

## **"Pupus Putus Sekolah" Digital Comic as a Medium for Reflecting the Reality of School Dropouts in Indonesia**

Rizka Kurnia Mailinda<sup>1</sup>, Achmad Nur Kholis<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Visual Communication Design Department, Universitas Pembangunan Jaya, Indonesia

*E-mai: Achmadnurkholis836@gmailcom*

### **ABSTRACT**

School dropout issues in Indonesia through the digital comic *Pupus Putus Sekolah* by Kurnia Harta Winata, while evaluating its effectiveness as a medium for social advocacy. Education in Indonesia faces a significant challenge with high dropout rates, particularly at the high school level which reaches 21.61% due to economic, access, and social factors. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method with a content analysis approach, utilizing Djelantik's Aesthetic Theory (form, weight, and appearance) and Social Psychology to examine visual and narrative elements. The findings reveal that *Pupus Putus Sekolah* effectively mirrors the complex reality of underprivileged children through its protagonist, Pupus. Visually, the comic utilizes a cartoon-style illustration and a warm, neutral color palette to build emotional closeness and simplify serious social themes for a broader audience. Narratively, the story highlights that dropping out of school is not merely an economic issue but is also tied to psychological burdens and a formal education system that sometimes fails to accommodate children's diverse needs. The "apprentice" learning model introduced in the plot offers a reflective alternative to non-formal education. The study concludes that digital comics are a powerful tool for social campaigns; their vertical layout on platforms like Webtoon and their ability to foster empathy through storytelling make them more engaging than traditional media. Reader engagement and moral integration within the dialogue further prove that *Pupus Putus Sekolah* serves as both a reflective educational medium and a strategic instrument for raising social awareness.

**Keywords:** *Pupus Putus Sekolah, comic, Webtoon, school dropout, social campaign.*

## INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia plays a crucial role in shaping the next generation to excel and be competitive. Education serves not only as a means of transferring knowledge but also as a platform for shaping the character, ethics, and moral attitudes of the younger generation (Zahrudin et al., 2024). However, many children in various regions still face challenges in accessing adequate education. One issue that remains a concern is the phenomenon of school dropouts. Based on data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2023, the percentage of children not attending school in Indonesia shows an increasing trend along with higher levels of education. At the elementary school level, the number of children not attending school is relatively low, at 0.67%. At the junior high school level, it reaches 6.93%. Meanwhile, at the high school level, it increases to 21.61%. This dropout rate in children can be caused by several factors, such as the child's education level, parental poverty, access to education, the child's perception of education, environmental conditions, and society's views on education (Mujiati, et al., 2018).

This issue requires serious attention because it concerns the future of Indonesia's younger generation. Various social campaigns have been launched to raise awareness about the importance of education and support children's continued access to it. One approach used in these campaigns is through visual media. Visual media has the power to convey messages emotionally and easily, especially to the younger generation, who are very familiar with digital media.

Comics are an effective visual medium for conveying educational and social messages. By combining storytelling and visual elements, comics can build empathy and provide a deeper understanding of an issue. One digital comic that addresses this social issue is "Pupus Putus Sekolah" (School Dropout) by Indonesian comic artist Kurnia Harta Winata. This comic is published on the digital comic platform *Webtoon*. This comic tells the story of a boy named Pupus who was forced to drop out of school due to his family's circumstances, but he did not give up on pursuing knowledge despite not being able to attend school like other children his age (Yuliaqanita, et al., 2024). The storyline depicts Pupus's inner struggle in facing challenges. The story in this comic depicts the reality experienced by many Indonesian children in the real world.

This study aims to analyze the representation of the issue of school dropouts in the digital comic *Pupus Putus Sekolah* (Pupus Putus Sekolah), as well as evaluate the effectiveness of comics as a social campaign tool. This research is important because it shows that visual works function not only as entertainment, but also as reflective and educational media. This research contributes to the development of visual communication design by demonstrating the role of comics in conveying social messages effectively. In addition, this study compares with previous research entitled *Analysis of Visual Elements in the Comic Pupus Putus Sekolah* (Yuliaqanita, et al., 2024). However, this study contains a visual analysis of the comic. Meanwhile, this research focuses on the representation of social issues raised in the narrative, specifically how the reality of school dropouts is reflected through the characters, storyline, and social context conveyed in the comic.

## METHODS

Qualitative research methods were used as a reference in collecting and analyzing data regarding the representation of social issues in the digital comic *Pupus Putus Sekolah*. Qualitative research is a type of research conducted in a natural setting with the aim of understanding a phenomenon in depth: what happens, why it happens, and how the process occurs (Naamy, 2019). According to Sugiyono (2011), a qualitative approach is very appropriate for exploring the meaning behind social phenomena and developing theories built from field data. In the context of this research, the researcher explored in depth the visual and narrative elements in the *Pupus Putus Sekolah* comic, and how these two elements convey social messages related to the issue of school dropouts in Indonesia. The data obtained were presented in the form of narrative descriptions, thus providing a comprehensive explanation of the visual representation and the intended message.

The data collection techniques in this study were carried out through content analysis of the *Pupus Putus Sekolah* comic, visual analysis, and literature study. The comic was read and observed thoroughly to identify visual elements such as illustration style, coloring, character depiction, and panel arrangement, which were then analyzed based on visual aesthetic theory. Literature study was conducted on relevant references, both from books, journals, and articles that discuss visual media, communication design, and the social issue of school dropouts. The use of various sources aims to apply the triangulation method, as explained by William Wiersma (1986) in Naamy (2019), namely checking data from various perspectives and techniques, to increase the validity and accuracy of research results. This approach allows researchers to understand the issue more broadly, not only from a visual perspective but also in a social context.

In conducting the analysis, this study uses theory as a basis for examining the visual aspects and symbolic meanings contained in the comic. The theories used include Djelantik's Aesthetic Theory to evaluate visual elements (appearance, weight, and appearance), as well as a Social Psychology approach to understand how the narrative and characters in the comic reflect the social reality of school dropouts. With this theory, the analysis is conducted in a directed and contextual manner in accordance with the principles of visual communication and social campaigns.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Comics are works of art consisting of static panels arranged sequentially to form a storyline, containing dialogue between characters depicted in speech balloons (Siregar & Melani, 2018). Comics combine images and text into a complementary whole. According to Soedarso (2015), comics aim to convey information to readers. While the general purpose of comics is to entertain readers, they also serve as educational and social campaign tools.

According to Bonnef (1998) in Soedarso (2015) comics are categorized into 2 types, namely serial comics (*comic strips*) and comic books (*comic books*). These serialized comics are often found in newspapers or magazines and generally have short storylines. Comic books, on the other hand, are a type of comic presented in book form and have longer storylines. Currently, comic books are very popular, especially Japanese comics, also known as "kanji" (literally "kanji" or "kanji" in Japanese). *manga*. Manga is popular among various groups because it has various genres, a distinctive drawing style, strong and expressive characters, and dynamic settings and stories (Kompas, 2024).

Comics have the advantage of conveying information chronologically through a series of images accompanied by text to strengthen the story's context, making them more effective than other visual media (Gunawan & Sujarwo, 2022). This advantage allows readers to more easily understand the flow of events and build emotional attachment to the characters in the story. Through a strong storyline and easily recognizable characters, comics can build a sense of closeness that makes it easier for readers to understand and absorb the messages and values being conveyed (Sabri et al., 2024). Comics are also flexible, adaptable for various purposes, including education, social campaigns, and raising awareness of important issues in society. In the context of social campaigns, comics can arouse empathy, shape public opinion, and encourage change through a more personal and humanistic approach.

As technology advances, comics have also evolved into a more modern form, namely digital comics. These digital comics can be accessed through electronic devices such as smartphones, tablet, or computer, making it more practical and accessible to readers. One popular platform that provides digital comics is Webtoon. Webtoon is a combination of the terms *Web* And *Cartoon*, which refers to digital comics adapted from conventional print comics (Hanum & Kurniawan, 2023). Webtoon is a digital comic platform originating from South Korea, presented in a vertical format optimized for scrolling on mobile devices, and usually released periodically in weekly episodes (A Brief History of Webtoons · V&A, n.d.).

The Pupus Putus Sekolah comic is a digital comic work in the social drama genre (*slice of life*) written by local Indonesian creator Kurnia Harta Winata. This comic is published in Webtoon format, making it easily accessible through digital devices such as mobile phones and computers. First published on August 20, 2021, the comic has now spanned six seasons, with releases scheduled twice a week, every Monday and Friday (Webtoon, 2025). Since its release, the comic has been read over 89 million times, demonstrating the high level of reader enthusiasm and its success in capturing public attention.



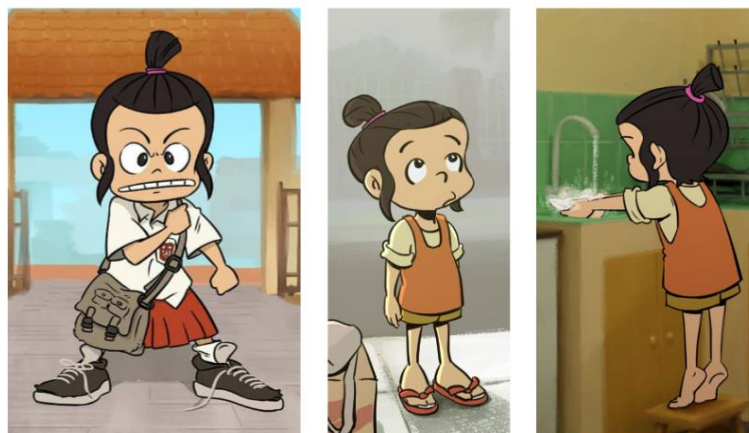
**Figure 1.** Pupus Drops Out of School  
Source: webtoon.com, 2025

The storyline centers on the main character, Pupus, an elementary school student who has to stop her education after her grandmother, the only family member who lives with her, dies. In this story, Pupus no longer has both of her parents, who are unknown where they are. Pupus and her

grandmother live in poverty and survive on the proceeds of selling basic necessities (Asmadi, 2023). Despite living in limitations, Pupus is described as a cheerful, enthusiastic, and active child in her daily life. However, her life changes drastically when her grandmother dies. Her grandmother's departure forces Pupus to live with her uncle, who works as a janitor at a university. Since then, Pupus no longer attends school and begins to follow her uncle's daily work.

On one occasion, while Pupus was accompanying his uncle on campus, he met a professor. Seeing Pupus's potential and enthusiasm for learning, the professor offered to help care for and educate him using a non-formal approach. He introduced a learning method called '*apprentice*', an alternative education system that does not rely on the classroom, but instead allows Pupus to learn freely according to his interests and needs. *apprentice* is a traditional learning system where students (*apprentice*) living with teachers and learning directly in a simple environment (BBPMP Central Java Province, 2022). This approach offers new hope for Pupus to continue receiving an education even though he is outside the formal school system.

The character of Pupus is a true representation of Indonesian children who experience social inequality, particularly in terms of access to education. Pupus is depicted as a simple child. His simplicity is visualized by his modest appearance, wearing shabby clothes and flip-flops. Pupus is depicted as a responsible child. This sense of responsibility is illustrated by Pupus's ability to perform household chores, as shown in the image of Pupus washing dishes.



**Figure 2.** Visual depiction of the character Pupus  
Source: webtoon.com, 2025

When analyzed using Djelantik's aesthetic theory, this comic fulfills three basic aspects: form, weight, and appearance (Usman et al., 2022). Visually, the Pupus Putus Sekolah comic features a cartoon-style illustration. Cartoons are symbolic and representative images, typically containing elements of humor, satire, or representation (Janottama & Putraka, 2017). This style was chosen to create characters that are easily understood by readers of all ages, especially children and adolescents. The cartoon illustration style was also chosen to balance the story's relatively serious content, as its simple appearance makes it effective as a medium for conveying and disseminating information

without sacrificing the entertainment element (Kusuma & Linda, 2022). The Pupus character is depicted with a petite body, a large head, and a highly expressive facial expression. With this visual aspect, readers can quickly grasp the character's mood and psychological state simply by their expressions and gestures. This illustration style also plays a role in building closeness between the character and the reader, reinforcing the intended social message.

Furthermore, the visual aspect also encompasses color. Color has its own character and meaning, visually reinforcing the identity of both the main and supporting characters in a story (Paksi, 2021). In terms of color usage, this comic is dominated by a warm and neutral palette of brown, orange, and cream. This color palette represents the simple, everyday atmosphere of Pupus. In color psychology theory, neutral colors are often associated with simplicity, creating a calm, peaceful, and relaxing atmosphere. The use of warm colors can also create a warm impression and atmosphere.

In terms of substance, the comic "Pupus Putus Sekolah" (Pupus Putus Sekolah) represents children who must live beyond their years. It portrays a child forced into adulthood by circumstances, accustomed to household responsibilities, and slowly losing the childhood he should have enjoyed. Pupus's experience of dropping out of school is presented not only from an economic perspective, but also from the psychological and social complexities that shape his attitudes and choices. Pupus's reason for dropping out of school was indeed rooted in his grandmother's death. However, the comic also depicts internal factors within Pupus's decision to stop attending school. In episode 27, Pupus directly states that school is a boring and frustrating place. He believes it's annoying because he isn't given the freedom to express himself and explore.



**Figure 3.** Episode 27 Stills  
Source: [webtoon.com](http://webtoon.com), 2025

Furthermore, Pupus's disinterest in school isn't simply due to a lack of desire to learn, but rather because he's accustomed to living a life full of responsibilities and pressures like an adult. Pupus isn't portrayed as a weak or lazy child, but rather as a realistic figure who feels the school system is unable to meet his emotional and intellectual needs. Pupus symbolizes children who want to learn but haven't found a suitable place to grow. In terms of appearance and visual composition,

the panels in this comic are designed with a vertical flow that has been optimized for reading on digital platforms like Webtoon. Each scene is composed in a simple yet communicative manner.



**Figure 4.** Comic panel with vertical flow  
Source: webtoon.com, 2025

Visual art plays a strategic role in conveying educational messages and building social awareness because it can communicate complex issues in an engaging and understandable way. In the context of campaigns, visual art, such as comics, can serve not only as a medium for information but also as a means of building empathy and encouraging critical reflection in the community. Based on the researchers' observations, the comic "Pupus Putus Sekolah" demonstrates high effectiveness in conveying a social message about the issue of dropping out of school while leaving a profound impact on its readers. Through emotional visuals and a touching narrative, the comic successfully depicts the complexity of the problems faced by children like Pupus, from economic pressures and discomfort in the formal education system to the psychological burdens that force them to mature prematurely.

The effectiveness of this message is reflected in the numerous reader comments on the Webtoon platform, which demonstrate empathetic and reflective responses. Based on reader feedback, the Pupus comic is considered successful in conveying a subtle yet meaningful social message about the real-life conditions experienced by many children in Indonesia. Furthermore, this comic evokes simple nostalgia for childhood while simultaneously teaching moral values. These moral values aren't simply inserted, but rather are naturally integrated into the storyline, character dialogue, and captivating visuals (Ningsih et al., 2025). The comic's message is considered light yet profound, making Pupus a work that's not only entertaining but also touching and positively impacting its readers.

Comics serve as a sophisticated sociological lens that can capture the intricate nuances of a society's condition, transforming abstract social issues into relatable human narratives. By blending sequential art with targeted dialogue, comics bridge the gap between objective reality and subjective experience, allowing readers to witness the lived conditions of a specific region through a more intimate perspective. In the case of *Pupus Putus Sekolah*, the medium transcends mere entertainment to become a powerful document of Indonesia's contemporary social landscape. It effectively frames the systemic challenges of the national education system and the persistent cycle of poverty, providing

a visual language for the "invisible" struggles of marginalized children that are often overlooked in formal reports or statistical data.

Digital medium operates as a strategic tool for social reflection by fostering deep empathy through its character-driven storytelling and immersive visual aesthetics. The portrayal of Pupus's daily life marked by economic hardship yet fueled by a resilient spirit acts as a mirror for the collective conscience of the Indonesian public, prompting critical reflection on the structural inequalities that force many children into premature adulthood. Narratives of the accessible and modern format of Webtoon can reach a vast, younger demographic, effectively turning a digital platform into a space for social advocacy. Comics like these prove that visual communication is essential in translating regional social crises into a universal human language, encouraging society to not only recognize these realities but also to develop a more profound sense of social responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

Digital comic "Pupus Putus Sekolah" by Kurnia Harta Winata serves as a highly effective reflective medium in portraying the social reality of school dropouts in Indonesia. Applying Djelantik's Aesthetic Theory, the comic successfully integrates aspects of form, weight, and appearance into a harmonious whole. The use of expressive cartoon-style illustrations, a warm color palette symbolizing simplicity, and the vertical Webtoon format has proven effective in building emotional resonance and allowing readers to digest complex social messages more easily.

The character of Pupus represents the complexities of educational issues that go beyond economic barriers; it encompasses the psychological burden of children forced into premature adulthood and the occasional inability of the formal education system to meet certain students' emotional and intellectual needs. The inclusion of the "apprentice" learning model within the storyline provides a fresh perspective on the flexibility of non-formal education. Ultimately, the high level of reader engagement and empathetic responses confirms that digital comics are not merely a form of entertainment, but a strategic visual communication tool for social campaigns, moral education, and raising public awareness regarding humanitarian issues in Indonesia.

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