

Low Reading Interest and Literacy Access Inequality: A Structural-Psychosocial Analysis in Indonesia

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Abstract

The problem of low reading literacy in Indonesia has always been seen as the consequence of poor public interest in reading. The concept has become widely spread in the public discourse and mass media and even frequently used as a foundation for forming policies on how to improve literacy levels. Nevertheless, such an attitude might distort the nature of the problem and fail to see the structural and other factors that affect the process of reading. The main goal of this article is to conduct a critical analysis of whether the low literacy level in Indonesia is really associated with poor interest in reading or is affected by expensive books and poor access to books. The methodology used in this research is a literature review which is based on secondary data obtained from the reports of government agencies, national surveys, data-based media publications, and scientific literature. The results of this study show that the interest of Indonesians in reading has been growing every year in quantitative terms, as shown by the Reading Interest Index and Reading Enthusiasm Rate. Nevertheless, this growth has not been followed by access to books because of their high prices, low reading material availability rate, and unequal regional distribution. It means that literacy problems in Indonesia should be considered as economic and structural ones and not just the absence of interest in reading. Thus, sustainability of literacy policies lies in reducing the price of books and providing access to them.

Keywords: Reading Literacy, Interest in Reading, Book Prices, Access to Reading Materials, Systematic Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

The capacity to read not only means the capability of understanding the written words but also means having the skills to analyze facts, to decide, to judge, and to participate in social and economic activities. In other words, literacy in the contemporary world entails much more than mere decoding of words; it also entails learning, thinking, and problem-solving skills. Nevertheless, literacy remains a challenge for Indonesian students. According to the findings of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022, the literacy score of 15-year-old Indonesian students is at 359, lower than the OECD average of 476 (OECD, 2023). Not infrequently, this issue is seen in the public sphere as an outcome of a low interest in reading books among Indonesians.

However, such a perception poses risks of reducing a serious social issue into a personal trait. The interest in reading does not occur in a vacuum. It grows from continuous exposure to the right kinds of texts and is affected by family income, school contexts, economic conditions, and access to the necessary literature. Access to books at home has been positively associated with reading attitudes and frequencies (Merga, 2015). Thus, one should not conclude that a person who does not purchase or read books has no interest in reading;

insufficient reading can also mean that there are few opportunities to acquire the proper literature.

This evidence from Indonesia shows the need to make the distinction between access and interest in reading. The Tingkat Gemar Membaca (TGM), which stands for "Reading Proclivity Level" of the National Library of Indonesia, has been increasing from 55.74 in 2020 to 59.52 in 2021, 63.90 in 2022, and 66.77 in 2023 (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2020, 2022, 2024). While this index should not be considered as an indicator of literacy skills, its steady growth proves that the claim about the unwillingness of Indonesian people to read is rather static and does not take into account that inequality of access can also be one of the factors.

The issue here is not only the quantity of books but also their relevance. According to INOVASI study, 68% of the books in the environment where the researchers conducted research were textbooks that were either not very interesting or difficult to read for beginners (Jackson & Warin, 2023). The issue explains why having printed material does not mean having good access. In order to be able to read something, the reader needs texts that suit his/her age, reading skills, language, and interests. The geographical disparities make the issue even more complicated since there are regions where there is no way to access bookstores and libraries.

Cost forms yet another critical barrier. As mentioned by the Indonesian Publishers Association, people have shown interest in reading, but their ability to do so is hindered by the rising costs of books, lack of purchasing power, and books losing precedence among other needs (Ikatan Penerbit Indonesia, 2024). The retail examples provided are a demonstration of the challenge people face in buying books; recent popular titles cost more than 100,000 (IDR), while there are some translated titles which may be costlier. It should be noted that these examples do not provide an average for the entire country, but they are just examples showing how purchasing even one book could form a significant expense for many families. The cost of books thus combines with income, location, library availability, and distribution to influence literacy outcomes; the latter factors, however, cannot be ignored completely.

This distinction is important for literacy policies. Where low reading frequency is viewed as being due to poor motivation, policy solutions are expected to emphasize awareness campaigns to encourage people to read. While the former policy solution might be helpful, they cannot fully tackle challenges of unaffordable books, insufficient stock, inappropriate titles, and uneven distribution.

Against this backdrop, this paper takes another look at the commonly-held story of “low reading interest” in Indonesia by analyzing the interplay between book prices, purchasing power, availability of suitable books, and the act of reading. Drawing upon national figures and literature review, it posits that the Indonesian literacy problem is not just a matter of individual’s lack of interest but needs to be looked at through the lens of the context in which one can translate interest into action.

METHOD

The research design applied in this study is descriptive qualitative in the form of systematic literature review. This design was chosen due to its effectiveness in studying multidimensional problems such as literacy, which encompasses social, economic, cultural, and public policy dimensions. Literature review makes it possible for researchers to combine evidence found in different sources in order to create a comprehensive picture of the relation between reading interest, book prices, and literacy access.

The sources of data used in this study comprise secondary data, gathered from official reports issued by government authorities, like National Library of the Republic of Indonesia, data from Reading Enthusiasm Survey (TGM), research institutions and data-based media like Kompas, ANTARA News, GoodStats, and Republika (Widyanuratikah, 2021). Also, this study uses scientific literature in the form of peer-reviewed journal articles, reports from OECD, and views of literacy experts and scholars.

In terms of data gathering, a digital literature review was conducted using such keywords as “reading interest,” “reading literacy in Indonesia,” “book prices,” and “access to reading materials.” Articles and documents were chosen based on their topic relevancy, authority of sources, and data currency. The collected data was further analyzed by means of content analysis in order to detect patterns in findings, common arguments, and perspective differences between the sources.

In this regard, this research utilized several themes, which were grouped from the data gathered, such as the cultivation of reading interest, cost of books and purchasing power, availability of reading materials, and its implications on literacy policy. To enhance validity, this research used the strategy of source triangulation through comparison of data from different sources and literature. In this way, the research findings will give an objective overview of the issue on literacy in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The problem of low reading interest amongst the Indonesian people has always been a point of discussion within public circles. A common discourse in many media sources is how Indonesians are lazy readers, have low interests in books, and prefer immediate entertainment. However, these discourses are not true representations of the situation.

Instead, it has been found that various field findings, institutional reports, and even technologies suggest that reading interest is not the main problem. The main problem is the expensive nature of books and lack of access to reading materials. The Reduction of Literacy Problems in the “Low Reading Interest” Discourse

The “low reading interest” discourse has been employed as the only reason for the literacy problems in Indonesia. However, such a discourse tends to blame the individuals themselves without considering the bigger picture. Literature on literacy suggests that reading behavior is highly dependent on the availability of reading materials, literacy environment, and economic opportunities (OECD, 2019).

1. The Narrative of “Low Interest in Reading” as an Oversimplification of the Literacy Problem

The stereotype about Indonesians having little interest in reading has existed for quite some time now. Mostly, this stereotype is based on Indonesia ranking last in various global literacy indices. However, some scholars and literacy experts suggest that the indicators that measure literacy are frequently misinterpreted and overly simplified with no consideration for the social context of Indonesia.

Firstly, global literacy indicators are concerned mainly about the quantity of printed books and neglect the informal practice of literacy that takes place in communities. For example, in small cities and villages, reading activity does not necessarily occur in big bookshops; instead, the activity occurs in the form of literacy communities, TBM (community reading garden), small libraries, and community book exchange programs.

Secondly, changes in reading preferences of the younger generation remain invisible to the metrics of traditional measures of literacy. Young Indonesians are active readers of e-books, web novels, online comics, fan fiction, and other kinds of digital literacy platforms. Such activity is not counted in traditional measures of literacy while being actually the same in its essence.

Thirdly, the findings of the Community Literacy Development Index (IPLM) report by the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia confirm that lack of access to reading materials is the main reason behind low literacy rates rather than an absence of reading

interest (Perpusnas, 2021). Therefore, it can be stated that the desire to read does exist in the Indonesian society but remains unfulfilled because of structural barriers.

2. Book Prices Are Relatively High from the Perspective of People's Purchasing Power

The average cost for new books in Indonesia starts from 60,000 to 150,000 (IDR) per piece. These costs are regarded as too expensive for the lower-middle class in particular since their location is not Jakarta. It refers to their budget in general.

a. Production and Raw Materials Costs

Most of the raw materials of the book industry, especially paper, are still dependent on imports. The increase in global raw material prices, printing costs, and the shrinkage of production machinery have a direct impact on the increase in the cost of book production.

b. Production and Raw Materials Costs

Book distribution in Indonesia is still through a long chain:

Publishers → distributors → bookstores → end consumers.

Distributors and wholesalers can take margins of up to 40–55% of the selling price, which significantly raises the price of books at the consumer level.

c. Tax and Logistics Costs

The distribution of books to areas outside Java faces infrastructure constraints and high logistics costs. As a result, book prices in regions such as Papua, NTT, and parts of Kalimantan are often much more expensive than in Java.

d. Low Production Scale

Unlike countries with established book industries (e.g. Japan or South Korea), the book printing volume in Indonesia is relatively small. Due to the small volume of production, the cost of each book becomes very high, and thus, cheap books cannot be distributed easily.

This situation illustrates that the problem with reading lies not in the lack of desire to read, but in the economic inability to do so.

3. Inequality of Reading Access Between Regions

In addition to the price factor, literacy problems in Indonesia are also marked by inequality in access to reading. National Library data shows that more than 40% of Indonesia's population does not have a proper public library, and many existing libraries have old collections and are rarely updated.

This situation is exacerbated by the following conditions:

a. Bookstores are concentrated in major cities

b. Small publishers struggle to penetrate the national distribution network

c. Access to digital reading is not fully equitable due to limited devices, internet networks, and data costs

As a result, people who have an interest in reading are still faced with limited choices: buy expensive books or not read at all.

4. Indicators That Show Interest in Reading Is Actually Increasing

Various developments in recent years have actually shown an increase in interest in reading, especially when access is made easier and cheaper.

a. Growth of Digital Library Users

National digital library applications such as iPusnas have recorded a significant increase in the number of book borrowings every year. The presence of free or cheap digital books has proven to be able to attract the reading interest of the wider public.

b. Enthusiasm for the Literacy Festival

The popularity of literary festivals and book bazaars, such as the Jakarta International Literary Festival, Patjar Merah, and Big Bad Wolf, indicates that the literacy problem in Indonesia may be related more closely to unequal access to books than to a lack of public interest in reading (Monica, 2022).

c. The Growth of Reading Communities

Book clubs, community reading parks, independent bookstores, and book-sharing movements are growing rapidly as a response to the high prices of commercial books.

d. Increasing Consumption of Digital Books

Platforms such as Gramedia Digital, Google Play Books, and online novel applications show thousands to millions of active users. This phenomenon confirms that people read when economic barriers can be minimized.

5. Policy Implications: Pushing for More Affordable Books

Based on these findings, efforts to improve literacy should extend beyond campaigns promoting reading interest and give greater attention to the structural conditions that shape access to reading materials. The relevant steps that can be taken to improve the situation include subsidizing the distribution of books to rural areas, exempting taxes from educational and literacy books, and enhancing services of libraries and digitized libraries at the village level. Supporting the small book publishers and book stores can also contribute towards making more reading material available. In addition, literacy policies can be combined with other measures that can safeguard the purchasing power of households, thus making it possible for people to buy books and read them regularly.

Thus, the problem of literacy in Indonesia does not lie in the willingness to read, but in the ability and opportunity to access decent and affordable reading.

Table 1. The State of Reading Interest and Access to Books in Indonesia

Indicators / Sources	Findings / Facts
National Library of Indonesia (Perpusnas) — “Literacy Development Index & Reading Interest Index 2020–2021”	The Reading Interest Index rose from 55.74 (2020) to 59.92 (2021). (ANTARA News)
2023 Survey of Reading Enthusiasm Level (TGM) – Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia	The national TGM score increased from 63.90 in 2022 to 66.77 in 2023, indicating an improvement in public reading enthusiasm (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2023).
Ratio of book availability per capita per year	Very low—1 book for every 11 people per year; the international standard is ~1 book for every 2 people.
Data on book consumption by physical book buyers (2025)	The majority of buyers can only afford to spend < 100,000 (IDR) per month; 24.6% can spend 100,000–500,000 (IDR); only 4.6% spend more than that. (GoodStats, 2025; Al-Fajri, 2025)
Recognition from practitioners/academic libraries	High book prices, limited time, and limited access to quality reading materials.

Findings from various surveys indicate that the issue of low literacy in Indonesia is often misunderstood as a lack of interest in reading among the public, when in fact interest in reading has been increasing year after year. The National Library of Indonesia notes that the Reading Interest Index rose from 55.74 in 2020 to 59.92 in 2021, indicating a positive trend in the public’s interest in reading (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2022, as reported by Antara News). Other findings from the Reading Enthusiasm Level (TGM) survey also show a rise in the score to 66.77 in 2023, indicating that the public actually has a fairly high willingness to read (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2023). Unfortunately, despite the rise in interest in literature, people's access to books was quite limited, especially with regards to their purchase. The data from GoodStats (2025) shows that most readers can afford to pay no more than 100,000 (IDR) for books per month while the price of a new book starts from 80,000 (IDR) and can reach 150,000 (IDR); hence, people want to read but cannot afford it.

Another problem that affects people's access to books is the ratio of books per person which is quite low in Indonesia as well, namely, one book for every 11 people per year, whereas the desired international standard is one book per every two people per year (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2023). Moreover, the limitation in access to

books in various regions additionally hinders the reading culture not because of people's laziness but due to difficulties in finding good literature to read. According to literacy practitioners and researchers, the major obstacles are not the lack of interest but high prices, inequality of distribution and priority of other issues in people's houses. In other words, low literacy rates should not be associated with the lack of interest in reading.

Thus, the solutions that should be considered are not only initiatives to enhance reading interest but also ways to increase the availability of inexpensive books, distribution to local libraries, and cheaper options for digital reading. Even the government has planned to give books to 10,000 libraries in order to overcome the gaps in accessing literacy (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2024). It will help solve the problems related to book prices, their accessibility and affordability, and thus ensure a sustainable growth in literacy among the Indonesian public. Therefore, one can say that these results show that the problem of literacy is not a lack of interest in reading among the population, but the access to literature and its prices, which are quite high.

It turns out that according to national reports, the situation with reading literacy in Indonesia is much more complicated than the stereotype of the lack of interest in reading among Indonesians. According to the national data of the Indonesian National Library, the national reading enjoyment level (TGM) has grown from 55.74 in 2020 to 59.52 in 2021. This positive tendency continues, because in 2022 the score was 63.90 while in 2023 it became 66.77 (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2022, 2023).

However, the increase in interest in reading has not been followed by the availability and accessibility of the reading material. Statistics have revealed that the number of available books per person annually in Indonesia is only 1 book for 11 people annually, which still falls behind the international standards of approximately 1 book for every two persons annually (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2022). Such facts point out the presence of structural limitations in terms of the access to the reading materials, mainly to physical books.

From the economic standpoint, statistics from the survey conducted in 2025 on the patterns of purchasing physical books have demonstrated that most of the buyers spend less than 100,000 (IDR) per month on buying books, while only 4.6% of them can afford to spend more on this (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2023). Such information indicates that economic conditions may affect reading practices despite interest in the reading itself.

In the case of academic library practice and administration, the same issues have been stated. The common barriers to the literacy mentioned by academic librarians were high costs of the books, lack of time, and limitation in accessing good reading material in the areas out

of the urban center (Zucker et al., 2022). Therefore, reading interest is not the only indicator related to literacy.

Structural barriers to the development of a reading culture in literature and observations of the state of literacy are related to the costs of book production, distribution, and supply chain in Indonesia, which can still be considered relatively high, thus making books less accessible for school students, university students, and families with low incomes (Ikatan Penerbit Indonesia, 2022). In addition, the budget allocated to buying books and reading material in general may receive lower priority compared to the purchase of the essential goods.

Another structural factor is connected to book distribution. Modern books and libraries are mostly found in cities, and rural and isolated areas do not have enough reading materials (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2023). Thus, people interested in reading may still face difficulties accessing necessary materials.

Those circumstances can affect reading habits of people in terms of turning to more easily accessed ways of getting entertainment and information, such as using social networks and short video and audio content (Kovac & van der Weel, 2018). Such a behavior pattern should not be interpreted as disinterest in reading, but rather as a reaction to the unavailability of reading material.

It should be noted that the narrative, connecting low literacy to the absence of interest in reading, may be too simplistic. The existing statistics show that there is demand for the physical books among certain population categories with purchasing power, as the purchase of books continues in spite of relatively high prices (GoodStats, 2025).

The increase in recent years in the indices of reading interest and scores of reading enthusiasm also refutes the assumption of unwillingness of Indonesians to read (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2022: Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2023). Thus, it becomes clear that structural factors such as price, distribution of reading material, existence of libraries, and priorities of expenses in families also have to be taken into account to evaluate literacy properly. Consequently, the lack of literacy caused by unwillingness to read is an insufficient explanation. Literacy, instead, might be explained in terms of interaction of personal interest and socioeconomic factors promoting or hindering continuous reading practices.

From the analysis of reviewed data and literature, attempts to increase reading literacy in Indonesia might pay more attention to the improvement of access to affordable reading materials. The solution might consist of the development of regional libraries and centers of community reading, as well as implementation of programs for distribution and donation of

books to promote equal access to affordable books (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2024). Financial incentives and subsidies might also be provided for book publishing to decrease book retail prices. Besides, the creation of digital literacy alternatives, including e-books and online libraries, can solve problems of geographical and financial inaccessibility of reading material. It can also be supplemented by the promotion of reading habits from an early age through cooperation of schools, families, and literacy communities to transform reading into daily activity rather than a mandatory academic practice.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the findings from literature review and data analysis, it is possible to argue that low level of reading literacy in Indonesia cannot be described as a consequence of low interest in reading among the population of the country. According to the data obtained from various official sources, an upward tendency towards an increase in reading interest and high level of reading enthusiasm can be observed in recent years. Therefore, it is clear that public interest in reading exists and develops.

Nevertheless, despite the growth of public interest in reading, there is no adequate access to the reading material for people. High cost of the books, low purchasing power of the population, low ratio of book availability that significantly differs from the ideal one, as well as inequality in provision of the reading materials are the main barriers to literacy. These barriers are of the structural and systemic character and, thus, cannot be overcome through morality campaigns and appeals to read.

In this way, it becomes evident that the problem of literacy should be considered as an interaction of individual interest and socioeconomic factors that allow or limit individuals from reading. Based on the above-mentioned findings, the implications of the study are connected with necessity of the implementation of literacy policies in the field of provision of affordable books, development of libraries, and digital literacy.

SUGGESTIONS

From the results of the literature review and analysis carried out in this study, some recommendations that can be used as references in developing the literacy of reading in Indonesia include the following. First, policies must be made in order to decrease the price of books either through production subsidies, tax exemption, or simplification of distribution so that book prices will be cheaper and affordable for the public. Second, equitable access to reading material should become a main priority in increasing the number of reading through the improvement of local library, rejuvenation of reading garden at the community level, and the budgeting for the acquisition of collection in the area of 3T. Third, the government and

related institutions should encourage the expansion of digital literacy through the provision of cheap internet and cheap digital device so that digital books become accessible for the public. Fourth, there should be cooperation among school, family, and literacy community in creating a reading culture since childhood not only as academic demands, but also through creative ways that will create intrinsic motivation in them. Finally, for the future research, there should be conducted some more in-depth empirical studies on the influence of purchasing power on reading frequency, as well as comparative research on the effectiveness of digital books and print books on literacy achievement.

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