

# Character Design for Interactive Pop-Up Storybook as Emotional Regulation Learning Media for Marginal Children

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## ABSTRACT

Children's emotional regulation is crucial for psychological well-being and social development, yet marginalized children in Indonesia remain vulnerable due to socioeconomic pressures and limited access to interventions. Existing studies have primarily focused on facilitator-oriented training modules that emphasize rules and activity flow. These are not easily accessible to children, lack visual appeal, and are hampered by time, resources, and technical requirements for training sessions. This creates a gap in non-digital, interactive visual media that children can use independently to memorize and practice emotion regulation strategies while gaining a comparable learning experience.

Addressing this gap, the present study aims to design character representations for an interactive pop-up storybook as a self-learning tool, facilitated by the WE POSE Surabaya community. Employing a qualitative Design Thinking approach through interviews with children aged 8–10, expert validation, and a literature review. This exploration resulted in four characters: Jalu, Tilu, Bara, and Laras. Warm color tones and chromatic shifts were applied to intuitively represent the emotional context. This storybook integrates interactive features such as pop-up scenes, liftable flaps, and pull-out tabs, allowing children to actively engage. The findings suggest that this type of interactive storybook can serve as an inclusive educational medium for marginalized children with limited digital access. This research contributes to Visual Communication Design by combining character design with physical interactivity to strengthen learning outcomes on emotion regulation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Children are the foundation of a nation, and their rights to protection, education, and participation must be guaranteed (Junaidi, 2021:2). Childhood is a critical stage for personality formation, where physical, cognitive, and emotional development interact profoundly. A child's ability to manage emotions determines the quality of their social relationships and psychological well-being in the future. In Indonesia, cases of violence against children remain high. Data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection SIMFONI-PPA, 2025 recorded 27,353 cases, with 16.8% of perpetrators being children themselves (KemenPPPA Indonesia, 2025).

This reflects the urgency of addressing emotional regulation failures, which often manifest as aggression in response to complex emotions (Mayers, 2012 as cited in Christy Sembiring & Christanti, 2024:1149). The situation is even more complicated for marginalized children living in poverty and exposed to environmental violence (Ramadhania, n.d., 2023; Christy Sembiring & Christanti, 2024:1157).

In this study, the participant group consisted of marginalized children aged 8-10 supported by the WE POSE Surabaya Community, which plays a crucial role in providing structured emotion regulation training in several areas of Surabaya. However, several operational constraints, such as time and logistical constraints, complex materials, and limited training duration, resulted in a high logistical burden, including the preparation of tools, materials, and instructors. In fact, based on the results of an interview with Tabitha Naema Christy, S.Psi., as a Psychologist and Founder of the Wepose Child Care Community conducted online on Thursday, October 2, 2025, aggressive behavior requires consistent guidance and training. Therefore, supporting media are needed to bridge formal training with independent daily practice. TThis study emphasizes character design as the core of developing interactive pop-up storybooks, where carefully crafted visual narratives are embedded within tactile features such as pop-ups, liftable flaps, and retractable tabs. The characters serve to embody emotional contexts, while the book's physical interactivity creates a dynamic reading experience. In this way, the pop-up storybook becomes not only a visually engaging medium but also

an accessible and sustainable tool that supports emotional regulation learning and provides equitable opportunities for marginalized children.

The story content is designed by adapting Greenberg's skills concept and WE POSE's practical modules, including the Stop-Think-Do technique, the Emotional Toolbox, and positive affirmations, with characters and settings that represent the realities of marginalized children. The selection of interactive, illustration-based storybooks as a media solution is based on the limited access to gadgets for marginalized children, while also providing an exclusive media experience they rarely have. The use of visual cues has been shown to be effective in supporting emotion regulation in childhood and in fostering prosocial behaviors such as sharing, taking turns, and following rules (Fachrudin, 2026:326). This aligns with the role of children's books act as an initial gateway into the world of literacy, where illustrations are an important element that can attract children's interest (Ghozalli, 2020:6). Picture storybooks that are visually appealing and relevant to children's daily lives can foster reading interest and strengthen basic literacy, Attractive visuals and relatable narratives help children connect with the story, grasp its messages, and stay engaged in the learning process (Himawati et al., 2024:672). Illustrations convey messages that cannot be fully conveyed through words. Furthermore, illustrations are effective in attracting attention, creating a lasting impression, and making it easier for children to remember important concepts or ideas (Masnuna & Zakiyah, 2020:137). Technically, interactive storybooks respond to user engagement, creating participatory learning experiences that combine narrative and physical interaction (Ghaisani & Ramdhan, 2020:1061; Berliani, 2024:156). Within this framework, character design serves not only as a decorative element but as a strategic visual cue that embodies emotional regulation techniques and strengthens children's ability to manage complex feelings.

In educational media, visuals play a central role in clarifying messages, maintaining interest, and enhancing the overall appeal of learning materials (Hidayah, 2023; Mashuda et al., 2024 ). In interactive storybooks, this visual function is most clearly manifested through character design, which not only builds the narrative but also communicates emotions directly to the reader

(Sapmayada, 2024). Characters serve a dual function: they propel the storyline forward while also acting as emotional models with whom children can identify or view themselves as peers (Teonata & Iswanto, 2021). This identification process is crucial, as it allows children to internalize emotional lessons through modeling and imitation. Therefore, effective character design requires careful attention to visual details such as physical features, color palette, expressions, and gestures that ensure emotional relevance and strengthen communication (Seftina, Aji and Nisa, 2024:230). In this interactive pop-up storybook “Jangan Marah Dulu, Jalu!”, empathetic character development is intentionally designed to reflect the social realities of marginalized children, making the visual narrative both understandable and meaningful. By integrating empathetic character designs with tactile features such as pop-ups, liftable flaps, and retractable tabs, these media not only achieve visual engagement but also embody social meaning and depth.

Existing studies have primarily focused on facilitator-oriented training modules that emphasize rules and activity flow. These are not easily accessible to children, lack visual appeal, and are hampered by time, resources, and technical requirements for training sessions. As a result, children especially those from marginalized backgrounds have limited opportunities to independently learn and practice emotional regulation strategies in engaging ways. This creates a gap in non-digital, interactive visual media that children can use independently to memorize and practice emotion regulation strategies while gaining a comparable learning experience. Based on this urgency, the central problem addressed in this study is how to design effective character representations that reflect the realities of marginalized children and can be applied in interactive storybooks as a self-learning tool and sustainable learning media.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This design uses a qualitative approach with the Design Thinking framework as the main method to produce human-centered design solutions. The choice of a qualitative approach was based on the need to deeply understand the behavior, perceptions, and emotional experiences of

marginalized children related to emotional regulation, which cannot be measured statistically alone. Design Thinking, as a user-focused problem-solving method, was applied due to its empathetic and iterative nature, allowing researchers to explore audience needs through five phases: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test (Mirnayanti & Sumadewa, 2020:53). In the Empathize stage, semi-structured interviews, observations, and a visual preference questionnaire revealed children's emotional challenges and social context. The Define stage synthesized these insights into problem statements and character profiles. The Ideate and Prototype stages developed character concepts through digital painting techniques, from sketching to applying color palettes, resulting in three alternatives for each character. Finally, the Test stage validated the designs through expert review and children's questionnaire responses, with assessment indicators referring to technical standards for children's book design (Ghozali, 2020). This systematic process ensured that the final character designs were not only visually appealing but also pedagogically sound and contextually relevant.

The subjects of this study were marginalized children aged 8–10 years from the WE POSE community in Surabaya, living in densely populated residential areas along the railway line. Primary data were obtained through group interviews with six children to explore their visual preferences and emotional experiences, providing direct insights into how character design can support emotional regulation. To ensure validity, expert input was collected from a child psychologist (Tabitha Naema Christy), a field facilitator (Nurmalita Herdiana) who verified the existing problems and dynamics in the field, and practitioners in illustration and pop-up techniques (Rosita Amalia and Dinda Rachma) who contributed strategies for composing visual elements. Secondary data were gathered through a literature review, including the WE POSE Training Module as a reference for emotional regulation material, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology's Book Assessment Guidelines (2022), Evelyn Ghozali's *Guide to Illustrating and Designing Children's Stories for Professionals* (2020), and child violence statistics from SIMFONI-PPA (2025). These multiple sources were integrated and triangulated to strengthen the rigor of the study, ensuring that findings

were not only grounded in design practice but also supported by psychological expertise and national educational standards.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Interview Data Analysis and Audience Preferences Result**

Based on in depth interviews with psychologist Tabitha Naema Christy and WE POSE facilitator Nurmalita Herdiana, it was found that marginalized children aged 8-10 are in the concrete operational stage. They require visual, concrete, and contextual learning media because verbal methods are often less effective in maintaining suspense. This is consistent with Riadi & Rusydiana (2026), who demonstrated that concrete visual media helps elementary school children grasp abstract concepts more effectively. A story-based narrative approach is considered far more effective than solely textual materials because it can build empathetic relationships with children's complex social backgrounds. Furthermore, operational constraints such as limited time and props require independent media that can be used outside of training sessions to retain material. From a technical visual perspective, illustrator experts Rosita Amalia and Dinda Rachma recommend using simple, expressive, and not overly realistic illustrations, as well as pop-up mechanisms that serve as attention-anchors, rather than mere decoration. Further validation through group interviews with the children in their care confirmed that they preferred "fun" cartoon visuals (referring to Maria Gabriela Gama's style) and needed representations of emotional triggers relevant to their daily lives, such as peer transmissions or game conflicts. Therefore, the emotional toolbox presented in the media content stories included concrete activities that were applicable and relevant to them, such as taking a breath, drinking water, eating a favorite snack, or walking.

### **Observation Results**

The observation phase was conducted to build a visual and narrative foundation relevant to the target audience's reality through direct fieldwork. The findings from this observation indicate that some interactive illustrations in printed picture books serve as instruments for conveying emotional

messages that are not always fully conveyed through narrative alone. One example is the use of color atmospheres to visualize the spectrum of characters' feelings when facing conflict. *Similarly, an illustration with a colorful atmosphere that effectively conveys an emotional message was identified during observation in the picturebook "Seri Anak Tangguh: Cerita-Cerita Raya."* The visual composition, through its use of vibrant colors and expressive character depictions, demonstrates how illustrations can communicate emotional states beyond what is conveyed in the narrative text.



Figure 1. Maria Gabriela Gama's style of illustration  
Source: author's documentation

These visual findings were then contextualized with observations in densely populated residential areas along the railway tracks, which revealed the dynamics of interactions and emotional expressions of marginalized children in their daily lives. Such harsh environments pose a risk of fostering persistent negative emotions, highlighting the importance of empathetic character design in educational media.

### Design Concept

The illustration style was developed based on group interviews regarding visual preferences with several WE POSE children (aged 8-10), who tended to prefer the visual style of Maria Gabriela Gama. Beyond aesthetic appeal, this style was chosen for its communicative effectiveness. The illustrations employ a cartoon-style digital painting technique characterized by fine brush strokes, minimal texture, bright, saturated colors, and strong, imaginative facial expressions simplified forms that make emotional cues more recognizable. According to Hashim (2016, as cited in Karina, Wuriyanto,

& Prihatini, 2023) cartoon images, as interpretative visuals, employ easily recognizable characters that are quickly understood, and their engaging and entertaining nature helps learners remember what has been studied. This reinforces the choice of a cartoon-based illustration style as not only culturally adapted but also pedagogically effective in supporting children's emotional regulation and literacy development. To maintain authenticity, this style was adapted by incorporating local elements typical of Indonesian children and physical details such as appearances, character clothing, and contextual environments to make them more relevant and understandable to the target audience.



Figure 2. Maria Gabriela Gama's style of illustration  
Source: Maria Gabriela Gama's portfolio (<https://www.mariagabrielaart.com/>)

The color scheme refers to the previously formulated keyword "Exploration of Contextual Emotional Regulation." The main palette is dominated by warm-earthy tones to represent the warm, familiar, and safe atmosphere of a residential environment for children. Theoretically, the selection of warm colors such as yellow, orange, and red is utilized to evoke psychological perceptions associated with cheerfulness, energy, and enthusiasm. In contrast, cool color groups such as blue, green, and purple are applied to convey a sense of calm while also representing nuances of sadness in the storyline (Putri et al., 2024:137). Through this spectrum division, color functions as an emotional marker instrument that is arranged to differentiate the situation or feelings of the main character from the book, named Jalu. Ranging from normal, sad, to angry. This visual strategy aims to make it easier for children to recognize changes in emotional context in narratives more

clearly and intuitively, so that the process of learning emotional regulation becomes more effective for marginalized children.

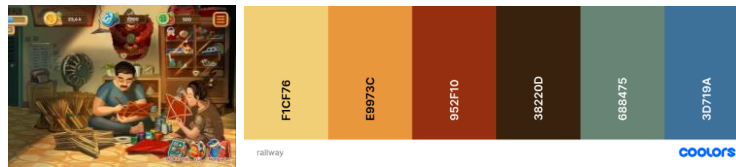


Figure 3. Color palette reference

Source: author's documentation generated via Coolors.co from illustration reference

Presents the main color palette reference, which was designed to communicate emotional contexts rather than serve as decoration. Warm earthy tones were selected to evoke familiarity and safety, aligning with the narrative's goal of creating a supportive environment for children.

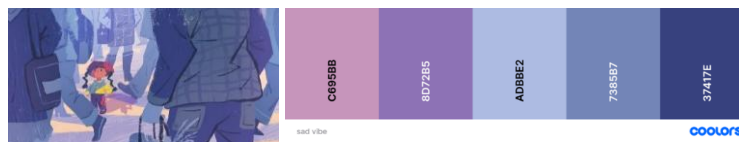


Figure 4. Sad illustration color palette reference

Source: author's documentation generated via Coolors.co from illustration reference

In contrast, cooler tones were introduced to represent sadness and calmness, functioning as visual markers that guide children in distinguishing emotional shifts within the storyline.

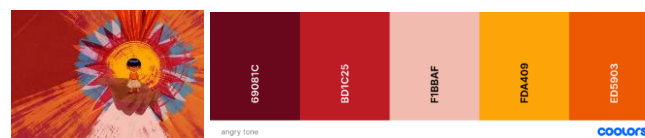


Figure 5. Angry illustration color palette reference

Source: author's documentation generated via Coolors.co from illustration reference

Figure 4 shows the palette for anger, characterized by saturated reds and contrasting dark tones. This combination was chosen to intensify the visual impact and signal heightened emotional states. The analytical rationale lies in

its communicative function, children can intuitively associate these colors with anger, thereby strengthening the connection between visual cues and emotional learning outcomes.

## Character Design Exploration

### 1. Character Visualization of Jalu



Figure 6. Moodbord reference and alternative character of Jalu  
Source: author's documentation

Jalu was designed as an authentic representation of a marginalized 10 year old child growing up in a densely populated residential area along the railway tracks. His physiological traits active posture, tanned skin, messy hair, and a missing tooth were not chosen merely for realism but to strengthen identification and relatability. The missing tooth, for instance, reflects a natural developmental stage common among children aged 9–12, canine and molar teeth typically undergo replacement (Aura, 2026). This detail enhances credibility and ensures that Jalu is perceived as a peer rather than an idealized figure.

Sociologically, his visual characteristics adopt the physical features of Dru Prawiro Sasono combined with references to the lifestyle of local Indonesian village children, as seen in his use of a singlet, flip-flops, and a sling bag accessory that functions as an "Emotion Box.". Psychologically, Jalu's

facial design was made highly expressive to accommodate a broad spectrum of feelings, in line with his impulsive temperament yet keen curiosity about the Stop-Think-Do emotion regulation technique. This choice was grounded in communication effectiveness: exaggerated expressions help children recognize emotional states more intuitively, supporting the pedagogical aim of teaching regulation strategies. Expert validation and audience preference confirmed that Alternative B was most effective, as its darker skin tone and chipped teeth conveyed an active, outdoor lifestyle, aligning with Jalu’s impulsive yet curious temperament. The simpler shirt design without decorative trim was chosen to emphasize authenticity and avoid distraction, ensuring that the character’s identity remained strong and relatable.

Thus, each design decision from physiological detail to sociocultural attributes and psychological expressiveness was analytically grounded in communication effectiveness. Jalu’s character was not only visually appealing but strategically constructed to function as a relatable medium for marginalized children to learn emotional regulation.

Table 1. Assessment matrix for alternative designs of Jalu characters

No	Assessment Indicator	Alt A	Alt B	Alt C
	<b>Playing with Shapes</b> Application of basic geometric shapes according to character traits	3	5	4
2	<b>Character Traits</b> Uniqueness and appropriateness of attributes, clothing style, and hairstyle represent the visual of marginalized children and stand out from other characters.	3	5	4
3	<b>Emotion &amp; Position (Flexibility of Expression)</b>	3	4	3

	Expressions and body language match character traits			
4	<b>Style &amp; Color</b> In harmony with character traits and story	3	5	4
5	<b>Target Preference</b>	<b>Audiences</b>	3	3
<b>Total Score</b>		15	22	19

Source: author's documentation

## 2. Character Visualization of Tilu

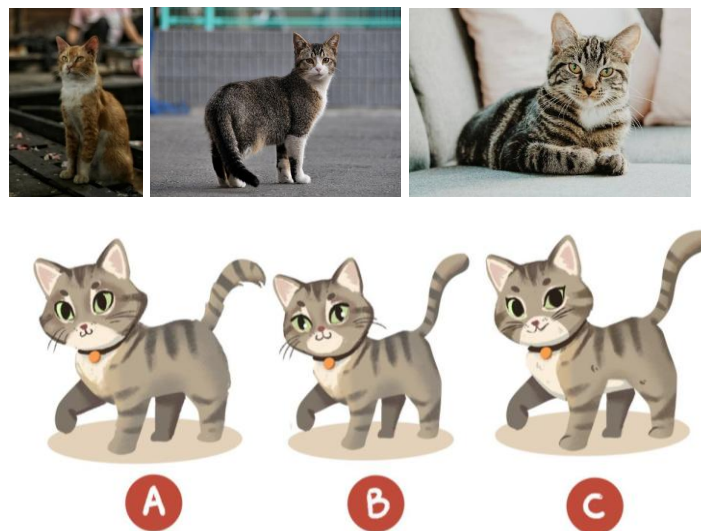


Figure 7. Moodbord reference and alternative character of Tilu  
 Source: author's documentation

Tilu is described as a grey-black domestic cat (tabby) which is often called a "tiger cat" or "striped cat". They are known for their intelligence, activity, exploration, and ability to learn new things. Their visual characteristics emphasize a calm, gentle expression and careful movements, emphasizing their role as empathetic and non-patronizing companions. In addition to cats being a relevant animal in marginalized children's environments, the selection was also based on research on pet attachment,

which shows that children with pets, such as cats, tend to develop stronger prosocial behavior, empathy, and emotional regulation skills. Although the cat is not depicted in this design as a personal pet, but rather as a familiar village cat, its symbolic and emotional function remains relevant. The presence of the cat as a guiding character capitalizes on children's everyday familiarity with cats in their environment, transforming this common figure into an empathetic companion that supports emotional regulation in the interactive storybook (Paramitha et al., 2025). Alternative C was selected based on expert validation results using assessments with indicator tables and audience preferences.

Table 2. Assessment matrix for alternative designs of tilu characters

No	Assessment Indicator	Alt A	Alt B	Alt C
1	<b>Playing with Shapes</b> Application of basic geometric shapes according to character traits	3	5	4
2	<b>Character Traits</b> Uniqueness and appropriateness of attributes, clothing style, and hairstyle represent the visual of marginalized children and stand out from other characters.	3	4	3
3	<b>Emotion &amp; Position (Flexibility of Expression)</b> Expressions and body language match character traits	3	3	3
4	<b>Style &amp; Color</b> In harmony with character traits and story	3	3	3
5	<b>Target Audiences Preference</b>	1	2	5
<b>Total Score</b>		13	17	18

Source: author's documentation

### 3. Character Visualization of Bara

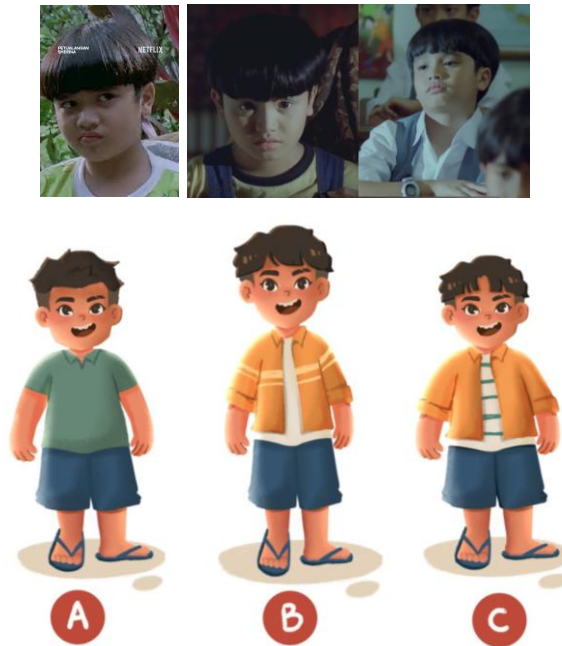


Figure 8. Moodbord reference and alternative character of Tilu  
 Source: author's documentation

Bara is a dominant antagonist who is Jalu's peer in the same neighborhood. Visually, Bara has a slightly larger body with distinctive gestures such as frequently pointing or lifting his chin to show his superiority in the playgroup. His face adopts the features of child actor Derby Romero with a cynical expression and a crooked smile, reflecting a temperament that is accusatory and selfish. These characteristics are deliberately created to be the trigger for the main conflict that tests the main character's ability to regulate emotions. Alternative A was selected based on expert validation results using assessments with indicator tables and audience preferences. Alternative A was chosen based on the results of the assessment table scores by the expert validator and the target audience's preferences.

Table 3. Assessment matrix for alternative designs of Jalu characters

No	Assessment Indicator	Alt A	Alt B	Alt C
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1	<b>Playing with Shapes</b> Application of basic geometric shapes according to character traits	5	3	3
2	<b>Character Traits</b> Uniqueness and appropriateness of attributes, clothing style, and hairstyle represent the visual of marginalized children and stand out from other characters.	5	3	3
3	<b>Emotion &amp; Position (Flexibility of Expression)</b> Expressions and body language match character traits	4	3	3
4	<b>Style &amp; Color</b> In harmony with character traits and story	5	3	3
5	<b>Target Audiences Preference</b>	2	4	3
<b>Total Score</b>		21	16	15

Source: author's documentation

#### 4. Character Visualization of Laras



Figure 9. Moodbord reference and alternative character of Tilu  
Source: author's documentation

Laras is visualized as Jalu's 6-year-old innocent and cheerful little sister. Physiologically, her appearance emphasizes an adorable impression through the application of a hairstyle with cute bangs that gives a fresher and simpler impression. Sociologically, Laras is visualized using brightly colored clothing in the form of a blue denim overall suit and a striped t-shirt and flip-flops to reflect the reality of children's clothing styles in marginal settlements. From a psychological perspective, her facial features still adopt the characteristics of child actress Fara Simatupang with a cheerful expression that is easy to read to emphasize her sensitive nature. Alternative C was chosen based on the results of the assessment table scores by the expert validator and the target audience's preferences.

Table 4 Assessment Matrix for Alternative Designs of Jalu Characters

No	Assessment Indicator	Alt A	Alt B	Alt C
1	<b>Playing with Shapes</b> Application of basic geometric shapes according to character traits	3	3	3
2	<b>Character Traits</b> Uniqueness and appropriateness of attributes, clothing style, and hairstyle represent the visual of marginalized children and stand out from other characters.	3	3	4
3	<b>Emotion &amp; Position (Flexibility of Expression)</b> Expressions and body language match character traits	3	3	4
4	<b>Style &amp; Color</b> In harmony with character traits and story	3	3	4
5	<b>Target Audiences Preference</b>	3	1	4
<b>Total Score</b>		15	13	19

Source: author's documentation

## CONCLUSION

This research was conducted to develop effective character designs for an interactive storybook that represents the social and psychological realities of marginalized children, specifically as a medium for learning and recalling emotional regulation techniques they have learned. This study shows that character design not only considers the physical development of children, such as the tooth changing phase at age 10, but also the social context. Elements of everyday life for Indonesian village children, such as sleeveless shirts and flip-flops, are presented to reinforce the realistic and relevant impression for the audience. By adopting the "fun" cartoon style of Maria Gabriela Gama and applying a specific color palette earthy warm tones for safety and chromatic shifts to denote sadness or anger the design effectively serves as a visual strategy instrument to trigger behavioral modeling in children.

Practically, this research contributes to the field of Visual Communication Design through the design of characters that can serve as inclusive, independent learning media, especially for children with limited access to devices. Theoretically, this research confirms that character design is not merely a visual element but can also function as a psychological instrument in social education media, prioritizing emotional connection over mere aesthetics. This research is expected to have a positive impact on children and the WE POSE community in learning long-term emotional regulation. its limitations lie in its geographic scope and relatively limited number of validation samples. Therefore, further research is recommended to examine the effectiveness of the characters more broadly. Furthermore, it is hoped that in future research, this character design can be developed and applied to other educational media, such as animated videos and social campaigns that address issues of marginalized children.

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