



YouTube as Informal Classroom: Symbolic Interactionism and Educational Communication for Cultural Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how YouTube comment sections function as informal classrooms that facilitate cultural learning through symbolic interaction. Focusing on user discussions under the Kraton Jogja's "Lela Ledhung" video, the research investigates nostalgic expressions as vehicles for transmitting Javanese values and identity. Using thematic content analysis, Barthesian semiotics, and Symbolic Interactionism, 847 comments were analyzed to reveal patterns of informal educational communication. The findings show that mediated nostalgia operates as a pedagogical tool because it fosters emotional engagement, identity performance, and collective meaning-making in digital "third places." These interactions communicate cultural myths, such as the idyllic past and the Kraton as custodian of Javanese heritage, making cultural learning accessible outside formal institutions. This contributes to SDG 4 by highlighting how user-generated content enables lifelong, inclusive learning rooted in cultural identity. The study expands the field of Educational Communication by emphasizing digital participation as a transformative force in informal education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital media has fundamentally reshaped how individuals connect, learn, and engage with culture. Platforms like YouTube have evolved beyond entertainment and information hubs to become dynamic “digital third places,” offering informal learning spaces where people construct meaning and form cultural communities outside traditional institutional frameworks. These participatory environments foster user-driven communication that contributes to collective knowledge and memory (Ong’ong’a, 2021). The comment sections, in particular, serve as emergent sites of educational communication, enabling cultural discourse and informal peer-to-peer learning without a predefined curriculum or instructor-led structure (Agustya et al., 2023). This dynamic interaction aligns with the goals of SDG 4, especially its emphasis on promoting inclusive and lifelong learning.

This study analyzes the YouTube comments under the “Lela Ledhung” video uploaded by Kraton Jogja, an official cultural institution. These comments form a unique educational site where nostalgic memories intersect with cultural identity, making the comment section a space for informal cultural pedagogy. The comment thread reveals a rich tapestry of communicative acts where users express memories, emotions, and reflections, co-constructing cultural understanding in real time.

Despite the growth of digital media research, the role of mediated nostalgia in educational communication remains underexplored in Communication Studies, particularly within non-Western contexts (Reimer et al., 2023). Although nostalgia is recognized as a powerful emotional force in music and film, its potential to transmit cultural knowledge and values through user interaction deserves deeper attention. Because nostalgia enhances attention and memory, it may operate as a pedagogical agent in digital spaces (Baqi, 2025).

This research revisits and reinterprets user interactions within the comments of the “Lela Ledhung” video, originally posted by Kraton Jogja (Supanggih et al., 2017). The aim is to understand how nostalgic expression in user-generated comments can serve as a form of informal learning, especially in the transmission of Javanese cultural values and identity (Li et al., 2023; Pramana & Priastuty, 2023). These online interactions reflect a shift in how cultural knowledge is conveyed—away from institutional classroom settings and into participatory, digital forums. The omnipresence of nostalgia in digital life offers more than sentiment; it can be a mode of cultural continuity, emotional resonance, and educational engagement across generations (Baqi, 2025). YouTube comment sections become digital “repositories of collective memory” and “communal classrooms” that facilitate informal cultural learning and identity negotiation (Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023). Through the lenses of Symbolic Interactionism and Barthesian semiotics, these interactions can be analyzed as meaningful pedagogical exchanges, revealing the communicative strategies through which culture is remembered, shared, and taught.

Current literature shows a significant gap in theorizing these digital spaces as educational environments, especially those centered on non-Western cultural heritage (Reimer et al., 2023). While mediated nostalgia and symbolic communication have been studied separately, little has been done to synthesize these concepts as part of a theoretical framework for informal cultural education online (Agustya et al., 2023). This paper, therefore, integrates mediated nostalgia, Symbolic Interactionism, and Barthesian semiotics to examine how digital comment sections operate as informal curricula that align with global educational goals, particularly SDG 4 and SDG 11.

To address this gap, the research is guided by the following questions: (i) How do nostalgic expressions within the YouTube comments on “Lela Ledhung” function as informal pedagogical communications, transmitting Javanese cultural values and narratives?; (ii) In

what ways do the communicative interactions in the comment section facilitate informal learning about Javanese culture and identity, particularly through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism?; (iii) How do the Barthesian layers of meaning (denotation, connotation, myth) embedded in commenters' nostalgic and cultural expressions contribute to an informal "curriculum" of Javanese heritage?; and (iv) How does the "Kraton Jogja" channel, as an authoritative cultural voice, and the ensuing user dialogue, shape an online educational environment for cultural understanding and identity performance?

The purpose of this study is to analyze the communicative dynamics of nostalgia and cultural meaning-making within a YouTube comment section. By applying Communication Studies frameworks to these interactions, the study demonstrates how user-driven, emotionally charged digital spaces facilitate informal learning, identity construction, and cultural preservation. This work contributes to the field of Educational Communication by expanding the understanding of how informal, decentralized, and culturally embedded learning processes operate in participatory digital media, advancing educational equity and cultural sustainability in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals.

2. METHODS

This study is grounded in a qualitative interpretive research paradigm (Galih Prakasa *et al.*, 2023), which is well-suited for examining the deep, nuanced meanings embedded in human communication. It emphasizes understanding phenomena from the perspective of those who experience them—here, the YouTube commenters. This paradigm enables researchers to explore subjective interpretations and symbolic constructions of reality, acknowledging that meaning is socially constructed through communication. Such an approach is especially relevant to understanding the role of nostalgia and cultural symbolism in informal educational discourse within digital environments.

The selection of the "Kraton Jogja" YouTube channel, which features the traditional Javanese lullaby "Lela Ledhung," provides a contextually rich site for analyzing how cultural authority interacts with user-generated educational communication (Supanggih *et al.*, 2017). As a representation of an authoritative cultural institution, the Kraton's channel becomes a catalyst for identity articulation and cultural learning through online dialogue. This aligns with SDG 4.7, which advocates for education that promotes cultural understanding and the appreciation of heritage.

Using purposive sampling, 847 YouTube comments were selected for their relevance to nostalgic expression and cultural significance. These comments served as units of analysis, providing insight into how informal learning about Javanese culture occurs within this digital setting (Putri, 2023). The study focused on comments that directly referenced "Lela Ledhung," its cultural context, or expressed nostalgia.

The analytical procedure followed a multi-method, layered framework:

- (i) Thematic Content Analysis was employed to detect and categorize recurrent topics within the comment data. This process mapped the "content" of the emergent informal curriculum by identifying both manifest and latent communicative patterns.
- (ii) Barthesian Semiotic Analysis was then used to deconstruct the symbolic and ideological meanings within selected comments. This involved identifying layers of denotation, connotation, and myth to uncover deeper cultural messages embedded in nostalgic discourse (Pertiwi *et al.*, 2023).
- (iii) Symbolic Interactionist Analysis illuminated how individuals collaboratively constructed meaning and negotiated identity through shared symbols and reflective interaction, which is often referred to as the "looking-glass self".

The combination of these methods reflects a triangulated approach, reinforcing the validity and trustworthiness of findings (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). This approach is particularly valuable in contexts where informal, non-institutional learning is central, demonstrating how individuals use shared cultural references and emotional memory to construct an unofficial educational discourse, consistent with the goals of lifelong learning in SDG 4.

Inclusion Criteria are in the following: (i) Comments written in either English or Indonesian (translated to English for analysis, with originals retained) and (ii) Comments must directly reference the “Lela Ledhung” performance or cultural context, or express discernible nostalgia. Exclusion criteria are in the following: (i) Spam or advertising content; (ii) Irrelevant comments unrelated to the video or cultural theme; and (iii) Emoji-only or non-textual comments unless supported by interpretable text.

The entire research process (from data gathering to interpretation) was meticulously documented for transparency and replicability. The purposive sampling strategy allowed for both depth and breadth in the analysis of cultural themes and emotional expressions. The integration of three theoretical lenses enabled a robust, triangulated interpretation of how nostalgia functions as an informal educational communication mechanism. This methodology illustrates how user-generated content in digital cultural spaces contributes to the development of cultural identity and informal learning, directly supporting the educational aims outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study analyzed 847 user comments from the YouTube video “Lela Ledhung” uploaded by the Kraton Jogja channel, aiming to investigate how nostalgic expressions function as informal pedagogical tools in transmitting Javanese cultural values. The findings reveal that YouTube comment sections serve as powerful environments for informal learning, particularly within non-Western cultural contexts. These sections function as what literature (Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023) calls “repositories of collective memory,” where cultural narratives are emotionally recalled, collaboratively reshaped, and implicitly taught. In such digital spaces—what have been described as “digital third places” (Ong’ong’a, 2021)—nostalgia becomes an educational force, drawing users into a dialogic space where values, memories, and identities are negotiated. These communicative practices align with the objectives of SDG 4, especially SDG 4.7, which promotes quality education that respects cultural diversity and encourages the transmission of local knowledge systems.

Throughout the dataset, nostalgia did not merely appear as sentimentality or personal memory but emerged as a recurring structure of feeling through which users invoked shared histories and cultural identity. Many comments centered on maternal figures, childhood bedtime rituals, and the comforting soundscape of Javanese lullabies. These personal narratives function as informal lessons that transmit social roles, aesthetic values, and intergenerational ties. One commenter wrote, “This song takes me back to my childhood in the village. My simbah putri (grandmother) used to sing this to lull me to sleep. So peaceful, miss those simple times.” Such expressions do not exist in isolation—they are received, validated, and often echoed by others, thereby creating a peer-based pedagogical cycle that resonates with the principles of lifelong and inclusive education advocated in SDG 4.3.

The pedagogical dimension of these expressions can be interpreted through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism. Identities are not innate but are performed and reinforced through social interaction and shared symbols. In this context, the YouTube comment thread becomes a space for performing cultural selves (filial children, village dwellers, or proud Javanese

inheritors of tradition) using symbols such as “ibu,” “desa,” “guyub,” or “Lela Ledhung” itself. These symbols evoke denotative elements (e.g., the literal act of singing a lullaby) but also carry connotative and mythic meanings that reinforce broader cultural ideals. For instance, as detailed in Table 1, the myth of the “Nurturing Mother” and the ideal of the “Idyllic Village” are repeatedly referenced, suggesting that these memories function as moral and cultural templates for how Javanese society should be remembered and reproduced.

Thematic analysis of the comments revealed three dominant strands: personal reminiscence, collective nostalgia, and sensory-affective responses. These themes were not isolated but intersected in ways that produced informal educational outcomes. For example, personal stories often transitioned into reflections on the collective loss of cultural values. One user wrote, “Listening to this makes me miss the village atmosphere of the past, people were still guyub, life was simple but peaceful. Different from now.” Here, the user performs a personal memory while simultaneously inviting critique of modernity and cultural erosion. Because such comments engage others and foster mutual reflection, they transform memory into cultural pedagogy. These discourses educate readers about traditional Javanese ideals, rural aesthetics, and the loss of communal harmony due to modernization, making them not only expressive but didactic.

These expressions also act as commentary on contemporary society. Digital comment sections often function as participatory spaces for user-based journalism and reflection (Reimer *et al.*, 2023). In the context of cultural heritage, this reflection is pedagogical. Commenters assume the role of cultural interpreters, educators, and custodians. Through nostalgic discourse, they instruct others—explicitly or implicitly—on the value of tradition, the importance of music as memory, and the role of cultural institutions in safeguarding identity. One such comment stated, “Luar biasa Kraton Jogja, selalu menjaga marwah budaya Jawa. Lela Ledhung ini bukan sekedar lagu, tapi warisan adiluhung.” (Extraordinary Kraton Jogja, always upholding the dignity of Javanese culture. This Lela Ledhung is not just a song, but a noble heritage.) This illustrates how nostalgia is tied to authority and authenticity, linking personal emotion to institutional legitimacy. The Kraton, as both a historical and digital presence, enhances the comment section’s educational tone by providing a culturally authoritative anchor for user interaction (Sekarningrum *et al.*, 2024).

The Kraton Jogja’s presence is especially relevant because it reinforces the importance of institutional-cultural dialogue in educational communication. By sharing traditional music on a global platform like YouTube, the Kraton acts as a facilitator of informal, digital pedagogy. Media institutions can function as cultural educators when they enable user engagement with local traditions (Pramana & Priastuty, 2023). In this case, the Kraton’s video initiates an educational process that is then expanded and personalized by users. This reflects the shift from institution-to-audience communication to institution-enabled peer-to-peer learning, a dynamic well-aligned with 21st-century learning models and digital citizenship frameworks. Because user interaction is dialogic and self-motivated, the learning is both inclusive and emotionally resonant.

This emotionally rich interaction also speaks to the embodied nature of cultural learning. Nostalgia has a pedagogical effect because it strengthens emotional connection and memory recall (Baqi, 2025). In the analyzed data, comments referring to the aesthetics of the music—its softness, refinement (*alus*), and calming effect—function as embodied responses that affirm Javanese aesthetic codes. Descriptions such as “trenyuh,” “damai,” or “adem” signal affective learning that is inseparable from cultural understanding. This is especially important in non-Western pedagogical traditions, where emotional tone, rhythm, and oral performance are integral to education (Mujaki *et al.*, 2024). By foregrounding such embodied experiences,

these commentaries challenge the cognitive bias of formal education and underscore the value of aesthetic-emotional learning modes—another key facet of SDG 4’s call for inclusive and context-sensitive education.

The multi-method analysis employed in this study—combining thematic content analysis, Barthesian semiotics, and Symbolic Interactionism—enabled a comprehensive interpretation of these dynamics. Table 1 illustrates how individual comments were analyzed through these three lenses. For example, the comment “Oh God, this reminds me of my late Mother...” was decoded as both a personal memory and a symbol of maternal love, loss, and care. Through Barthesian semiotics, this comment was shown to reinforce the myth of motherhood as an emotional sanctuary, while Symbolic Interactionism revealed how the commenter’s identity as a dutiful child was co-constructed through interaction with others. These layered analyses confirm that YouTube comment sections do not merely reflect memory; they generate educational meaning through participatory interpretation and symbolic reinforcement.

Moreover, these findings highlight the emergent nature of “cultural performance zones”, spaces where identity, value, and knowledge are enacted and reinterpreted through symbolic interaction. In such zones, meaning is not fixed but continually negotiated, and learning is not top-down but dialogic. These performances in the YouTube comments are pedagogical because they offer models of how to remember, feel, and respond to cultural artifacts. Because other users respond, like, or echo such expressions, the meaning becomes collective and embedded in a wider interpretive community.

In this light, the YouTube comment section functions as an “unofficial curriculum”, one that teaches without teaching, structures without imposing, and educates without certifying. The knowledge transmitted here includes Javanese cultural norms, intergenerational relationships, musical aesthetics, and social critique. These learnings are disseminated through emotion, memory, and symbolic references—components often marginalized in formal curricula but central to community-based and culturally responsive education. As such, this space offers a unique educational communication model that expands the boundaries of how and where learning can happen.

Additionally, these findings support the argument that social media platforms are fertile sites for cultural meaning construction (Li *et al.*, 2023). The present study extends that insight by showing how such meaning-making is not only cultural but also pedagogical. Because the comments are directed not just at the original video but at each other, they form a cooperative learning environment grounded in shared cultural context and emotional resonance. This reinforces other findings (Byun *et al.*, 2023) on how YouTube interactivity strengthens engagement and transforms passive viewing into dialogic participation.

In practical terms, this suggests that cultural institutions, educators, and digital content creators can leverage user interaction to foster informal education. For institutions like the Kraton Jogja, YouTube provides more than a broadcasting tool—it becomes a pedagogical interface that invites reflection, storytelling, and communal learning. For educators, these findings affirm the value of using user-generated content and affective media as authentic learning materials, particularly in courses on communication, heritage, or digital culture. This also invites policymakers and curriculum designers to recognize informal digital spaces as legitimate sites of learning that align with national and global education strategies.

In summary, the findings show that nostalgia, far from being a passive longing for the past, is an active pedagogical force within digital cultural communication. Because it facilitates identity performance, symbolic negotiation, and emotional connection, nostalgia in YouTube comments like those under “Lela Ledhung” enables informal, meaningful, and culturally embedded learning. These interactions reveal the potential of user-driven platforms to serve

as alternative classrooms, spaces where tradition is not only preserved but also taught, adapted, and re-imagined in emotionally resonant ways. Grounded in communication theory and framed by global education goals, this study contributes to the field of Educational Communication by showing that mediated nostalgia can function as both a symbolic resource and a pedagogical strategy in the digital age.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that YouTube comment sections, particularly those surrounding culturally significant content like the “Lela Ledhung” video on the Kraton Jogja channel, function as rich sites of informal educational communication. Through the integration of thematic content analysis, Barthesian semiotics, and Symbolic Interactionism, the research reveals that nostalgic user comments serve as emotionally resonant tools for transmitting Javanese cultural values, identities, and traditions. These expressions, far from being individual sentiments, emerge as shared pedagogical acts that contribute to a peer-driven, dynamic, and culturally grounded learning environment.

The findings underscore that mediated nostalgia is not only a memory mechanism but also a vehicle for informal pedagogy. Because it enhances emotional engagement, supports identity performance, and encourages collective meaning-making, nostalgia becomes a communicative force that facilitates learning outside traditional educational institutions. The presence of Kraton Jogja as a cultural authority amplifies the legitimacy and depth of these interactions, enabling the construction of what may be termed an “unofficial curriculum” of Javanese heritage. This curriculum unfolds in dialogic, user-centered ways, exemplifying how digital participation can function as a mode of lifelong and inclusive education.

In alignment with SDG 4 (Quality Education), particularly Target 4.7, the study illustrates how informal, culturally sensitive learning can be promoted through digital platforms that value emotional expression and communal knowledge-making. Furthermore, by drawing attention to the preservation of intangible heritage through interactive media, the study supports SDG 11.4, which calls for efforts to safeguard cultural heritage. The results also resonate with the broader objectives of Educational Communication by offering new insights into how peer-generated content, affective discourse, and symbolic interaction contribute to meaningful learning in everyday digital contexts.

While the study is limited by its focus on a single video and a specific cultural setting, it opens avenues for broader application. Future research could explore comparative studies across cultures or languages, examine how different age groups engage with nostalgia online, or analyze the ethical implications of using publicly posted digital content in educational contexts. Additionally, scholars and practitioners may examine how platform design, algorithmic visibility, and moderation policies affect the visibility and continuity of such informal learning dialogues.

Key recommendations arising from this research include encouraging cultural institutions to function as facilitators of digital pedagogy rather than merely content distributors, promoting reflective and critical engagement with nostalgic content in formal education settings, and integrating affective-cultural media into educational strategies. Educators and policymakers should consider the pedagogical potential of user-generated content and the value of emotional and symbolic discourse in achieving more inclusive and culturally sustaining education systems. Ultimately, this study affirms that cultural learning can thrive in non-institutional, emotionally charged, and symbolically rich digital spaces. Nostalgia, far from being regressive, emerges as a transformative resource for cultural education—one that

connects generations, strengthens identity, and enriches the landscape of informal learning in the digital age.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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