DIGITALIZING JAVANESE CULTURE: A MULTIMODAL APPROACH TO PRESERVING LOCAL LANGUAGE AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

The rapid development of digital media offers new opportunities for preserving and revitalizing local languages and cultural heritage, while also creating challenges concerning cultural authenticity, representation, and intergenerational transmission. Javanese language and cultural knowledge face increasing pressure from globalization and the growing dominance of Indonesian and global languages, particularly among younger generations. Recent studies demonstrate the potential of digital platforms, social media, and digital storytelling to support Javanese language and cultural preservation. However, limited attention has been given to how linguistic, visual, auditory, and other semiotic resources collectively construct and transmit Javanese indigenous knowledge in digital spaces. This study aims to investigate how Javanese cultural heritage is represented and preserved through multimodal digital media. Employing a qualitative multimodal approach, the study analyses selected digital artifacts containing Javanese language, cultural narratives, traditional practices, visual symbols, music, and other semiotic resources. Data are examined using multimodal and social-semiotic analysis, complemented by analysis of audience comments posted in response to selected digital artifacts. The study focuses on how different modes interact to construct cultural identity, communicate local wisdom, and facilitate intergenerational transmission. It also examines the opportunities and challenges of digitalization in maintaining linguistic and cultural authenticity. The study is expected to contribute a community-oriented multimodal framework for Javanese cultural heritage preservation, demonstrating how digital media can transform cultural preservation from passive documentation into active participation, cultural learning, and knowledge transmission. The findings may support more inclusive and sustainable strategies for revitalizing Javanese language and indigenous knowledge in contemporary digital environments.

Keywords: Javanese language; cultural heritage; multimodality; cultural preservation; digital media

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for communication but a repository of a community's worldview, ancestral knowledge, and cultural identity. Among the many local languages spoken across Indonesia's archipelago, Javanese stands as one of the most widely used, yet it faces mounting pressure from the accelerating forces of globalization and the growing dominance of Indonesian as the national lingua franca, alongside the pervasive influence of global languages such as English. This pressure is particularly acute among younger generations, who increasingly favor Indonesian and global languages in everyday interaction, education, and digital communication, leaving Javanese language use along with the cultural narratives confined to older generations and formal ceremonial contexts.

At the same time, the rapid expansion of digital media has opened new possibilities for language and cultural preservation. Social media platforms and other online spaces have enabled communities to document, share, and reinterpret cultural heritage in ways that were previously unavailable through print or broadcast media alone. Recent studies have begun to demonstrate the potential of these digital platforms to support the revitalization of Javanese language and cultural expression, showing social media content can extend the reach of local cultural narratives to broader and younger audiences (Muhsyanur et al., 2025; Wijayanti & Hapsari, 2026). More broadly, digital technologies have been shown to open informal, community-driven spaces in which endangered and marginalized languages can be used, circulated, and normalized among younger speakers (Meighan, 2021). Digitalization, in this sense, offers not only a means of documentation but also a space for reimagining how cultural heritage is produced, circulated, and experienced.

However, this shift toward digital media is not without its complications. The move from face-to-face, embodied transmission of cultural knowledge to mediated, screen-based representation raises pressing questions about cultural authenticity, the fidelity of representation, and the risk of decontextualizing or oversimplifying indigenous knowledge for digital consumption. Furthermore, existing research on Javanese digital heritage has tended to focus on isolated aspects of this phenomenon examining, for instance, language use on social media or the narrative content of digital storytelling (Muhsyanur et al., 2025) without adequately accounting for how these efforts function multimodally. Digital artifacts rarely rely on language alone; they combine written and spoken language with visual imagery, music, gesture, and other semiotic resources that work together to construct meaning, functioning as assemblages of multiple semiotic repertoires rather than as single-mode texts (Simungala et al., 2025). Limited attention has been given to how these linguistic, visual, auditory, and other semiotic resources collectively construct and transmit Javanese cultural narratives and indigenous knowledge within digital spaces, and how this multimodal interplay shapes both cultural authenticity and intergenerational transmission.

This gap is significant because understanding how meaning is multimodally constructed rather than simply documenting that cultural content exists online is essential

for developing preservation strategies that are both culturally faithful and genuinely engaging for younger audiences. Without such understanding, digitalization efforts risk becoming acts of passive documentation rather than vehicles for active cultural participation and sustained knowledge transmission.

In response to this gap, the present study investigates how Javanese cultural heritage is represented and preserved through multimodal digital media. Specifically, it asks:

1. How is Javanese cultural heritage including language, narratives, traditional practices, and visual and auditory symbols represented across selected digital artifacts?
2. How do different semiotic modes interact to construct cultural identity and communicate local wisdom in these digital spaces?
3. How do audiences perceive content promoting local language in their posting in the comments they leave in response to it?
4. In what ways does multimodal digital media facilitate Javanese indigenous knowledge?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Endangerment and Revitalization Theory

Language endangerment has become a central concern in sociolinguistics as globalization accelerates the shift toward dominant national and international languages. Scholars have long argued that language loss entails more than the disappearance of linguistic forms; it represents the erosion of accumulated cultural knowledge, worldview, and ways of relating to the environment that are encoded in language-specific structures and expressions. Revitalization theory has correspondingly evolved from early documentation-focused approaches centered on archiving endangered languages before they disappear toward more dynamic, community-driven models that emphasize intergenerational transmission, domain expansion, and the creation of new spaces for language use. Within this trajectory, digital media has increasingly been recognized as a potential domain for revitalization, offering informal, low-stakes contexts in which endangered or marginalized languages can be used, circulated, and normalized among younger speakers (Fishman, 1991; UNESCO, 2003).

Javanese Language and Cultural Heritage: Prior Scholarship

As one of the largest local languages in Indonesia by number of speakers, Javanese occupies a distinctive position: it is not endangered in the same acute sense as many minority languages worldwide, yet it faces a steady erosion of intergenerational transmission, particularly in urban areas and among younger, educated populations who increasingly default to Indonesian in daily life. Prior scholarship on Javanese has examined its sociolinguistic complexity including its elaborate speech-level system (ngoko, madya, krama) as well as its role as a vehicle for transmitting local philosophy, ethics, and traditional knowledge through oral literature, performance arts such as wayang and gamelan, and ritual practice (Poedjosoedarmo, 1968; Errington, 1998). However, much of this literature predates the widespread adoption of social media and digital storytelling platforms, leaving open questions about how these traditional transmission channels are being reconfigured in digital contexts.

Digital Media, Storytelling, and Heritage Preservation

A growing body of research has explored the role of digital platforms in cultural and linguistic preservation more broadly, documenting how social media, mobile applications, and digital storytelling formats can extend the reach and appeal of endangered or marginalized languages beyond traditional community boundaries. Studies specific to the Indonesian context have begun to show similar patterns for Javanese, pointing to the emergence of content creators who use platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to produce Javanese-language content ranging from folklore retellings to contemporary commentary delivered in regional speech styles (Smith-Hefner, 2009; Dewi & Goebel, 2023; Dewi, 2024; Hinton & Putra, 2020). These studies suggest considerable promise for digital media as a revitalization tool, yet they have tended to treat language, narrative content, and visual or audio elements as separate objects of analysis rather than examining how these elements function together as an integrated system of meaning-making a gap this study addresses directly.

Indigenous and Local Knowledge Transmission: Intergenerational Dimensions

Indigenous knowledge encompassing traditional ecological knowledge, ethical philosophy, ritual practice, and craft is conventionally transmitted through embodied, face-to-face interaction: oral storytelling, apprenticeship, participation in ceremony, and

observation within community settings. Scholars of intergenerational knowledge transmission have emphasized the relational and experiential nature of this process, raising questions about whether and how such transmission can be replicated or approximated in mediated, screen-based environments (Rogoff, 1990). This tension between the traditionally embodied nature of cultural transmission and the disembodied, asynchronous nature of digital media forms a key conceptual thread this study seeks to explore through its multimodal lens.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in multimodal and social-semiotic analysis. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's aim to understand how meaning is constructed across multiple semiotic resources and how audiences interpret and respond to digitalized Javanese cultural content questions that require rich, interpretive engagement with both textual artifacts and audience discourse rather than measurement or generalization across a large sample. The design combines two complementary strands of data: (1) multimodal social-semiotic analysis of digital cultural artifacts, and (2) analysis of audience comments posted in response to these artifacts. This combination allows the study to triangulate textual observations about how Javanese heritage is represented with audience accounts of how these representations are received and interpreted.

The primary corpus consists of purposively selected digital artifacts featuring Javanese language, cultural narratives, traditional practices, and associated visual and auditory symbols. Data were drawn from content creators who actively promote Javanese language and culture across social media platforms, including YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Selected creators include Bayu Skak, Arif Wisdom, Dika BJ (Mama Lela the Series), Bunga Salsabila, Awing Aljamal, and Denny Caknan & Ndarboy Genk. Artifact types include short-form videos, digital storytelling content, and animated folklore adaptations.

1. Creators and their content were selected based on the following criteria:
2. Content explicitly framed as Javanese cultural, linguistic, or heritage-related material

3. Content produced within 1-5 years ago.

A range of content types and creator profiles (e.g., comedic vlogging, scripted series, music, folklore-based storytelling) to capture diversity in how Javanese heritage is digitally represented. Selected digital artifacts were systematically collected and archived via screen recording or platform download tools along with associated metadata creator, platform, publication date, and engagement metrics (views, likes, comment count) to support both analysis and contextual interpretation.

Audience comments posted in response to each selected artifact were also collected as a secondary data source, capturing audience reception and interpretation of the represented cultural content. Comments purposively selected and manually extracted for relevance to language, cultural identity, or authenticity themes.

Multimodal and social-semiotic analysis of artifacts proceeded by identifying and coding the semiotic resources present in each artifact linguistic choices (including speech level/register), visual composition, music and sound, on-screen text, and editing/pacing and examining how these modes interact to construct meaning. This followed Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar categories as an analytical framework for interpreting representational, interactive, and compositional meaning across modes.

Audience comment analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with comments coded for recurring themes such as perceived authenticity, emotional or nostalgic response, linguistic engagement (e.g., commenters replying in Javanese), and expressions of cultural pride or critique. Coding categories were developed deductively informed by the study's theoretical framework.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, this study draws on credibility that was supported through investigator triangulation during the coding of both artifacts and comments where more than one coder is involved, initial coding categories were discussed and cross-checked to reduce individual interpretive bias, with disagreements resolved through discussion and refinement of the coding scheme. Credibility was further supported by triangulating the two data strands themselves: patterns identified in the multimodal analysis of artifacts were cross-checked against audience comment themes to see whether audience interpretation aligned with, complicated, or contested the intended representation.

Ethical Considerations of this study relies on publicly available digital content and publicly posted comments, ethical handling centers on responsible use of public data. Specific measures include anonymization and public content, not private data. Only content and comments publicly accessible on the respective platforms (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok) at the time of data collection were included; no private messages, restricted content, or content requiring special access were used.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Multimodal Representation of Javanese Cultural Heritage Across Selected Artifacts

Across the four artifacts analyzed, Javanese cultural heritage is represented through markedly different configurations of linguistic, visual, and auditory resources, suggesting that "Javanese digital content" is not a single genre but a cluster of distinct representational strategies.

Linguistically, the artifacts reveal at least three separate functions that Javanese-language variation perform, which prior single-mode studies would likely treat as a single phenomenon of language use. For example, in data AA-01, dialectal variation (standard Javanese pronouns kowe versus the Ngapak-dialect koen/rika) is foregrounded explicitly as pedagogical content the creator names and teaches the distinction directly.

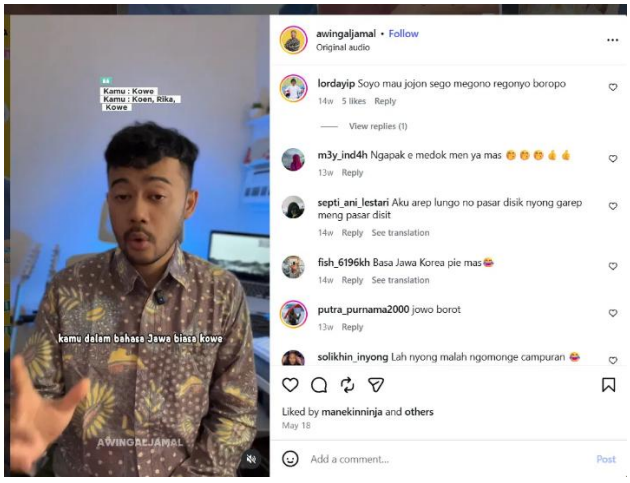


Figure 4.1 Awing Jamal speak Javanese Banyumas-Ngapak accent (AA-01)

In AA-02, by contrast, linguistic variation is not dialectal but performative: Javanese is spoken through a stylized, exaggerated foreign (mock-Thai) accent purely for comedic effect, with no pedagogical or documentary intent.

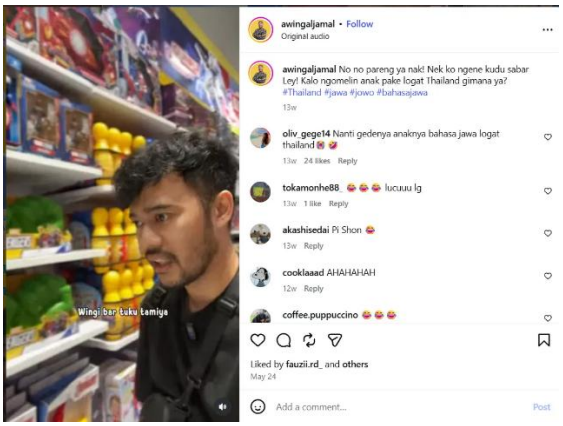


Figure 4.2 Awing Jamal speak Javanese using Thai accent (AA-02)

In BS-01, a third function appears: Madurese-accented Javanese is used for ethnic characterization within a narrative, distinguishing Madurese migrant characters from Suroboyoan-speaking Surabayan characters.

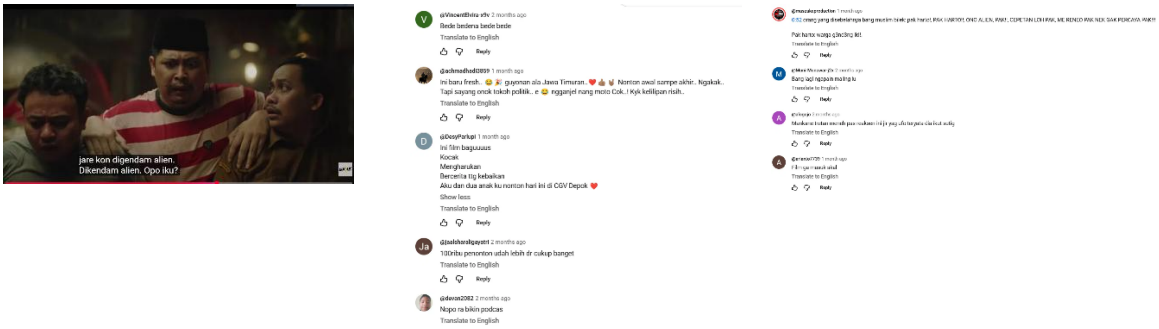


Figure 4.3 Short film created by Bayu Skak Studio entitled FOUFO (BS-01)

In NG-01, Javanese functions as song lyric, paired with built-in Indonesian subtitle translation a bilingual accessibility strategy absent from the other three artifacts. Taken together, these four cases indicate that linguistic variation in Javanese digital content is doing at least four distinct kinds of representational work pedagogical, comedic-performative, characteristic, and lyrical-accessible.



Figure 4.4 Music Video of a song entitled Bakul Sayur by Ndarboy Genk feat. Arlinda Putri (NG-01)

Visually, traditional cultural markers appear unevenly and are often subordinated to genre convention rather than foregrounded as heritage content per se. AA-01's batik shirt functions as understated, everyday presenter attire; BS-01's peci and working-class costuming index contemporary regional/ethnic identity rather than heritage in a historical sense; NG-01 stages the most conventionally traditional visual coding (curler-haired, housedress-clad market women bargaining over produce) but embeds it within a comedic-romantic music video narrative rather than a documentary or educational frame. Only AA-01 approaches anything resembling direct heritage instruction; the remaining three artifacts represent Javanese identity obliquely, through genre (comedy, film, music video) rather than explicit cultural framing.

Auditorily, the corpus subset shows a similar split between documentary/pedagogical intent (AA-01's plain spoken address) and entertainment-driven hybridization (NG-01's campursari-pop instrumentation, BS-01's film scoring). This is consistent with and extends empirically the "hybridization" pattern.

Mode Interaction and Meaning-Making

The clearest evidence of cross-modal interaction in this subset comes from comparing AA-01 and AA-02 two artifacts from the same creator. In AA-01, pedagogical intent is carried consistently across modes: direct-address gaze, plain speech, explanatory captions, and understated traditional dress cohere into what might be called an instructional bundle. In AA-02, the same creator abandons this bundle entirely: candid (non-studio) setting, unaccented written caption, but an exaggerated performed accent in speech producing a cross-modal divergence where the written/visual channel signals ordinary Javanese content while the auditory channel alone carries the comedic marking.

This divergence is analytically significant: it demonstrates that authenticity or pedagogical seriousness in this corpus is not a property of an artifact as a whole but can be concentrated in a single mode while other modes remain neutral a finding that complicates any coding approach treating artifacts as uniformly authentic or comedic.

BS-01 offers a related but distinct pattern: rather than divergence within a single artifact, it shows mode stacking for characterization accent, costume, and narrative role (migrant scrap-collector) are bundled consistently onto specific characters to construct ethnic identity within the story. This raises a representational question addressed further in Section 5.7 and the Discussion: bundling modes for comedic ethnic characterization carries different stakes than bundling modes for cultural pedagogy (AA-01), even though both are technically "multimodal construction of Javanese-related identity."

Audience Perception of Content Promoting Local Language

Addressing RQ3, four patterns recur in how audiences perceive and respond, in their own posted comments, to content promoting Javanese language — though the distribution of these patterns differs sharply by artifact, and by whether an artifact foregrounds language itself as its subject:

Dialect/regional self-identification (prominent in AA-01 only): commenters explicitly name and position their own dialect relative to the speaker's ("Ngapak e medok," "jowo borot," "ngomonge campuran"), and one commenter responds in Javanese, enacting the very language practice the video teaches.

Pure entertainment response (dominant in AA-02): comment activity is almost entirely laughter reactions and short exclamations, with no dialect, authenticity, or learning-related commentary present in this sample.

Genre-trope recognition and critique (present in BS-01 and NG-01): audiences in both artifacts explicitly name the narrative conventions being used — BS-01 commenters critique the inclusion of a political figure as "jarring" (nganjel) against an otherwise praised comedic premise; NG-01 commenters explicitly identify the "undercover rich person" storyline as a "dracin" (drama-genre) trope, with one commenter contesting its real-world plausibility. This suggests audiences are not simply reacting to cultural authenticity but also to narrative authenticity whether a storyline convention feels earned or clichéd a distinct evaluative axis from the language-focused authenticity discourse.

Occupational/identity mobilization (unique to NG-01, but the strongest evidence of participatory transmission in the dataset): two commenters describe real-world vegetable and beverage vendors adopting the song's theme as a badge of shared occupational identity, including one report of a vendor community coining a self-referential acronym inspired by the song. This is the only instance across the four artifacts of audience response extending beyond commentary into apparent real-world identity practice.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that audiences do not perceive local-language-promoting content uniformly: perception is contingent on genre and on whether language itself is the explicit subject of a post. Audiences respond to explicit language instruction with linguistic participation and dialect self-positioning, to comedic or narrative content with entertainment appreciation and genre-literate critique, and, in at least one case, extend their engagement into everyday occupational identity.

Points of Alignment and Tension Between Representation and Reception

Where an artifact's multimodal design is coherent and singularly purposed (AA-01's instructional bundle), audience response aligns closely with apparent creator intent comments engage substantively with the dialect content being taught. Where multimodal design is organized around comedy or genre convention (AA-02, BS-01, NG-01), audience engagement shifts toward entertainment appreciation and, notably, toward evaluating the artifice itself (trope-naming in BS-01 and NG-01) rather than engaging with any underlying cultural-pedagogical content. This suggests a tension worth stating plainly: entertainment-oriented framing, even when it deploys recognizably Javanese linguistic or cultural material, appears to redirect audience attention toward genre and craft evaluation rather than toward the cultural content per se, a more specific and more cautious claim than a simple assumption that comedic framing merely dilutes cultural engagement. In this subset, it does not so much dilute as redirect engagement to a different evaluative register.

Facilitation of Javanese Indigenous Knowledge

Addressing RQ4, multimodal digital media in this subset facilitates Javanese indigenous knowledge through at least two distinguishable mechanisms. The first is direct linguistic uptake: AA-01 shows a commenter actively producing a Javanese-language reply, prompted by the video's explicit dialect instruction a small but concrete instance of

digital media facilitating knowledge of the language itself. The second, evident in NG-01, is a related but distinct mechanism: not transmission of knowledge across generations, but mobilization of identity within a present-day occupational community, prompted by cultural media. Both are relevant to RQ4 but should not be conflated: one is linguistic/knowledge uptake, the other is effective/identity reinforcement among people who likely already possessed the relevant knowledge. Across this subset, facilitation is real but uneven and emergent rather than systematic, concentrated in artifacts that either teach language directly or that audiences adopt for their own identity purposes.

Discussion

Interpreting Multimodal Strategies Against the Theoretical Framework

These four artifacts substantiate the study's core multimodal premise while also refining it. Meaning is indeed constructed relationally across modes rather than by language alone most clearly demonstrated by AA-01/AA-02's cross-modal divergence, where identical creator, platform, and general subject matter (Javanese language) produced entirely different audience uptake depending on how modes were bundled or decoupled. This offers more precise support for social semiotics' claim that semiotic choices are never neutral: here, the same topic (Javanese speech) was rendered pedagogically legible or purely comedic almost entirely through auditory performance choices layered onto otherwise similar visual/textual framing.

At the same time, the data complicates the framework's original emphasis on a single "authenticity bundle" (hypothesized in the earlier template as krama speech + traditional dress + gamelan + slow pacing). None of the four real artifacts actually deploy that specific bundle. Instead, each constructs a different coherence pattern suited to its genre dialect-pedagogy coherence (AA-01), comedic-performance coherence (AA-02), ethnic-characterization coherence (BS-01), romantic-narrative-with-bilingual-lyric coherence (NG-01). This suggests the theoretical construct should be generalized: rather than one fixed authenticity bundle, the relevant analytical unit is genre-specific multimodal coherence, where each genre has its own internally consistent mode-configuration, and audience response tracks the coherence or incoherence of that configuration rather than adherence to a single traditional-authenticity template.

From Passive Documentation to Active Participatory Preservation

The NG-01 vendor-identification comments provide the strongest evidence in this dataset for the study's participatory-preservation argument. This is a concrete, if modest, instance of the "artifact-plus-reception assemblage" functioning as more than documentation: a commercial, entertainment-oriented music video prompted a real occupational community to adopt shared language around their own identity, echoing the broader observation that digital spaces can normalize and re-embed marginalized-language use in everyday, informal domains of community life rather than only in formal preservation efforts (Meighan, 2021). Notably, this occurred in the artifact least framed as cultural preservation (a sponsored pop song), not in the most overtly pedagogical one (AA-01) suggesting that participatory uptake may not correlate straightforwardly with a creator's explicit preservationist intent, and that affective/entertainment content can generate real-world identity engagement through channels a purely documentary approach would not reach.

Balancing Authenticity and Innovation and Naming Representational Risk

The accessibility-versus-fidelity tension anticipated in the original framework is visible here, but the data also surface a tension the framework had not fully specified: the difference between linguistic innovation for accessibility (NG-01's bilingual subtitles; a low-risk, purely additive strategy) and comedic ethnic performance (AA-02's accent parody; BS-01's ethnic characterization), which carries a different kind of risk. AA-02's mock-Thai accent is self-contained parody with no real ethnic group targeted as an in-group/out-group distinction within the Javanese-speaking audience itself, and audience response registered no discomfort. BS-01's Madurese-accented characterization is a different case: it maps accent onto a real, specific regional-ethnic minority within Indonesia in a narrative built around a stereotyped occupation (scrap-collecting), and although audience comments in this sample did not directly contest this framing, the adjacent discomfort registered about the film's political cameo suggests audiences are willing to voice representational objections when something crosses a threshold for them meaning the absence of explicit backlash in this sample should not be read as absence of risk. This aligns with findings that regional and dialectal language deployment on Indonesian social media functions simultaneously as a resource for authenticating creators to local audiences and as a reputational risk that can alienate viewers or invite

unwanted judgment (Muhsyanur et al., 2025). A community-oriented multimodal framework for Javanese heritage preservation should distinguish clearly between innovation that broadens access to Javanese-ness (bilingual subtitling, dialect teaching) and comedic strategies that construct in-group/out-group distinctions among Javanese and neighboring regional identities, since these carry different ethical and representational weight even when both are technically "multimodal creativity."

CONCLUSION

These findings should be read as a pilot analysis of four artifacts, not a representative account of Javanese digital heritage content generally. Genre diversity across only four artifacts (one dialect lesson, one comedy skit, one film, one music video) cannot support claims about relative frequency of representational strategies across the wider corpus, and the reception patterns identified particularly NG-01's occupational-identity mobilization may not generalize even to other artifacts by the same creators. These patterns are nonetheless consistent with, and extend, prior sociolinguistic accounts of Javanese youth digital and media practice including evidence of comedic, identity-driven repurposing of Javanese in online spaces (Dewi, 2024) and of Javanese being discursively revalued rather than simply lost in youth-oriented media (Dewi & Goebel, 2023; Smith-Hefner, 2009) as well as broader findings on digital media's role in indigenous and local-language revitalization elsewhere in Indonesia (Hinton & Putra, 2020). They are also consistent with recent platform-specific evidence that Javanese-language TikTok content is used deliberately by creators as a cultural-preservation strategy that attracts audience attention through everyday content, humor, and speech-level variation (Wijayanti & Hapsari, 2026), and with the broader claim that social media discourse operates as an assemblage of multiple semiotic repertoires rather than a single linguistic channel (Simungala et al., 2025).

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