SOCIAL CRITICISM IN INDONESIAN COMICS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW (SLR) STUDY OF MULTIMODALITY AND MEDIA POWER

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a systematic literature review of several literatures that examine the position of comics as a medium for social criticism in a contemporary context. Through the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this study examines the construction of discourse, visual forms, and production dynamics inherent in comic works, both in editorial strip formats, graphic novels, and digital platforms. The results of the review show that comics are not only a symbolic articulation space for social inequality, power, and representational politics, but also act as an arena for negotiation between creative expression and the institutional structure of the media. The literature analyzed is mapped into five main thematic clusters: (1) Comics as a Medium for Social and Political Criticism (2) Social Representation in Indonesian Comic Strips: Symbols, Figures, and Criticism, (3) Visual Structure, Multimodality, and Comic Language, (4) History, Historiography, and Development of Comics, and (5) Media Production, Editorial, and Censorship. This study also identifies conceptual gaps that have not been widely touched upon, especially related to aspects of critical studies in reading comics, systematic multimodal approaches, and intersectional representation. These findings are expected to be a conceptual contribution in the development of studies of visual culture, popular media, and representation in the Indonesian comic landscape.

Keywords: Comics, Indonesia, Social Critics

INTRODUCTION

Comics as a form of popular culture have undergone significant development, moving from mere entertainment to a vehicle for social, political, and ideological expression. With the development of print and digital culture, comics are now found not only in children's media or entertainment spaces, but also in editorial formats, graphic novels, and online media that actively discuss contemporary issues and became an inescapable part of the public discourse landscape (Bajraghosa and Jatmiko 2023) (Benatti 2024). In the Indonesian context, Many local comics have become well-known today, such as *Benny & Mice*, *Si Juki*, *Tahi Lalats*, and those still published today, such as the comic strips *Timun* and *Panji Koming* in the *Kompas* daily which have strengthened comics' position as a reflection of the transformation of Indonesian society.

Studies on comics have developed in various directions, ranging from content criticism and analysis of production and distribution to multimodal and representational theories. Numerous studies in global and Indonesia have shown that comics can convey social critiques of power, economic inequality, gender issues, and even societal moral problems (Danesi 2013), (Mufti and Syam 2018), (Novriansyah 2006), (Ersyad 2020), and (Ramadhani and Putra 2017). This medium is appealing because of its ability to combine text and images in a concise yet easy-to-understand narrative format. In many cases, especially in Indonesia history as has been explained well by Bonneff (Bonneff 2008) or Seno Gumira Ajidarma (Ajidarma 2021), comics are more effective than lengthy texts in conveying sensitive messages due to the power of visual metaphors and humor (Dwi Waluyanto 2000).

However, despite the continued growth of comics studies, few studies have systematically summarized and synthesized the literature, particularly in the context of Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Therefore, this study was conducted in the form of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to map the various approaches, findings, and theoretical frameworks in the study of comics and social criticism. Using the SLR method (Visic 2022), the author identified key themes emerging from the available literature and identified underexplored research gaps.

The scope of this study focuses on literature that discusses the world of comics, including definitions, the historical nature of comics, and the methods used. The main timeframe for discussion will be 1997 to 2022. This period was chosen because it encompasses the post-New Order era in Indonesia, a period marked by increased freedom of the press and expression. During this period, comics such as *Timun*, *Panji Koming*, and *Benny & Mice* in *Kompas* daily developed rapidly as a critique of bureaucracy, corruption, and post-reform social conditions. Therefore, the primary focus of this study is to examine how comics function as a medium for social criticism and how representations in comics shape the meaning of public issues.

This SLR includes not only journal articles but also relevant academic books, dissertations, and proceedings. This study is expected to not only provide a comprehensive overview of the development of comic studies and social criticism, but also serve as a starting point for further research—particularly in the context of the author's dissertation which focuses on the *Timun* comic strip in the *Kompas* daily.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to identify, filter, and synthesize various academic studies that discuss comics as a medium for social criticism within the context of culture, media, and power.

1. Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted through online databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate, as well as academic books available in print and online. Keywords used in the search included:

"comics" OR "comic strips" AND "social criticism" AND "Indonesia"

Keywords were also adapted into English to reach international sources:

"comics" OR "strip comics" AND "social criticism" AND "cultural studies"

2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Academic articles and books	Popular articles or non-academic news
Focus on comics, cartoons, or comic strips, or graphics containing elements of social criticism	Studies that only discuss comics as entertainment without analysis or comics for other purposes
Using scientific principles and fully accessible	Articles without scientific references or not fully accessible
Indonesian or English	Other languages

3. Selection Procedure (PRISMA Protocol)

The literature screening process followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) principles (Abrori et al. 2025), which is a guide and checklist used in systematic review research. (Systematic Literature Review/SLR) to improve transparency and quality of reporting results. Based on this, the following steps were taken:

• A total of 412 initial sources were found through searches on Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate.

• After reading the titles and abstracts, 310 sources were eliminated due to their relevance to the theme and inclusion criteria.

• 102 articles and books were then thoroughly read.

• From this selection, 43 primary sources were selected for analysis because they met all inclusion criteria and were relevant to the study's focus.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Comics as a Medium for Social and Political Criticism

Comics, as a popular medium, have long been used to convey social and political criticism with a distinctive approach: lighthearted, humorous, and easily understood by the general public. Lent (Lent 1999) and Wijayanto (Wijayanto 2015) explore how cartoons and editorial comics were used as a form of political satire in Southeast Asia, particularly in the face of authoritarian regimes and repressive social conditions. Mahamood (Mahamood 1997) underscores that cartoons became an underground form of expression in Malaysia when conventional media was silenced. A similar

trend is seen in the works of Rahmat Riyadi and Mice Cartoon, which sharply convey social commentary in the post-New Order era.

Comics also play a role in resisting the hegemony of global capitalism, as argued by Dorfman and Mattelart (Dorfman and Mattelart 2019) in their ideological reading of Disney comics. Comics are considered a vehicle for the spread of Western-style capitalist ideology in the Third World. In a Indonesia context, especially during the New Order and reform era, when foreign comics, especially manga from Japan dominated the market, works like Garudayana (Lent 2014) demonstrate resistance to foreign pop culture by embracing local themes and Indonesian mythology in a modern visual context.

Furthermore, protest cartoons, as studied by Totry and Medzini (Totry and Medzini 2013) are used in public demonstrations and serve as a tool for political communication in countries with low literacy rates. Naji Al-Ali's Handala character has even become an icon of resistance in the Arab world. In Indonesia, comic strips like *Panji Koming* (Setiawan 2002) frequently critique corruption, bureaucracy, and social inequality.

2. Social Representation in Comic Strips: Symbols, Characters, and Criticism

Indonesian comic strips have a unique characteristic in conveying social criticism through the representation of characters and visual symbols. Throughout its history, comics have often satirically depicted how social classes have been presented in a different and striking way. In many cases, the characters in comic strips which represented elite figures such as officials, businessmen, or politicians are often depicted with symbols of power: neat suits, thick ties, protruding bellies, or sitting in plush chairs. In contrast, ordinary people or the lower classes are depicted with thin bodies, shabby clothes, and resigned expressions. This representation creates a visual dichotomy that emphasizes inequality and wide social distance.

In the Timun comic strip, this visualization appears consistently. Elite characters are depicted in luxurious rooms with large tables, expensive curtains, and symbolic props such as cash, cars, and suitcases. Meanwhile, the "victim" characters or ordinary people are depicted sitting on the floor, sweating, and crouching. According to Stuart Hall's theory of representation, this process is not simply a reflection of reality, but a form of social construction that spreads certain meanings about who is strong and who is weak.

Symbols also play a crucial role in conveying social criticism. Rizkyanoor (Rizkyanoor et al. 2017) note that through humorous visualizations in *Mice Comics*, symbols such as banknotes, cats, or worn-out pans are used as visual devices to satirize and criticize government policies. In Timun, symbols such as brown envelopes, luxury bags, and expensive watches are often used to represent corrupt practices and the consumptive lifestyles of officials. These symbols are not explained verbally but are instead allowed to speak through the visual context and interactions between characters. Furthermore, social representations in comic strips also construct certain moral images. Figures identified as elite are depicted not only as wealthy, but also as cunning, laughing sarcastically, or wielding power manipulatively (Black 2009) (Courperie et al. 1971). Conversely, "victim" characters are depicted as innocent, submissive, and often the object of exploitation. This representation reinforces the notion that comic strips function as a mechanism for criticizing unequal social structures.

Chute (2010) states that comics are a form of visual narrative capable of simultaneously revealing power relations through text and images. This allows readers to grasp social complexities through facial expressions, body postures, and panel sequences. In this regard, social representation in comics becomes an important means of addressing structural injustice in a way that is easily accessible to the general public (Chute 2010).

However, these representations are not always free from stereotypes. Sometimes, the characters of the common people are reduced to symbols of passive suffering, powerlessness, and a tendency to accept their circumstances. In some cases, visual repetition even occurs, normalizing the subordinate position of this group within the social structure. Therefore, it is important to read social representation in comics not only as a form of sympathy, but also as a discourse that needs to be critiqued.

Overall, social representation in Indonesian comic strips, as seen in *Mice* and *Panji Koming*, plays a strategic role in conveying critiques of power relations. By constructing contrasting characters and visual symbols, comics not only entertain but also shape collective awareness of who benefits and who is disadvantaged within the existing social system.

3. Visual Structure, Multimodality, and the Language of Comics

Comics are a particularly rich form of discourse semiotically because they combine visual and verbal elements in a single multimodal space. Within this framework, Mario Saraceni calls comics "dynamic multimodal texts that enable simultaneous interaction between creator and reader through the channels of words and images." Elements such as panels, gutters, balloons, and captions function not only as visual supports but also as structures that shape the flow of time, space, and rhythm of the reading. Saraceni explains that:

> "*Panels are moments in time that represent events, not simply freeze them,*" and "*gutters are not simply empty spaces between panels, but places where readers actively create meaning from what is unseen*"
> (Saraceni 2003).

This approach aligns with the framework developed by Neil Cohn in visual language theory. In this regard, Cohn states that comics are not merely language, but rather are written through visual language in the same way that novels are written in English (Cohn 2013). Cohn further developed the narrative categories of establisher–initial–peak–release, which function like syntax in verbal sentences. This explains how a sequence of images can create a cohesive narrative structure. In his other book, *Who Understands Comics?* (Cohn 2020), he emphasized that understanding comics is the result of a deeper construction, in this case, culture. Visual narrative is also a complex system, which, in his view, can be compared to language, music, or arithmetic. In his follow-up, *The Patterns of Comics*, Cohn emphasized the importance of the connection between comic structure and culture, citing several examples, such as the differences between Japanese manga and Western comic strips (Cohn 2024).

In the Indonesian context, visual structure also exhibits local characteristics. Laine Berman points out that in *Panji Koming*, for example, the panel layout can be dynamic, tending to be dense, and sometimes non-linear. This is then complemented by several visualizations and word consonances closely related to local regional genius, such as in this case Javanese culture, which

then makes this comic unique (Lent 2001). This is also seen in other comic equivalents such as *Timun*, and *Doyok* in Lembar cerita bergambar (Lembergar) *Poskota*. On the other hand, comic books offer more stable visualizations with several panels per edition and their series are often continued, this is seen in Japanese comic books such as *Doraemon*, *Dragon Ball*, as well as Western comics such as *Tintin* and *Captain America* (Eka Kusuma and Setyoko 2023). Furthermore, Chen et al (Chen et al. 2023) added that referring to the present day, comics are not only depicted in printed visual media but also digitally, which we then know as digital comics (such as webtoons and Instagram comics), where this form of comic brings innovation in narrative structure. The storytelling method such as vertical "scrolling" creates a "new visual time flow" that is different from printed comics. This impacts how we read pauses, climaxes, and visual surprises in online comics (Berube and Priego 2022).

From a social critique perspective, visual structure is crucial. Several examples, such as character gestures, facial expressions, and visual props like envelopes, jackets, and ties, have political meaning. This demonstrates that social criticism in comic strips is not only embedded in the text but also in the visual image (Iliescu 2016). Understanding visual grammar allows readers to grasp hidden messages without the need for explicit verbal language. Based on this, comics, in this case, utilize the power of multimodality to construct complex narratives involving cognitive, cultural, and symbolic processes. As a negation of the assumption that comics are light texts, they become a "field of discourse" where social and political meanings are negotiated, naturally with humor and jokes.

4. History, Historiography, and Development of Comics

The history of Indonesian comics reflects the complex dynamics of popular culture, particularly in terms of the intersection of external influences and local identities. Indonesian comics did not emerge from a vacuum; they were shaped by a history of colonialism, foreign cultural intervention, and efforts to internalize local values. John A. Lent (Lent 2015) refers to this process as "*zigzagging*", a back-and-forth between transnational styles and the desire for local authenticity. Even early comics like Kho Wang Gie's Put On, according to Lent (2015), already show a strong influence from Western strips, both in their panel structure and visual style.

During the Japanese occupation, the influence of manga began to permeate local visual styles. Japanese comic artists like Saseo Ono introduced fast-drawing techniques and narrative patterns that would later become part of the Asian comic aesthetic (Bonneff 2008). Lent (Lent 2015) notes that although the initial purpose of comics at the time was military propaganda, the presence of Japanese visual aesthetics left a lasting imprint on the development of Indonesian comic forms.

After independence, comic artists like R.A. Kosasih attempted to develop a national comic form by adapting local stories like the Mahabharata and Ramayana into a visual medium (Nuriarta 2024). Bonneff also cited Kosasih as a pioneer who combined local narratives with Western storytelling styles. He argued that comics were not only a form of entertainment, but also "social documents" that captured the cultural, political, and economic dynamics of Indonesian society (Bonneff 2008). Continuing during the New Order era, the state used comics as a medium for development propaganda, exploiting official narratives of nationalism and stability. At the same

time, editorial cartoons and comic strips emerged that subtly infused social criticism, such as *Oom Pasikom* (Sudarta 2007) and *Panji Koming* (Setiawan 2002), published in the daily *Kompas*.

The post-New Order era opened up greater space for critique and experimentation with form. Lent (Lent 2014) emphasized that the Reformation era was marked by the relaxation of censorship, the rise of independent publishers (Oktafian and Utama 2022a), and the emergence of digital distribution, which accelerated the spread of comics. Several comic artists, such as Muhammad "Mice" Misrad and Rahmat Riyadi, utilized this space to convey sharper and more explicit social criticism (Puspitasari 2013). In this context, comic strips can serve as a visual channel for representing the public's voice against inequality, corruption, and elite hypocrisy. They emerge as a deeply rooted form of critique, one that retains a distinctive Indonesian style and humor. Their visual language not only reflects critique but also forms a distinctive collective discourse. Such comics become a "field of articulation" where public issues are negotiated in a humorous yet critical manner.

On the other hand, Indonesian comics are also increasingly open to independent production models. Various communities and other independent publishers are beginning to introduce social themes, identity, and even alternative histories into visual formats. Bonneff (Bonneff 2008) noted the importance of reading parks, newsstands, and other informal distribution channels in establishing a comic reader ecosystem that does not always rely on large markets. This demonstrates that comics are also a cultural practice connected to the people's economic structure.

In his work, Alkatiri (MA 1993) (MA 2000) noted that Japanese manga once dominated over 90% of the Indonesian comic market. This encouraged some local creators to pursue a path where local comics adapted the art styles of Japanese comics. This effort was undertaken by Is Yuniarto, for example, who created Garudayana, a graphic novel that combines wayang stories with manga format. According to Lent (Lent 2014), this phenomenon represents a form of negotiation of ideas that allows local content to remain competitive in the global market. Referring to its long history, the history of Indonesian comics demonstrates that comics are part of the popular cultural arena that not only presents stories but also shapes, negotiates, and challenges dominant narratives. No study of comic strips would be complete without understanding the legacy of visual history—from colonialism, propaganda, to the post-reformation era that continues to this day.

5. Media Production, Editorialism, and Censorship

The production of comic strips in print media, such as daily newspapers, cannot be separated from the editorial context and institutional structure of the media itself. In the Indonesian context, comic strips published in national newspapers like *Kompas* serve not only as entertainment but also as a space for social criticism that must undergo several stages of filtering. The literature reviewed in this SLR demonstrates how comics, particularly editorial cartoons and comic strips, are constantly positioned in a tug-of-war between cartoonist creativity, editorial policies, and external structural pressures such as censorship, market interests, and media ownership.

John A. Lent (Lent 2001) (Lent 2015) asserts that comic strips in Asia, including Indonesia, have been part of the print media landscape, closely tied to political and social contexts, from the outset. He notes that despite post-Suharto media liberalization, pressures on expression persist,

both through direct and indirect censorship. This contributes to the subtlety of comic strip content in conveying social criticism. In this regard, newspaper editors play a crucial role, indirectly controlling the boundaries of expression.

In his book, *Transnationalism in East and Southeast Asian Comics Art*, Lent (Lent et al. 2022), also highlights that cartoonists often employ negotiation strategies to ensure their content passes editorial screening. For example, the use of visual metaphors, allegories, or blunt humor are used as techniques to convey criticism in a way that remains acceptable to both editors and the general readership. This demonstrates that censorship is not only carried out by external institutions but also by editors themselves as a form of self-censorship or internal oversight that is both symbolic and ideological.

Censorship in the media context can take the form of structural and cultural censorship. Lent, on the other hand, also points out that in Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, censorship often comes in the form of pressure from media owners or governments who discourage overly critical content (Lent 2014). This aligns with Manning and Phiddian's observation (Manning and Phiddian 2005) that censorship of political cartoonists can be achieved through termination of employment contracts, editorial intervention, or even legal action if the cartoon's content is deemed offensive to certain groups. Referring to its Indonesian history, comics have experienced ups and downs in previous periods, starting from the era of Soekarno's leadership, where the government's response to comics was not so good, considering that comics were considered something dangerous for the spirit of revolution that was being stirred up at that time (Oktafian and Utama 2022b), to the ban because the publications contained elements that were not suitable for children's reading material. In this case, the comic artists then creatively anticipated by improving the quality of graphics and stories and compromising with the publishers so that their comics could be published to the public. In the case of comic strips in mainstream media like *Kompas*, although not always explicitly censored, cartoonists need to conform to editorial policies and avoid violating sensitive cultural boundaries.

Sen and Hill caution that the reform era has not necessarily eliminated political pressure in the media world. They state that while state control has weakened, political-economic pressure has actually increased, particularly from media owners with political affiliations or business interests. This has made editors more cautious about publishing content deemed potentially disruptive to stability or relationships with certain parties (Hill and Sen 2011). In this regard, comic strips, as part of the media product, are also subject to similar dynamics.

Ignatius Haryanto, in the same book, asserts that media owner intervention in the newsroom is a form of indirect censorship that is difficult to track but crucial. Cartoonists and journalists working within them tend to engage in self-censorship, both consciously and unconsciously, to maintain their work and the media's position within the national political-economic landscape (Haryanto in Sen & Hill, 2011).

Janet Steele (2010), in her ethnographic study of the *Kompas* editorial staff, emphasized that journalists and editors operate within a tension between journalistic idealism and business interests. She noted that ethical journalistic values at Kompas, such as "prudence," "balance," and "politeness," are not merely editorial norms but also strategies for surviving political and market pressures. For cartoonists, this means that the critical space in comic strips like Timun must align with these values to allow for publication without conflicting with media structures (Steele in Sen & Hill, 2011).

Cartoonists' strategies in navigating censorship and editorial constraints can be seen as a form of creative adaptation. For example, in the book which entitled "*Berteriak dalam Bisikan*," GM Sudarta uses humor and local symbols to disguise criticism. Humor serves as a "wrapper" for social criticism, avoiding direct offense while still conveying its message to the reader. This technique is considered quite successful because it allows social criticism to be presented in a lighthearted and non-confrontational manner (Sudarta 2018).

Regarding media ownership, Lent (Lent 2014) highlights how media workers in Southeast Asia are vulnerable because they lack control over the content they publish. In this regard, comic strips, like news reports, are media products subject to market logic and the economic interests of publishing institutions. Comics that are overly critical or touch on sensitive issues may be rejected for publication, not because they are of poor quality, but because they do not align with "market tastes" or corporate strategies.

In the context of *Kompas*, Wijayanto (Wijayanto 2015) (2019) explains that although the editorial staff does not explicitly censor the content of comic strips like *Timun*, cartoonists remain aware of the symbolic boundaries that cannot be crossed. Criticism of corruption, for example, can be expressed, but must be packaged in a humorous manner that does not directly mention names or institutions. This demonstrates how the editorial staff performs a symbolic gatekeeping function: neither prohibiting nor allowing all expression to pass unchecked.

Thus, it can be concluded that comic strips, as a medium for social criticism in Indonesian print media, exist within a complex production structure. It must not only be visually appealing and communicative, but also negotiate the editorial constraints and cultural censorship inherent in media structures. Editors act as gatekeepers, determining how far criticism can be published. Censorship isn't always directly repressive, but can manifest in subtle forms, such as topic restrictions, choice of visual language, and even adjustments to market and political interests of media owners.

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH GAPS

This systematic review of the literature demonstrates that comics are a complex medium that not only provides entertainment but also plays a significant role in shaping social and political discourse. The literature findings confirm that comics, whether in the form of editorial strips, graphic novels, or digital webtoons, have been used to convey critiques of authoritarianism, corruption, social inequality, and gender construction. Comics also demonstrate their potential as a multimodal medium, combining visual and verbal language to shape ideological meaning. Furthermore, the findings also affirm that the historical trajectory of comics cannot be separated from the dynamics of media, censorship, and power negotiations. Indonesian comics, particularly those published in print media like *Kompas*, exhibit a tendency toward subtle, symbolic, and metaphorical criticism, framed within local values.

In this regard, the review underscores how the Indonesian comic tradition, particularly within print ecosystems like *Kompas* daily, has developed a distinctive mode of subtle, symbolic, and culturally embedded criticism. At the same tume, the historical transformation from print to digital platforms reveals evolving functions of comics, which is from metaphorical and institutionally mediated critique toward more diverse, participatory, and networked expressions in

contemporary digital cultures. The synthesis of these perspectives situates comic not only as cultural text but also dynamic social documents shaped by changing political climates and media infrastructures.

However, there are several research gaps that could serve as a foundation for further research. First, there is still very little empirical research on critical studies of comics. Existing studies focus primarily on the content and production of comics, rather than on their meaning. Second, there are not many studies that have in-depth applied a multimodal approach to local Indonesian comics with a rigorous theoretical framework (e.g., Cohn's visual grammar or Kress & van Leeuwen's multimodalism). Third, intersectional aspects—namely, the interrelationships between class, ethnicity, and gender—have not been explored in much detail.

While these gaps are important to note, this study consciously limits its focus to the representational dimensions of social criticism in Indonesian comics. Therefore, the approach used focuses more on analyzing the content and structure of visual discourse in the post-New Order context, without exploring aspects of audience reception or production communities in depth. Therefore, the results of this SLR are expected to provide a strong theoretical foundation and conceptual direction for further research in the fields of visual culture, media, and comics studies.

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