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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ISLAMIC COMICS ON CHARACTER EDUCATION AND LITERACY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengevaluasi efektivitas komik Islami sebagai media literasi visual dalam menguatkan pendidikan karakter dan budaya literasi siswa sekolah dasar di Pamekasan. Pendekatan penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus komparatif pada dua satuan pendidikan dasar berbasis Islam, yaitu SDN Potoan Laok 1 dan SD Quran Utrujah. Subjek penelitian meliputi 26 siswa kelas VI di SDN Potoan Laok 1 dengan intervensi komik bertema “*Stop Bullying*” dan 13 siswa kelas 3B di SD Quran Utrujah dengan intervensi komik bertema “*Jangan Pacaran dan Saling Menghargai*”. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam dengan guru dan orang tua, serta tes lisan *pre-test* dan *post-test* untuk mengukur pemahaman nilai karakter Islami. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa komik Islami efektif menjembatani nilai moral abstrak menjadi narasi visual yang konkret dan dekat dengan pengalaman keseharian siswa. Di SDN Potoan Laok 1, komik berkontribusi pada peningkatan pemahaman bentuk-bentuk *bullying* serta memunculkan komitmen kelas untuk membangun lingkungan belajar yang lebih empatik. Di SD Quran Utrujah, terjadi peningkatan skor rata-rata pemahaman nilai dari 48 menjadi 76 (kenaikan 58,3%) dan orang tua menilai komik membantu mereka mengomunikasikan isu pergaulan pra-remaja secara lebih dialogis. Literasi visual berbasis komik mendukung pembelajaran bermakna yang selaras dengan perkembangan kognitif anak. Hal ini juga menunjukkan potensi yang kuat sebagai strategi alternatif dalam pengembangan kurikulum Pendidikan Agama Islam di tingkat sekolah dasar. Penelitian ini memiliki keterbatasan pada ukuran sampel yang kecil, fokus hanya pada dua sekolah di Pamekasan, serta ketergantungan pada data kualitatif dan *pre-post* test lisan. Meskipun demikian, temuan penelitian ini menawarkan implikasi penting bagi

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pemanfaatan media visual berbasis narasi untuk mengoperasionalkan nilai-nilai moral Islam dalam pendidikan dasar.

Kata Kunci: Komik Islami; Pendidikan Karakter; Literasi Visual; Sekolah Dasar; Pamekasan.

Abstract

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of Islamic comics as a visual literacy medium in strengthening character education and literacy culture among elementary school students in Pamekasan. A qualitative approach with a comparative case study design was employed in two Islamic-based elementary settings, namely SDN Potoan Laok 1 and SD Quran Utrujah. The research subjects consisted of 26 sixth-grade students at SDN Potoan Laok 1, who received an intervention using a comic titled “Stop Bullying”, and 13 third-grade students at SD Quran Utrujah, who were introduced to a comic titled “Jangan Pacaran dan Saling Menghargai”. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with teachers and parents, as well as oral pre-tests and post-tests to measure students’ understanding of Islamic character values. The findings indicate that Islamic comics are effective in translating abstract moral messages into concrete visual narratives that are closely related to students’ everyday experiences. At SDN Potoan Laok 1, the comics contributed to improved understanding of different forms of bullying and fostered a collective commitment to building a more empathetic classroom climate. At SD Quran Utrujah, the average understanding score increased from 48 to 76 (a gain of 58.3%), and parents reported that the comics facilitated more dialogic communication about pre-adolescent relationships. Comic-based visual literacy supports meaningful learning that is aligned with children’s cognitive development. It also shows strong potential as an alternative strategy for developing Islamic Religious Education curricula at the elementary level. The study is limited by its small sample, its focus on two schools in Pamekasan, and its reliance on qualitative data and oral pre- and post-tests. Even so, the findings offer important implications for using visual, narrative-based media to operationalize Islamic moral values in elementary education.

Keywords: Islamic Comics; Character Education; Visual Literacy; Elementary School; Pamekasan.

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of digital disruption, Islamic education at the elementary level faces simultaneous challenges in the form of low reading interest and increasing character degradation among children (Sari et al., 2024). The rise of bullying, the normalization of abusive language, and the pervasive exposure to non-educational digital content have become alarming signals for Islamic educational institutions, both traditional and formal. In Madura, particularly in Pamekasan, institutions such as Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI), Taman Pendidikan Al-Qur'an (TPQ), and pesantren remain the main pillars of character formation, yet the predominance of textual and lecture-based teaching methods often does not align with the psychological developmental needs of elementary school-aged children (Ahmadi, 2025).

Theoretically, children in the concrete operational stage require visual representations to help them grasp abstract concepts, including ethical and religious values (Sidiq et al., 2025). Piaget emphasizes that at this stage, children think more effectively when interacting with concrete objects and representations rather than relying solely on verbal symbols (Alfadhilah, 2025). When moral values are presented only in the form of text or oral admonitions, learners are prone to experiencing a gap between moral knowledge (moral knowing) and behavioral practice (moral action), as reflected in cases of bullying, promiscuous interactions, and a lack of mutual respect in the school environment (Ahmadi, 2025).

Conversely, visual literacy through comic media is increasingly recognized as an effective pedagogical tool to mediate moral messages and strengthen the understanding of complex concepts (Listiana et al., 2025). Comics integrate text and images so that narratives become more concrete, engaging, and memorable, as explained by McCloud in his discussion of the uniqueness of comics as “the invisible art” (Justify Brilliant, 2023). Visual literacy research shows that comic-based interventions can significantly improve reading comprehension and student engagement, making them highly relevant for use in value and character education at the elementary school level.

Various studies indicate that educational comics grounded in local wisdom and moral values can support the cultivation of noble character in elementary school students, including in efforts to prevent deviant behavior (Mekalungi et al., 2025). Comics with specific themes such as bullying and respect for oneself and others have been shown to strengthen empathy, moral awareness, and prosocial behavior, especially when integrated into character-based learning. However, there remains a dearth of studies that specifically examine how Islamic comics rooted in the Madurese cultural context—such as locally developed titles “*Stop Bullying*” and “*Don't Date and Respect Each Other*”—are used to mitigate bullying and pre-adolescent social interaction issues in Islamic-based elementary schools located in rural areas such as Pamekasan (Murti et al., 2020).. This gap is crucial because these comics are not only grounded in Islamic teachings, but also employ local language, settings, and social

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situations that are familiar to Madurese children, which differentiates them from more generic Islamic comics circulated at the national level.

This research gap provides a crucial basis for developing more contextual Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning media that resonate with pupils' everyday lives. There is a need for in-depth inquiry into how Islamic comics with themes such as *"Stop Bullying"* and *"Don't Date and Respect Each Other"* can bridge theological values with tangible changes in children's attitudes and behaviors in the elementary school setting, while simultaneously strengthening their literacy culture (Kusumawati et al., 2024). Building on this context and research gap, the present study addresses the following problem: to what extent are Islamic comics effective in strengthening character education and literacy among elementary school students in Pamekasan?

Accordingly, this study has three main objectives: (1) to describe the process of implementing Islamic comics in classroom and home-based learning; (2) to measure changes in students' understanding of Islamic character values related to bullying and respectful relationships through oral pre- and post-tests; and (3) to explore teacher and parent perceptions of how Islamic comics influence students' literacy practices and everyday behavior. Using a qualitative approach with a comparative case study design involving one public and one Islamic-based private elementary school, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of visual literacy within Islamic Religious Education and to offer practical implications for educators in madrasahs and elementary schools in responding to the challenges of moral degradation in the digital era (Golding & Verrier, 2021).

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a comparative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of Islamic comics in internalizing character values and literacy in two different elementary education contexts (Salsabila Nur Aini et al., 2025). A qualitative case study design is chosen because it allows the researcher to explore phenomena contextually and holistically within a limited unit of analysis. This approach facilitates the comparison of patterns in the implementation and impact of visual media in a public school and an Islamic-based private school within a relatively similar sociocultural context (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The research subjects are elementary school students in two educational institutions in Pamekasan Regency: (1) 26 sixth-grade students at SDN Potoan Laok 1, which serves as the locus for an intervention using a comic themed *"Stop Bullying"*; and (2) 13 third-grade B students at SD Quran Utrujah, which serves as the locus for an intervention using a comic themed *"Don't Date and Respect Each Other"*. The subjects are selected using purposive sampling, taking into account the existence of real cases related to bullying and pre-adolescent social interaction issues, as well as the availability of classroom teachers and

religious coordinators as supporting informants to strengthen data depth (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The research procedure follows a qualitative comparative case study workflow comprising four stages: initial diagnosis, implementation of comic-based learning sessions, participatory exploration of students' responses, and final evaluation through post-intervention observations and reflections. These stages are inspired by the logic of action research cycles, yet the present study remains positioned as a qualitative case study focusing on contextual understanding rather than systematic instructional redesign. First, an initial diagnosis is conducted through observations and preliminary interviews to identify literacy and character issues in each school. Second, the researcher implements the intervention in the form of reading and meaning-making sessions using Islamic comics in line with the theme at each locus. Third, participatory discussions and role play are carried out to further explore students' understanding of values and their emotional responses to the characters and storyline in the comics. Fourth, a final evaluation is conducted through post-intervention behavioral observations and joint reflections with teachers and parents. This sequence of stages aligns with the action research model that emphasizes cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection to improve instructional practice (Lili Yaya, 2014).

Data collection employs method triangulation, namely participant observation, in-depth interviews, and simple oral tests. Observations are conducted during learning activities to record student engagement, social interactions, and indications of behavioral changes in the classroom. In-depth interviews are conducted with teachers and parents to explore their perceptions of the effectiveness of comics in communicating sensitive character values, while simple oral pre-tests and post-tests are used to descriptively measure improvements in the understanding of Islamic character values as a reinforcement of qualitative findings.

Data are analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis technique, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing in an iterative manner. During the reduction stage, data from the two loci are classified into themes such as literacy, empathy, bullying mitigation, and healthy social interaction. In the display stage, the data are presented comparatively to observe patterns of similarity and difference between the public school and the Islamic private school. The study's conclusions are then validated through member checking with key informants and triangulation of techniques to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, as recommended in qualitative data analysis (Miles et al., 2014).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Data in this section draw on classroom observations, oral pre-post tests with students, and interviews with homeroom teachers and selected parents at both schools. These multiple sources allow for a combined qualitative and simple quantitative description of the effects of Islamic comics on students' understanding and behavior.

Mitigating bullying at SDN Potoan Laok 1

At SDN Potoan Laok 1, the implementation of the Islamic comic “Stop Bullying” with 26 sixth-grade students led to a noticeable increase in students’ cognitive understanding of various forms of bullying that had previously been perceived as normal joking in daily interactions. During the reading and discussion sessions, observational data showed that students were able to identify examples of verbal, physical, and social bullying visualized in the storyline and connect them to the religious obligation to guard one’s speech and respect others.

Classroom observations indicated active student participation in commenting on both victim and perpetrator characters, followed by expressions of empathy and feelings of guilt toward similar behaviors they admitted having engaged in. Documentation of the discussions captured the emergence of a shared commitment to reduce teasing and to make the classroom a friendlier space, which was reinforced by the homeroom teacher’s support in formulating simple anti-bullying rules posted on the classroom wall. In a follow-up interview, the homeroom teacher reported that “students became more aware that certain jokes were actually hurtful, and they started reminding each other in a softer way,” indicating early behavioral shifts even without formal numerical testing at this site.

Overall, the qualitative data from observations and teacher interviews at SDN Potoan Laok 1 highlight three main themes: increased awareness of different bullying forms, emerging empathy toward victims, and a class-level commitment to reducing hurtful teasing.

Social interaction education at SD Quran Utrujah

At SD Qur’an Utrujah, the use of the comic “*Don’t Date and Respect Each Other*” with 13 third-grade B students proved effective in enhancing their understanding of the value of iffah (maintaining personal dignity) and the boundaries of pre-adolescent social interaction. Oral pre–post tests were used to measure changes in students’ understanding of key values, with scores calculated on a 0–100 scale.

Table 1 – Pre-test and Post-Test

Measure	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
Mean score (0–100 scale)	48	76	+28

The mean post-test score (76) was higher than the mean pre-test score (48), indicating an increase of 28 points or approximately 58.3% in students’ understanding of the targeted values after the comic-based intervention. In addition to this quantitative improvement, observational notes showed that almost all students were actively involved in question-and-answer sessions and role play, and were able to reconstruct the storyline and main messages of the comic with considerable accuracy.

From the environmental support perspective, simple parent response questionnaires indicated that around 95% of guardians felt that the comic helped them communicate issues of social interaction and the prohibition of dating to their children in a calmer and more dialogical manner compared to relying solely on direct prohibitions. An interview with the third-grade B homeroom teacher corroborated these perceptions; the teacher assessed that comics are a highly effective medium for teaching morals to third-grade students, who are

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still at a concrete cognitive developmental stage and thus greatly supported by visual media. The teacher also reported that during the learning activities, students appeared enthusiastic, frequently asked questions, and were willing to express their opinions, making the process of internalizing moral values more vivid and meaningful.

Taken together, the quantitative results and the qualitative interview and observation data at SD Qur'an Utrujah suggest that Islamic comics can improve both cognitive understanding and classroom engagement related to sensitive themes such as friendship and interaction with the opposite sex.

General patterns of the effectiveness of Islamic comics

Comparatively, both sites show a similar pattern: Islamic comics encourage higher levels of student participation, facilitate the internalization of abstract moral and religious concepts, and open up dialogic space around sensitive issues such as bullying and pre-adolescent interactions with the opposite sex. The visualization of characters and plots that are close to children's everyday experiences makes moral values feel more realistic and applicable, rather than merely remaining in the form of abstract or normative advice.

Table 2 - Summary of Islamic comic effectiveness across sites

Locus	Main qualitative themes	Key quantitative / reported indicators
SDN Potoan Laok 1	Increased awareness of bullying forms, emerging empathy, class commitment to reduce teasing	No formal test; teacher reports fewer hurtful teasing incidents in class (descriptive observation)
SD Qur'an Utrujah	Better understanding of iffah, more open discussion of social interaction, strong parental support	Mean oral test score increase from 48 to 76; ≈95% parents report comics help communication

Across both contexts, qualitative data from observations and interviews, combined with simple quantitative findings from pre-post tests and parent questionnaires, indicate that comic-based visual literacy can function as a bridge between religious texts and behavioral practices in the elementary school environment. This is evident in the combination of improved cognitive understanding, expressions of empathy, and reported behavioral commitments by students, as well as positive evaluations from teachers and parents regarding the use of Islamic comics in character education.

Discussion

Islamic comics as a bridge for abstract values

Findings at SDN Potoan Laok 1 show that Islamic comics are effective in bridging abstract moral values, such as the prohibition against hurting others and the obligation to guard one's speech into concrete situations that children can easily recognize in their daily lives. The visualization of bullying victims and the emotional consequences of bullying behavior triggers affective responses in the form of empathy and a desire to correct one's behavior, which is in line with the view that children in the concrete operational stage need

visual representations to understand the impact of moral actions (Murti et al., 2020). In this context, the comic functions not only as reading material but also as a social intervention tool in the classroom, supporting studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of educational comics in reducing bullying and strengthening character education (Zagkotas, 2025).

The illustrated narrative depicting the transformation of a bully into a defender of friends provides a role model for prosocial behavior, consistent with research on educational comics as pedagogical tools for cultivating emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-awareness in primary education (Zagkotas, 2025). Rather than proposing a new theoretical model, these findings confirm and extend existing work on educational comics and character education, showing how visual narratives can operationalize moral teachings in a specific elementary school context characterized by everyday bullying practices.

Visual literacy and teaching sensitive values

At SD Qur'an Utrujah, topics such as social interaction and the prohibition of dating which are often perceived as taboo or difficult for parents and teachers to explain directly were communicated more gently through comic narratives. The 58.3% increase in understanding scores and the high level of student participation indicate that the visual-narrative format makes sensitive material easier to accept without excessive resistance, resonating with visual literacy literature that emphasizes the role of comics and graphic narratives in clarifying complex social and emotional issues in the classroom (Golding & Verrier, 2021).

The integration of text and images helps students connect the values of iffah and mutual respect with real-life episodes in the lives of their peers, so that character values do not remain at a purely cognitive level but begin to be internalized as attitudes and intentions. This pattern is consistent with prior studies showing that character education comics and digital comics can enhance students' understanding of moral concepts and support interventions aimed at improving empathy and social responsibility. In this section, the discussion situates the findings within established theoretical and empirical work on visual literacy and character education, rather than constructing a new framework.

Meaningful learning and the local Madurese context

A comparative reading of the two sites reveals both convergences and context-specific nuances in the effectiveness of Islamic comics. At SDN Potoan Laok 1, a public school, the comic "Stop Bullying" primarily facilitated awareness-raising and collective commitment to change everyday interaction patterns that had long been normalized as harmless teasing, aligning with studies that use comic media to reduce bullying behavior in elementary classrooms. In contrast, at SD Qur'an Utrujah, an Islamic-based private school, the comic "*Don't Date and Respect Each Other*" was more strongly oriented toward clarifying religiously grounded boundaries of social interaction and strengthening iffah, supported by an environment where parents and teachers were already receptive to explicit religious messaging in character education (Larrañaga et al., 2025).

Despite these differences, both settings demonstrate that Islamic comics can: (a) increase student participation in discussions, (b) make abstract or sensitive values more understandable and discussable, and (c) engage adult stakeholders (teachers and parents) in

a more dialogic approach to character education. The public school context highlights the role of comics in reframing peer culture and mitigating bullying, whereas the Islamic private school context emphasizes the role of comics in clarifying gendered social norms and supporting home–school communication about dating and friendship. This comparative pattern is in line with research on educational and local wisdom–based comics, which shows that such media can be flexibly adapted to different institutional cultures while still serving as effective tools for fostering morality and social awareness among elementary school students (Ahmadi, 2025).

Implications for developing Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in elementary schools

Theoretically, integrating Islamic comics into Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in both schools reinforces the concept of meaningful learning, in which new information is anchored to students’ existing cognitive structures and the cultural contexts in which they live. The use of local Pamekasan settings and Madurese cultural nuances in the stories brings moral messages closer to students’ social realities, thereby minimizing the gap between textual discourse and lived experience, in line with studies on local wisdom–based educational comics that foster morality among elementary students (Murti et al., 2020). In this way, Islamic comics operate as a form of visual literacy that connects theological teachings with actual social situations, such as bullying, peer interaction, and respect for classmates, echoing broader discussions on the role of educational comics in character building.

For PAI instruction at the elementary level, findings from the two sites suggest that integrating Islamic comics offers a promising alternative to the dominance of lecture- and rote-based methods. High student engagement, increased value understanding, and strong support from teachers and parents indicate that comics can be positioned as a core medium, not merely a supplementary tool, in character and literacy education, as also recommended by research on character education comics and digital comics in primary education. Practically, PAI teachers and homeroom teachers can develop or adapt Islamic character-themed comics that are relevant to local needs and integrate them with classroom discussions, role-play activities, and written or oral reflections, which is consistent with prior work on the development of comic-based teaching materials in Islamic and general elementary school contexts.

Rather than offering a new theoretical framework, the present study contributes by providing contextualized evidence from a public school and an Islamic-based private school in a rural Indonesian setting, thereby enriching existing discussions on comics, visual literacy, and character education in Islamic elementary education (Murti et al., 2020; Zagkotas, 2025; Golding & Verrier, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how Islamic comics could be utilized to internalize character values and foster literacy among elementary school students in two different

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educational settings in Pamekasan: a public school and an Islamic-based private school. The findings indicate that comic-based visual literacy can support these objectives by making abstract Islamic moral teachings more concrete, discussable, and emotionally resonant for children at the concrete operational stage, while also engaging teachers and parents in more dialogic forms of character education.

Despite these contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study involved a relatively small number of students in only two schools within one regency, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions or school types. The quasi-experimental elements were modest, relying on simple pre–post oral tests rather than more robust psychometric instruments, and the interventions were implemented over a short period, making it difficult to assess long-term behavioral change. In addition, the comics were developed and facilitated by researchers in close collaboration with teachers, which may have introduced researcher presence effects that are not easily replicated in routine classroom practice.

Theoretically, the study strengthens existing discussions on visual literacy and character education by providing contextualized evidence of how Islamic comics can function as mediating tools between religious texts and students' social realities in rural Indonesian contexts. It also highlights the value of comparative case analysis between public and Islamic-based schools for understanding how institutional culture shapes the reception and use of religiously themed visual media. Practically, the results suggest that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers and homeroom teachers can integrate Islamic comics into lesson planning—through guided reading, structured discussion, and role-play—as an alternative to predominantly lecture- and rote-based approaches, while involving parents to extend value discussions into the home environment.

Future research could build on this work by involving larger and more diverse samples across multiple regions, incorporating more rigorous measurement tools for socio-emotional and behavioral outcomes, and examining the long-term impact of sustained comic-based interventions over a full academic year or more. It would also be valuable to develop and test digital or interactive Islamic comics tailored to different age groups, to explore how variations in format, narrative style, and cultural referencing influence effectiveness in different school types and community settings.

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