Popular Culture in Social Media & Online Games: Between Morality, Fear, and Expectations from Families and Schools

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This article aims to present the meanings given by families and schools in viewing popular culture in social media and online games, and the implications for children. Important questions in this study include the relevance of educational values, concerns, fears and hopes of families and schools in viewing popular culture today.

Methods. Phenomenology to explore how families and schools interpret the presence of popular culture in children's lives.

Results. Families and schools agree that compared to the positive benefits, popular culture has more negative effects on children. Concerns related to children's imitation nature, such as imitating various popular content on social media and online games and practising them in the real world. Families and schools fear of negative popular content will appear algorithmically and randomly on children's social media or online game homepages. All parties hope that the Indonesian government has the firmness to limit the intensity of use and the type of content consumed by children.

Conclusion. Popular culture is inseparable from children's lives today, as social media and online games have become new spaces for them. Despite knowing this, families and schools still suffer from worry and fear of the negative effects of popular culture on children. The control exercised by families and schools still provides a gap for negative popular culture to enter when children operate social media and online games. Therefore, moral teachings are needed for families and schools to ask the government to be actively involved in limiting children's consumption of popular culture.

Keywords: Pop Culture, Social Media, Online Games, Fear, Expectations

Introduction

In general, popular culture is defined as a culture that is favoured and recognized by many people (Atmadja & Ariyani, 2018). Popular culture is usually related to entertainment and modernity. The implication of popular culture is that it can replace the noble cultural order or values that were originally ingrained in families, schools, or communities (Strinati, 2020). Popular culture is nothing more than the practice of capitalism from various entertainment industries, mass culture that is massively produced, so that it gains popularity among certain ages. Finally, the culture of society is dominated by popular culture, no longer high culture (elitism), but material culture that is entertaining or for people's pleasure (Burton, 2012). The study of popular culture is important because it is directly related to the reproduction of the meaning of relationships and social reality (Storey, 2010). Presenting popular culture studies means interpreting production, distribution, and consumption for the audience. As consumers of popular culture, they will experience habituation and continuity practices in enjoying popular content (Jeong et al., 2017).

In practice, the popular culture content present in social media is not neutral, but controlled by the desires of the market and producers, so consumers do not have full control in determining the algorithm on their social media (Beer, 2013). Social media is responsible for giving birth to and fostering popular culture, and the two are interdependent in practice. As society becomes more dependent on media, popular culture will continue to thrive (Rafique et al., 2022). Popular culture, which is present through various social media platforms, one of which is TikTok, has a dialectical relationship with childhood and adolescence. Parents' assumptions about their children's privacy practices do not always match adolescents' ability to negotiate the boundaries between public and private. Popular culture disseminated through TikTok evolves into a public space. Socio-cultural constructs shape and are shaped by TikTok (De Leyn et al., 2022). Another implication of popular culture is that it creates certain expectations or beliefs in children (Theobald et al., 2018).

Popular culture can easily influence children and adolescents because it relates to the following aspects. First, every child can express their enjoyment simultaneously. Second, it offers a world to explore their self-identity. Third, popular culture is present due to technological advancements, which create new social spaces accessible at all times. Fourth, popular culture comes through movies, online games, social media, thus making children more aggressive in using them. Fifth, popular culture can change the lifestyle, personality, and social patterns of individuals (Vyomakesisri et al., 2020). Because there are no binding rules or norms, popular culture contains arbitrary content as long as it is favoured by many people, so it does not pay attention to ethics or morals. As a result, misleading or destructive content is everywhere. Provocative and extreme content can be easily accessed by everyone (Powers, 2022). It is feared that children or adolescents also represent or imitate the popular culture, even though it is misleading, destructive, or harmful in everyday reality. Once again, it is emphasised that popular culture can shape individuals' attitudes and identities, as it carries ideological hegemony (Aistrope, 2020).

Popular culture can influence individuals through widespread social interactions and passions (Hosseini, 2010). Most recently, people's social interactions and passions are now presented through social media. The role of social media is to aid in the dissemination and even the development of popular culture content (D'Lima & Higgins, 2021). Social media not only reflects, but also reinforces popular culture. However, excessive use of social media also poses risks to children's lives, in addition to its imitative nature, it can also worsen peer relationships and cause depression.

Social media can change children's perceptions and behaviour (Bozzola et al., 2022). Children can imitate all kinds of behaviour on social media. Negative content needs to be monitored as it can influence children's perspectives of themselves and others, impacting long-term behaviour (Willoughby, 2019). The risks posed by social media to children include harmful and inappropriate content that can be easily accessed. Such content occurs because of algorithms from people's favorites or simply appears, even though it is not intended to appear on the screen (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023).

Social media users may also experience decreased feelings leading to social isolation. Moreover, social media can transmit feelings and emotions to other users (Wilson & Stock, 2021). When children excessively use social media, it can lead to maladaptive behaviours, difficulty in self-control, and emotional problems (Montag et al., 2024). Social media has now become a new space for children, and compared to its positive benefits, the risks it poses also have greater potential, thus requiring parents and teachers to protect children from the dangers of social media (Hayes et al., 2022). Besides social media, online gaming is also another platform of popular culture.

Online games are highly popular among teenagers and children, with an increasing number of users each year (Novrialdy et al., 2019; ÖZGÜR, 2019). About 40% of children aged 8-12 years old and 44% of teenagers aged 13-17 years old have experienced negative experiences while playing online games in the last year (eSafety Commisioner, 2024). Currently, children explore various aspects while playing online games. For those aged 5-7 years old, approximately one-third of them (34%) engage in such activities. The most popular types of games involve creativity and building (53%), followed by action/adventure games (37%), and puzzles or quizzes (35%). Roblox is their favorite gaming application. However, only a small percentage of children aged 3-4 years old play online games (18%). Here, the top games include puzzles or quizzes (35%), creative and building (34%), and action or adventure (23%). When it comes to children aged 8-11 years old, seven out of ten (71%) who play online games state that they interact with other players through messages or headsets. Social aspects also play a significant role in the gaming experience, where children aged 3-17 years old mention that they play for 'socialise with friends' (24%), while children aged 8-17 years old use games as a means to play (55%) and chat (47%) with people they know. However, there are concerns regarding the fact that 25% of them play with, and 22% talk to, strangers outside the gaming environment (OfCom, 2023).

Online gaming addiction can hinder psychological development, leading to emotional and behavioral problems for users (Zhu, 2023). Online games with violent themes can also increase children's aggression. Apart from damaging mental health, users addicted to online games can result in the breakdown of relationships or social interactions in the real life. Although online gaming addiction is not solely the fault of the child, it is caused by unmet basic needs of the child by family or school in the real world (Kaya et al., 2023).

Indonesia ranks 9th out of 10 countries with the highest social media usage, with an average of 191 minutes of social media usage per day (Annur, 2024b). The most popular platforms used in Indonesia are WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok (Annur, 2024c). In fact, Indonesia is second in the world in terms of frequency of TikTok use (Annur, 2024a). The number of TikTok users in Indonesia increased by 22% annually from 2020 to 2022 (Pudjianto et. al., 2022). In addition to social media, Indonesians also enjoy playing online games, with 94.5 million players, placing Indonesia 3rd in the world (Dihni, 2024). Online game players in Indonesia spend more than four hours a day playing (Muhamad, 2024). Indonesia has internet access policies in Government

Regulation No. 71 of 2019 and Minister of Communication and Informatics Regulation No. 19 of 2019, which restrict illegal content (Adhari & Sitabuana, 2021). However, there are no specific policies related to usage intensity, content restrictions, content creation, and media platforms, so restrictions cannot be fully implemented.

Parents play an essential and crucial role in preventing unwanted outcomes, such as children imitating content in online games, addiction to online games, or social and emotional disorders suffered by children (Şenol et al., 2024). In addition to parents who are in direct contact with children within the family, schools also play an important role. By strengthening the bond between students and schools and building close relationships between students and teachers (Ciris et al., 2022). Therefore, families and schools are the main figures who deal directly with popular culture that is present in children's social media and online games.

Based on the background description, this article will explore the meaning of popular culture that is present through children's social media and online games. The meanings to be explored are the concerns, fears, and hopes of parents, teachers, and principals as educators in dealing with the exposure to popular culture that children consume all the time. The in-depth meanings revealed aim to provide a view that, although families and schools know that children are now consumers of popular culture all the time, it turns out that behind popular culture there are hidden things: worries, fears, and hopes.

Methods

This research utilises a qualitative-phenomenological approach. In phenomenological research, the researcher aims to uncover, describe, and explain the meanings derived from a phenomenon. Each subject interprets the phenomenon differently. The subjective experiences of informants become primary data, as the experiences themselves are already evident within them. Phenomenology seeks to formulate a strict abstraction of the fundamental layers in the process of consciousness and unveil the universal structures in subjective behaviour (Flick et al., 2020). Regarding the steps of the phenomenological approach by Husserl (Hamzah, 2020), they include epoché, reduction of phenomena, variants of imagination, and synthesis of meaning and essence.

In-depth interviews to explore meanings were conducted with parents, teachers, and school principals. There were 12 parents and teachers involved, who were from the upper grades, specifically grades four, five, and six. This was decided by the researcher following a preliminary study through observation, which revealed that children in the upper grades have broader access to consuming popular culture. Then, two school principals were selected due to their roles as policy makers in the school.

The selection of research sites and subjects utilized the purposive sampling technique, which involved specific considerations in choosing informants as subjects. Parents, classroom teachers, and school principals were selected because they are

educators who interact directly with children regularly, and their children have access to social media and online games. The research was conducted at Tamansiswa Jetis Elementary School and NU Sleman Elementary School in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. In phenomenological research, the number of subjects is not a fixed criterion; what matters most is whether the assumptions and research considerations can be answered by the research subjects. The research questions can be seen in table 1 below, but the set of questions is only a guideline, because in reality in the field, the questions develop and are dynamic, adjusting to the situation and conditions.

Table 1
Interview questions

Aspects in Phenomenology	Research Questions
Textural (Experience)	How do you experience popular culture in children's lives today?
	Is the popular culture embodied in today's social media and online games becoming the new world of children?
	Does popular culture contained in social media and online games affect children's personalities and social behaviour?
	Is popular culture in line with the educational values that have been built by families and schools?
Structural (Meaning)	Why does popular culture on social media and online gaming always involve the thoughts and feelings of families and schools in educating children?
	Why does popular culture on social media and online gaming instil caution, caution and fear?
	How do you expect popular culture to be delivered freely through children's social media and online games?

Source. Own Research

Results

The results of this research are presented in an inductive-interactive manner, which involves quoting, narrating, and explaining the meanings conveyed directly by the research subjects. The findings are divided or categorised based on the diversity of responses from the subjects. Interview excerpts presented are responses that can represent other subjects.

Social Media & Online Games: A New Space for Children

Social media and online games, which offer various popular content, have become a new space for children nowadays. This is because children nowadays cannot be

separated from their gadgets. "The current generation is inseparable from gadgets. Perhaps due to the influence of games. So, children tend to be busier with their smartphones and rarely play with friends who don't have gadgets." (Parent 4-1); "The access is extraordinary. It's truly personal because every child, holding one gadget, which contains social media and online games. It's terrifying." (Parent 4-2); "Nowadays, children interact through social media, TikTok, games, and others. So, children prefer to stay at home and what they are looking for now is Wi-Fi access." (Parent 5-2).

> Their new space, having their own world once they hold gadgets. It's influential because it depends on what they watch, so sometimes children get angry on their own. Basically, their mood swings easily, sometimes yelling, the point is their emotions are often unstable. (Parent 5-1)

For parents, popular culture enjoyed through social media and online games is not just a new space or world, but also influences the personality and social behaviour of children. This viewpoint is also agreed upon by schools. "They have their own world, where they enjoy those entertainments on social media. As a result, some children are difficult to control, some are easy to provoke, and some even resort to using harsh words." (Classroom Teacher 5-3).

> Because they are bored at school, as they keep studying. So, they feel bored and uncomfortable. Therefore, they vent it out (on social media & online games), seeking something more interesting for them. Eventually, children nowadays have strayed from the prevailing social norms (manners). (Classroom Teacher 5-1)

> Children are starting to become curious, or perhaps they want to have experiences outside their own environment, outside of school. Yes, maybe they find school routines monotonous and seek something new and cooler, which they find through their social media and online games: popular culture. (School Principal-1)

The current reality cannot be denied, which positions gadgets as indispensable tools for children. Because nowadays children enjoy popular culture that they can access through social media and online games. It's a new space for them to seek entertainment and pleasure. Even schools themselves realise that the consumption of popular culture is also caused by children's boredom during school.

Educational Values: Are They Aligned?

Each family and school have educational value practices implemented for children. This subsection will verify the relevance of the educational values established by families and schools with this new space: popular culture on social media and online games. "Not aligned with the educational goals of our family." (Parent 4-1); "Not suitable. If popular culture follows the times, while my family follows the Javanese family values

that are tied to manners. Popular culture and Javanese culture clearly have different directions. Once again, popular culture greatly influences children." (Parent 5-2).

> Some are there, but there are also many deviations from family teachings. For example, like kids nowadays, even in 5th or 6th grade of elementary school, many are already riding motorcycles. Even though they don't have a driver's license yet. The minimum age for a driver's license is 17, right? This happens because the current popular content (FYP) on social media feeds often shows young children driving cars or riding motorcycles self-taught. Eventually, children imitate it, even though parents never taught them. If on Instagram or TikTok, parents don't always control. Everything that's interesting, whether positive or negative, even though often negative, will surely be imitated by children. (Parent 5-1)

Parents will teach something based on its good and bad aspects to their children. However, it's different for children. They will learn something if it's interesting to them. Yet not all popular content shown on social media and online games embodies the educational values advocated by the family. Of course, the values intended by the family have positive meanings, not leading children to do socially deviant things. Schools also agree on this. Many stray because within popular culture, the content tends to lean towards negative things. "Like what I saw yesterday, children were cutting their hands until they bled and it left scars, that's very dangerous." (Classroom Teacher 5-1); "It's always two-sided. We can't reject cultural developments. However, on the negative side, for example, the game FreeFire, honestly, after we watch it, it contains elements of violence." (School Principal-2).

> So far, popular cultures, especially, have been very concerning for me. The latest and most recent viral trend is the handshaking culture. Initially pretending to offer a handshake, when the other person extends their hand, they instead pull it back and start dancing mockingly. (Classroom Teacher 5-2).

The school expresses that these negative attitudes and behaviour are even practiced at school. Even though in the morning, the principal delivers speeches about goodness, followed by advice given by teachers during class, these deviant practices still persist. The educational values that the school painstakingly builds are not fully absorbed because they are already blocked by the popular content accessed by the children. Popular culture has become ingrained in them.

Worries and Fears Regarding Popular Culture on Social Media and Online Games

Popular culture has become the daily consumption of children. Every child has a gadget, with social media and online games installed on it. Schools feel that children will dive into enjoying popular culture because they feel bored after spending all

day at school, while parents struggle to control their children's activities in consuming popular culture. Because all content that appears along with verbal and written comments can never be controlled by parents. If social media has algorithms, then online games depend on "who" the child plays with. Because access to popular culture through social media and games is too wide open, even unrestricted within the applications themselves. "Because it's too free, I'm worried that children can access any content too easily." (Parent 5-2).

> Sadly. Nowadays, there are many videos being released that are sometimes not filtered. So, there are many videos that may have more negative aspects than positive ones. There are videos mocking others, sometimes they like to act in front of the mirror. If parents don't monitor, the fear is that they'll do as they please and imitate what they watch and see. (Parent 4-1).

> I once checked my child's gadget, and on TikTok's FYP (For You Page), there were videos of slapping, hitting heads, and I was shocked, why is it like this? We are very worried; how will our child grow into adulthood if their entertainment is like this? Then, what we have taught will surely be erased and replaced by popular cultures. (Parent 5-1).

The concerns of parents relate to randomly appearing content that can be viewed by children, while as users, they cannot fully control it because negative content will inevitably appear at some point. Parents' fear is when their children mimic various forms of popular culture they watch. So, it's not just about watching, but also about being brought by the child into the real world to be practiced. Parents feel afraid when immoral content, especially those containing violence, is imitated and practiced by children in their daily lives. This is in line with what teachers said. "There's a trend on social media, which is self-harm, and it's also practiced by some students at school." (School Principal-1).

> Perhaps it's from those games earlier that provide violent content, unpleasant remarks to hear, inappropriate for a child to say to an elder, things like that which make me sad and concerned because in those contents, they are not educational in nature, but what matters is that they sell. (Classroom Teacher 5-1).

For teachers, popular culture doesn't prioritize educational values but rather leans towards capitalist culture. As long as the content sells well and is profitable, it can be accessed freely by anyone, even produced on a massive scale. The culture being disseminated only prioritises popularity and producer profit alone.

> My concern is that popular culture leads or invites children to forget their identity, their religious teachings, the prohibitions of their religion. In some cases, it is found that children are influenced by bullying because of popular culture. They see it, they are exposed to it, they can't control it, and eventually, they imitate and emulate it to become perpetrators. (Classroom Teacher 5-2).

Popular culture is also feared to make children forget about the teachings of goodness from their beliefs and religions. Eventually, the practice of bullying also arises because there are no longer boundaries between good and bad, right and wrong. Violent content from popular culture that is broadcast on social media or adopted freely by children in online games contributes to this. The principal is afraid that popular culture can make children forget their true identity.

Family and School Expectations of Popular Culture

Although parents as educators within the family, and teachers as well as school principals as educators within schools, have concerns and fears about popular culture, on the other hand, they have hopes that popular culture will not indiscriminately influence children's characters. This uniform hope is placed upon the government to realise it. "As a parent, I hope that the government becomes more aware, caring, and filters content that is now accessible to all segments of society." (Parent 5-1); "The government should be able to limit users of social media and online games according to their age." (Classroom Teacher 5-1); "The government should be more assertive in minimizing violent content on social media." (Classroom Teacher 5-2).

> The hope is that inappropriate content won't be approved (by the government). If we want Indonesia to be good, we have to go back to the idea that culture cannot be separated from daily life. If we want to promote good culture, the content must also be good. (School Principal-2).

The family and school authorities agree that the central government should impose restrictions on social media users and online gamers to prevent excessive consumption of popular culture. The desired restrictions could be related to the users' age or the ability to block negative content. However, there are parents who have "utopian" hopes because it is difficult to realise them in the development of digital technology. These parents express their desires as follows. "My hope is that negative content doesn't appear frequently on my child's social media or online gaming screens. Because, nowadays, most of what children watch is bad." (Parent 4-1).

It is not without reason that parents have such utopian desires. Because they have given up on exercising control independently as parents, and do not expect more from the school. However, this desire is dismissed by the uncontrolled flow of popular culture due to algorithms on social media and the plurality of players in online games. Although there are parents who leave moral values to content creators to limit things that are negative. "It goes back to the Content Creators, so they can limit the content and its delivery. Perhaps, if possible, not too vulgar or harsh." (Parent 4-2).

Indeed, content creators and families/schools have different goals. For content creators, popularity or virality is the aim, as they are involved in the entertainment industry. Whereas for families/schools, popular content that shapes new cultures must

be positive and not damage children's attitudes and behaviour. Similarly, there are parents who want their children to be more independent in limiting the consumption of negative popular culture. "What we hope for as parents is that if it's something negative, our child should be able to filter it themselves and they should be able to handle it." (Parent 6-2).

Parents hope their children become more independent in limiting their consumption because the practice of consuming popular culture cannot be fully monitored and controlled by family or school authorities. Children have full authority as consumers to choose their own entertainment. However, a more complex and ideal condition is expressed by the following parent.

> The hope is for further filtering. The hope is that parents and teachers can provide understanding to children, and if possible, parents should also pay attention to their children's activities, not just their physical activities, but also their activities in the digital world. Sometimes, children nowadays are much smarter than their parents, and they can even hide various things. Therefore, there needs to be control. (Parent 5-2).

Parents hope for intense communication between the family, school, and the child regarding the consumption of popular culture on social media and online games. Policies, controls, and supervision should be carried out by all three parties. Children should also realize that negative content is not suitable for viewing and should not be consumed, let alone practiced in daily life. This way, parental supervision won't be in vain, as children can be encouraged to cooperate.

DISCUSSIONS

Popular Culture: Morality, Entertainment, and Reflection for Family and School

From the research results, it is explained that the educational values built by families and schools are not aligned with popular culture. These educational values aim to shape good character in individuals, in line with the principles of moral education—teaching about right and wrong. A person's morality is shaped through social interactions: heard, experienced, and acquired from society (Yalçın, 2021). Moral values include justice, honesty, and kindness (Barni et al., 2020). These three values are practiced in a complex manner, in any context. Kindness knows no bounds, but the kindness referred to is in accordance with the teachings provided by family, school, and society. Families and schools must be able to highlight and predict the moral values being taught, adhered to, and practiced by children, especially the social ties in schools and peer groups (Grégoire & Pauwels, 2020). If deviations in the attitudes and behaviour of children are found in this process, then families and schools must immediately take

action to address them. In the social interactions to shape children's morality, there is one medium that also becomes a new social structure, namely social media and online games. Popular culture is the content contained within these two platforms. The problem is that social media and online games are social structures that create new spaces and cannot be fully cooperated with by families and schools to shape children's morality. Both platforms have their own authority: algorithms and market demands. Yet children consume popular culture through these two platforms.

The formation of morality can be done through moral discussions between two parties, namely educators and children. This dialectic provides conclusions about the values of goodness embraced and practiced by children (Wong, 2021). However, social media and online games do not provide space for such moral discussions. Popular culture just prioritises the entertainment industry: exploitation, manipulation, and com-mercialisation (Powers, 2022), meaning the goal of popular culture is solely to chase content popularity and entertainment industry dominance. Regardless of whether the content is positive or negative, what matters most is its massive and widespread consumption. Popular culture blurs the boundaries of educational values built by each social structure. Whether local or international, everything merges into one without boundaries (Hosseini, 2010). As a result, all teachings of goodness provided by families and schools will be replaced by popular culture. Moreover, popular culture is capable of influencing a person's way of life.

Families and schools are also concerned about the violent content displayed in the form of popular culture. On the other hand, popular culture can determine a person's attitudes and behaviour (Rafique et al., 2022). Hence, there is concern that children will imitate the popular violent content on social media and online games, which will then be practiced in real life. One way to prevent this is by teaching moral education to children. Moral education can prevent the occurrence of violent practices (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012). However, the problem lies in the dominance between moral education conveyed through family education or popular content contained in social media and online games.

Although it is acknowledged that popular culture prioritises entertainment, which has now reached children and teenagers (De Leyn et al., 2022), it's not just that. Because popular culture also encompasses social and cultural aspects (Horton, 2010). This happens because popular culture initially provides entertainment to children, then unconsciously provides consumption and socialisation practices to them. Therefore, the reflection of children's culture will be determined by the popular culture they consume. If the process of imitation in children persists, then families are responsible for fully monitoring their children's use of social media and online games. Furthermore, families ask schools to provide training on understanding safe internet use to parents, so that all parents understand the risks of modern internet usage and its influence on children. Similarly, the government must create policies and legal frameworks

related to the use of social media and online games, or even broader, encompassing internet consumption (Siska et al., 2022).

Morality is considered important for teaching vigilance to children (van Dijk et al., 2020), as well as understanding the feelings, thoughts, and intentions of others, and continuously discussing virtues and goodness that impact the general public (Peterson, 2020). Moral education is also crucial for individuals to consider every action and social practice in their daily lives (Wheeler, 2023).

In conclusion, it can be synthesised that popular culture does not embody the educational values built by families and schools. Popular culture only prioritises the capitalist entertainment industry. Families and schools need to take two important steps. First, hold seminars or training sessions to enhance understanding of children's consumption of popular culture through social media and online games. Second, to uphold the educational values established by families, it is necessary to practice moral values—teaching about right and wrong to children, followed by monitoring and control. If deviations in attitudes and behaviour occur, families are responsible for making decisions that have been previously communicated with the school.

Conclusion

The popular culture found in social media and online games has become a new space for children to seek entertainment and pleasure. The unpredictable algorithms cause worries and fears for families and schools. They fear that negative content consumed by children will be practiced in their daily lives. The educational values of families and schools, which include moral values related to right and wrong, are directly confronted with the dominance of popular culture. Hopes from families and schools include requesting the government to provide specific digital boundaries and regulations regarding the consumption of popular culture. Intensive communication among families, schools, and children is crucial to prevent the imitation of unwanted popular culture content.

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