

VERTICAL GRAMMAR: A VISUAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN INDONESIAN DIGITAL MICRODRAMA

Agus Budiman^{1*}, Firaz Yazar², Fairuz Zerlina Putri Nafa Islami³, syam gigih azizul fath⁴

¹Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia
e-mail : agusbudiman@um-surabaya.ac.id

²Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia
e-mail : feerazyro@gmail.com

³Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia
e-mail : zerlinaalchatib@gmail.com

⁴Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia
e-mail : syamfath8@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30651/cadj.v2i1.34158>



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Paper received: 08-10-2026

Revised: 12-08-2026

Published: 12-08-2026

ABSTRACT

Microdrama, a serialized vertical drama format presented in one to three minute episodes, has expanded rapidly across Indonesian streaming platforms throughout 2026, with industry reporting describing the global microdrama business as a multi billion dollar growth sector. Existing scholarship on vertical video aesthetics has largely examined standalone short form content on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels, leaving the serialized microdrama format, with its freemium monetization mechanics and continuous episodic narrative, comparatively unexamined. This study aims to map the visual grammar and narrative structure of Indonesian microdrama through a design discourse and multimodal semiotic approach, adapting a three level semiotic framework of reality, representation, and ideology previously applied to professional vertical video. Data were gathered through non participant observation of paratextual elements, including titles, celebrity casting, and promotional material, together with the documented monetization mechanisms of three major Indonesian microdrama platforms. Findings show that microdrama's vertical grammar is formed by three interrelated elements, namely hyperbolic title and casting conventions that function as narrative hooks, short episodic structures paired with platform specific paid unlock mechanisms, and cross-border genre formulas tied to industrial, technology assisted production. Together, these elements operate as a persuasive design system aimed at maximizing viewer engagement on mobile devices. The study distinguishes these directly observed findings from a further theoretical hypothesis, developed but not directly confirmed here, that microdrama's commercial orientation may accelerate a more native vertical visual grammar than is found in prestige vertical productions, and it proposes this hypothesis as a conceptual foundation for further microdrama research using full access to paid episode corpora.

Keyword: digital visual culture, microdrama, multimodal semiotics, narrative design, vertical video

INTRODUCTION

Audiovisual consumption in Indonesia has shifted significantly as mobile screens have become the primary means through which audiences access entertainment content. The vertical 9:16 ratio has emerged as the dominant architectural logic of the mobile first media ecosystem, given that the large majority of smartphone users primarily hold their devices vertically, a pattern noted in recent vertical video scholarship (Clayton, 2022, as cited in Yusanto, Hidayat, and Lyndon, 2026). This shift has compelled the media industry to reorganize conventional cinematographic rules to accommodate a narrower, taller screen.

Building on this culture of vertical video, a new phenomenon has emerged in the form of microdrama, a serialized fictional drama format presented in **one-to-three-minute** vertical episodes and consumed through mobile applications. Unlike standalone vertical video content such as TikTok or Instagram Reels uploads, microdrama offers a continuous narrative structure spanning dozens of episodes, paired with a monetization mechanism in which the first few episodes are offered free before subsequent episodes are locked behind a weekly or monthly subscription.

The phenomenon first emerged in China before spreading to other countries, including Indonesia. Indonesian business media reported, citing a Media Partners Asia analysis, that the global microdrama business was projected to generate sixteen billion United States dollars in revenue in 2026 and to grow to **twenty-six** billion United States dollars by 2030 (Kontan.co.id, 2026). It should be noted that Media Partners Asia's own published market breakdowns present these figures with more regional granularity, for instance sizing the market outside China at 3.6 billion United States dollars in 2026 growing to 9.5 billion by 2031, alongside a separate, larger estimate for China's domestic market reaching 16.2 billion United States dollars by 2030 (Campaign Asia, 2026; Screen Daily, 2026). The **sixteen-and-twenty-six-billion-dollar** figures cited in Indonesian coverage of the industry appear to conflate these regional estimates into a single global headline number; this study reports the figure as it circulated in Indonesian trade media, since that circulated figure, rather than the underlying regional model, is what shaped local industry discourse and platform investment decisions, but flags the discrepancy here in the interest of source transparency. In Indonesia specifically, a 2026 survey by the IDN Research Institute involving more than one thousand five hundred respondents across twelve cities found that fast paced, emotionally charged one to two minute episodes have become a new genre shaping youth popular culture (Fortune Indonesia, 2026a). Three major local platforms, namely IDN NONTON, Vidio Short Drama, and MNC V+Short, now compete to offer local titles as well as adaptations of Chinese dramas, each applying a broadly similar free-then-locked monetization logic, albeit with platform specific variations detailed in the Results section below (Katadata, 2026).

Literature Review

Scholarship on the aesthetics of vertical video has grown over the past decade, informed by multimodal social semiotics. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, argue that visual imagery carries its own grammar in the same way that written text follows a linguistic grammar; composition, viewpoint, and camera distance are meaningful choices that convey ideological messages to viewers, a framework directly relevant to how the constraints of a vertical frame reshape compositional choices compared with conventional horizontal formats.

Theoretical Framework: Integrating Visual Grammar and Semiotic Levels

This study treats Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar and Fiske's (2001) three level semiotics not as two separate lenses applied in parallel, but as functionally nested within a single analytic framework. Kress and van Leeuwen supply the descriptive vocabulary for compositional choice, namely framing distance, camera angle, and **on-screen** text placement, while Fiske's three levels supply the interpretive scaffolding that explains why particular compositional choices carry social and economic weight. Concretely, this study operationalizes the relationship as follows: visual grammar categories

populate the representation level of Fiske's model, since close framing, cut pacing, and **on-screen** text are precisely the compositional codes Kress and van Leeuwen describe. The reality level, in turn, extends beyond pure visual grammar into denotative social signs, such as costume and casting, that visual grammar theory treats only in passing. The ideology level extends the analysis further still, beyond any single frame or shot, into the economic and cross-border structures, such as platform monetization and formula licensing, that condition why certain compositional choices recur. Read this way, visual grammar answers the question of how a microdrama frame is composed, while Fiske's three levels answer the question of why that composition recurs and whose interests it serves.

Within vertical video studies specifically, Ryan (2018) regards verticality as a disruptive aesthetic paradigm that unsettles established cinematic norms, while Menotti (2019) traces the discourse surrounding vertical aspect ratios once dismissed as technically incorrect. Clayton (2019, 2022) instead frames the 9:16 ratio as a logical outcome of mobile first filmmaking, emphasizing its functional and ergonomic advantages. Mulier, Slabbinck, and Vermeir (2021) demonstrate the marketing effectiveness of vertical video, while Canella (2018) finds that vertical video in local news production is perceived as amateurish yet more authentic by audiences. Kaye, Chen, and Zeng (2021) examine the parallel platformization of Douyin and TikTok as drivers of a global vertical viewing habit, and Mustikawati, Sadewa, and Fadholi (2023) identify close ups, quick transitions, on screen text, and center-framed subjects as the defining aesthetic and narrative traits of vertical video among amateur digital platform users.

The most directly relevant study comes from Yusanto, Hidayat, and Lyndon (2026), who examined the professional vertical film X and Y produced by TikTok Indonesia through John Fiske's semiotic framework. Applying Fiske's three levels of reality, representation, and ideology, they identified a phenomenon they term aesthetic stuttering, a tension between high resolution camera technology capable of building visual intimacy and professional filmmakers' tendency to retain horizontal cinematographic conventions, evidenced by the dominance of objective camera angles and limited exploration of the subjective point of view characteristic of vertical video culture.

Within this journal specifically, design discourse analysis has already been applied to Indonesian screen media artifacts, for instance in a study of character and environmental design in the animated feature Jumbo through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and habitus (Faqih, Gusma, and Yazar, 2026), while a semiotic analysis of digital callout design has examined how visual rhetoric shapes public opinion formation on Indonesian social media platforms (Faqih and Nasrillah, 2026). The present study extends this analytical lineage from single screen artifacts and platform-based visual rhetoric toward the emerging genre of serialized commercial microdrama.

While this body of work provides a strong analytical framework, existing research remains focused on standalone, short duration vertical video. No study to date has examined microdrama as a continuous serialized format with its own freemium mechanics and recurring genre conventions. This study addresses that gap by asking three questions: how does the vertical format shape the paratextual and narrative conventions of Indonesian microdrama, how does the freemium mechanism function as a deliberately designed interaction pattern, and what semiotic patterns recur across microdrama genre categories such as CEO drama, revenge stories, and family drama.

RESEARCH METHOD

emerging industry phenomenon in Indonesia throughout 2026, is better understood through mapping recurring visual and narrative conventions across titles than through quantitative hypothesis testing.

Object and Unit of Analysis

The object of this research is the microdrama format across three major platforms in Indonesia, namely IDN NONTON, Vidio Short Drama, and MNC V+Short. Titles were selected purposively to represent the

genres most commonly found on these platforms, including CEO drama, revenge stories, family drama, and romantic comedy, drawing on titles reported in media coverage as representative, such as *Gadis Tani Bersuami CEO* (Farm Girl Married to a CEO), *My Husband's Secret Identity*, *Flame of Betrayal*, and *Wake Up, Dad! Wedding Time*. The unit of analysis comprises three layers: paratextual elements (titles, synopses, thumbnails, and publicly accessible promotional material), platform interface mechanisms related to episode structure and paid unlock schemes, and recurring genre patterns across titles.

Data Collection

Data were collected between August and September 2026 through non participant observation of the three applications' interfaces, official promotional material on the platforms' social media accounts, and documentary study of media coverage and industry research reports, including the IDN Research Institute survey and Media Partners Asia data as cited in national media.

Scope and Access Limitations

This study did not purchase a paid subscription or coin bundle on any of the three platforms. Consequently, the analysis draws on four categories of accessible material only: free introductory episodes, publicly posted trailers and promotional clips, platform interface features described in the applications' own marketing communications and in trade press coverage, and secondary accounts by journalists, industry analysts, and one cited psychology researcher who discuss viewer behavior and platform mechanics. No frame by frame or shot by shot coding of paid episode content was performed. Statements in the Results section that describe title conventions, interface mechanics, and casting patterns are treated as directly observed findings, since they are drawn from material the researcher accessed and verified directly or from specific, named claims in cited secondary sources. Statements about the internal visual composition of paid episodes not viewed by the researcher, such as shot framing or editing tempo inside locked content, are explicitly flagged in the Discussion as theoretical extensions drawn from the general vertical video literature rather than as direct findings about microdrama specifically. Full shot level access to a purchased episode corpus is identified as a requirement for the follow up study proposed in the Conclusion.

General vertical video composition conventions not directly observable through free content, such as close up dominance and subject centered framing, were drawn from prior literature on vertical video generally (Ryan, 2018; Mustikawati, Sadewa, and Fadholi, 2023; Yusanto, Hidayat, and Lyndon, 2026) and are presented as a projection rather than a confirmed finding about microdrama.

Data Analysis

Data analysis adapts Fiske's three level semiotic framework as operationalized by Yusanto, Hidayat, and Lyndon (2026): the reality level (social codes and denotative signs within titles and visual properties), the representation level (compositional patterns and technical conventions typical of vertical video), and the ideology level (the synthesis of platform economic interests, genre conventions, and audience consumption patterns). Triangulation was conducted by comparing platform observation results with industry data and prior vertical video literature to strengthen the validity of the interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reality Level: Paratextual Codes and Title Conventions

Observation of microdrama titles circulating on Indonesian platforms reveals a consistent pattern of hyperbolic titles that explicitly reveal the story's central conflict from the outset, such as *Gadis Tani Bersuami CEO*, *My Husband's Secret Identity*, *Mary adalah Maut* (Mary Is Death), and *Flame of Betrayal*. Rather than concealing narrative surprise as conventional television drama titles typically do, these titles function as attention hooks designed to convince viewers to tap within seconds while scrolling through an application's title list. Props and settings visible in thumbnails, such as formal business attire for CEO

dramas or plain clothing for rags to riches revenge stories, function as denotative social codes that immediately signal class position and the direction of conflict without requiring further narrative explanation.

A further, directly observable paratextual code is celebrity casting. V+Short's promotional material names established Indonesian television actors in leading microdrama roles, including Amanda Manopo in PayLater, Wulan Guritno in Sugar Baby Diaries, and Davina Karamoy in Culture Shock (iNews.id, 2026a). This casting strategy functions as a denotative trust signal borrowed directly from Indonesian soap opera and celebrity culture, lending the new, unfamiliar vertical format a familiar face before a viewer has watched a single episode, and offering a concrete, verifiable instance of paratextual code that does not require access to paid episode content to observe.

Representation Level: Episode Structure and Freemium Mechanics

All three observed platforms apply a broadly similar **one-to-three-minute** episode structure in which a number of introductory episodes are offered free before subsequent episodes require payment, though the precise mechanism differs by platform (see Table 1). IDN NONTON and V+Short both offer weekly or monthly subscription options, whereas Vidio Short Drama instead offers full length, entirely free access to a subset of titles specifically adapted from its parent company's existing soap opera archive, reserving the freemium lock for its other titles (Katadata, 2026). V+Short operationalizes payment through three distinct tiers rather than a single paywall: a Watch Free tier for new users, an Earn Coins tier in which viewers accumulate or purchase coins to unlock individual episodes, and a VIP Membership tier offering uninterrupted access (iNews.id, 2026b). This three-tier structure is comparable to the coin based unlock systems documented on the international platforms ReelShort, priced at fifteen coins per episode with coin bundles ranging from approximately **forty-eight** thousand to four hundred **seventy-nine** thousand rupiah, and DramaBox, which combines coin purchases with weekly to yearly subscriptions and daily login bonuses (detiknet, 2025). A documented case reported in Fortune Indonesia describes one viewer paying approximately seventy thousand rupiah in coins to unlock a single title after first encountering it as a free **clip-on** social media (Fortune Indonesia, 2026b), a concrete, reported instance of the paid unlock mechanism converting free exposure into paid engagement.

Platform	Launch	Monetization mechanism
IDN NONTON	2025 (first in Indonesia)	First episodes free, then locked; weekly or monthly subscription
Vidio Short Drama	May 2025	First episodes free, then locked; selected sinetron-adapted titles offered fully free
MNC V+Short	May 8, 2026	Three-tier: Watch Free, Earn Coins (pay per unlock), VIP Membership (subscription); content localized into seven languages

Table 1. Monetization mechanics across three Indonesian microdrama platforms, compiled from Katadata (2026) and iNews.id (2026b).

Every episode observed in the freely accessible introductory material is structured to end on a pronounced cliffhanger, a pattern consistent with the vertical video traits of quick transitions and dense plotting identified by Mustikawati, Sadewa, and Fadholi (2023), reinforced here by a direct economic incentive rather than a purely stylistic one. This cliffhanger structure and its three-tier monetization pairing are treated as direct findings, since both were observed in the platforms' own accessible interfaces and promotional statements.

A separate, more speculative claim concerns the internal visual composition of locked episode content. Drawing on Ryan (2018) and Yusanto, Hidayat, and Lyndon (2026) regarding the general dominance of close up, subject centered framing in vertical video, it can be projected, though not directly confirmed by this study, that microdrama likewise inherits a similar visual grammar inside its paid episodes, given that the limited space of a vertical frame naturally directs attention toward facial expression and gesture. This projection is distinguished here from the directly observed findings above and is developed further as a hypothesis in the Discussion.

Ideology Level: Cross-Border Genre Formulas

The majority of popular microdrama titles in Indonesia are translated or adapted from short Chinese dramas, as seen in distribution partnerships such as that between WeTV and Chinese content producers, which has aired dozens of Chinese origin microdrama titles in Indonesia, and the May 2026 agreement between WeWatch and the Chinese state affiliated China Broadcasting and Television Media Co., through which hundreds of premium short dramas are being brought into Southeast Asia across 2026 (detiklnet, 2026). V+Short's own positioning statement, "Global Shorts, Local Hits," and its localization of content into seven languages, makes the cross-border ambition explicit at the level of platform strategy rather than inferring it only from content adaptation patterns (Katadata, 2026). Genre formulas such as CEO drama and revenge stories, originally popular in the Chinese market, are now replicated and localized within an Indonesian cultural context. V+Short additionally reports a catalogue exceeding twenty thousand episodes produced through an **in-house** studio that pairs creative teams with AI assisted production technology (Sindonews, 2026), a documented scale and production method that offers concrete, if not conclusive, support for the hypothesis developed below that industrial, technology assisted production pressure may reduce attachment to prestige cinematic convention. This phenomenon affirms the argument made by Yusanto, Hidayat, and Lyndon (2026) that digital platforms function as guardians of a new visual culture, which in the case of microdrama operates across national borders by exporting narrative formulas already proven commercially successful in one market into a culturally distinct market.

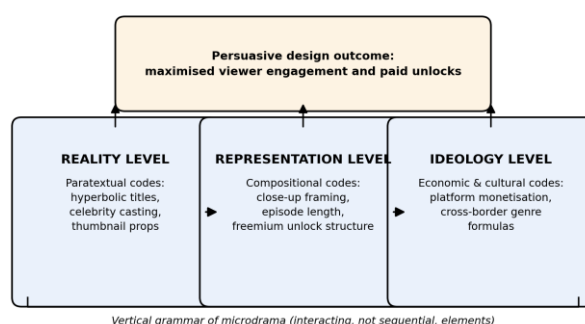


Figure 1. Three-level semiotic framework applied to Indonesian microdrama, adapted from Fiske's (2001) levels as operationalized by Yusanto, Hidayat, and Lyndon (2026).

Discussion

Summary of findings versus theoretical extension. The results above combine two kinds of claims that this discussion keeps explicitly separate. Directly observed findings, drawn from accessible platform interfaces, promotional material, and named secondary reporting, include the hyperbolic title convention, celebrity casting as a trust signal, the platform specific monetization mechanics summarized in Table 1, the cliffhanger episode structure, the cross-border sourcing of genre formulas, and the

documented scale and AI assisted production method reported for V+Short. Theoretical extensions, by contrast, are propositions this study puts forward for future testing rather than confirms: namely, that microdrama's paid episodes inherit close up dominant vertical framing from vertical video generally, and the hypothesis discussed next, that microdrama displays a lower degree of aesthetic stuttering than prestige vertical productions. Readers should treat only the first category as established by this study.

Compared with Yusanto, Hidayat, and Lyndon's (2026) finding of aesthetic stuttering in the professional vertical film X and Y, this study proposes the hypothesis that microdrama may in fact display a lower degree of stuttering. Because microdrama production is not burdened by the demands of cinematic legitimacy that weigh on prestige productions such as X and Y, and because at least one major platform documents industrial scale, AI assisted production (Sindonews, 2026), microdrama producers may be structurally freer to adopt native vertical conventions, such as extreme close ups and extremely fast editing tempo, purely in the interest of commercial performance. In other words, the purely commercial orientation of microdrama, often regarded as an aesthetic weakness from the standpoint of conventional art criticism, may in fact accelerate the formation of a genuinely native vertical visual grammar, compared with productions that strive to preserve artistic or cinematic status. This remains a hypothesis, supported so far only by circumstantial production-scale evidence rather than by direct shot level comparison.

Microdrama's freemium mechanism should also be read as a persuasive design device rather than a purely neutral business strategy, a reading corroborated outside the design literature by BINUS University psychology researcher Esther Widhi Andangsari, who has characterized microdrama viewing as tied to adrenaline and emotional intensity comparable to a theme park ride, and has noted that producers deliberately cut episodes at their most tense moment to compel continued payment (Fortune Indonesia, 2026b). Because every episode is engineered to end at a particular point of tension, the narrative structure itself becomes a commercial instrument. This aligns with Yusanto, Hidayat, and Lyndon's (2026) argument that platform algorithms and mechanisms function as guardians of a new digital culture, which in microdrama is realized through the direct integration of story structure with payment schemes, as illustrated in Figure 1. The implication is that design critique of microdrama cannot separate visual aesthetic analysis from business model analysis, since the two are fused within a single user experience design.

At a broader level, the dominance of titles and genre formulas adapted from China, together with V+Short's explicit seven language localization strategy, affirms that microdrama is a cross-border visual culture phenomenon, while also raising questions about how much room remains for local narrative diversity amid globally proven commercial formulas. This resonates with concerns raised by Yusanto, Hidayat, and Lyndon (2026) regarding the potential homogenization of digital culture under platform dominance, although in microdrama this homogenization occurs at the level of narrative formula and genre rather than purely at the level of visual aesthetics.

This study is limited in that in depth, shot by shot analysis of paid episode content could not be conducted, since no subscription or coin purchase was made on any platform, as stated in the Scope and Access Limitations above. The hypothesis regarding a lower degree of aesthetic stuttering in microdrama therefore remains theoretical and requires further empirical testing through comprehensive textual analysis of a complete, purchased episode corpus.

CONCLUSION

This study has mapped the visual grammar and narrative structure of digital microdrama in Indonesia through a design discourse and multimodal semiotic approach, adapting Fiske's three level semiotic framework previously applied to professional vertical video. The findings show that microdrama's vertical grammar is formed by three interrelated elements: hyperbolic title conventions functioning as narrative hooks at the reality level, short episode structures bound to paid unlock mechanisms at the

representation level, and cross-border genre formulas replicated commercially at the ideology level. Together, these elements operate as a single persuasive design system engineered to maximize viewer engagement on mobile devices.

This study contributes conceptually by extending vertical video aesthetics scholarship, which has thus far primarily addressed standalone short form content, toward the emerging genre of commercially serialized microdrama with integrated monetization mechanics. It also proposes the preliminary hypothesis that microdrama's purely commercial orientation may accelerate the formation of a more genuinely native vertical visual grammar compared with vertical video productions oriented toward cinematic prestige.

Future research is recommended to conduct comprehensive textual analysis of a complete paid episode corpus in order to empirically test the hypothesis regarding the degree of aesthetic stuttering in microdrama, as well as to undertake cross-national comparative studies to understand how microdrama genre formulas are localized as they move from China into various Southeast Asian markets, including Indonesia.

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