

Tere Liye's Reader in Makassar: Community, Class, and the Social Construction of Literary Taste

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana para pembaca muda di Makassar membangun dan menampilkan selera sastra mereka melalui keterlibatan mereka dengan fiksi populer karya Tere Liye. Dengan menggunakan konsep-konsep Bourdieu tentang ranah, habitus, dan modal, serta berdasarkan wawancara mendalam, studi ini menelusuri bagaimana selera dibentuk di persimpangan latar belakang keluarga, lingkungan sekolah, jaringan pertemanan, nilai-nilai keagamaan, dan kekuatan simbolik pasar. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa, berbeda dengan model klasik Bourdieu, modal budaya keluarga tidak secara sederhana menentukan selera; sebaliknya, sebagian besar partisipan, tanpa memandang kelas sosial, mengenal fiksi melalui sekolah dan komunitas, bukan dari rumah. Kehidupan organisasi dan kelompok baca muncul sebagai ruang penting di mana modal sosial diakumulasi, batas-batas selera dibentuk, serta pembaca memperoleh pengakuan dan rasa memiliki. Dominasi komersial penerbit dan toko buku turut membentuk apa yang tampak dan dianggap sah, sementara tema motivasi dan Islam dalam karya Tere Liye merespons aspirasi neoliberal sekaligus ideal-ideal keagamaan. Studi ini menyoroti pentingnya pengakuan terhadap agensi pembaca, beragam sumber legitimasi, dan struktur yang tidak merata yang membingkai selera sastra di Indonesia kontemporer, khususnya di Makassar.

Kata kunci: selera sastra, Bourdieu, fiksi populer, Tere Liye

ABSTRACT

This article examines how young readers in Makassar construct and perform literary taste through their engagement with Tere Liye's popular fiction. Employing Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital, and drawing on in-depth interviews, the study traces how taste is formed at the intersection of family background, school environment, peer networks, religious values, and the symbolic power of the marketplace. The findings reveal that, in contrast to Bourdieu's classic model, family cultural capital does not neatly determine taste; instead, most participants, regardless of class, encounter fiction through schools and communities rather than at home. Organizational life and reading groups emerge as crucial spaces where social capital is accumulated, boundaries of taste are formed, and readers gain recognition and belonging. The commercial dominance of publishers and bookstores further shapes what is visible and legitimate, while the motivational and Islamic themes in Tere Liye's work respond to both neoliberal aspirations and religious ideals. The study highlights the importance of recognizing the agency of readers, the plural sources of legitimacy, and the uneven structures that frame literary taste in contemporary Indonesia, especially Makassar.

Keywords: literary taste, Bourdieu, popular fiction, Tere Liye

A. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the question of literary taste has moved to the center of global debates about cultural identity, legitimacy, and social mobility (Friedman et al., 2019; Hanquinet, 2022; Kuipers, 2022). Once considered peripheral, popular fiction now commands attention not only from readers but from scholars seeking to understand how new forms of

distinction are made and unmade in an era marked by digital connectivity, transnational cultural flows, and shifting class boundaries. Indonesia's literary field, where religion, neoliberal aspiration, and postcolonial modernity intermingle, offers a particularly fertile site for exploring these dynamics (Heryanto, 2015; Setiawan & Jati, 2022).

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital (Bourdieu, 1984) continue to serve as touchstones for analyses of taste and distinction. Bourdieu's work revealed how seemingly personal preferences for literature, art, or music are deeply structured by histories of power and social stratification. Yet, as recent research shows, the sharp boundaries Bourdieu observed between "high" and "low" culture are increasingly difficult to locate. Digital platforms, global media, and new reading publics have complicated old hierarchies, opening spaces for the legitimation—and sometimes contestation—of genres like self-help, fantasy, and Islamic popular fiction (Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Kuipers, 2022; Hanquinet, 2022).

The question of taste is increasingly significant in a global context, where the rapid spread of digital platforms, transnational media flows, and new cultural markets are reshaping patterns of cultural consumption (Kuipers, 2022). Popular fiction, once considered as "lowbrow," is now at the center of global debates about cultural legitimacy, identity, and social mobility (Friedman et al., 2019; Hanquinet, 2022). Across the world, best-selling novels, online fan cultures, and self-help literature not only reflect but actively shape aspirations and anxieties linked to class, gender, and ethnicity. The global circulation of popular genres, such as K-drama-inspired fiction in East Asia to romance and Islamic fiction in Southeast Asia, demonstrates that taste is increasingly produced at the intersection of local values and transnational influences (Rinaldo, 2022; Setiawan & Jati, 2022). These developments challenge traditional, Eurocentric theories of taste and open new avenues for understanding how cultural preferences are negotiated in diverse, rapidly changing societies.

Within this landscape, Makassar has emerged as a particularly compelling site for investigating how literary taste is formed and negotiated. The city's dynamic literary ecosystem is shaped by both the Makassar International Writers Festival (MIWF), which since 2011 has fostered a spirit of literary engagement among youth, and a growing network of independent bookstores such as Katakkerja and Dialektika. These bookstores serve as vital community spaces, regularly hosting discussions, book launches, and creative workshops that bring together readers, writers, and activists (Duangdee, 2024; Hughes, 2024). The synergy between festival programming and grassroots initiatives has contributed to the development of an active, inclusive reading public in Makassar. This local climate of literary enthusiasm provides a distinctive backdrop for exploring how young readers engage with popular fiction, and highlights the importance of regional diversity and community-based initiatives in shaping Indonesia's broader reading culture.

In Indonesia, the rise of a new, urban Muslim middle class and the intersection of market-oriented values with religious ethics have reshaped both the production and reception of popular literature (Heryanto, 2015; Rinaldo, 2022; Setiawan & Jati, 2022). Tere Liye, one of the country's most popular and widely read authors, stands at the heart of this transformation. His novels, spanning themes from self-improvement to Islamic morality and fantasy, draw a remarkably diverse audience across classes and backgrounds, prompting a question about how taste is produced and performed in everyday life.

Drawing on recent work in the sociology of culture (Friedman et al., 2019; Hanquinet, 2022), studies of Islamic consumer publics in Southeast Asia (Rinaldo, 2022; Setiawan & Jati,

2022), and global research on self-help genres (Elias & Gill, 2018), we situate Indonesia's literary transformations within broader shifts in the meaning and value of popular fiction worldwide. The analysis is grounded in qualitative interviews with young Tere Liye readers, tracing how class, religion, and the creative agency of readers themselves shape the contours of literary taste.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital remain central in the analysis of taste, cultural consumption, and the production of distinction across diverse social contexts. In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu famously argued that taste—whether in art, literature, music, or everyday consumption—is never purely individual, but emerges from the interplay of inherited dispositions and structured social worlds. Seeking to overcome the classical dualism of structure and agency, Bourdieu posits that habitus, as a system of embodied dispositions, is simultaneously shaped by social structure and generative of individual practice (Jenkins, 1992; Grenfell, 2014). In his words, habitus “enables the infinite number of practices which are possible... within the limits of these schemes” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 95).

Habitus, then, consists of both personal and collective histories, sedimented within individuals as ways of perceiving, judging, and acting in the world (Bourdieu, 1996). It is acquired primarily through early socialization—family, schooling, cultural exposure—but is continually re-shaped in everyday life. Taste, in this framework, is not simply a matter of conscious choice or free will, but rather the “feel for the game” that guides what feels natural or desirable to different social groups (Jenkins, 1992). Bourdieu's work highlights the unconscious, habitual nature of cultural consumption, noting that agents rarely reflect on the reasons for their preferences; instead, these are enacted as second nature (Grenfell, 2014; Atkinson, 2016).

This process unfolds within fields—relatively autonomous arenas such as literature, art, education, or the media—each governed by its own logic, rules, and struggles over meaning and value (Bourdieu, 1993; Rocamora, 2002). In fields of cultural production, for example, the distinction between “restricted production” (oriented toward prestige and innovation) and “large-scale production” (oriented toward mass audiences and profit) shapes what is considered valuable, legitimate, or transgressive (Bourdieu, 1993; Friedman & Reeves, 2020). Fields are not isolated but interact and overlap, often contested by both established actors and newcomers, and continually shaped by broader social forces (Swartz, 2022).

Central to position-taking in these fields is the notion of capital. Bourdieu expands this beyond the economic to include social capital (networks and group membership), cultural capital (education, tastes, credentials, and knowledge), and symbolic capital (prestige, honor, recognition) (Jenkins, 1992). Cultural capital, in particular, is crucial in the making of taste: it determines not only access to cultural goods, but the authority to define what counts as “good” or “legitimate” culture (Atkinson, 2016; Hanquinet, 2022). These capitals are acquired over time, through both formal education and informal cultural participation, and can be converted from one form to another within particular fields (Grenfell, 2014).

Bourdieu's framework has been widely applied to studies of popular culture and literary taste, both within and beyond Western contexts. Scholars have used his concepts to analyze the boundaries of “high” and “low” art (Rocamora, 2002; Hanquinet, 2022), the formation of cultural hierarchies in the literary field (Atkinson, 2016; Friedman & Reeves, 2020), and the ways that readers and audiences use taste to signal identity, aspiration, and distinction

(Friedman et al., 2019; Kuipers, 2022). In literary studies, Atkinson (2016) examines how class, gender, and education shape reading preferences and the value attached to different genres in the UK. Hanquinet (2022) explores the evolving relevance of Bourdieu's framework for analyzing contemporary cultural participation in Europe, and Setiawan and Jati (2022) apply these insights to the Indonesian context, highlighting the intersections of religion, middle-class aspiration, and the consumption of popular fiction.

C. METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology to examine the formation and negotiation of literary taste among young fans of Tere Liye in Makassar, South Sulawesi. The choice of Makassar as the research site reflects its unique position as a rapidly growing literary hub, marked by the proliferation of bookstores, reading communities, and events such as the Makassar International Writers Festival. These developments have fostered an increasingly dynamic environment for the production and consumption of popular literature, a context that is particularly apt for exploring how reading preferences and cultural distinctions are shaped and performed.

Participants for this study were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, in line with established qualitative research traditions that emphasize depth of insight and contextual relevance over broad representativeness (Bryman, 2016; Noy, 2008). Invitations to participate were distributed via WhatsApp and through literary and social networks in Makassar. This strategy not only ensured access to self-identified fans of Tere Liye, but also fostered trust and rapport, which are critical for eliciting authentic and reflective responses (Abidin, 2020). Ultimately, ten respondents—primarily women aged 19 to 27—agreed to participate. Their backgrounds were diverse, encompassing undergraduate and graduate students, a recent graduate, a junior high school teacher, and a courier service employee, some of whom had migrated from rural South Sulawesi to Makassar for study or work.

The data collection relied on in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesian via Zoom or WhatsApp audio calls, each lasting 35 to 45 minutes. The interview protocol began with demographic questions and inquiries into family reading cultures, before moving to the participants' personal histories with fiction, their initial and ongoing experiences with Tere Liye's works, and the broader motivations underlying their reading choices. Further questions addressed their access to bookstores, libraries, and reading communities, as well as their engagement with different genres and authors, including those with ideological positions distinct from Tere Liye. The interview guide was explicitly informed by Bourdieu's theoretical triad (*habitus*, *field*, and *capital*) with questions designed to surface both the socialization processes that shape taste and the ways in which individuals accrue, deploy, or contest various forms of cultural capital (Grenfell, 2014; Hanquinet, 2022).

Upon completion, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and systematically coded for analysis. The coding process was both inductive and deductive: while some codes were anticipated based on Bourdieu's framework (e.g., "*habitus*," "*cultural capital*," "*field of literary consumption*"), many others emerged organically from the data itself. Using a coding matrix (see Coding Interview.xlsx), each transcript was read multiple times for familiarization, and meaningful segments were tagged with initial codes such as "*early exposure to books*," "*family encouragement*," "*reading as self-development*," "*role of Islamic identity*," "*book purchasing*

practices,” and “evolving taste in fiction.” As the coding progressed, these initial codes were grouped into broader analytic themes such as “negotiating rural and urban reading cultures,” “bookstores and community activities as taste incubators,” “motivation and moral values in fiction,” and “shifts in literary aspiration during college.” This multi-stage, thematic analytic approach closely follows the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006), and is recognized as best practice for capturing both cross-cutting patterns and the specificity of individual experience. Throughout the process, analytic rigor was enhanced by the maintenance of detailed memos, regular reflection on coding decisions, and cross-case comparisons to ensure consistency and depth. Coding and theme development were further triangulated with demographic information and, where possible, with field notes about Makassar’s literary infrastructure (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2006). The rich detail of the coding sheet also allowed for the identification of minority or outlier positions, ensuring that voices which diverged from dominant themes were also accounted for.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research, consistent with the principles of confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Bryman, 2016). All data were anonymized and securely stored, with names and identifying details removed from transcripts and reports. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Additionally, researcher reflexivity was maintained from the outset, with the author consciously reflecting on their outsider status with respect to the Tere Liye fan community and actively interrogating how their own literary preferences, experiences, and assumptions might shape interpretation (Berger, 2015).

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the landscape of contemporary Indonesian literature, Darwis—widely known by his pen name Tere Liye—stands as one of the nation’s most prolific and commercially successful authors. Since debuting in 2005, at a moment when Islamic-themed publications were flourishing and occupying significant space in commercial bookshops (Heryanto, 2011), Tere Liye has authored seventy books across diverse genres, encompassing novels, short story collections, poetry anthologies, and compilations of motivational quotations, according to his Goodreads profile. Such figures position Tere Liye as an example of a contemporary author whose work reaches a wider national audience.

What distinguishes Tere Liye from other self-help or motivational fiction authors is his flexibility in moving across genres. His oeuvre ranges from historical fiction, action, romance, Islamic-themed narratives, fantasy, science fiction, biography, children’s literature, to political economy. Despite this breadth, the majority of his stories deliver personal motivation and moral lessons, often through heroic protagonists who triumph over adversity—usually with a happy ending. The novels’ settings are equally diverse, frequently referencing specific localities and names from across Indonesia’s western and central regions.

Tere Liye’s influence extends beyond literature into film and digital culture. Two of his Islamic novels, *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* (2011) and *Moga Bunda Disayang Allah* (2013), were adapted for the screen, attracting 668,731 and 114,374 viewers, respectively, with the former ranking among the most-watched Indonesian films of its year (FilmIndonesia.or.id). These adaptations further expanded the reach of his motivational and Islamic-themed stories, nourishing a taste for this genre among young readers in Indonesia.

A key factor in Tere Liye's broad appeal is his accessibility across ages and socio-cultural backgrounds. His works are recommended reading in both elite Islamic schools and grassroots educational contexts: in Makassar, educators regularly suggest his novels as part of reading programs, while young people in coastal villages actively seek out his work even when other titles are offered. Empirical evidence from a recent mixed-methods study by Fathiyah, Anshari, and Juanda (2025) reinforces these observations. Their research with 54 Indonesian Literature undergraduates at the State University of Makassar found that *Bandit-Bandit Berkelas* shaped students' interpretations of social phenomena—such as organized crime and corruption—and encouraged critical reflection and meaning-making through textual gaps. These findings underscore the active engagement of Makassar's youth with Tere Liye's narratives and highlight how regional reading environments amplify the reach and impact of popular fiction.

Tere Liye's publishing trajectory reflects the dual structure of Indonesia's contemporary book market. Approximately half his works are published by Gramedia—the largest national bookseller and publisher—while the remainder are issued by Republika Publisher, an Islamic media group (Janet, 2013; Tempo, 2021; Republika, 2022). Works published by Republika tend to have more explicitly Islamic themes, while Gramedia handles his fantasy, science fiction, political economy, and romance novels. Nonetheless, Tere Liye's titles from both publishers are commonly found in best-seller sections at Gramedia bookstores, often displayed prominently at store entrances.

The author's influence is amplified by his active social media presence: as of 2024, Tere Liye has over 5.5 million followers on Facebook and 55,000 on Twitter. He frequently shares quotes, reflections, and motivational messages, many drawn from his books. These posts are widely shared by readers and further cement his position as one of the best-selling author in Indonesia (Republika, 2022).

Taken together, these patterns reveal Tere Liye's unique place in Indonesian popular fiction: a writer whose works cross genre boundaries and social divisions, who is present in both formal educational settings and reading communities, and whose readers actively participate in shaping the meaning and value of popular literature. These dynamics make Tere Liye an instructive case for examining how habitus, field, and capital interact in the formation of literary taste, particularly within Makassar's vibrant and youth reading culture.

The formation of literary taste among young readers of Tere Liye in Makassar is a multidimensional social process, shaped by the intersecting logics of education, peer networks, family background, organizational life, commercial dynamics, religious values, and personal negotiation. A careful reading of ten in-depth interviews, informed by thematic coding and Bourdieu's framework of field, habitus, and capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993; Grenfell, 2014; Hanquinet, 2022), demonstrates that taste is never simply inherited, nor is it solely the product of free individual choice. Instead, it is constructed over time, across social settings, and through active negotiation with the opportunities and constraints of the Indonesian literary field.

Within this dynamic landscape, multiple social fields converge to shape the possibilities for reading and meaning-making. The school emerges as a primary site, both a social field and an incubator of habitus, where institutional supports and peer interactions together nurture and delimit the contours of literary engagement. Alongside the school, community organizations and reading clubs (both religious and secular) act as vital "fields within the field," offering not only access to books but also social capital, belonging, and spaces where taste is actively discussed, performed, and legitimated. The commercial marketplace, dominated by publishers

and booksellers such as Gramedia, wields powerful symbolic influence, defining what is visible, desirable, and ultimately “thinkable” for young readers, especially in the absence of robust critical mediation.

For our participants, reading Tere Liye’s fiction is a vehicle for self-actualization or creative inspiration; for others, it is a source of motivation, moral guidance, or a means to navigate insecurity and aspiration in a rapidly changing society. These patterns underscore how class distinction continues to structure not only access to literature, but also the very meanings attached to genres such as self-help and motivational fiction.

1. The School as Social Field and Incubator of Habitus

For the majority of Tere Liye’s young readers in Makassar, the school serves as the most significant social field in the early development of literary taste. While classic Bourdieuan theory highlights the family as the main locus for the transmission of cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), the present study reveals that, for many students whose homes were oriented toward religious or practical texts rather than fiction, it was the educational environment that most effectively fostered a relationship with literature. Participant Sari recalled:

“I never read novels at home, only religious books or textbooks. But in high school, I found a group of friends who loved Tere Liye, and we would borrow his novels from the school library and discuss them after class. That’s when I started to really enjoy reading fiction.”

Such accounts were echoed across several interviews and coded as “peer influence” and “school community.” The everyday routines of borrowing, sharing, and discussing novels in the school library created a supportive environment in which reading for pleasure was normalized, even in the absence of family encouragement. This dynamic underlines Bourdieu’s (1996) insight that educational institutions, particularly when combined with the influence of peers, can act as powerful “incubators” of habitus.

The agency of teachers and other adult “enablers” was especially crucial in faith-based schools, where the legitimacy of fiction could be contested. Participant Dina, now a teacher herself at her former Islamic boarding school, described how attitudes toward fiction changed over time:

“When I was a student, some teachers said reading novels was a waste of time, or they worried about bad influences. But a few of us argued that Tere Liye’s books were good. They teach character, they’re not Westernized or vulgar. Now, as a teacher, I recommend his books to my students, because I know they fit with our values and help students build good habits.”

In this way, the boundaries of taste within the school were constantly being negotiated, not only between students and teachers, but also among faculty themselves. Bourdieu (1996) contends that such negotiations within the field reflect broader struggles over symbolic power, as agents compete to define the limits of legitimate cultural practice. In the context of Makassar, these negotiations often resulted in a selective openness: certain fiction, especially works like Tere Liye’s that align with moral and religious norms, was gradually sanctioned and even promoted within the school.

Despite these positive openings, limitations remained. Many participants described how the

actual selection of available fiction in school libraries or recommended reading lists was narrow, with mainstream and Islamic-themed works dominating. As Rina, now a university student, put it, *“All the books in the school library were by Tere Liye, Andrea Hirata, or Asma Nadia. There was nothing by those ‘serious’ writers we learned about later in literature class.”*

Such comments point to the ways in which the school field both enables and constrains: it can nurture a love of reading and provide resources, but it may also limit exposure to a broader range of genres, especially those outside the mainstream or not aligned with prevailing values. These moments of everyday competition and cooperation helped transform reading from a solitary activity into a shared social experience, reinforcing both literacy skills and the symbolic value of being a “reader” within the peer group. In this regard, the school emerges as a pivotal site in the making of literary taste for young Makassar readers of Tere Liye. Through both formal structures (libraries, curricula, teacher support) and informal processes (peer groups, reading clubs, shared enthusiasm), schools foster the emergence of new reading habits and provide legitimacy to certain genres and authors. Yet these processes are also marked by constraint such as the narrowness of available selections and the filtering effect of institutional and peer values mean that the field of literary possibility is always both enabled and limited by the school’s position in the broader social structure (Bourdieu, 1996; Hanquinet, 2022).

The role of educational institutions in cultivating reading preferences extends to the critical assessment of a literary work’s content based on its moral inclination. There is a tendency in evaluating Indonesian literature based on whether it has moral value or not. In other words, the weight of literature is determined by the morality it brings to the reader. This perspective aligns with Pradopo’s (1995:94) assertion that a good literary work directly educates readers on ethics and moral values through its embedded message.

2. Community, Organization, and Social Capital

For many young readers in Makassar, reading Tere Liye’s fiction becomes a deeply social experience through active participation in book clubs, religious groups, and digital communities. Within these organizations, social capital is cultivated through shared activity, mutual support, and recognition. Belonging to a reading group or literary organization often provides not just access to books, but also entry into networks of trust, status, and symbolic reward. Indah, who participates in her university book club, found that collective activities transformed her reading experience. She explained:

“Reading was something I mostly did alone before. But with the club, it became social. We would meet to discuss a new Tere Liye novel, and sometimes we even acted out our favorite scenes just for fun. It was as much about being together as it was about the stories themselves.”

Within these spaces, the exchange of book recommendations, spirited debate over plotlines, and collaborative events all foster an atmosphere in which readers motivate each other to pursue more ambitious reading goals. This collaborative ethos is reinforced by a subtle system of prestige, as Fauzi shared:

“If you’re the first to finish a new novel or you come up with a sharp opinion in a discussion, people remember you. It’s a point of pride, but also a way to motivate yourself to read more and think more deeply.”

This process of gaining recognition within the group is a clear example of social capital in practice, where intellectual contribution and enthusiasm become forms of currency that circulate among peers. Writers organizations also provide an additional layer of collective meaning. In groups such as Forum Lingkar Pena, reading is linked with character-building and spiritual growth. Dina emphasized that their discussions always extended beyond literary appreciation, “We weren’t just talking about the book. We asked, what can we learn? How does this story remind us to be more patient or grateful, or how does it reflect our faith?”

3. Marketplace, Symbolic Power, and Legitimacy

The literary tastes of young readers in Makassar are also profoundly shaped by the structures and strategies of the commercial book marketplace. The ways books are displayed, promoted, and marketed, particularly by dominant publishers and bookstores, play a decisive role in shaping not only what is read but also what is perceived as legitimate, desirable, or even essential. Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production is highly relevant here, as it reminds us that commercial actors wield significant symbolic power, granting legitimacy to particular genres and authors and often relegating alternatives to the margins (Bourdieu, 1993; Grenfell, 2014).

For many participants in this study, the bookstore Gramedia is the gateway to fiction. Its best-seller tables, highly visible displays, and consistent marketing of Tere Liye’s novels provide clear cues about which books are worth attention and admiration. Fauzi explained that he did not grow up in a family that read novels, but his curiosity about Tere Liye was sparked by how the books were presented in Gramedia:

“When I went to Gramedia, I always saw Tere Liye’s books at the front, in a big stack. They always had the best-seller label, and that made me curious. I thought, if it’s so popular, maybe it’s really good.”

For readers like Fauzi, the prominence and popularity of Tere Liye’s works act as powerful forms of symbolic capital, functioning almost as a substitute for critical authority or inherited taste. In a context where many do not have family members who read fiction or where traditions of literary criticism are weak, commercial signals such as best-seller labels and eye-catching displays become persuasive guides. Similar to Fauzi, Desi recalled that before attending university, her exposure to literature was shaped almost entirely by what was available and visible in Gramedia, *“Before university, I only knew the authors I saw in Gramedia. I thought they were the only important writers. It wasn’t until college that I discovered other names, and realized there’s so much more.”*

This kind of experience highlights how the marketplace narrows the field of literary possibility for many young readers, particularly in environments where critical mediation is lacking and alternative forms of legitimacy are not widely accessible. Participants also spoke about the trust they placed in books published by established names like Gramedia or Republika.

The branding and reputation of a publisher are thus not only market signals but also forms of symbolic assurance, aligning book choices with prevailing social, religious, or moral expectations. This commercial logic is further reinforced through group dynamics. Indah observed that in her book club, the books most likely to be read and discussed are those labeled as best-sellers or featured prominently in Gramedia or on social media, *“Most of the books we read together in the club are best-sellers. People are more interested if the book is on display at Gramedia or if it’s*

talked about on social media.”

In this way, the marketplace does not just provide access to books but also organizes and structures the field of literary legitimacy, shaping what is visible and “thinkable” for a generation of readers. For many young readers in Makassar, the commercial book marketplace functions as both an enabler and a gatekeeper. It expands access to literature but also sets implicit limits on what is considered valuable or worthy. The symbolic power of publishers, bookstores, and marketing labels organizes the literary field and shapes the very possibilities for developing taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Grenfell, 2014; Hanquinet, 2022).

4. Class Distinction, Motivation, and the Social Work of Self-Help Fiction

Bourdieu’s insights into cultural distinction and the distribution of capital are especially illuminating when examining how young readers in Makassar engage with self-help and motivational fiction. Across the interviews, it is evident that social class plays a complex but powerful role, not only in shaping access to literature but also in influencing the meanings readers attach to books by Tere Liye and similar authors.

The appeal of motivational and self-help fiction is often most pronounced among participants from middle- and lower-middle-class backgrounds. For these readers, stories of resilience, hard work, and moral fortitude resonate deeply with both their everyday struggles and their aspirations for the future. Many described how Tere Liye’s novels offered guidance in times of difficulty, functioning almost as companions or advisors. Sari spoke about this with a quiet sincerity:

“Sometimes when I feel overwhelmed or uncertain, I read Tere Liye and it helps me remember to be patient, to keep trying, and to accept what I cannot control. His stories make me believe I can achieve more, even if life is difficult now.”

The literature here acts as more than mere entertainment. It also becomes a tool for self-formation and emotional management. It is a resource that offers both practical advice and hope, shaped by the specific insecurities and ambitions of its readers. Dina echoed this feeling, describing how the novels’ moral messages were inseparable from her religious values, strengthening her sense of identity and resilience.

Among participants from upper-middle-class families, the relationship with motivational fiction is often more ambivalent. While some still enjoy Tere Liye’s storytelling, they tend to view these books less as guides for living and more as sources of creative inspiration or aesthetic pleasure. Yusuf, for example, told us:

“I like reading his fantasy novels because they are imaginative and make me think differently, but I don’t really need the motivation. I read more for ideas and to learn about how to write stories myself.”

This subtle difference in approach points to the operation of cultural capital, when economic security and educational opportunity are becoming less pressing concerns, fiction is more likely to be experienced as a space for creativity, self-actualization, and distinction, rather than as a source of direct instruction or reassurance. Bourdieu (1984, 1996) argues that the tastes of the privileged tend to move away from the immediately useful or didactic, favoring forms of “art for art’s sake.” The Makassar case supports this, but also demonstrates that class boundaries are not

absolute; even among the more privileged, moments of uncertainty or transition may rekindle an appetite for motivational themes.

Across all class backgrounds, the “work” of self-help fiction is evident in the way readers narrate their own development. Stories of characters overcoming adversity, showing humility, or striving for success become templates for how to act, how to endure, and how to dream. Fauzi, who comes from a low-middle-income family, put it simply, “*I like the characters who struggle but don’t give up. It reminds me that I can do the same, even if my situation is different.*”

The power of these narratives is not only individual but collective. Through reading circles, school clubs, and religious organizations, the values of perseverance, gratitude, and aspiration are reinforced and shared. As participants exchange favorite passages and discuss the lessons learned from Tere Liye’s books, a kind of social capital is generated. It is a shared language for talking about hopes, setbacks, and personal growth. Yet, there are moments when the limits of self-help fiction become apparent. Several participants who began exploring more experimental or critical literature expressed frustration with the predictability of the motivational genre or the narrowness of its solutions. As Rina, reflecting on her own journey said, “*Sometimes I want stories that are more complicated, that don’t just tell you to be patient or grateful. Life isn’t always like that, and I want to read about characters who face things differently.*”

Her observation reveals that while self-help fiction can provide comfort and guidance, it may also reinforce certain boundaries around what is thinkable or possible, especially when alternative stories are hard to find in the mainstream market. What emerges from these diverse accounts is a picture of taste as both a reflection and a negotiation of class position, ambition, and emotional need. The novels of Tere Liye and other motivational writers serve as resources for building character and facing uncertainty, but they are also part of distinction. It is a marker of what it means to be a good student, a pious Muslim, or a member of an aspiring generation. In Makassar, as elsewhere, the social work of self-help fiction is inseparable from the social structures in which reading takes place, and from the ongoing search for meaning and legitimacy in an unequal world (Bourdieu, 1984; McGee, 2005; Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Hanquinet, 2022).

The above findings reveal a highly dynamic and context-specific negotiation of taste, where family background, educational experiences, peer networks, community participation, marketplace forces, and religious values all play constitutive roles. In weaving together these results, several key patterns and theoretical implications become clear. First, it is evident that habitus and social background remain powerful influences on literary preferences, but these influences are neither uniform nor deterministic. For many participants, the lack of strong literary capital in the family—whether due to class, religious orientation, or the simple absence of books at home—meant that schools, peer groups, and community organizations became decisive in shaping both the habitus of reading and the specific tastes that developed. The school thus emerges as a social space in which literary taste is incubated, peer influence is amplified, and the boundaries of legitimate reading are both enforced and negotiated.

A closer look at the data reveals that different forms of cultural capital—economic, educational, and symbolic—interact in nuanced ways with class background to shape the formation of literary taste among Makassar’s youth. Economic capital determines access to books, internet connectivity, and the ability to participate in reading-related activities; however, it is not sufficient on its own to guarantee engagement with fiction or the development of refined literary taste. Educational capital, accumulated through schooling, literacy programs, and

extracurricular organizations, plays a particularly vital role in compensating for the lack of literary tradition in many families, providing not just skills but also the socialization into practices and values that support reading for pleasure and self-development. Symbolic capital, meanwhile, is negotiated in community and organizational settings, where recognition, prestige, and group acceptance are linked to one's demonstrated engagement with certain authors or genres—especially those considered legitimate by peers or local authorities. For example, participants from upper-middle-class backgrounds may possess greater economic capital, but without strong educational or symbolic capital related to literature, their taste may be no more “elite” than that of peers from less privileged backgrounds. Conversely, young people from lower-middle-class families who accumulate educational and symbolic capital through active participation in school clubs or reading communities often acquire distinction and recognition as readers, regardless of their material circumstances. These findings reinforce Bourdieu's argument that cultural capital is multifaceted and relational, and that its conversion and accumulation depend on social context as well as individual agency.

The data further illustrate how community and organizational life generate and circulate social capital (Bourdieu, 1993; Grenfell, 2014). Membership in reading clubs, literary forums, or faith-based organizations such as Forum Lingkar Pena provides opportunities for recognition, leadership, and the accumulation of symbolic resources. Here, as Hilkey (1997) and Hanquinet (2022) suggest, the very act of being an “active reader” or “thoughtful discussant” becomes a marker of social distinction and a source of interpersonal connection. At the same time, these communities often act as gatekeepers: they both affirm popular tastes and, at times, resist or exclude less conventional or more experimental literary forms. As several participants noted, book recommendations and group discussions frequently reinforce the boundaries of what is considered appropriate, relevant, or “safe” literature, particularly around questions of morality and religious identity.

A key finding of this research is the crucial role of the commercial marketplace (publishers, bookstores, and marketing) in shaping literary legitimacy and visibility. Gramedia's best-seller lists, eye-catching displays, and the symbolic power of “market success” substitute for critical authority in a field where literary criticism is weakly institutionalized (Sitomorang, 2012). For many young readers, especially those without inherited cultural capital, these commercial cues serve as trusted guides. As Bourdieu (1993) theorizes, symbolic capital and economic capital are often intertwined: what sells is what circulates, and what circulates is what becomes “naturalized” as literary taste. The dominance of publishers like Gramedia and Republika has thus established certain genres and authors—notably, Tere Liye—as default choices for readers seeking legitimacy, entertainment, and social acceptance.

The logic of association and distinction (Bourdieu, 1984; Friedman & Reeves, 2020) is visible in participants' reading choices and discussions. Associative logic draws readers toward genres and authors already validated by their networks, faith communities, or commercial signals. Distinction, meanwhile, is evident in subtle practices of boundary-setting, such as avoiding certain genres, expressing discomfort with controversial works, or seeking to be recognized for one's unique reading tastes. Several participants described how they gravitated toward fiction and film that shared thematic or moral proximity to Tere Liye's works, while a smaller group found satisfaction in exploring alternative genres privately, outside the gaze of peers or family.

Self-help and motivational fiction perform vital social work in this context. For many,

especially those navigating economic or social uncertainty, Tere Liye's stories offer templates for resilience, patience, and hope. The narratives become resources for managing anxiety, envisioning success, and cultivating the character traits valued by both neoliberal and religious discourses (McGee, 2005; Sasono, 2010; McGuigan, 2014). Success is re-imagined as both a personal and a moral project, where achievement and piety reinforce each other, a pattern that mirrors broader social changes in Indonesia (Rani, 2012; Heryanto, 2013). The capacity to quote or embody the values articulated in these novels is itself a form of social capital, making it easier for readers to participate in group life, command respect, or demonstrate their readiness for adult roles.

This study finally affirms that literary taste is produced through the ongoing negotiation of agency and structure. Young readers in Makassar are not passive recipients of literary fashion, but active participants in shaping, circulating, and sometimes contesting what is considered valuable in their social worlds. At the same time, their agency is conditioned by the resources available to them, their family background, school environment, community participation, economic security, and the broader field of cultural production. In this regard, the findings both confirm and extend Bourdieu's theoretical model, demonstrating the ways in which taste is continually re-made at the intersection of personal aspiration, group belonging, and structural constraint.

E. CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand how young readers in Makassar form and negotiate literary taste through their engagement with Tere Liye's fiction, and how this process is mediated by class, social capital, community networks, religion, and the wider structures of the literary field. The findings challenge the assumptions of a simple, class-based model of taste, as imagined by Bourdieu in the context of twentieth-century France, where upper-class families are seen as the primary incubators of highbrow cultural practices and working-class backgrounds are associated with so-called "lowbrow" forms.

In Makassar, Tere Liye's novels are read and valued across a wide spectrum of class, and religious backgrounds. Family background, while still relevant, does not predict literary taste in a straightforward way. Most participants in this study, regardless of their parents' social class, did not inherit strong literary capital from home. Instead, schools, peer networks, and community organizations played a decisive role in introducing young people to fiction and fostering the habitus of reading. It is within these social fields that taste is most actively shaped, negotiated, and given meaning. Nevertheless, distinctions do emerge. Young readers from upper-middle-class families tend to approach fiction for self-actualization, gravitating towards fantasy and creative genres. In contrast, those from middle- and lower-middle-class backgrounds often find in Tere Liye's works a source of practical guidance and emotional motivation, using literature as a tool for self-management, resilience, and hope. The appeal of self-help and motivational fiction, therefore, cuts across class boundaries but is experienced and articulated differently according to the resources, needs, and aspirations of each group.

The power of Tere Liye's fiction, and its widespread popularity, cannot be separated from broader structural factors. These include the dominance of large publishers like Gramedia, whose marketing and distribution networks set the terms of literary legitimacy; the rise of Islamic popular literature, which aligns personal success with religious values in a changing Indonesia;

and the absence of strong literary criticism, which leaves commercial cues and group consensus as the primary arbiters of taste. Given these dynamics, future research would benefit from investigating how digital communities and online reading platforms are reshaping the boundaries of taste, social capital, and legitimacy among Indonesian youth. Comparative studies that examine different regions of Indonesia could further illuminate how diverse local cultures, religious influences, and market structures produce distinct patterns of literary consumption and reader identity across the archipelago.

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