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DIGITAL WATTPAD CULTURE IN INDONESIA: YOUTH, ROMANCE, AND THE CHANGING PRACTICES OF READING AND WRITING

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Abstract: This article explores digital Wattpad culture among Indonesian youth, focusing on how romance narratives shape changing practices of reading and writing. Using a qualitative descriptive design grounded in cultural and literacy studies, the research involves 15–24-year-old Wattpad users who actively read and/or write romance stories. Data were collected through online semi-structured interviews, digital ethnographic observation of Wattpad activities, and document analysis of selected romance texts. Thematic analysis reveals that Wattpad functions as an everyday literacy space where youth move from casual readers to more selective readers and, in many cases, to active writers. Romance emerges as the dominant genre, particularly subgenres such as school/campus romance, enemies-to-lovers, friends-to-lovers, and religious romance, which offer both familiarity and emotional intensity. Participants use Wattpad to explore identity, gender roles, love, and religiosity, while simultaneously negotiating global romance tropes with local Indonesian cultural norms. The findings also indicate perceived improvements in reading fluency, vocabulary, and narrative writing skills, alongside the development of audience awareness and critical judgment. However, the study also notes ambivalent effects, including the risk of unrealistic romantic expectations and normalization of problematic relationship models. The article argues that Wattpad should be recognized as part of Indonesia's contemporary reading landscape and suggests that educators and policymakers can strategically leverage this platform to support youth literacy, provided that critical digital literacy is also fostered.

Keywords Wattpad; digital culture; youth literacy; romance narratives; reading and practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have become central to how young people engage with stories, and Wattpad is one of the most influential spaces where Indonesian youth now read, write, and circulate fiction. With over 90 million global users and Indonesia ranking among the top three countries by active users, Wattpad has become particularly influential in shaping youth reading culture in the archipelago (Ohta & Yoshida, 2025). Romance dominates the platform's Indonesian content, with school/campus romance and religious romance subgenres attracting millions of reads and generating substantial community engagement (McMullen et al., 2021). As a free, mobile-based platform with interactive features such as inline commenting, likes, and social sharing, Wattpad enables young readers to consume stories anytime and anywhere while also positioning them as potential authors and

community members (Drenten & Gurrieri, 2025; Juliansen et al., 2024; Peeples et al., 2018). In Indonesia, where concerns about declining reading interest persist alongside rapid smartphone penetration, Wattpad appears as a paradoxical site: it is often dismissed as "light" or "popular" entertainment, yet it is precisely here that many teenagers and young adults spend hours reading serial fiction, especially romance (DePamphilis, 2026; Merga, 2021). This shift invites closer examination of how digital reading and writing practices on Wattpad are reshaping youth literacy culture in Indonesia, particularly around genres that dominate the platform such as teen romance.

The rise of "digital Wattpad culture" cannot be separated from broader transformations in global youth reading practices, where platforms like Wattpad, Webtoon, and fanfiction archives blur boundaries between author and reader, publication and social networking, and leisure and learning (Cordón-García et al., 2013; Król & Zdonek, 2020; Merga, 2021). Recent studies show that Gen Z readers do not necessarily read less; instead, they navigate stories across formats—from print and audiobooks to fanfiction and social reading apps such as Wattpad and BookTok-linked platforms (Nam & Jung, 2022; Santa María et al., 2022; Storm et al., 2022). In Indonesia, this trend is intensified by high social media usage and a growing ecosystem of "cyber literature" in which Wattpad and similar platforms function as alternative literary publics that exist partly outside school and traditional publishing (Beach & Smith, 2022; Magnifico & Jones, 2025; Ohta & Yoshida, 2025). Wattpad thus emerges as a key arena where youth experiment with new forms of storytelling, identity performance, and community participation.

Within this environment, romance fiction especially teen and young adult romance—occupies a privileged position as one of the most consumed and produced genres on Wattpad. Indonesian teenagers often prefer romance narratives that foreground emotional intensity, everyday conflicts, and aspirational lifestyles, with Wattpad offering a vast catalogue of such stories written by peers or near-peers (Afrilyasanti et al., 2022; McMullen et al., 2021; Zhao, 2025). Romantic narratives on Wattpad are not merely escapist entertainment; they can serve as spaces where youth negotiate gender norms, intimacy, religiosity, class mobility, and cultural values in ways that differ from both school literature and mainstream commercial novels (Howard-Sukhil, 2023; Santa María et al., 2024). Yet, despite the centrality of romance on the platform, there remains limited empirical work examining how Indonesian youth use these texts, how they move between reading and writing, and how this shapes their broader literacy practices.

At a more specific level, the present study is concerned with the changing practices of reading and writing among Indonesian youth who participate in Wattpad culture, with a focus on romance stories. Research on Wattpad in Indonesia has often foregrounded its role as a pedagogical tool—for improving reading comprehension, vocabulary, or motivation in English as a foreign language—rather than as a cultural site where youth actively construct meaning and identity through popular genres (Creswell et al., 2024; Scibetta et al., 2025). Studies have examined correlations between Wattpad use and reading comprehension (Alifah, 2024; Desimoni et al., 2024), strategies for reading English web novels (Bedington et al., 2024), and student attitudes toward Wattpad as an online reading platform (Mathias & Standal, 2025; Skovdahl et al., 2025). However, fewer studies investigate how everyday practices on Wattpad—such as commenting, serial writing, co-constructing storylines, and sharing fan- based content—reshape the ways young people understand what it means to read and write literature, especially romantic fiction, in contemporary Indonesia.

This gap is particularly important given ongoing debates about the crisis of reading culture in Indonesia, where national surveys often report low reading interest, while school and university teachers simultaneously observe that students spend long periods reading on screens (Hasan et al., 2025; Saud et al., 2025). Studies focusing on Wattpad indicate that the platform can increase reading motivation, support extensive reading, and foster digital literacy when appropriately integrated into learning environments (Yorke et al., 2025). At the same time, critical work suggests that youth engagement with digital platforms may reinforce

commercial logics, reinforce gendered stereotypes within romance plots, or produce forms of digital addiction (Donelle et al., 2021; Kruzan et al., 2023). Understanding digital Wattpad culture in Indonesia thus requires attention to both its empowering and problematic dimensions, especially as they relate to youth romance narratives and the broader ecology of reading and writing.

To our knowledge, this is the first study in the Indonesian context to systematically examine Wattpad as a site of digital romance culture by combining in-depth qualitative methods—including interviews, digital ethnography, and textual analysis—to capture how youth readers and writers negotiate global romance tropes within local cultural and religious frameworks. While previous Indonesian research has documented Wattpad's role in reading motivation and language learning, this study uniquely foregrounds romance as a central analytical category and explores how seriality, community feedback, and platform affordances shape both literacy practices and identity construction among Indonesian adolescents and young adults.

Previous research within the Indonesian context has highlighted several key roles of Wattpad in youth literacy yet tends to approach the platform from either an educational technology perspective or a general interest-in-reading framework. Lestari (2022) shows that Wattpad can increase reading and writing interest among Indonesian youth by providing easy access to stories that match their preferences and language levels, while Dewi (2024) emphasizes how Wattpad can help arouse reading habits among young people amid pervasive digital distractions. Other studies explore Wattpad's integration into classroom practices, demonstrating its effectiveness in enhancing reading comprehension, vocabulary, and literary engagement among secondary and tertiary students (Fendt et al., 2025). Meanwhile, research by Muryanti (2021) and related work on Islamic-themed stories shows how young Muslim authors use Wattpad to write religiously inflected narratives, suggesting the platform's relevance to identity and value negotiation beyond formal schooling (Imjai et al., 2024; Wennås Brante et al., 2024).

Despite these contributions, several limitations remain. First, romance as a genre is often taken for granted—as a background category rather than an analytical focus—leaving underexplored how romantic plots, tropes, and character types participate in shaping youth imaginaries and everyday discourses about love, gender, and the future (Cyber Literature as a Media for Reading Popular Romantic Topics, 2024; The Popularity of the Wattpad Application in Increasing Reading Interest, 2023; Increase in Reading Habits Among Young People, 2024). Second, most existing studies either examine Wattpad primarily as a tool to support English language learning or focus on quantitative measures of attitudes, motivation, or comprehension, rather than the lived cultural practices of reading and writing on the platform (Berg et al., 2024; Hestholm, 2023). Third, there is relatively little work that situates Indonesian Wattpad practices within broader debates on digital culture, participatory media, and youth popular literature, which would allow for a richer interpretation of how local and global forces intersect in shaping Indonesian digital romance culture (Bailey et al., 2025).

In summary, three key gaps emerge from existing literature: (1) romance genre is undertheorized despite its dominance on Wattpad, with limited analysis of how romantic tropes shape youth identities; (2) methodological focus on quantitative attitudes rather than qualitative cultural practices leaves unexplored the lived experiences of reading and writing; and (3) insufficient attention to the intersection of global digital culture and local Indonesian norms around religion, gender, and family values. In response to these gaps, this article proposes the notion of "digital Wattpad culture"as an analytical lens to understand how Indonesian youth engage with romance narratives through intertwined practices of reading, writing, and social interaction on the platform. Rather than treating Wattpad merely as a neutral tool or a container of texts, this study foregrounds the platform's affordances—such as serial publication, instant feedback through comments and votes, follower systems, and algorithmic recommendation—as structuring how stories are produced, circulated, and valued by young people (Luyten, 2024).

The novelty of this research lies in combining cultural and literacy studies perspectives to examine: (1) how Indonesian youth readers and writers of romance on Wattpad describe their

everyday practices and motivations; (2) how these practices reconfigure boundaries between reading and writing, amateur and professional authorship, and private and public textual engagement; and (3) how digital Wattpad culture intersects with local norms around gender, religion, and adolescence in Indonesia (Muryanti, 2021; Cyber Literature as a Media for Reading Popular Romantic Topics, 2024; Increase in Reading Habits Among Young People, 2024).

Given the growing influence of Wattpad among Indonesian youth and the relative scarcity of research that examines it as a cultural and literacy phenomenon centered on romance, there is an urgent need to investigate how this platform is reshaping everyday practices of reading and writing. Understanding digital Wattpad culture is important not only for scholars of literature and media, but also for educators, policymakers, and publishing stakeholders who are concerned with revitalizing reading culture and engaging young people on their own terms. Such an investigation can reveal how youth negotiate agency, pleasure, and constraint within the platform, and how their participation might open or foreclose possibilities for critical and creative literacy. By focusing on youth, romance, and changing reading and writing practices, this article seeks to capture a dynamic moment in Indonesia's literary landscape, where the boundaries between popular culture, education, and digital media are increasingly porous.

Building on this background, the present study aims to (1) describe the reading and writing practices of Indonesian youth who engage with romance narratives on Wattpad; (2) analyze how platform-specific features and community norms shape these practices; and (3) interpret how youth participants understand the meanings and implications of their involvement in digital Wattpad culture, particularly in relation to their identities as readers and writers. The expected benefits of this research include providing a more nuanced understanding of contemporary youth literacy in Indonesia, offering insights for educators seeking to integrate popular digital platforms into literacy pedagogy, and contributing to scholarly debates on digital culture, participatory media, and popular romance. More broadly, the findings are expected to inform cultural and educational policies that recognize and value the diverse ways in which Indonesian youth engage with stories in the digital age, while also critically addressing issues such as representation, commercialization, and the quality of reading and writing practices on platforms like Wattpad.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in cultural and literacy studies, aiming to capture in depth the lived experiences, meanings, and everyday practices of Indonesian youth who participate in Wattpad-based romance reading and writing. The research is positioned within an interpretivist paradigm, assuming that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' narratives and actions in their natural digital environment. The population of the study consists of Indonesian Wattpad users aged approximately 15–24 who actively engage with romance stories, either as readers, writers, or both. From this population, participants will be selected using purposive sampling with clearly defined criteria: (1) using Wattpad for at least six months; (2) accessing the platform at least three times a week; and (3) regularly reading or writing romance stories. In addition, maximum variation sampling will be applied to ensure diversity in gender, region (big cities and smaller towns), type of school or campus, and role on the platform (reader-only, reader–writer, and mainly writer). The expected sample size ranges from 20–30 participants, adjusted based on data saturation, that is, the point at which no substantially new themes emerge from the interviews and observations.

Several research instruments will be employed to generate rich and multi-layered data. First, semi-structured interview guides are developed around key thematic blocks: participants' biographical background and media history; their journey of discovering Wattpad; current reading and/or writing routines; engagement with romance subgenres; experiences with comments, votes, and followers; and reflections on how Wattpad influences their views about love, gender, religion, and themselves as readers and writers. The interview

guide remains flexible to allow probing, follow-up questions, and adaptation to each participant's unique trajectory. Second, a digital ethnographic observation protocol is designed to record how participants interact with Wattpad in real time, including the way they browse stories, select titles, respond to updates, comment on chapters, or write and edit their own texts. This protocol includes observation fields such as date and time, device used, features accessed (e.g., library, reading list, comment section, author's note), and researcher reflections. Third, a short demographic and usage questionnaire is administered at the beginning of the study to collect systematic information on age, gender, location, educational level, length of Wattpad use, daily or weekly usage duration, preferred romance subgenres, and self-identification as reader or writer. All instruments are drafted in Indonesian, then reviewed by two experts in literacy/digital culture and tested in a small pilot with two or three Wattpad users to check clarity, length, and sensitivity of questions. Feedback from the pilot is used to refine wording, order of questions, and technical procedures (for example, dealing with unstable connections during online interviews).

Data collection will be conducted through three interconnected techniques: online semi-structured interviews, platform-based digital ethnography, and document analysis of selected Wattpad texts. Potential participants will first be identified through public Wattpad profiles (for example, users who actively post romance stories or comment frequently), social media postings about Wattpad (such as Instagram or X/Twitter discussions), and snowball sampling, in which existing participants recommend other suitable users. After identification, the researcher will send an initial invitation message explaining the purpose, procedures, confidentiality, and voluntary nature of the study. Those who agree will complete the demographic questionnaire and provide informed consent electronically (e.g., via Google Form or signed digital consent form). Interviews will be carried out using video calls, voice calls, or text-based chat (WhatsApp, Telegram, or other mutually agreed platforms), depending on participants' comfort and internet access. Each interview is expected to last between 45 and 90 minutes, and—with explicit consent—will be audio-recorded or saved as chat logs. Recordings will then be transcribed verbatim, while text-chat interviews are cleaned and formatted for analysis.

Alongside interviews, digital ethnographic observation will be conducted over an agreed period (for example, two to four weeks per participant), with the researcher either following participants' Wattpad accounts (if they consent) or asking them to share screenshots and brief screen recordings of their activities. The focus of observation includes their reading lists, ongoing stories in the library, comment threads they participate in, author's notes they read or write, and patterns of updating or revising their own stories. Where ethically appropriate, the researcher will also access and archive specific romance stories that participants mention as particularly meaningful, either as readers or as authors. These stories and associated paratexts (titles, blurbs, tags, comment exchanges, author notes) will be treated as documents for textual analysis, allowing triangulation between what participants say in interviews and what they actually do on the platform. Throughout data collection, pseudonyms will be used and identifying details will be anonymized to protect participants' privacy.

The research procedure unfolds in several stages: (1) preparatory phase, including literature review, design of instruments, ethical clearance, and pilot testing; (2) recruitment and consent, involving the identification of potential participants, initial contact, explanation of the study, and obtaining written or digital consent; (3) intensive data collection, where interviews, observations, and document gathering are conducted in parallel; and (4) data management and iterative analysis. During data management, all transcripts, observation notes, screenshots, and story files will be organized in a secure digital folder structure, with backups and clear file naming conventions. Qualitative data analysis software (such as NVivo, Atlas.ti, or similar tools) may be used to facilitate coding and retrieval, though manual coding remains an option depending on the volume of data. Thematic analysis will guide the interpretation process, following several steps: familiarization with the data by repeated reading of transcripts and fieldnotes; generation of initial codes capturing salient features of reading practices, writing practices,

platform affordances, emotional responses, identity negotiations, and perceptions of romance; grouping of codes into broader categories; and construction of overarching themes that relate directly to the research focus on digital Wattpad culture, youth romance, and changing literacy practices.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies will be applied. Triangulation will be achieved by comparing and integrating data from different sources and techniques (interviews, observation, and document analysis), ensuring that interpretations are not based on a single type of evidence. Member checking will be conducted by sharing preliminary thematic summaries or selected interpretations with a subset of participants, inviting their feedback on whether these reflect their experiences accurately; their responses will be used to refine or nuance the analysis. Peer debriefing may be carried out with fellow researchers or advisors who can question assumptions, identify blind spots, and strengthen the coherence of emerging themes. An audit trail will be maintained in the form of analytic memos, methodological notes, and decision logs that document how codes and themes were developed, how sampling decisions were made, and how ethical issues were handled. Through these procedures, the analysis will attend carefully to patterns and variations in reading and writing practices, uses of comments, votes, and followers, negotiations of romance tropes and cultural norms, and the ways participants position themselves as readers and writers within digital Wattpad culture.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Profiles and Reading–Writing Trajectories of Indonesian Wattpad Youth

The participants in this study were predominantly in the 16–22 age range, with a balance of senior high school and undergraduate students, and a smaller number of vocational students. Most of them reported discovering Wattpad during early or mid adolescence, typically through friends, social media recommendations, or curiosity triggered by viral Wattpad-based novels and film adaptations. Over time, Wattpad moved from being a casual entertainment application to a habitual reading space that many accessed daily, often for more than one hour per day. Reading was usually done via smartphones, particularly in the evenings or late at night, when participants felt they had more privacy and free time.

Although most participants initially identified themselves primarily as readers, a significant proportion eventually experimented with writing romance stories on Wattpad. This transition from reader to reader–writer was often described as gradual and driven by curiosity, inspiration from favorite authors, and the desire to "try" publishing a story in a low- risk environment. For some, starting to write was also a way to respond to plots they felt were missing, such as more realistic friendship dynamics, stronger female characters, or religiously infused romance. As one participant (P14, female, 19) explained, "I started writing because I couldn't find stories where the heroine was smart and independent without being mean. I wanted to show that you can be kind and still be strong."A smaller group remained exclusivelyreaders but still engaged actively by commenting, voting, and sharing recommendations within their online circles.

The trajectories of reading and writing also showed a pattern of increasing selectivity over time. At the beginning of their Wattpad journey, many youth read almost any romance story that appeared in trending lists or popular tags. After several years, however, they reported becoming more critical about writing quality, plot consistency, character development, and themes. Some participants unfollowed stories that normalized toxic relationships or shallow portrayals of love, while others shifted toward subgenres such as campus romance, friends-to-lovers, or religious romance that they perceived as more aligned with their personal values. This trajectory reflects an evolving sense of taste and critical judgment shaped within the digital Wattpad environment.

Table 1 summarizes the basic demographic and Wattpad usage profiles of the participants in this study. The data are illustrative of the diversity within the sample rather than statistically representative of all Indonesian Wattpad users. Nonetheless, they provide an overview of how age, education level, and roles on the platform (reader-only vs. reader–writer) intersect with intensity of engagement. Notably, the group of reader–writers showed slightly higher daily usage duration and a longer average time since joining Wattpad.

Table 1. Demographic Profile and Wattpad Usage of Participants (n = 24)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	15–17	10	41.7%
	18–20	9	37.5%
	21–24	5	20.8%
Education Level	Senior High School	11	45.8%
	Vocational High School	4	16.7%
	Undergraduate	9	37.5%
Main Role on Wattpad	Reader only	13	54.2%
	Reader and writer	11	45.8%
Daily Usage Duration	< 1 hour	4	16.7%
	1–2 hours	11	45.8%
	> 2 hours	9	37.5%
Years Using Wattpad	< 2 years	6	25.0%
	2–4 years	10	41.7%
	> 4 years	8	33.3%
Variable	**Category**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**

Figure 1 presents a simple bar chart of participants' reported daily usage duration. The majority of youth in this study used Wattpad for one to two hours daily, with a substantial group spending more than two hours. This pattern indicates that Wattpad has become a stable part of their everyday media routine, comparable to social media platforms they use for communication and entertainment.

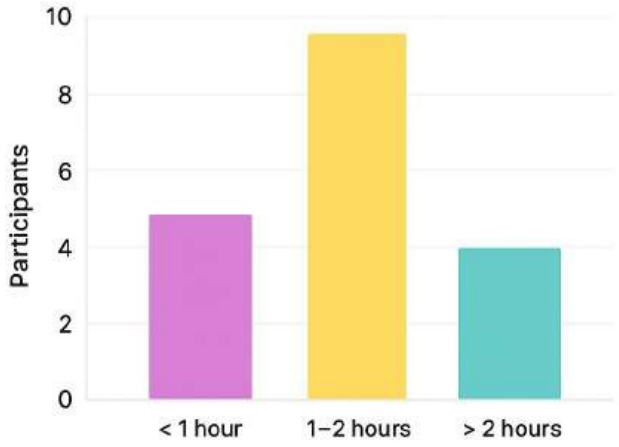

Figure X. Distribution of daily usage duration (n = 24)

Figure 1. Daily Wattpad Usage Duration Among Participants

In addition, Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of participants' main roles on Wattpad. While a slight majority identified as readers only, nearly half also engaged in writing and publishing their own romance stories. This suggests that, for many young users, Wattpad is not a purely consumption-oriented platform but a participatory space where the boundary between reader and writer is fluid and negotiable.



Figure 2. Participant Roles on Wattpad

Figure 2. Participant Roles on Wattpad

Romance as Everyday Literacy: Reading Practices, Themes, and Emotional Engagement

Participants consistently described romance as the core genre that drew them to and kept them on Wattpad. Romance was perceived as relatable, emotionally satisfying, and "easy to follow" compared to other genres that might require more background knowledge. Many youth shared that romance stories on Wattpad mirrored situations they encountered or imagined in school, campus, friendship, and family life—such as first crushes, unrequited love, jealousy, academic pressures, or conflict between personal desire and parental expectations. This sense of recognition reinforced their attachment to specific stories and characters.

In terms of reading practices, participants often followed multiple ongoing stories at once, reading new chapters as soon as they were updated. They developed routines around waiting for updates, checking author notices, and discussing plot developments with friends, either in comment sections or via private chat. Some participants "binge-read" completed stories over a few days, while others preferred to follow serialized works and grow with the characters over time. The emotional engagement was strong: several participants reported crying, laughing, or getting "emotional hangovers" after intense story arcs, and some mentioned that reading romance on Wattpad helped them cope with stress or loneliness. One reader (P07, female, 17) shared, "When I'm stressed about exams, I read romance on Wattpad. It helps me escape and feel something positive. Sometimes I cry with the characters, and it makes me feel less alone."

The thematic preferences of participants clustered around several popular subgenres of romance, including school and campus romance, enemies-to-lovers, friends-to-lovers, arranged marriage narratives, and religiously framed love stories. Table 2 summarizes the main romance subgenres read by participants and the proportion of the sample that identified each subgenre as a favorite. Many youth followed more than one subgenre, but usually had one or two primary preferences shaped by their current life stage and values.

Table 2. Preferred Romance Subgenres Among Participants (Multiple Responses Allowed)

Subgenre	Number of Mentions	Percentage of Participants (n = 24)
School/Campus Romance	18	75.0%

Enemies-to-Lovers	14	58.3%
Friends-to-Lovers	13	54.2%
Arranged Marriage	9	37.5%
Religious/Islamic Romance	11	45.8%
Fantasy/Paranormal Romance	7	29.2%
Mature/New Adult Romance	6	25.0%

Figure 3 visualizes these preferences in a bar chart, highlighting the dominance of school/campus romance and conflict-based subgenres such as enemies-to-lovers. These subgenres often provide a combination of familiarity (school settings, examinations, group projects) and dramatic tension (misunderstandings, rivalries, secrets), which participants found compelling. Religious romance, meanwhile, attracted youth who wanted stories that negotiated love and morality within explicitly Islamic frames, such as halal dating, hijrah narratives, or marriage-oriented relationships.

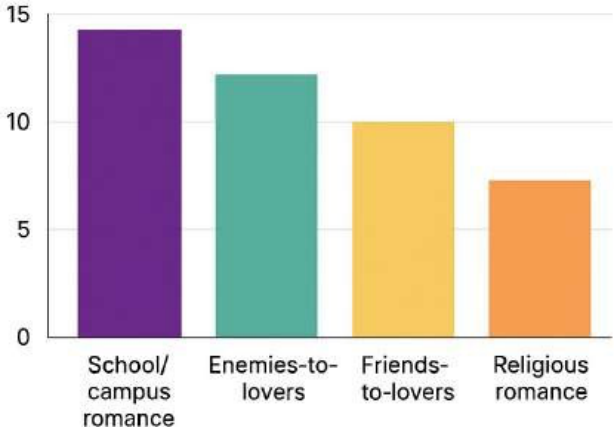

Figure 3. Preferred Romance Subgenres

From a literacy perspective, these romance reading practices illustrate how youth use Wattpad to explore emotions, relationships, and identity in ways that are not always available in school textbooks or formal literature curricula. Participants developed a vocabulary for describing feelings, conflicts, and resolutions; they encountered a wide range of dialogic styles, internal monologues, and narrative voices; and they absorbed narrative structures such as cliffhangers, flashbacks, and dual perspectives. Although they did not always name these as "literary skills," their descriptions of what made a story "good" or "boring" indicated emerging critical literacies regarding pacing, characterization, and plausibility.

At the same time, participants were aware of the limitations and risks of romance stories on Wattpad. Some criticized narratives that normalized possessive or controlling behavior as romantic, glorified unhealthy jealousy, or idealized early marriage without considering economic or psychological readiness. A few participants reported gradually avoiding such themes after feeling that they negatively affected their expectations of real-life relationships. For instance, P11 (female, 20) reflected, "I used to think jealousy and possessiveness were romantic, but after reading so many stories, I realized that's toxic. Now I avoid those stories and look for healthier relationship models. This critical stance suggests that reading romance on Wattpad is not purely passive; youth negotiate, accept, and sometimes resist the representations of love, gender, and future life that they encounter in these digital texts.

Becoming Writers: Platform Affordances, Seriality, and Community Feedback

For participants who also wrote stories, Wattpad functioned as an accessible and motivating space to develop writing skills. Many described the thrill of publishing their first chapter and receiving immediate responses from readers in the form of reads, votes, and comments. Unlike school assignments, where writing is evaluated by a teacher and often read by no one else, Wattpad allowed youth to imagine themselves as authors with audiences. This shift altered their relationship to writing, from a duty imposed by school to an expressive practice linked to personal interests and social recognition.

Platform affordances played a central role in shaping their writing practices. The serial publication format of Wattpad encouraged writers to think in terms of episodes or "parts," each ending with a hook or cliffhanger to maintain reader interest. The notification system reminded both writers and readers about updates, reinforcing the rhythm of weekly or even daily posting. Comment sections under each part provided a steady stream of feedback, ranging from praise and emotional reactions to criticism and suggestions for plot direction. Writers reported adjusting dialogue, pacing, or character decisions in response to these comments, sometimes even running informal polls to decide between alternative storylines.

To illustrate the relationship between writing activity and reader engagement, Table 3 presents a snapshot of writing-related metrics for eleven reader–writer participants in this study. While the numbers are not meant to be statistically generalizable, they highlight how even relatively young writers can accumulate hundreds or thousands of reads, votes, and followers within the Wattpad ecosystem. These metrics often became both a source of motivation and pressure for participants, who felt obligated to "not disappoint" their readers.

Table 3. Writing Activity and Reader Engagement of Reader–Writer Participants (n = 11)

Participant Code	Number of Stories Published	Total Reads	Total Votes	Number of Followers
P01	3	8,450	1,320	540
P02	1	1,200	180	95
P03	2	5,780	960	410
P04	4	12,300	2,150	890
P05	1	750	120	60
P06	2	2,430	410	210
P07	3	9,100	1,600	670
P08	1	520	80	45
P09	2	3,650	620	300
P10	1	980	150	80
P11	2	4,200	710	330

Qualitative analysis of interview data and platform observations revealed that community feedback was experienced as both supportive and demanding. Positive comments, such as readers expressing identification with characters or appreciation for dialogue, strengthened writers' confidence and sense of authorship. Critical comments, when constructive, were often internalized as lessons about how to avoid plot holes or improve narrative coherence. However, writers also confronted impatient readers who complained about slow updates or pressured them to prioritize specific romantic outcomes (for example, favoring one "ship" over another). Managing these expectations required emotional labor and time management, especially for students juggling schoolwork and family responsibilities. A writer-participant (P04, female, 18) described this pressure: "My readers comment every day asking when the next chapter will be up. It's motivating, but also stressful. I feel guilty if I take too long, even though I have school exams."

Overall, Wattpad enabled youth to engage in iterative writing processes, where drafting, publishing, receiving feedback, and revising occurred in overlapping cycles rather than in isolated stages. This process contributed to the development of practical writing skills (such as organizing chapters, refining dialogue, and maintaining consistent character arcs) as well as broader literacies related to audience awareness, self-presentation, and online community participation. The experience of being a writer on Wattpad thus represents a significant dimension of digital Wattpad culture that transforms how youth understand and practice writing in everyday life.

Negotiating Identity, Gender, and Cultural Norms in Digital Wattpad Culture

Beyond reading and writing mechanics, Wattpad served as a space where participants experimented with identity, particularly around gender roles, romantic expectations, and cultural values. Many youth used their stories to explore versions of themselves that were more confident, independent, or rebellious than they felt they could be in offline life. For example, several female writers created heroines who spoke assertively, resisted controlling partners, or pursued education and career goals while navigating romance. Conversely, some male writers crafted male protagonists who were more emotionally expressive and supportive than typical representations in mainstream media. P09 (female, 21), a writer, explained, "In my stories, the girl doesn't wait for the guy to save her. She has her own goals and doesn't change her personality just to please him. I think Indonesian girls need to see more of that."

At the same time, participants were not free from dominant gender norms and cultural scripts. Analysis of selected stories showed recurring tropes such as protective male leads, shy or self-sacrificing female leads, and narratives in which jealousy and possessiveness were framed as proof of love. For some youth, these tropes were simply part of the "fantasy" of romance and did not necessarily reflect their real-life expectations. For others, such patterns subtly influenced their ideals of what a romantic partner should be like. Interviews revealed a spectrum of responses: some participants accepted these tropes without question, others selectively adopted them, and still others explicitly critiqued and modified them in their writing.

Religious and cultural norms also shaped how participants approached romantic content. A subset of youth preferred stories that avoided explicit physical intimacy, emphasized emotional connection, and framed relationships in terms of religious obligations and future marriage. These participants sometimes wrote or read stories where characters navigated boundaries such as avoiding dating, wearing the hijab, or seeking parental approval. P16 (female, 18), who prefers religious romance, stated, "I like stories where the couple respects Islamic boundaries. No dating, just ta'aruf and family involvement. It shows me that love can be halal and still beautiful." Another subset gravitated toward more liberal or "mature" romance, sometimes using Wattpad as a space to encounter and process topics that would be taboo in their everyday environments. The coexistence of these different orientations within the same platform created a diverse and sometimes contested cultural landscape.

To capture how participants perceived the influence of Wattpad on their views of romance and self, a simple coding scheme was applied to interview responses, resulting in the distribution shown in Table 4. While the categories are simplified, they illustrate three broad orientations toward the platform's impact: primarily positive, mixed/ambivalent, and primarily negative. The majority of participants experienced Wattpad's influence as positive, associating it with improved literacy, emotional exploration, and social connection. However, a notable portion described mixed feelings, acknowledging both benefits and potential distortions of expectations.

Table 4. Participants' Perceived Influence of Wattpad on Views of Romance and Self (n = 24)

Perceived Influence Category	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Mainly Positive	More confident, more expressive, inspired to read/write	11	45.8%
Mixed/Ambivalent	Both inspiration and unrealistic expectations	9	37.5%
Mainly Negative	Unhealthy comparisons or unrealistic romantic ideals	4	16.7%

The negotiation of identity, gender, and culture in digital Wattpad culture thus involves complex, ongoing processes rather than straightforward adoption or rejection. Youth participants actively selected stories, wrote characters, and engaged in discussions that aligned with or challenged their existing beliefs. Through this, they constructed hybrid identities that drew from both global romance conventions and local Indonesian norms related to family, religion, and respectability. Wattpad offered them a semi-public stage on which to perform and refine these identities, sometimes under pseudonyms that provided a degree of safety and experimentation.

Educational and Literacy Implications of Digital Wattpad Culture

Although Wattpad is primarily perceived by participants as an entertainment platform, their narratives and observed practices reveal substantial educational and literacy implications. Many youth reported that their vocabulary, especially in Indonesian and sometimes in English, expanded through extensive reading of Wattpad stories. They became more familiar with colloquial expressions, dialogue structures, and narrative conventions. P12 (male, 19) remarked, "My Indonesian vocabulary improved a lot from Wattpad. I learned so many slang words and ways to express emotions that I never saw in textbooks. It made me more confident in writing essays." Some participants also noted improvements in spelling, sentence flow, and creativity after they started writing and revising their own stories. These self-reported changes align with the observed sophistication of some participants' texts compared to earlier drafts.

Moreover, Wattpad functioned as a bridge between formal and informal literacies. Several participants described situations where skills gained from Wattpad—such as constructing narratives, writing dialogue, or understanding character motivation—helped them in school assignments, presentations, and group projects. A few reported that teachers had encouraged or at least tolerated their engagement with Wattpad when it did not interfere with academic performance. Others, however, felt that teachers and parents still undervalued Wattpad reading, viewing it as a distraction from "serious" books and school textbooks.

To explore the potential link between Wattpad engagement and self-perceived literacy growth, participants were asked whether they felt their reading and writing abilities had improved since using the platform. The distribution of responses is presented in Table 5. While these are subjective perceptions rather than standardized measures, they provide insight into how youth themselves interpret the educational value of their Wattpad practices.

Table 5. Self-Perceived Impact of Wattpad on Reading and Writing Skills (n = 24)

Response Category	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Strong Improvement	Feels significant growth in reading and writing ability	10	41.7%
Moderate Improvement	Notices some improvements, but not very large	11	45.8%
Little or No Improvement	Feels skills are about the same as before	3	12.5%

These findings suggest that integrating Wattpad more deliberately into literacy pedagogy could be promising, provided that educators acknowledge youth interests and guide them toward critical engagement. For instance, teachers might invite students to analyze the structure of a popular Wattpad romance chapter, rewrite scenes from different perspectives, or compare digital stories with printed novels on similar themes. However, participants' ambivalence about some romance tropes and the potential for unrealistic expectations also underline the importance of critical discussions around representation, consent, gender roles, and the difference between fictional narratives and real-life relationships.

Finally, the broader implications of digital Wattpad culture for Indonesian literacy policy include recognizing digital platforms as part of the national reading landscape, not merely as entertainment. The study indicates that youth are already reading and writing extensively in informal environments; the challenge is to value, support, and critically channel these practices rather than ignoring or dismissing them. By doing so, stakeholders may be able to cultivate a more dynamic, youth-centered approach to reading and writing in the digital age, one that connects popular culture, educational goals, and the changing realities of Indonesian adolescents' lives.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that Indonesian youth experience Wattpad as a dense, everyday literacy environment in which reading, writing, and social interaction are tightly interwoven. Participants' trajectories from casual readers to more selective readers—and in many cases to active writers—indicate that Wattpad is not simply a leisure application but a space where tastes, critical judgment, and identities as "readers" and "writers" are formed over time. This reinforces the idea that digital platforms can support extensive reading and incidental learning, but the data here deepen that view by demonstrating how young users manage seriality, anticipate updates, and emotionally invest in characters as part of their daily routines. The strong presence of romance subgenres and the emotional intensity described by participants highlight that what is often dismissed as "light" reading actually involves complex engagements with narrative structures, voice, and characterization.

Compared with previous Indonesian studies that have emphasized Wattpad's role in increasing reading interest or motivating students in language learning, the present findings shift the focus toward Wattpad as a cultural and participatory space. Earlier research has generally framed Wattpad as a useful tool to foster reading habits, improve comprehension, or support vocabulary building in English and Indonesian, frequently in school-based settings. The current study aligns with those observations to the extent that participants also report expanded vocabulary, improved fluency, and increased willingness to read long texts. However, it goes further by showing how these literacy gains are entangled with the pleasures of genre fiction, the dynamics of online communities, and the platform's affordances such as comments, votes, and follower systems. In this way, Wattpad-based literacy appears less as a by-product of a "reading intervention" and more as a consequence of young people's

sustained participation in a living, evolving digital culture.

The findings also resonate with, but extend, research that has noted the potential of Wattpad to support writing skills and student creativity. Previous work has typically approached writing on Wattpad as an add-on to classroom activities—students posting assignments or using the platform in guided tasks. By contrast, the youth in this study largely wrote outside formal educational structures, driven by personal interest and peer recognition rather than teacher evaluation. Their accounts of serial writing, adjusting plots in response to reader feedback, and managing the pressure to update on time show that Wattpad fosters forms of authorship that are dialogic, iterative, and audience-aware. This adds nuance to existing discussions by foregrounding how young writers balance their creative intentions with the expectations of a visible, vocal readership—an issue rarely captured in more instrumental, school-based uses of the platform.

A further area of comparison lies in the representation of romance, gender, and cultural values. Earlier research has highlighted the popularity of romantic themes and, in some cases, the presence of religiously inflected narratives on Wattpad. The present study confirms the centrality of romance but treats it not just as a popular topic, rather as a lens through which youth negotiate ideals and anxieties about love, gender roles, and future life paths. Participants simultaneously drew on familiar tropes—protective male leads, shy heroines, dramatic jealousy—and, in some cases, actively revised or resisted them by creating more assertive female characters or more emotionally open male protagonists. This suggests a more dynamic process than prior descriptions that simply catalog popular themes; it shows young Indonesians navigating a tension between global romance conventions and local norms around religion, family, and respectability.

In terms of educational implications, the findings support earlier claims that Wattpad can enhance reading interest and literacy, but they highlight additional dimensions that are particularly relevant for practitioners. First, the strong emotional and social investment of youth in Wattpad indicates that teachers and educators can leverage this platform to bridge school literacies with students' existing reading lives. Instead of treating Wattpad as a distraction, educators could invite students to analyze narrative techniques, dialogue, and characterization from stories they already love, or to rewrite scenes in ways that critically engage with problematic tropes such as possessiveness or idealized early marriage. Second, the presence of youth writers suggests an opportunity to design classroom tasks that align with existing practices of serial writing, feedback, and revision, while also introducing more explicit reflection on structure, coherence, and ethical representation.

The study also offers practical implications for parents, librarians, and policymakers. Parents and guardians who worry that Wattpad is "just entertainment" might reframe it as a potential site for literacy development, provided they maintain open communication about content, boundaries, and the difference between fiction and reality. Librarians and cultural institutions could incorporate workshops on digital storytelling, fan-based communities, or critical reading of online romance into their programs, acknowledging Wattpad as part of contemporary reading culture rather than opposing it to printed books. At a policy level, recognizing platforms like Wattpad in discussions of national reading culture would allow for more realistic and youth-centered strategies, moving beyond narrow metrics of book borrowing or textbook use to include digital, participatory forms of reading and writing.

At the same time, the findings also reveal ambivalence and potential risks that need to be taken seriously in practice. Some participants reported that certain stories shaped unrealistic expectations of romance or normalized unhealthy behaviors, and a subset described negative feelings when comparing themselves with idealized characters or "successful" Wattpad authors. This underlines the importance of developing critical digital literacy, not only around issues such as plagiarism and copyright, but also around representation, consent, and emotional wellbeing in relation to romantic narratives. Educators and counselors could work with youth to unpack the difference between dramatic plot devices and healthy relationships, helping them to "filter" the stories they consume and produce.

This study is not without limitations. The sample is relatively small and drawn from a

particular segment of Indonesian youth who were willing to be interviewed and observed, which may bias the findings toward more reflective or highly engaged users. The data are also self-reported and situated in a specific moment of Wattpad's evolution; platform features, popularity, and user practices may shift over time, especially as new social media platforms and reading applications emerge. Furthermore, the study focuses primarily on romance and does not systematically compare this genre with others on Wattpad, such as horror, fantasy, or fanfiction, which may support different forms of literacy and identity work. Given these limitations, future research could employ mixed methods with larger samples, include longitudinal tracking of reading and writing practices, or explore cross-platform literacy trajectories that connect Wattpad with other digital spaces like Webtoon, TikTok, or Instagram.

Despite these constraints, the research contributes a detailed, culturally situated portrait of digital Wattpad culture among Indonesian youth, emphasizing the intertwined nature of reading, writing, and social participation. The findings suggest that Wattpad is a significant site of contemporary youth literacy, one that both confirms and complicates previous research. For practitioners and policymakers, the key challenge is to harness the platform's rich literacy potential while supporting young people in critically navigating its narratives, communities, and emotional intensities.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that Wattpad has become a significant digital literacy space for Indonesian youth, particularly through romance narratives. Young Indonesians use Wattpad not merely for entertainment but as a participatory platform where they develop as readers and writers, navigating between global romance tropes and local cultural values. The research reveals substantial literacy gains including enhanced reading fluency, expanded vocabulary, improved narrative writing skills, and increased audience awareness through platform affordances such as comments and serialized publication. Romance subgenres—especially school/campus romance, enemies-to-lovers, and religious romance—serve as vehicles for exploring identity, gender roles, and relationships in ways rarely accommodated in formal education. However, the study also identifies risks, including unrealistic romantic expectations and normalization of problematic relationship dynamics, underscoring the need for critical digital literacy alongside engagement. Theoretically, this research contributes to cultural studies and digital literacy scholarship by demonstrating how global platforms function as sites of cultural translation where youth negotiate local and global forces. For educators and policymakers, the challenge is recognizing Wattpad as part of Indonesia's contemporary reading landscape while supporting young people in engaging critically and responsibly with its content, communities, and emotional intensities.

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