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ANALYSIS OF VISUAL ELEMENTS OF YOUTUBE VIDEOS AS A MEDIUM FOR TEACHING CHARACTER VALUES IN CHILDREN

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Abstract: Digital Natives represent the new generation of children exposed early to digital technologies and growing alongside the rapid advancements of the 21st century. Platforms such as YouTube have become digital environments designed for entertainment, play, and learning, providing various visual stimuli characters and gestures, colors and shapes, and narrative backgrounds to construct cohesive storytelling. However, much of the available content has not produced a positive impact due to the lack of purposeful meaning. Premature creative approaches may lead to declining attention spans, negative ethics, and weakened cognitive development in young viewers. This research aims to analyze visual elements and storytelling in YouTube content targeted at children as a medium to implement moral ethics, support cognitive thinking, and help maintain attention spans. A qualitative descriptive method is utilized, supported by Roland Barthes' Semiotics theory. Primary data were obtained through direct interviews with parents and children, complemented by secondary data from observation and documentation. The results show that simple, communicative visual elements and supportive narration can effectively convey emotion, stimulate empathy, and encourage values such as honesty and accountability. However, overly aggressive visual effects and contrasting colours tend to stimulate consumptive tendencies. These findings highlight the importance of communicative design in creating digital content that not only captures interest but also enhances cognitive capacity and supports positive character formation among elementary-aged children in the digital era.

Keywords: visual elements; YouTube; digital gaming; character; elementary school

Introduction

Students in elementary school are in a vital stage of development that shapes their cognitive abilities and emotional maturity. Childhood experiences, both direct and mediated play a central role in the formation of logical thinking, ethical reasoning, and social behavior. Children between the ages of 7 and 12 are generally in the concrete operational stage of cognitive development (Mubarokah et al., 2022), during which they begin to think logically, understand sequences, and de-

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velop stable character traits. Additionally, it is within this stage that children form individual personalities. Technological advancements and easy access to the digital realm via mobile phones are creating new environments where children learn, communicate, and develop their understanding of the world (Nastiti et al., 2024). The adaptation to a new environment may enhance cognitive capacity and emotional growth, or it may even deter one's cognitive capacity, attention span, and emotional maturity, in which the resulting growth is degenerate (Choi & Kim, 2024).

Children's activities contribute to their learning and understanding of the world. This method of observation and re-inforced learning leads them to develop long-term patterns of thought, behavior, and morality. However, the execution of digitalization into a child's life has made the developmental process more complicated. For example, a great deal of a child's daily routine may now be taken time spent on digital platforms, and as a result, many children are exposed to unregulated consumption of digital content which risk. Research has shown that excessive exposure to screen time and screen-based media can have a detrimental effect on the child's ability to develop language skills, the ability to solve problems, and to reason within a spatial and temporal context (Denisova et al., 2021).

One prominent phenomenon among elementary-aged children is the habitual use of social media platforms, particularly YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram for entertainment. These platforms attract a young audience with their multimodal combinations of visuals, sounds, and narrative structures (Diyorova, 2025). Research has demonstrated that using multimodal digital stories has increased student/family engagement, positively impacted students' retention of memo-

ries, and aided in promoting reflection, empathy, and creativity (Gürsoy, 2021; Wu & Chen, 2020).

Although the use of digital media can have both positive effects on knowledge acquisition, if used excessively and unmonitored, this may lead to a dependency and result in creating a shallow processing of information, decreasing span of attention, and decreasing ability to critically think (Wang, 2024).

To address the above issues, this research investigates the extent to which children's YouTube gaming video contains visual components and how they may act as a medium for developing characters of children. This study will explore the multimodal aspects (e.g., visuals, audio, symbols) and narrative structure to determine how they influence children's character development through interactions with game-based digital media.

The novelty of this study lies in the multimodal analysis that combines Barthes' semiotic study with observations of children's behavior in the context of YouTube gaming videos. This research will also identify the social and moral messages contained within these forms of digital media and evaluate the potential of these forms of media to positively influence children's emotional intelligence, attitudes, and values through contemporary forms of digital education.

With data that was collected, the aim of this research was to analyze the visual elements (character design, color, symbols/icons, and narrative structure) in YouTube videos with the theme of children's games to determine the extent to which these elements can function as a medium for forming character values in elementary school-aged children (7–12 years). Unlike previous studies that fo-

cus only on screen-time impact or general digital literacy, this research provides a visual-semiotic mapping specific to You-Tube gaming videos targeted at children.

Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative descriptive study design to investigate how children experience the use of visuals in storytelling via YouTube as an entertainment medium. The qualitative method is ideal for obtaining detailed insight into children's interpretations of their surroundings along with how they view themselves and the environment based on their experiences (Khoa et al., 2023). By creating specific observations and using an interpretive framework created for this study, the researcher identified how children interpret meaning created through visual storytelling, the symbolic interpretation of visual representations (symbols) by children, and how they experience the visual arts through its aspects one of it is fluidity, textures, colour, etc. (Risna Sari et al., 2025).

The foundation of this study is based on a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, where the construction of meaning takes place via social experience rather than through an objective process of discovery. This paradigm is important because it provides a way to examine how young children who actively consume multimodal digital media interpret their observations into character values, develop their personal identities, and examine characters and stories within contemporary media (Fodouop Kouam, 2024). The research therefore aims to describe how students internalize values and analyze visual cues within their cultural and developmental contexts.

Six children aged 7–12 and their par-

ents participated through purposive sampling. Data collection consisted of:

• observations during viewing sessions,

• semi-structured interviews via Zoom, and

• visual content analysis of the selected YouTube episode.

Observation conducted while children watched a full-length episode prototype. To get a deeper evaluation of the audience's understanding of the intended meaning of the film, the authors examined the viewers' reactions, emotional expressions, and interpretive behaviors through an analysis of the video via an emotional assessment of the viewers as well as through interviews (Kaczynski et al., 2024). Interviews were conducted live via Zoom and documented.

The data collected were then analyzed thematically with the triangulation method by comparing (1) behavioral observation findings, (2) interview transcripts, and (3) visual content analysis to ensure thematic consistency. This approach was applied to identify patterns, themes, and symbolic meanings in the collected data. Coding, classification, and thematic analysis were conducted to trace recurring indicators of how visual and audio features in children's YouTube gaming content may support value transmission and early character formation.

The researcher interviewed parents in depth to collect data about how children consume media, and how media may change a child's their behavior and how much exposure they receive to digital media while they are at home (Taherdoost, 2021). The information that the parents provided along with that of the teachers gave a better understanding of how dig-

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ital media influences the development of children's character values.

A visual media analysis was performed on YouTube (Rose, 2022). through digitally developed cinematography systematically using visual composition, colour, shape, symbol, and lighting to analyze how each of these can illustrate narrative meaning and message (the moral). The episode was chosen as an educational resource explaining cognitive development as well as character building principles for elementary age learners (Quintela Do Carmo et al., 2024), therefore it also meets the digital storytelling concepts of accessibility for children.

Result

Through examining the visual characteristics present in the chosen YouTube children's video, this investigation focused predominantly on how the character design, choice of colours, use of symbols/icons and narrative composition influenced the acquisition of moral/cognitive values by elementary-aged viewers. These findings were then combined with interviews with both parents and children to provide insight into how young audiences interpret digital content. The results and discussion of this study can be found below.

Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, both the literal (denotative) and symbolic (connotative) meanings of the visual components of this episode are represented (Huang et al., 2023). This layered approach to understanding meaning is important for young viewers, as they are still developing symbolic thought and are very attuned to emotional signals.

1. Character and Characterization

The characters connect the story visually. During interviews, characters are shown to be viewed and assessed by viewers most, forming an emotional bond with these fictional characters. The bond created paves way for the viewer to simulate strong emotional responses to the main character's actions, expression, and conflict during the entire episode. Flora & Susanto (2025) stated that characters create a relationship with the audience through their behavior, which creates an emotional connection.

Figure 1. Main Characters Design
(Source: Personal research documentation, 2025)

Children interpreted the character's struggles and positive behaviors, including but not limited to their hard-working nature, as opportunities to empathize and develop morals. The following events presented forms a storyline which connects between the two main characters. This is analyzed visually but they also imitate the behaviors represented by the characters, thereby demonstrating their understanding of morality in internalized behaviors, such as sharing, apologizing, and helping others (Alfakihuddin et al., 2024).

2. Colour as Emotional Encoding

Children were influenced by the colours which may convey a certain emotion. Of each shade of colour presented in-video lies their emotional engagement

with it. Pastel colours and soft hues created feelings of comfort and approachability while a high degree of contrast between warm and cool tones represented emotional tension or calmness. Interviews indicated that children labelled various scenes "sad," "exciting" or "happy" purely based on shifts in colour. This suggests that children rely on visual-emotional cues before they are able to articulate their feelings through words.

This supports Barthes' view that connotation occurs through cultural associations and confirms previous research that has demonstrated how colours can help young viewers to understand emotions and capture attention.

3. Symbols and Icons as Cognitive Signposts

Children exhibited an inherent ability to decode basic metaphors (e.g., hearts, as indicators of emotion and/or health, bones as indicators of death, fireflies as indicators of luminance, and so on) which serve as a vessel to conclude meaning (e.g., positive or negative), in a visual storytelling sequence. The presence of metaphorical cues allowed children to maintain their attention, assist in identifying how to interpret an emotionally charged scene and to reinforce a moral message even without the addition of explicit verbal explanations. Sceneries constructed to convey emotions intended by the storyteller were quickly noticed by young viewers. These scenes utilized visual elements such as composition and color correction to convey a specific emotion during the sequence.

Figure 2. Main Characters Design
(Source: Personal research documentation, 2025)

These findings corroborate multimodal learning theory since they indicate children do not receive their understanding of meaning solely from spoken language. Non-verbal visual (e.g., pictorial) coding creates an enhanced level of engagement with children, increases their use of symbolic reasoning and supports the same process for younger participants (6-8 years of age).

4. Storytelling and Narrative Structure

An exploration of children's understanding of stories concluded that storytelling is central to their understanding. The structure of conflict followed by resolution helped children understand how to identify cause-and-effect relationships, make predictions and reflect on ethical outcomes. Children 8–12 years of age were able to describe the implicit meaning of stories around concepts like honesty, teamwork and responsibility, which

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indicates their capacity to abstract a moral understanding from the story.

Budi (2019) found that these narrative structures provide children with the opportunity to learn moral reasoning through real-life experiences as opposed to learning to be morally righteous via traditional methods (i.e. instruction). No new literature supports Budi's statement, but it is in line with other research on parental mediation as a significant protective factor when children are allowed to view content on their devices without parental guidance. Without these safeguards, children are vulnerable to algorithmically-driven content; therefore, children will experience extreme swings in emotion and develop patterns of addiction through continuous scrolling.

5. Parental Interview Findings: Awareness Gaps & Media Influence

Interviews conducted with parents who participated in this study revealed significant deficits in their understanding of both screen time's effect on children's cognitive and emotional growth and about digital literacy and supervision of digital media.

Table 1. Parental Interview Synthesis of their children's Digital media Consumption
(Primary Data, developed by researcher 2025)

Category	Key Findings	Representative Quote
Digital Media Benefits	Multi-functional medium as a source of entertainment as well as a learning and teaching format	"When we choose the right media to display, it could bring educational benefits"
Parental Guidance	Inconsistent guidance on the behalf of parents due to imbalanced time management	"When we're busy we give the phone for them to play on".
Literacy in Media Influence	Majority of parents hadn't had complete comprehension and it's consequences of the subject manner	"It is a result of modernization where they need phones and gadgets to access education."
Character of Children	Empathy and teamwork may be learnt and developed from daily observation	"Yes, they are taught to be empathetic to whom truly need it ."
Concern of negative content impact	Concerns surfaced when their children consume content with violent tendencies and/or inappropriate language.	"Our most concern is if they watch a fellow YouTuber with inappropriate language."

As shown in the data, parents tended to equate "educational" with "safe," even when children consumed entertainment-driven videos.

Key findings include:

● parents have reported using screens (smartphones, tablets, etc., as devices that distract their children when they are busy doing other activities.

● Most parents report relying on content categories such as, "kids channel" instead of being engaged with their child's experience.

● Parents stated that they have witnessed both positive (joining groups, watching movies together) and negative behavior (aggression, swearing) in their children due to their children's exposure to digital media.

Thus, parental mediation is a key factor in protecting children from the adverse effects of exposure to digital media.

6. Child Interview Findings: Attention, Emotion, and Digital Dependency

According to the interviews conducted with the participants, the recent themes that emerged are consistent with previous research about how digital media affects a child's growth and development. Some of the most important themes include: attention span; character development; and improving children's intellectual abilities and cognitive skills.

Table 2. Respondent characteristics based on Age Digital Behavior, Emotional Regulation (Primary Data, developed by researcher 2025)

Code	Interest in Digital Media	Emotional Regulation & Digital Literacy
R1	Use of Digital Devices from an early age, with physical hobbies	Unstable emotion, easily influenced by visual stimuli
R2	Managed use of digital devices, with athletic hobbies.	Emotionally mature, digital interactions being monitored by parents
R3	Video-game play (Minecraft and Roblox), possessing an artistic hobby	Emotionally stable, Understanding the context of digital games and art
R4	Moderate use of digital device and media consumption, possessing a hobby for literature and art.	Emotionally stable, capable of balancing real life activities with digital media consumption
R5	High-intensity Short-form Content Consumption (*TikTok*, *Reels*)	Emotionally Unstable Emphasized indication of device addiction.
R6	Interested in a selective and specific parts of digital media	Emotionally stable with the capacity of controlling media consumption

Interview data from children revealed key behavioral patterns:

- Shortened attention spans among children who consume fast-paced, short-form content.

- Emotional dysregulation in participants who heavily rely on digital entertainment.

- Cognitive immersion leading to distorted perception of time ("time feels fast"), consistent with the "doom-scrolling" and "brain rot" phenomena described by Wilson et al., (2024).

- Growing but inconsistent moral reasoning older children can identify connotative meanings, while younger children interpret mostly denotative visual cues.

Children with balanced device usage and supportive parenting showed more stable emotional regulation, higher empathy, and better understanding of narrative meaning.

These findings strengthen the relevance of considering developmental psychology when designing children's visual media.

Visual–Narrative Integration as a Tool for Character Education

Findings from visual analysis, parental interviews, and the younger audience interviews collectively show that children's YouTube videos do have the potential to function as informal learning environments but only when visual elements and storytelling are intentionally crafted with educational objectives.

Table 3. Visual & Narrative Analysis (Primary Data, developed by researcher 2025)

Category Analysis	Contribution to Research	Interview Findings
Character	Tangible characters have more impact to teach empathy as they allow the viewer to place	Character Design as expressive, yet soft invites a sense of curiosity and joy.

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	themselves in the story.	
Color	Emotion recognition amongst the minds of children.	Colors as an element which spark emotion and ambience in a visual composition
Symbol/Icon	Internalize story continuity, expressions and morals in children	Familiar with simplistic symbols and icons of which have
Storytelling	Teaching problem solving skills and training cognitive functions (focus, critical thinking, understanding chronology)	Peaked interest in dramatic storytelling providing a positive resolution

Based on research findings, visual elements that contribute to character values:

● Characters generate identification → empathy → moral reflection.

● Colour encodes emotional meaning → supporting emotional literacy.

● Symbols/icons guide attention → aid memory and moral recognition.

● Plot provides structure → supports logical thinking and moral reasoning.

When these components combine with each other, they form multimodal environments, as described in the theory of visual storytelling, which facilitate both cognitive and emotional engagement. These are necessary for the growth of a character in a positive way.

Nevertheless, the study highlighted an important limitation, in which the role of a parent as well as their supervision is deemed critical. The parent(s) are obligated to partake in digitalization and being literate in digitalization. Unsupervised content consumed by a young audience will more likely lead to negative conse-

quences to their behavior. Issues such as dependence, fragmentation of attention, or instability of emotions. Thus, the educational potential that exists within the content presented on YouTube is not automatic; it is contingent upon whether or not parents monitor their children's consumption of this media and help curate it for them.

The connotative meanings that a narrative conveys can be more easily understood when the audience is able to embody a character's experiential perspective (either as an individual or as a group) and the character's storyline depicts real-life experiences (e.g., authentic experiences that the audience can relate to) (Nasution & Juanda, 2025). Developing characters in this manner allows children to recognize and understand the emotions of other people, which helps them to internalize moral values, including but not limited to, honesty, accountability, and empathy.

Conclusion

Research results of this study have shown the significance of visual elements found in children's video content (e.g., characters, colour schemes, symbols/icons, and narrative structures) have a significant influence on the moral development, emotional literacy, and cognitive skills developed by the young audience within the elementary school age group. Visualization of fictional characters displaying clear emotional signs are important in developing empathy; they also allow young viewers to absorb values like honesty, co-operative effort, and responsibility. Colour and symbolic cues create emotional and cognitive anchors for young viewers, allowing them to interpret the mood, intent, and moral context of each scene. Narrative structures that

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include both conflict(s) and resolution(s) provide opportunities for children to develop and practice logical reasoning, make predictions on the consequences, and think through their moral choices.

Moreover, interview data indicate that children's understanding of the video's message is strongly affected by their affinity with the digital realm. Browsing habits and content consumed play a large role in how much parents should be mediating or restricting their children's digital footprints. Large amounts of unsupervised or excessive screen time are likely to create an environment where children do not develop the emotional regulation, have shortened attention spans and consume digital media uncritically, causing the potential benefits of educational visual storytelling to be neutralized or diminished. Conversely, children who use digital media in a balanced manner along with active parental mediation have a greater understanding of connotative meanings and more stable socio-emotional development. This study's findings support the idea that digital visual storytelling has educational benefits, but they are only as effective as the intentional design of the content and the supportive learning situations that accompany it.

The study highlights the importance of developing communicative and ethically sound digital content for the younger audience and improving digital literacy of parents and educators. As a media platform, YouTube has had a reputable history and still holds the opportunity to act as informal learning environment, developing empathy, character values and cognitive growth. Future research should evaluate the long-term influence of digital visual media and explore different types of content as well as develop joint approaches to working with parents, teachers, and content creators. This will help ensure

that children's increased use of digital media positively affects their moral and intellectual development.

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