tastes written in Bourdieu's book *Distinction* (1984/2010).

"This means that, being 'adapted' to a particular class of conditions of existence characterized by a particular degree of distance from necessity, class 'moralities' and 'aesthetics' are also necessarily situated with respect to one another by the criterion of degree of banality or distinction, and that all the 'choices' they produce are automatically associated with a distinct position and therefore endowed with a distinctive value." (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 262).

The clearest indication that aesthetic choices belong to the set of ethical choices which constitutes a lifestyle is the opposition which emerges, in the aesthetic area itself, between two categories as close to each other with respect to cultural capital. (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 296)

What Bourdieu means is differences in tastes between different classes in the society causes distinction or inequality. It is because the high-class people are believed to have better judgement of aesthetic and valuable objects. On the other hand, the working-class people are associated with the usage of unaesthetic and less valuable objects because they pay more

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attention to the practical functions of the objects to fulfil their needs. Hence, the dominant class has the privilege to decide what objects should be considered excellent cultural capital, and their tastes are often adopted as norms to determine what can be categorized ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ cultures.

2. Objects as markers of identity

For the second notion, Woodward elucidates that it is impossible if material culture or objects are consumed purely for its aesthetic values. Objects, in fact, can be associated very closely with the users’ identity (Woodward, 2007, p. 11). To illustrate, the Bible can be a marker of identity for how Christian people conduct their lives, but at the same time it can be stigmatized as the identity of those who are morally imperialist with strictly conservative moral codes and values (Woodward, 2007, p. 11).

3. Objects are sites of cultural and political power

This last notion as Woodward said roots from actant-network theory which asserts that there are relationships between people and technological objects. Objects like mobile phones are ‘produced by particular networks of cultural and political discourses, and create inextricable relations between people and objects’ as claimed by MacKenzie and Wajman in 1999 (Woodward, 2007, pp. 12–13). Woodward also borrows the concept of panopticon from Foucault. Panopticon is a model prison planned by an architect named Jeremy Bentham. It is ‘an annular building with an internal periphery consisting of cells containing iron grate doors opening to the interior and windows opening to the exterior as well as multi-floored central towers containing wide windows with blinds and partitions’ (Taylor, 2011, p. 34). Foucault then renders that Panopticon is a perfect way to exercise disciplinary power as it raises awareness among the prison inmates that they are constantly under surveillance (Ibid.) Woodward then argues that in this modern and technological era, panopticons are technological material objects that ‘act’ or have powers over their users (Woodward, 2007, p. 14).

ANALYSIS

Material Culture in a Webtoon ‘Terlalu Cantik’

Transportation, House and Food as Objects of Social Marker in ‘Terlalu Cantik’

In ‘Terlalu Cantik’, the main female character, *Teh Ga*, is shown to have particular taste and preferences in choosing the objects she uses or she consumes. There are three examples of how *Teh Ga*’s consumption differentiates her from other people and proves that “the display of possessions has always demonstrated new status, protected the existing hierarchy within and between groups, and announced social standing and allegiance.” (Grassby, 2005, p. 596).

1. Teh Ga’s means of transportation (Figure 1)

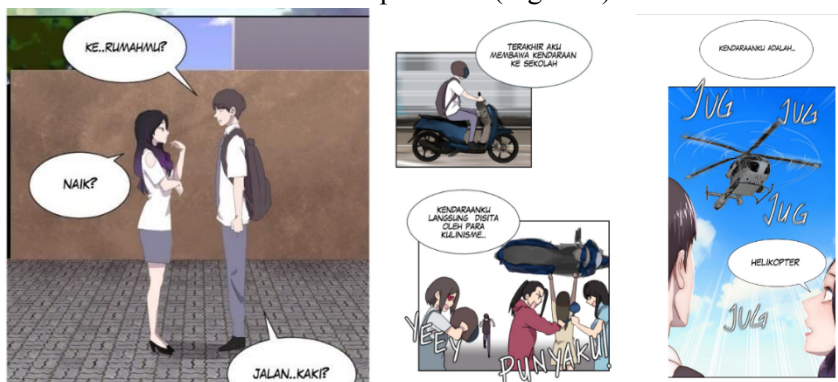


Figure 1. ‘Terlalu Cantik’ Episode 4

The scenes taken from episode 4 of the Webtoon ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’ show a very big gap in consumption between *Teh Ga* and her classmate, *Kulin*. *Kulin* would like to go to *Teh Ga*’s house on foot because the last time he rode his motorcycle, it was taken by his fans, so since then he goes everywhere on foot. *Teh Ga*, being a rich girl, has a solution considering that her means of transportation is a helicopter. These scenes show how objects like means of transportation can show social status. *Kulin* can only afford a motorcycle, a vehicle that is mostly used by Indonesian people and usually bought by middle class people because they can’t afford a car (Suriانشا, 2020, p. 172), and when he can no longer ride a motorcycle, he chooses to walk. To the contrary, *Teh Ga*, uses a helicopter of which operational cost is very high. One needs to spend around 7 million rupiahs per 15 minutes to rent a helicopter, and the cost to buy a unit of helicopter can reach 2.2 billion rupiahs for one unit plus the operational cost at around 20.2 million rupiahs per hour (Andrian, 2021). Only rich or crazy rich people can afford renting or buying a helicopter. As can be seen, objects -the motorcycle versus helicopter- are social markers of different social and economic status between *Teh Ga* and *Kulin*.

2. *Teh Ga*’s House (Figure 2)

Teh Ga’s house is another example how distinct her taste is as can be seen in some scenes from Episode 5 ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’:

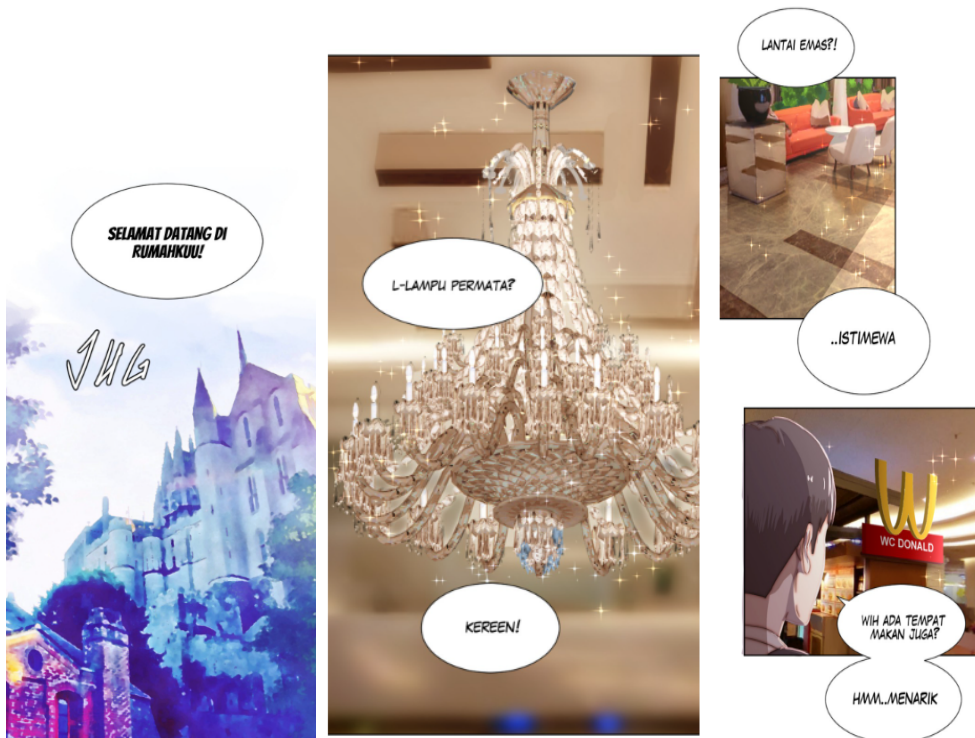


Figure 2. ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’ Episode 5

The architecture of the *Teh Ga*’s huge house from the outside looks like a European castle with the curtain walls and towers unlike the design of modern Indonesian houses these days that are more minimalistic and smaller in size due to the increasing price of lands. It is reported that the average size of Indonesians’ house varies from 21 square meters until 120 square meters (Wardana, 2020) while the size of *Teh Ga*’s house seen from the picture is more than 1000 square meters. The interiors of the house also consist of features or facilities that cannot be found in average houses: the crystal chandelier, gold floor, and even fast-food restaurant. The examples might be exaggeration, but they really show that *Teh Ga* has a distinct taste in decorating or completing the facility in her house. This message is strengthened in

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episode 39 when *Teh Ga* is narrated to have temporary amnesia, and used her standard to judge Kulin’s house and furniture as having poor people’s taste or ‘lowbrow’ taste. Material culture such as house’s architecture and its interior design including furniture invokes cultural hierarchies of values (Grassby, 2005, p. 595).

3. *Teh Ga*’s choice of food

It is riveting that choice of food can also reflect social differences. The narration in ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’ tells a story about *Teh Ga*’s preferences to consume chef- made international expensive food such as *Wagyu* (Japanese beef) steak, Truffle mushroom, and etc. which of course is consumed by limited people from wealthier economic background while *Kulin* is shown to prefer *pecel* – a humble Indonesian mixed vegetables with peanut sauce which is affordable for all people especially by those from lower economic background (Figure 4).

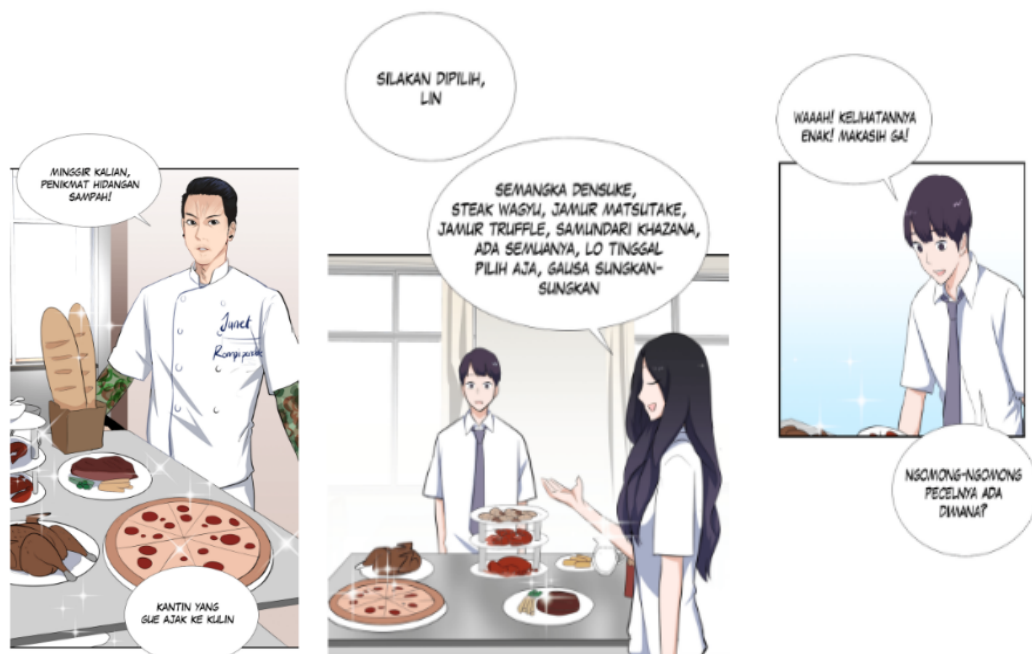


Figure 4. ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’ Episode 57

Obviously, there is disparity in the food preference that people from different classes usually consume and choose. In other words, food is also an object of social marker.

Fashion and Skincare to Mark Identity

In ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’, *Teh Ga*’s consumption of objects function not only to show her social standing, but also to shape her identity. There are two objects that are personally connected to *Teh Ga*’s identity as an extremely beautiful girl.

1. *Teh Ga*’s clothes



Figure 6. ‘Terlalu Cantik’ Episode 1 and KapanLagi.com

“Clothes in a drawer have no meaning, but when worn they become a uniform with social and moral implications (Grassby, 2005, p. 597). The notion is conspicuous through Teh Ga’s dressing style. She still wears the common Indonesian high school uniform with white shirt and grey skirt, but she adds a necklace and glamorous fur jacket that makes her appearance outstanding. The way she dresses herself is even compared to the fashion style of Ji-Soo, a member of a famous Korean Band, Black Pink (Safitri, 2019). The appearance of Teh Ga is the reflection of how much Indonesian teenagers adopt Korean fashion style as they feel that they can be as handsome or as beautiful as their idols when they follow their idol’s style closely (Wicaksono et al., 2021, p. 82). By combining high school uniforms with Korean fashion style, Teh Ga reflects the way she looks at herself and also affects the way other people see her – her identity as someone as beautiful as South Korean idols.

2. Teh Ga’s excessive use of skincare

Indonesia has a lot of local cosmetic brands such as Martha Tilaar, Viva, Mustika Ratu, and many others, but the idea of using skincare is seen as necessities after Korean Wave brings with it idols with perfect shining smooth skin that makes Indonesian women want to be like one (Setyani & Azhari, 2021, p. 68). Skincare usually refers to a series of skin products that can moisturize, nourish, and protect the skins (Riha et al., 2021, p. 182), and usually women use all the series to get maximum result. The importance of skincare is also depicted in ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’. In order to maintain her identity as ‘too beautiful’ girl, *Teh Ga* is addicted to skincare because without one, her skin face suddenly becomes wrinkled, and she will lose her identity as narrated in ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’ episode 79 and 80. That is to say, skincare for *Teh Ga* has personal value associated with her identity.

Instagram account as an object to exercise power

It is undeniable that in this globalization era, social media has been used more and more because of several reasons including encouraging participation, prioritizing openness, enhancing two-way communication, forming a community, and building networks (Prihatiningsih, 2017, pp. 54–55). However, all these benefits somehow create a virtual life that functions like a Foucault’s concept of Panopticon because when someone shares something in a social media, there might be a lot of people watching it, commenting on it, or even sharing it to others, so one’s life is open and visible to other people. It then becomes very important for one to look

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perfect in his or her social media account. As a result, social media gives birth to micro celebrities who became famous for their skills in exposing themselves online, for example celebgram- celebrity in Instagram (Hasna, 2022, p. 3) whose perfection instead of probably being untrue, can attract and influence millions of their followers. In short, these Instagram celebrities use their Instagram account as a powerful tool to steer their fans or even the public’s opinions.



Figure 8: ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’ Episode 17

In the same way, *Teh Ga* uses her Instagram account as a powerful tool to get her fans aka followers do what she wants. From the second picture on Figure 8, it is intriguing to see that *Teh Ga*’s Instagram account has 6.7 million followers, but she does not follow anyone. She enjoys using the object which in this case Instagram to showcase her life, and use it as a tool to control her followers who apparently want to be recognized firstly by her, but also by others. The logic is if their account is followed by famous *Teh Ga*, they will look good, and might as well get a lot of followers. In this case, the Instagram account functions as a powerful ‘panopticon’ that gives whoever succeeds in using it wisely has controlling power over others.

CONCLUSION

It is quite surprising to see how popular Webtoon has become since its appearance in the early twenty first century. The digital experience, the variety of stories, and opportunities it offers to local creators are the formulas that make Webtoon more and more prominent these days. Despite its entertaining nature, Webtoon still brings up numerous issues to ponder inside their seemingly light and predictable stories. One of the local Webtoon, ‘*Terlalu Cantik*’ is chosen to be the center of discussion of this paper as the authors of this Webtoon cleverly mix Indonesian and South Korean culture in humorous way, but at the same time, there is issue of materialistic culture narrated in the Webtoon. The main character, *Teh Ga*, is surrounded by

different material cultures that are packed with meanings. Her high- end transportation, house, and food separate her from those of lower classes. She also uses objects such as clothes, accessories, and skincare to construct and sustain her identity. Last but not least, she uses a technological object, her Instagram account, to exercise power over others. To conclude, material culture or objects do have meanings, and it is through them that “culture is transmitted, received and produced” (Woodward, 2007, p. 14).

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