

# Foreign influencers in Indonesia: love of the country or a ploy for popularity?

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David Jephcott, more commonly known as “Londo Kampung”. Screenshot from *Londo Kampung*.

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A video of a western man wearing batik and speaking fluent Javanese went viral on Facebook a few years ago. I remember being surprised because despite having Javanese ancestry I could not match his language skills. Most comments on the video were in Indonesian and expressed a sense of pride and amazement that there were foreigners who loved Indonesian culture. The comments were mostly innocuous but one fawning comment, in particular, raised my eyebrows: “Indonesia owes him a great deal.” A great deal for what?

It is not unusual to see similarly proud and excessive comments when Indonesia is mentioned in Hollywood movies and television shows. The film “Minions” (2015) used [several Indonesian words](#), such as *kemari* (come here) and *terima kasih* (thank you). Indonesia was named as the [origin of the character Nagini](#) in “Fantastic Beasts, The Crimes of Grindelwald” (2018) and director James Cameron said that “Avatar: The Way of Water” (2022) was partly inspired by [the Bajo ethnic group in Indonesia](#).

Indonesian social media lights up at these mentions of the country, and online news outlets cover them in breathless detail. A few weeks ago, Indonesians delighted in the HBO series “The Last of Us” setting its second episode in Jakarta. The phenomenon is so common it is often gently mocked by a meme, “Ada Indonesia coy!” (which could be loosely translated as, “Hey guys, it’s Indonesia!”).

What prompts this excessive pride in how foreigners view Indonesia? One of the most common explanations is that centuries of colonisation left Indonesians with [an inferiority complex](#). Some Indonesians may believe foreigners, especially westerners, are more modern, educated, and culturally sophisticated. When foreigners create content about Indonesia, it is seen as a validation of Indonesia’s uniqueness in the eyes of the rest of the world. The lack of representation of Indonesia in western media (captured well by [this satirical article](#)) only makes Indonesians more enthusiastic for the few mentions it ever gets.

Indonesia has 139 million YouTube users, the [fourth largest](#) number of users globally after India, the United States, and Brazil. This makes Indonesia a large market for advertisers. Foreigners have started to catch on, and many now post content about Indonesia on social media to get more views and engagement, and therefore advertising revenue.

Over recent years, growing numbers of foreign YouTubers have made Indonesia their primary audience. Many have millions of subscribers, such as Korea Reomit (real name Jang Hansol) (5.3 million), Londo Kampung (David Jephcott) (4.9 million), Hari Jisun (3.3 million), and Sacha Stevenson (1.3 million).

Sacha Stevenson was one of the first of these foreign YouTubers to become popular. She made a name for herself with her “[How to Act Indonesian](#)” videos, which reflected some of the idiosyncrasies of Indonesian culture back to a mostly Indonesian audience. Similarly, Londo Kampung focuses mainly on scenes of daily life in Java, often “pranking” locals with his [surprising ability to speak fluent Javanese](#). Hari Jisun posts a range of content but is well known for her [mukbang \(eating\) videos](#), where she films herself eating a variety of Indonesian dishes.

This new batch of foreign influencers all deliver their content in Indonesian. Most have spent time living in Indonesia and have good language skills. Some have married Indonesians. A generous reading of their content might be that it provides a shortcut to cultural exchange. But it is typically their “Indonesian-ness” that makes them popular among Indonesians.

Some have even been regarded as “ambassadors” for Indonesia across the world. For example, South Korean content creators that produce Indonesian-related content, such as Korea Reomit, Sunny Dahye, the Kimbab Family, and Bung Korea, were invited to meet President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo during state visits to South Korea in 2018 and 2022.

But not all foreign influencers’ content about Indonesia is insightful or provides opportunities for sharing ideas, customs or understanding. Several content producers are clearly using Indonesia solely to raise their number of views and subscribers. Some of these more cynical efforts are simply “reaction videos”, with foreigners eating Indomie, listening to dangdut, or seeing Muslims praying.

The foreigners typically react with awe, surprise, and sometimes even tears of emotion. And seemingly there are many Indonesians who lap up this content, liking and sharing the videos, and adding comments. But it is hard to see the attraction of their videos, which offer little new knowledge for viewers. For example, a US-based YouTuber has created a channel where he [shares his reactions to all things Indonesian](#). He struggles to pronounce Indonesian words and even acknowledges he cannot understand the songs he is reacting to.

Nevertheless, not all Indonesians are passive audiences for content created by foreigners. Several foreign influencers have been fiercely criticised by Indonesians. In late 2020, for example, [Russian influencer Sergey Kosenko](#) was savaged by Indonesians online after he filmed himself driving a motorbike into the sea in Karangasem, Bali. Popular Balinese politician and designer Ni Luh Djelantik – who has become known for reprimanding foreigners behaving badly in Bali – [warned him not to try to gain popularity](#) by breaking the law and posting stupid content. Kosenko was deported by Indonesian immigration soon after.

Likewise, South Korean YouTuber Sunny Dahye also faced backlash after an Instagram account [accused her of previously describing Indonesians as stupid and poor](#), and pretending to fast to attract likes (she is non-Muslim). The incident went viral and topped Twitter’s trending topics for several days. Despite apologising and denying the accusations against her, Sunny lost hundreds of thousands of followers.

These recent incidents have led to more Indonesians starting to question foreign influencers’ sincerity. Do they genuinely love Indonesia or are they merely taking advantage of it for popularity and profit? Does excitement about westerners referencing Indonesia reflect an unconscious sense of inferiority among Indonesians?

It is little wonder that calls are growing for Indonesians to [stop being “overproud”](#) of online references to their country by foreigners. A more critical approach to western content focused on Indonesia certainly wouldn’t hurt, given so much of it is so superficial.

ARTS, MEDIA, SOCIETY

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