

Critical Literacy Narratives in Digital Comics: A Semiotic Analysis of Social Critique on Indonesian Webtoons

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ABSTRACT

Background. Indonesian webtoons have become a dynamic cultural medium, blending visual artistry with episodic storytelling to address pressing social issues. The growing popularity of these digital comics among young audiences creates opportunities for fostering critical literacy, yet systematic analyses of their semiotic strategies remain scarce. This study examines how social critiques are embedded in Indonesian webtoons and how these narratives encourage audiences to engage critically with socio-political realities.

Purpose. The research aimed to identify thematic patterns, semiotic modes, and multimodal strategies that contribute to constructing social critique within webtoon narratives.

Method. A qualitative design was employed using multimodal semiotic analysis, integrating Kress and van Leeuwen's framework with Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model. Ten Indonesian webtoons were purposively selected based on thematic relevance and popularity, resulting in the analysis of 450 episodes and 3,125 coded instances of semiotic elements.

Results. Findings revealed that visual strategies accounted for 58.7% of semiotic instances, with class disparity, gender inequality, and political corruption as dominant themes. Symbolic imagery, color contrasts, and visual metaphors were central to delivering critique, often complemented by textual elements for nuance. Multimodal strategies proved particularly effective in addressing gender issues. Case study evidence from Urban Fractures illustrated how narrative pacing and recurring symbols fostered both individual reflection and participatory audience dialogue.

Conclusion. The study concludes that Indonesian webtoons strategically employ visual semiotics to navigate socio-political constraints while promoting critical engagement. The novelty lies in combining multimodal semiotic analysis with critical literacy theory to explore popular digital media as a vehicle for socio-political discourse.

KEYWORDS

Critical Literacy, Semiotic Analysis, Webtoons

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesian webtoons reflect the complexities of local and global cultural intersections. Many creators draw from traditional folklore, modern urban experiences, and pressing societal concerns such as inequality, gender roles, and political corruption (Chairil dkk., 2023). This dynamic blend of content provides fertile ground for exploring how visual and textual elements interact to produce meaning.

The interplay between image and text in digital comics makes them a rich medium for semiotic analysis, especially when examining layers of implied critique embedded within seemingly simple narratives (Makai, 2021).

The integration of social critique into popular media aligns with the concept of critical literacy, which emphasizes the ability to read and interpret texts beyond their surface meaning (Zhu dkk., 2024). According to Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model, readers should engage with texts as code breakers, meaning makers, text users, and text critics (Pratiwi dkk., 2022). In the context of webtoons, this means not only understanding the storyline and characters but also recognizing the underlying ideological messages and questioning how these narratives challenge or reinforce societal norms. This theoretical lens provides a foundation for examining how digital comics operate as spaces for public dialogue and critical engagement (Alfattah, 2025).

Narratives in Indonesian webtoons frequently employ symbolism, satire, and allegory to communicate social critique. Certain visual motifs, color schemes, or character archetypes may be strategically used to evoke associations with real-world political figures, historical events, or cultural stereotypes (Boyd, 2021). Such semiotic cues require active interpretation, demanding that readers bring their own cultural knowledge and critical awareness to the reading process. These strategies highlight the capacity of digital comics to serve as a subtle yet powerful form of resistance or commentary within the constraints of popular entertainment (Chakraborty, 2021).

The rise of participatory culture in the digital era has amplified the reach and impact of socially critical narratives in webtoons (Dinata & Juniarta, 2024). Readers are no longer passive consumers but active participants, engaging in comment threads, fan art, and social media discussions that extend the life and meaning of the comic beyond its original publication (M. Putri & Kurniawati, 2025). This participatory dimension allows social critiques to resonate more widely, fostering communities that share, debate, and reinterpret the messages embedded in these visual narratives. The interactive nature of the medium makes it an important cultural space for negotiating meanings and questioning dominant ideologies (Wildy, 2024).

Existing scholarship on Indonesian webtoons has predominantly focused on their entertainment value, narrative structure, or audience engagement, leaving limited exploration of how these works function as mediums for social critique through the lens of critical literacy (Park, t.t.). While several studies address the general impact of comics on literacy and cultural awareness, few systematically investigate how semiotic elements within digital comics construct layered meanings that encourage readers to question social realities. This absence of a targeted analytical approach leaves a gap in understanding the ideological depth of Indonesian webtoons (Baker, 2020).

Research into critical literacy often privileges printed texts or traditional media, with relatively little attention given to the multimodal features of digital storytelling platforms like webtoons (Sunbeam, 2022). The combination of visual symbols, textual cues, and interactive engagement poses unique interpretive challenges that are not fully addressed by existing frameworks. Consequently, the ways in which Indonesian webtoons deploy these multimodal resources to present, mask, or subvert social critique remain underexplored (McGarry, 2020).

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework offers a useful perspective for bridging this gap, as it addresses meaning-making across modes and contexts (Lesjak & Thy, 2024). However, its application in the study of Indonesian webtoons is scarce, especially when integrated with critical literacy theory to unpack how audiences decode ideological messages. This theoretical

synergy could illuminate the semiotic strategies used to provoke reflection, resistance, or dialogue among readers (Nurohmah dkk., 2024).

Scholarly literature also lacks a culturally specific analysis that considers how local social issues—such as class inequality, gender dynamics, or political corruption—are embedded in visual storytelling forms accessible to a mass audience (Berube, 2025). Without such investigation, the transformative potential of webtoons as tools for fostering critical literacy in Indonesian society remains poorly understood, limiting both academic discourse and educational practice (Milton & Cobelo, 2023).

Addressing this gap is essential because webtoons have become a pervasive cultural form among Indonesian youth, making them a strategic site for fostering critical literacy skills (Kim, 2023). By uncovering how social critiques are encoded in visual and textual elements, educators, creators, and researchers can better leverage the medium to encourage deeper engagement with issues of justice, equality, and cultural identity. The popularity of the format ensures that such interventions have the potential for widespread reach and impact (Dewi dkk., 2021).

Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of multimodality emphasizes the importance of understanding how multiple semiotic modes such as images, text, and layout—work together to produce meaning. Applying this perspective alongside critical literacy theory allows for a nuanced examination of how Indonesian webtoons structure their narratives to invite or resist particular readings. This combined lens can reveal the implicit power relations and cultural assumptions embedded within the medium, offering insights relevant for both media studies and literacy education.

The present study aims to conduct a semiotic analysis of selected Indonesian webtoons to identify how they embed and communicate social critique within their narratives. By doing so, it seeks to expand the scholarly understanding of digital comics as critical literacy tools, while also providing a framework for educators to integrate such media into literacy practices. The underlying hypothesis is that Indonesian webtoons employ specific multimodal strategies that both reflect and challenge dominant societal discourses, thereby serving as catalysts for critical engagement among readers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a semiotic analysis, to examine the presence and construction of social critique within Indonesian webtoons. This approach was chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of both the visual and textual modes of meaning-making, focusing on how critical literacy narratives are embedded in the medium. The analysis drew on multimodal semiotics to uncover the interplay of symbols, narrative structures, and ideological cues that invite or resist critical interpretation by readers (S. Putri, 2023).

The population consisted of Indonesian webtoons published on popular digital platforms such as LINE Webtoon, which have a wide readership among young audiences. From this population, a purposive sampling strategy was applied to select ten titles that explicitly or implicitly addressed social issues relevant to the Indonesian socio-cultural context, including gender inequality, political corruption, and class disparity. Selection criteria included popularity ranking, thematic relevance, and narrative richness to ensure the chosen works provided sufficient depth for semiotic interpretation (Wilde, 2023).

Data collection relied on an analytical instrument developed from Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal analysis framework, combined with elements of Luke and Freebody's Four Resources

Model for critical literacy (Artina dkk., 2025). This instrument guided the identification and categorization of visual motifs, color symbolism, textual cues, and narrative strategies that contribute to the construction of social critique. A coding sheet was employed to ensure systematic documentation of recurring semiotic features across the sampled works.

The research procedure began with an initial review of each selected webtoon to familiarize the researcher with narrative arcs and recurring characters. Episodes were then analyzed scene by scene, with both visual and textual elements examined for semiotic significance (Haessler, 2022). Coded data were organized into thematic clusters representing distinct forms of social critique, which were then interpreted within the frameworks of multimodality and critical literacy. Findings were validated through peer debriefing with experts in media studies and Indonesian culture to enhance credibility and interpretive accuracy (Rhee dkk., 2022).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The dataset consisted of ten Indonesian webtoons selected based on thematic relevance, popularity, and narrative richness. Each webtoon contained between 25 and 70 episodes, with an average of 45 episodes per title. Across the dataset, a total of 450 episodes were analyzed, yielding 3,125 coded instances of semiotic elements, including visual motifs, color symbolism, character archetypes, and intertextual references. Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of thematic categories identified across the ten webtoons. Social critique was most commonly expressed through depictions of class disparity, gender inequality, and political corruption. Lesser but still significant themes included environmental issues and critiques of consumerism.

Table 1. Frequency of Thematic Categories Across Webtoons

Theme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Class disparity	872	27.9
Gender inequality	745	23.8
Political corruption	691	22.1
Environmental issues	452	14.5
Consumerism critique	365	11.7
Total	3,125	100

The dominance of class disparity as a recurring theme indicates the centrality of socio-economic tensions in Indonesian digital storytelling. Webtoon narratives frequently used contrasting visual depictions of urban affluence and rural poverty to highlight economic divides. These contrasts were reinforced through symbolic use of colors, such as bright tones for elite spaces and muted or earthy tones for marginalized settings. Gender inequality emerged as another prevalent theme, often presented through interpersonal relationships and institutional settings. Female characters were shown navigating patriarchal structures, with some narratives employing satire to challenge gender norms. These representations encouraged readers to question traditional role expectations. Political corruption was depicted in both direct and allegorical forms. Storylines included corrupt officials, rigged systems, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, often using humor or metaphor to bypass overt censorship. Such portrayals invited audiences to interpret beyond literal plotlines and consider the broader societal implications.

Table 2 details the distribution of semiotic modes identified in the dataset, categorizing them into visual, textual, and multimodal strategies. Visual strategies accounted for the highest proportion, underscoring the primacy of imagery in digital comics.

Table 2. Distribution of Semiotic Modes in Indonesian Webtoons

Semiotic Mode	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Visual only	1,835	58.7
Textual only	615	19.7
Multimodal combined	675	21.6
Total	3,125	100

The prevalence of purely visual strategies suggests that many critical messages were encoded in non-verbal elements. This reliance on imagery aligns with the multimodal nature of webtoons, where narrative and meaning are co-constructed through art rather than text alone.

The predominance of visual strategies reflects the strength of symbolic imagery in conveying critique subtly, particularly in contexts where overt political statements may face resistance. Visual metaphors, recurring motifs, and exaggerated caricatures were common devices to signal discontent or resistance without direct textual confrontation. Textual strategies, although less frequent, played an essential role in reinforcing or clarifying the intended critique. Dialogue often served as a space for irony, sarcasm, or rhetorical questioning, prompting the reader to reconsider surface-level meanings. Captions, footnotes, and textual inserts sometimes broke the fourth wall to directly address the audience. Multimodal strategies combined the strengths of both image and text, often using juxtaposition to create interpretive tension. For example, a cheerful visual scene might be accompanied by cynical narration, prompting readers to reconcile contradictory cues and engage in deeper critical thinking.

The high frequency of visual strategies aligns with the dominance of class disparity and political corruption themes identified earlier. Depicting socio-economic contrasts and institutional dysfunction visually allows creators to bypass textual censorship while still delivering a potent critique. This visual coding relies heavily on the reader's ability to decode symbolic language, a key component of critical literacy.

Gender inequality themes often relied more on multimodal strategies. While visual cues depicted gendered spaces and behaviors, textual elements provided the necessary nuance to expose societal double standards or contradictions in character behavior. This interplay made gender critique more accessible to audiences unfamiliar with feminist discourse. Environmental issues and consumerism critique showed balanced use of visual and textual modes. Environmental narratives often used lush versus degraded landscapes as visual contrasts, while consumerism critiques leaned on satirical dialogue and exaggerated visual branding to question consumption culture.

One notable case study is the webtoon *Urban Fractures*, which centers on the lives of marginalized communities living under constant threat of eviction in a rapidly modernizing city. The narrative intertwines personal struggles with systemic issues, revealing the human cost of unchecked urban development. Visual contrasts between luxury apartments and informal settlements were stark, employing rich detail in architecture and texture to evoke emotional responses.

Episodes frequently incorporated recurring symbolic imagery, such as cracked walls and broken streetlights, to represent societal neglect. The storyline also integrated flashback sequences to juxtapose the city's history with its current state, subtly critiquing urban policies that prioritize profit over people. Audience engagement for *Urban Fractures* was exceptionally high, with comment sections filled with personal testimonies from readers who related the narrative to their own experiences. This interaction created a participatory dialogue that extended the comic's critique beyond its fictional setting.

The success of *Urban Fractures* in fostering critical literacy lies in its layered semiotic construction. Visual storytelling carried the weight of critique, while occasional textual interventions provided interpretive anchors for the audience. The symbolic use of decaying infrastructure not only reflected economic disparity but also functioned as a metaphor for institutional decay. Narrative pacing played a significant role in sustaining audience engagement. Slow-build sequences allowed readers to immerse themselves in character development before major socio-political conflicts emerged. This approach deepened the impact of the critique by making systemic injustice personal and relatable. Reader participation in online discussions indicated active engagement with the underlying issues. Comments often linked the fictional events to real-world policies, demonstrating that audiences were decoding the semiotic cues in ways aligned with critical literacy objectives.

The case of *Urban Fractures* demonstrates the alignment between multimodal semiotic strategies and audience reception in fostering critical literacy. The combination of strong visual contrasts, recurring symbols, and selective textual reinforcement created a rich interpretive environment that encouraged readers to draw parallels with lived realities. The participatory culture surrounding the webtoon amplified its social critique, transforming individual interpretation into a communal act of meaning-making. This dynamic illustrates the potential of webtoons as digital spaces where critical discourse can emerge organically. Insights from this case parallel broader dataset patterns, confirming that visual dominance in semiotic strategies is not only a stylistic choice but also a pragmatic one, allowing creators to communicate sensitive critiques in an accessible and resonant manner.

The analysis revealed that Indonesian webtoons embed social critique predominantly through visual semiotic strategies, with class disparity, gender inequality, and political corruption as the most recurring themes. Visual contrasts, recurring symbols, and strategic use of color palettes served as primary vehicles for these critiques, often bypassing overt textual statements. Multimodal combinations of text and imagery were particularly effective for gender-related narratives, while environmental and consumerism critiques used a balanced mix of both modes. Case study evidence from *Urban Fractures* demonstrated that symbolic imagery and narrative pacing could foster deep audience engagement and critical reflection. Recurring motifs such as cracked walls and decaying infrastructure acted as metaphors for systemic neglect, while textual interventions clarified interpretive intentions. This webtoon generated significant participatory discourse, with readers linking fictional scenarios to real-life policies and events. Findings also highlighted that audience engagement extended beyond passive consumption. Comment sections functioned as active spaces for public dialogue, enabling readers to reinterpret and expand the social critique presented in the comics. The participatory dimension confirmed that critical literacy in the digital era is both an individual and collective practice.

Existing studies on comics and critical literacy have emphasized the role of multimodality in encouraging readers to question ideological messages. This research aligns with such findings but extends them by highlighting how Indonesian webtoons specifically use visual dominance as a strategic adaptation to local socio-political contexts. Prior works on Western graphic novels often foreground textual depth, while this study finds meaning conveyed primarily through symbolic imagery. Comparative studies on Japanese and Korean webtoons reveal that social critique is often encoded in genre-specific conventions such as romance or fantasy. Indonesian creators appear to blend these genres with socio-political realism, resulting in narratives that resonate both culturally and politically. The blending of allegory with everyday realism distinguishes Indonesian webtoons

from their regional counterparts. Earlier research into online participatory culture has noted its potential for amplifying messages, but limited attention has been paid to its role in reinforcing critical literacy. The current findings show that audience interaction not only extends narrative meaning but also supports the interpretive labor required for semiotic decoding, an aspect underrepresented in prior scholarship.

The prominence of visual strategies signifies a shift in how social critique is communicated in digital media environments where textual content can be more easily censored or contested. Imagery serves as both a shield and a conduit, allowing sensitive messages to circulate under the guise of entertainment while still inviting critical interpretation. This adaptation reflects a creative negotiation with the constraints of media freedom. The findings also signify the growing role of participatory spaces as sites of public pedagogy. Reader commentary, fan art, and social media discussions extend the webtoon's critical engagement beyond the page, transforming audiences into co-constructors of meaning. This transformation underscores the evolving nature of literacy in digital contexts, where meaning-making is collaborative and dynamic. Patterns observed in the dataset signal an emerging aesthetic of critique unique to Indonesian digital comics. This aesthetic blends local socio-political references with globally recognizable visual tropes, creating narratives that are accessible to domestic audiences while remaining legible to international readers familiar with comic culture.

The findings have pedagogical implications for literacy education. Incorporating Indonesian webtoons into classroom practices could foster critical literacy skills by encouraging students to decode visual and textual cues, question embedded ideologies, and engage in collaborative interpretation. Such integration could bridge academic literacy objectives with popular cultural interests. For creators, the research highlights the strategic power of visual semiotics in communicating sensitive social critiques without overt confrontation. Understanding how audiences decode and engage with these cues can inform the crafting of more impactful narratives that balance accessibility with critical depth. Policymakers and cultural institutions may also view webtoons as valuable tools for social awareness campaigns. The ability of these narratives to engage large audiences while embedding critical perspectives offers a culturally relevant channel for promoting social justice, civic engagement, and media literacy.

The dominance of visual strategies is partly explained by the multimodal affordances of the webtoon format, which privileges vertical scrolling and episodic reading. This format emphasizes imagery as the primary conveyor of meaning, with text functioning as a supplement rather than the core. Indonesian creators exploit this affordance to embed critiques subtly and visually. Socio-political conditions in Indonesia also contribute to the preference for visual semiotics. In contexts where explicit political criticism can attract unwanted scrutiny, visual allegory offers a safer and often more impactful mode of resistance. This aligns with historical traditions of using art and performance as indirect vehicles for dissent. Audience demographics further explain the findings. The majority of webtoon readers in Indonesia are young digital natives accustomed to interpreting visual content quickly and intuitively. This literacy profile encourages creators to lean on visual symbolism, knowing that their audience possesses the cultural fluency to decode it.

Further research could expand the dataset to include lesser-known or independent Indonesian webtoons, potentially revealing alternative aesthetic and thematic strategies for social critique. Examining works beyond the mainstream platform ecosystem may uncover more experimental uses of semiotics and narrative form. Collaborative projects between educators and webtoon creators could be developed to design content explicitly aimed at fostering critical literacy. Such initiatives

could serve as case studies for integrating popular media into formal education while maintaining creative integrity. Longitudinal studies on audience engagement could track how readers' interpretive skills evolve through sustained interaction with socially critical webtoons. These findings could inform both literacy pedagogy and cultural policy, ensuring that the potential of digital comics as tools for civic engagement is fully realized.

CONCLUSION

The research identified that Indonesian webtoons embed social critique predominantly through visual semiotic strategies, with class disparity, gender inequality, and political corruption emerging as the most prominent themes. Visual contrasts, symbolic imagery, and multimodal combinations proved central to constructing narratives that invite critical literacy engagement while circumventing direct textual confrontation. This reliance on visual dominance distinguishes Indonesian webtoons from similar digital comic cultures in other regions.

The study contributes conceptually by integrating multimodal semiotic analysis with Luke and Freebody's critical literacy framework to examine digital comics as tools for socio-political discourse. Methodologically, the combination of thematic frequency mapping with detailed case study analysis offers a replicable model for examining visual narratives across different cultural contexts. This dual approach bridges media studies and literacy education, expanding the scope of critical literacy research into digital popular culture.

The research was limited to ten popular Indonesian webtoons hosted on mainstream platforms, potentially overlooking critical narratives in independent or niche works. Audience engagement was analyzed through visible online interactions without longitudinal tracking of interpretive changes over time. Future research should expand the dataset to include alternative platforms and employ mixed-method approaches to capture evolving reader interpretations, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how webtoons influence critical literacy.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

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