

Symbolic Interaction in Conveying Climate Crisis Messages through Bandung Cabaret “*Kemelut Nafash Tirani*”

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Bandung Cabaret, Climate Crisis, Performing Arts, Symbolic Communication, Symbolic Interactionism

Received: 19, February

Revised: 20, March

Accepted: 30, April

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ABSTRACT

The climate crisis in the energy sector is a global emergency that requires public awareness and participation. Artistic media like cabaret performances can effectively communicate environmental issues. This study examines how the Bandung cabaret “*Kemelut Nafash Tirani*” by Fourtastic Cabaret conveys the climate crisis through symbolic communication. Using George Herbert Mead’s symbolic interactionism, the research explores verbal and non-verbal symbols such as script, audio, costumes, props, gestures, and expressions. Data were collected through interviews and observation, then analyzed with the Miles and Huberman model. The findings show that symbolic communication represents the urgency of the crisis. Meaning is formed through interaction between director and performers, making cabaret a medium for environmental education, reflection, and encouraging behavioral change.

INTRODUCTION

In response to these alarming developments, various environmental awareness initiatives have emerged across Indonesia. One example is the “Fun Walk Generasi Iklim” campaign organized by the Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Cultural Affairs in collaboration with Save The Children Indonesia (Bandung, 2024). This initiative encouraged young people to take an active role as agents of change in addressing the climate crisis. Similar efforts can also be seen in the creative arts scene, especially within the Bandung cabaret community.

During the “Suara Marabahaya” festival with the theme “Climate Change - Climate Action,” several cabaret groups in Bandung presented performances that raised issues such as waste, deforestation, and the energy sector. Performing arts have long functioned as a medium for cultural reflection and social commentary. Darlenis (2021) explains that performing arts combine elements of ritual, entertainment, and aesthetic expression that can convey moral and social values. In Indonesia, Bandung cabaret has developed into a unique cultural form that blends local creativity with elements of Western cabaret.

Compared to conventional drama, Bandung cabaret is known for its lip sync technique, musical arrangements, and symbolic storytelling. Performances often incorporate recorded dialogue, popular music, and sound effects to communicate issues relevant to society, making the stage a space for both expression and critique. Among these groups, Fourtastic Cabaret is known for consistently raising social themes in its performances. Works such as *Disable is Able* (disability issues), *Rusuntera* (public policy), and *Maling-Maling Kecil* (corruption) show this commitment. The performance *Kemelut Nafash Tirani* continues this approach by addressing the climate crisis through symbolic representation.

The story portrays a village that depends on coal-based energy and the impacts that follow, including environmental damage and social conflict, before introducing biomass as an alternative. These issues are presented through dialogue, gestures, costumes, and stage properties such as industrial visuals and smoke imagery. From a communication perspective, *Kemelut Nafash Tirani* shows how performing arts can function as a symbolic medium. Verbal and non-verbal elements such as dialogue, facial expressions, body movement, and stage design are used to construct meaning about the climate crisis. The interaction between the director and performers also plays an important role in shaping these meanings, reflecting the process described in George Herbert Mead’s symbolic interactionism.

Through this perspective, the study looks at how meaning is formed through interaction in performance. However, despite the increasing use of performing arts in environmental campaigns, there is still limited research that specifically examines cabaret as a medium of symbolic communication in representing climate issues. This study contributes by combining symbolic interactionism with performing arts analysis to understand how environmental meaning is constructed in performance. Therefore, this study aims to examine

how verbal and non-verbal symbols in the Bandung cabaret performance *Kemelut Nafash Tirani* represent and communicate the climate crisis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism explains that meaning is constructed through social interaction using symbols. This perspective emphasizes that meaning does not inherently exist within objects or actions, but emerges through interpretation and shared understanding among individuals. George Herbert Mead introduced this concept by highlighting the relationship between mind, self, and society in the process of communication.

The mind refers to the ability to interpret symbols, the self develops through interaction with others, and society represents the social context in which meaning is negotiated. As further explained by Mulyana (2018), communication is a human activity in which symbols gain meaning through interaction rather than existing independently. In the context of performing arts, this theory helps explain how messages are created, interpreted, and understood through symbolic expressions.

Performing Arts as a Medium of Communication

Performing arts have long functioned as a medium for cultural reflection and social commentary. They combine elements of aesthetics, expression, and communication to convey messages to audiences.

Through dialogue, music, movement, and visual elements, the performing arts allow complex social issues to be presented in a more engaging and interpretive form. Unlike conventional communication, performing arts rely not only on verbal language but also on non-verbal symbols, enabling audiences to construct meaning based on their experiences and perspectives. This makes performing arts an effective medium for communicating issues such as environmental awareness and social critique.

Cabaret as Symbolic and Social Expression

Cabaret is a form of performing art that integrates entertainment with symbolic storytelling and social commentary. In Indonesia, Bandung Cabaret has developed as a unique cultural form that blends Western cabaret elements with local creativity.

It is characterized by lip sync performance, musical arrangement, and expressive gestures that emphasize symbolic meaning. Through the use of costumes, stage properties, and audio elements, cabaret performances are able to represent social realities and convey critical messages. However, despite the growing use of performing arts in addressing social issues, research that specifically examines cabaret as a medium of symbolic communication in representing the climate crisis remains limited.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is based on the assumption that cabaret performances function as a form of symbolic communication. Verbal and non-verbal elements such as dialogue, facial expressions, body movements, costumes, and stage

properties are used to construct meaning. These meanings are formed through interaction between the director and performers, as well as through the interpretation of the audience. Using the perspective of symbolic interactionism, this study examines how symbolic elements in the performance “*Kemelut Nafash Tirani*” are used to represent and communicate the climate crisis.

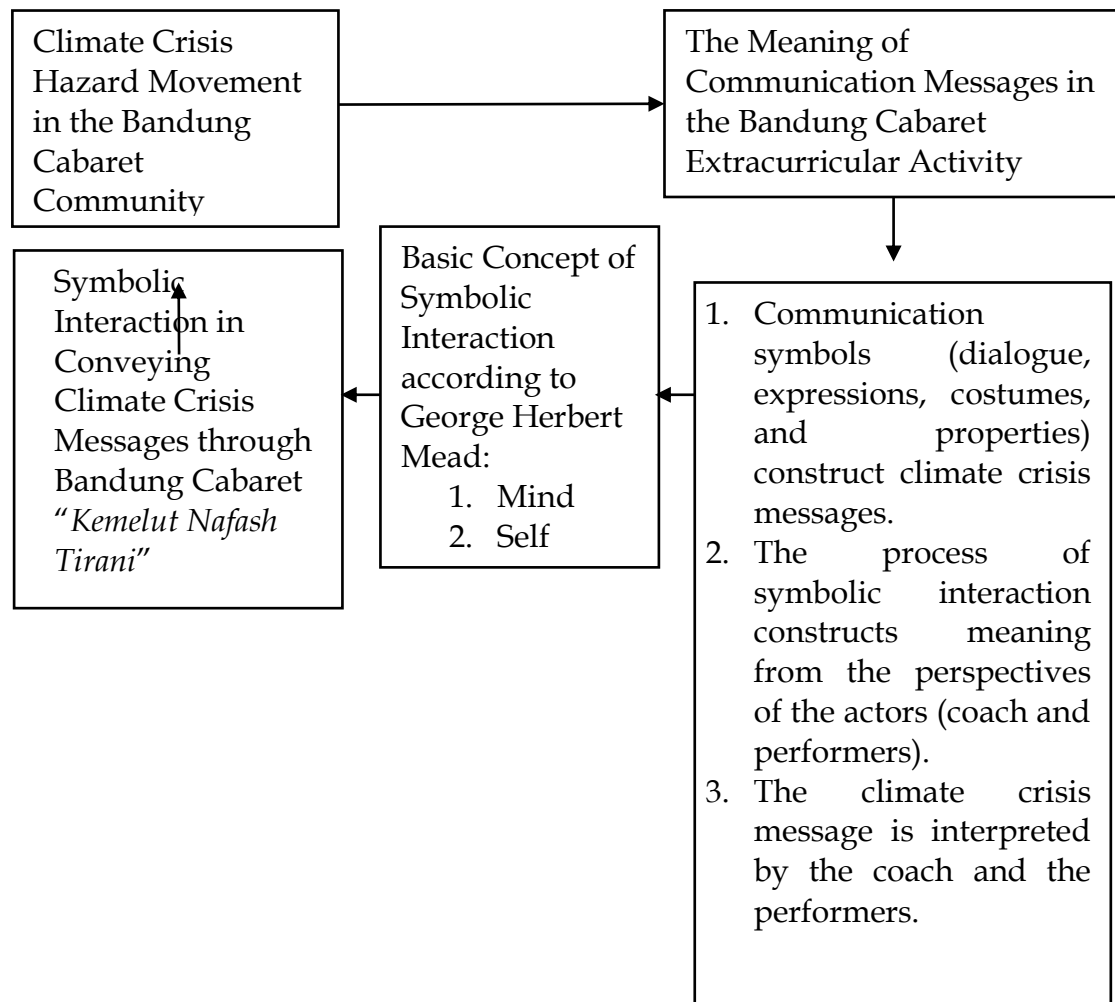


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach based on the philosophy of post-positivism. It was conducted in a natural setting, where the researcher acted as the primary instrument, utilizing triangulation as the main technique for data validation. The study aims to explore how symbolic communication is represented and interpreted in the Bandung cabaret performance “*Kemelut Nafash Tirani*” by Fourtastic Cabaret in conveying messages about the dangers of the climate crisis.

A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, interpretations, and interactions as they occur in real contexts. The research applied a symbolic interactionism approach, which assumes that meaning in communication is created and

negotiated through social interactions involving symbols, gestures, and shared interpretations. As emphasized by George Herbert Mead and further elaborated by Mulyana (2018), communication is a distinctively human activity in which symbols gain meaning through interaction rather than existing inherently within them.

This approach was used to understand how verbal and non-verbal symbols, such as dialogue, facial expressions, body gestures, costumes, and props, are constructed, interpreted, and presented by the director and performers in *Fourtastic Cabaret* as a critique of climate crisis issues.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study were derived from in-depth interviews with key informants, including the director, coach, and performers of *Fourtastic Cabaret*, as well as non-participatory observation of the cabaret performance "*Kemelut Nafash Tirani*." Thematic analysis identified three core themes illustrating how symbolic communication conveys the dangers of the climate crisis through performing arts.

1. Symbolic Communication in the Performance

The first theme highlights the use of both verbal and nonverbal symbols to represent the dangers of the climate crisis, particularly related to coal-based energy production. Verbal symbols are primarily expressed through the script and song lyrics, such as "*Selamatkan Nafas Kami*" (Save Our Breath), as well as the President's monologue criticizing political corruption and environmental negligence. These verbal elements explicitly depict the people's suffering as victims of industrial pollution and government irresponsibility.

Nonverbal symbols reinforce these messages through audio, costumes, properties, gestures, and facial expressions. Industrial sounds and coughing effects symbolize environmental degradation and respiratory distress, not merely as literal representations of illness, but as embodied signs of the invisible and pervasive impact of pollution. Costumes, such as suits worn by politicians, portray them as "well-dressed rats," representing corrupt officials who exploit natural resources.

This metaphor works by contrasting outward appearance as a symbol of authority with hidden moral decay, thereby strengthening the critique of power structures. The towering smokestack prop and artificial smoke visually dramatize the destructive impact of coal plants, functioning as visual cues that make abstract environmental damage more tangible. Gestures of suffocation and pain, especially the suffering of Ibu Pertiwi as a pregnant woman symbolizing Indonesia, intensify the narrative of ecological devastation by linking environmental destruction to human vulnerability and future generations.

These findings indicate that symbols carry meaning not in isolation, but through their interaction within the performance, allowing audiences to interpret complex environmental issues through emotionally engaging representations.

2. Performers' Understanding of Symbolic Communication

The second theme centers on the actors' interpretive understanding of the symbols they embodied on stage. Guided by the director's creative vision, performers developed a shared awareness of the symbolic meanings embedded in the script and performance design. Drawing on George Herbert Mead's concepts of mind, self, and society, the actors constructed meaning through interaction and translated abstract environmental concerns into emotional and physical expressions.

This process shows that meaning is actively negotiated rather than passively received. Performers interpret symbols through internal reflection, then express them through embodied action, which is shaped by interaction with others. For instance, the actor portraying the President internalized the role as a reflection of political accountability, demonstrating how symbolic roles become meaningful when connected to broader social realities. Similarly, the actress playing the People embodied emotional and physical suffering, transforming abstract environmental discourse into a more relatable human experience.

The director's use of musical drama elements also plays an important role in simplifying complex themes such as energy politics and environmental ethics into symbolic forms that are easier to understand. This indicates that symbolic communication becomes effective when it connects abstract concepts with lived or imagined experiences, enabling both performers and audiences to construct shared meaning.

3. Self-Reflection and Meaning Construction

The director's use of musical drama elements also plays an important role in simplifying complex themes such as energy politics and environmental ethics into symbolic forms that are easier to understand. This indicates that symbolic communication becomes effective when it connects abstract concepts with lived or imagined experiences, enabling both performers and audiences to construct shared meaning.

This finding suggests that symbolic interaction extends beyond the stage into personal consciousness. The meaning constructed during the performance process is internalized by the performers and influences their attitudes and behaviors. In this context, symbols function not only as communicative tools but also as reflective mechanisms that encourage individuals to reassess their relationship with environmental issues.

These findings demonstrate that *Fourtastic Cabaret* functions not only as a form of creative expression but also as a transformative space for environmental education and moral reflection. Through symbolic interaction, the performers collectively constructed meaning that bridges art, ethics, and activism, showing that the effectiveness of symbolic communication lies in its ability to generate both understanding and personal transformation. The findings of this study indicate that the cabaret performance "*Kemelut Nafash Tirani*" functions as an effective medium for communicating the climate crisis through symbolic interaction.

Rather than merely presenting environmental issues, the performance constructs meaning through the integration of verbal and non-verbal symbols, which are interpreted and negotiated by performers within a social context. This supports the perspective of George Herbert Mead (1934), which emphasizes that meaning emerges through interaction and is not inherent in symbols themselves. The use of symbolic elements such as dialogue, gesture, costume, and stage properties demonstrates how abstract environmental issues can be translated into concrete and emotionally engaging representations. In line with Mulyana (2018), communication in this context operates as a process of shared meaning-making, where symbols gain significance through collective interpretation.

The findings show that non-verbal elements play a dominant role in strengthening meaning, particularly in conveying invisible environmental threats such as pollution. This suggests that performative communication can bridge the gap between complex environmental discourse and audience understanding. Furthermore, the study highlights how Mead's concepts of mind, self, and society are reflected in the performance process. The concept of mind is evident in the performers' ability to interpret environmental issues and transform them into symbolic expressions. The self is manifested through the embodiment of roles, where performers internalize and express symbolic meanings.

Meanwhile, society is represented through the collaborative interaction between the director and performers, which shapes a shared understanding of the climate crisis. This confirms that meaning is socially constructed through interaction, particularly within creative and performative contexts. Compared to previous studies that primarily focus on symbolic representation in visual arts or conventional theater, this research emphasizes the process of meaning construction within performance.

The findings suggest that Kabaret Bandung offers a distinctive communicative approach, where lip-sync techniques and audio playback shift the focus from verbal narration to embodied and visual expression. These characteristic positions of cabaret as a form of communication that relies heavily on interpretative engagement, both from performers and audiences.

In addition, this study contributes to the development of communication studies by positioning cabaret as a medium of environmental communication. The findings indicate that performing arts do not only function as entertainment, but also as a space for social reflection and awareness-building. This aligns with previous research that views performing arts as a tool for education and social critique, while extending it into the context of environmental issues.

However, this study has several limitations. The focus on a single cabaret group limits the generalization of the findings. The qualitative approach also allows for subjective interpretation, particularly in analyzing symbolic meaning. Additionally, the use of non-participatory observation restricts deeper involvement in the creative process. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve multiple performance groups, include audience reception analysis,

and apply mixed methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of symbolic communication in performing arts.

Overall, this study demonstrates that symbolic communication in cabaret performance serves as an effective approach to conveying environmental messages. Through interaction, interpretation, and embodiment, the performance creates meaningful connections between artistic expression and social awareness, particularly in addressing the climate crisis.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the Bandung cabaret performance "*Kemelut Nafash Tirani*" effectively communicates the message of the climate crisis through symbolic interaction. The meaning of environmental issues is constructed not only through verbal and non-verbal symbols, but also through the interactive process between the director and performers. The concepts of mind, self, and society are reflected in how performers interpret, embody, and negotiate symbolic meanings within the performance.

The findings also show that cabaret functions as more than entertainment, serving as a communicative medium that fosters environmental awareness and social reflection. This study further conceptualizes cabaret as a socio-ecological communication model that links artistic expression with environmental consciousness. Based on the findings, several recommendations can be proposed. First, performing arts practitioners are encouraged to utilize symbolic communication more strategically to address social and environmental issues, particularly in making abstract topics more accessible to audiences.

Second, educational institutions can integrate performing arts into environmental communication strategies to enhance awareness and engagement among students and the wider community. For future research, it is recommended to involve multiple performing arts communities and include audience reception analysis to better understand how symbolic messages are interpreted. The use of mixed methods is also suggested to strengthen the validity and depth of analysis in studying symbolic communication within performing arts.

FURTHER STUDY

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the research focuses only on a single performing arts group, Fourtastic Cabaret, which limits the generalizability of the findings to broader cultural or artistic contexts. Second, the qualitative approach with a limited number of informants may introduce subjectivity in interpreting symbolic meanings.

Third, the use of non-participatory observation restricted deeper engagement with the rehearsal process and the development of symbolic elements within the performance. Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to involve multiple cabaret or performing arts communities to enable comparative analysis across different cultural settings.

Further studies may also incorporate audience reception analysis to understand how symbolic messages are interpreted from the viewers'

perspective. In addition, the use of mixed-method approaches is suggested to strengthen the validity and depth of findings. Expanding the theoretical framework through semiotics or cultural studies may also provide a more comprehensive understanding of symbolic communication in performing arts, particularly in addressing environmental issues.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the director, performers, and all members of Fourtastic Cabaret for their openness and willingness to participate in this study. Their insights and experiences were invaluable in the completion of this research.

The author also extends appreciation to academic advisors and colleagues who provided constructive feedback and support throughout the research process. In addition, gratitude is given to the affiliated institution for facilitating this study. Finally, the author acknowledges all forms of support, both direct and indirect, that contributed to the successful completion of this research.

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