

The Construction of Solidarity Values and Critical Thinking through Symbolic Interaction in the Semarang Book Club Community

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital culture has reshaped how adolescents access information, construct meaning, and interact socially. While information is increasingly abundant, opportunities for deep reflection, critical engagement, and the cultivation of social values remain limited. In this context, non-formal literacy communities such as book clubs emerge as alternative spaces for fostering both intellectual and social development. This study aims to analyze how solidarity values and critical thinking are constructed through symbolic interaction within the Semarang Book Club community.

This research employs a qualitative approach grounded in symbolic interactionism as articulated by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation analysis involving adolescent members and community facilitators. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of meaning-making, interaction, and value construction.

The findings reveal that symbolic interaction in the Semarang Book Club is built through recurring social practices, including silent reading, book reviews, and

collective discussions. Books function not merely as reading materials but as symbolic media that stimulate dialogue, negotiation of meaning, and reflective thinking. Through these interactions, members develop solidarity characterized by mutual acceptance, respect for diverse perspectives, a sense of belonging, and collective identity. Simultaneously, critical thinking is fostered through dialogic discussions, openness to differing interpretations, and continuous negotiation of meaning. The role of community facilitators is central in creating a safe and inclusive environment that supports self-expression and reflective engagement.

This study concludes that the Semarang Book Club serves as a meaningful social space where symbolic interaction effectively contributes to the construction of solidarity values and critical thinking among adolescents. These findings highlight the potential of community-based literacy initiatives as complementary agents of socialization beyond formal educational institutions.

Keywords: *symbolic interaction, solidarity values, critical thinking, book club community*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology in recent years has transformed the ways individuals' access, interpret, and share information. Contemporary generations, particularly adolescents, live amid an intense flow of instant communication. This condition is characterized by an abundance of information that is not accompanied by sufficient reflective capacity to critically select, interpret, and use information wisely. The Global Education Monitoring Report emphasizes that current global educational challenges extend beyond academic achievement to include the development of character and ethical literacy in a fast-paced information environment (UNESCO, 2023). The report also highlights the phenomenon of superficial learning, referring to shallow learning practices driven by digital cultures that prioritize speed and efficiency over depth of meaning and reflective engagement.

Indonesia continues to face the problem of low literacy levels, which may hinder educational progress and social participation. According to data from the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia (Perpusnas RI), in collaboration with PT Indekstat Konsultan Indonesia in December 2024, the national Reading Interest Index (TGM) reached 72.44 points, placing it in the moderate category (Larasati, 2025). Meanwhile, the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results released by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicate that Indonesian students achieved a reading literacy score of 359 points, ranking Indonesia 71st out of 81 participating countries (Teig, 2023). In the Semarang region, the Reading Interest Index (TGM) was recorded at 76.63 points (diskominfokotasemarang, 2025). These conditions reflect not only weak reading interest but also the insufficient development of social and moral values that should emerge through deep and reflective literacy practices. Consequently, the literacy

crisis in Indonesia may also be closely associated with a broader crisis of social character in the digital era.

The crisis of literacy and social character cannot be addressed solely through formal education. Schools remain largely oriented toward cognitive achievement and the evaluation of learning outcomes, while families often face limitations in time and capacity to support children's social development. As a result, adolescents seek alternative spaces outside formal institutions to develop self-identity, social identity, and a sense of belonging. One such space that has grown rapidly in recent years is non-formal literacy communities. Book discussions provide opportunities for members to interpret texts from multiple perspectives, while the sharing of experiences and interpretations fosters empathy and social sensitivity. Previous studies have shown that engagement in literacy communities can enhance critical thinking skills, broaden perspectives, and cultivate solidarity among members (Rusiana et al., 2024). Moreover, literacy communities have the potential to serve as a bridge between intellectual learning and the formation of adolescents' social character (Hinchman & Olcott, 2020).

The presence of positive communities, such as literacy communities, is essential for fostering a healthy social order among adolescents. The National Population and Family Planning Agency of Indonesia (BKKBN) defines adolescence as individuals aged 12–24 years who are unmarried (Putri & Utama, 2024). According to BKKBN age classifications (15–24 years), the adolescent population in Indonesia reaches 44.25 million individuals (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025). This figure indicates that Indonesia has a substantial adolescent population that requires supportive and positive community spaces for personal and social development.

This study is grounded in the symbolic interactionism framework introduced by George Herbert Mead and further developed by Herbert Blumer. Through symbolic

interaction, individuals do not merely exchange information but actively construct shared definitions of social reality. In the context of literacy communities such as book clubs, symbolic interaction occurs when members engage in dialogue, interpret texts, and collectively make meaning of reading experiences. Consequently, book clubs function as spaces that transcend the rigid structures of formal education, allowing adolescents to explore texts in improvisational and collaborative ways. This approach aligns with the concept of worlding, which refers to the co-construction of meaning through fluid and dialogic discussions (Ehret & Rowsell, 2021). Through these processes, values of solidarity and critical thinking are constructed and internalized within the community.

This study focuses on the Semarang Book Club community. Initially, the Semarang Book Club was a small community formed based on a shared passion for books and literacy. The community was established on November 27, 2022, and has since actively organized literacy-oriented activities in the city of Semarang. The vision of the Semarang Book Club is “to position Semarang as a center of literacy.” To achieve this vision, the community pursues several missions, including consistently organizing literacy events, inviting authors, promoting literacy through social media, building a healthy and supportive reading community, and fostering literacy development at the local level, particularly in Semarang.

Social interactions within the Semarang Book Club extend beyond collective reading activities to create spaces for in-depth discussion. Community members share perspectives, experiences, and knowledge derived from the books they read. Activities such as group discussions, book review presentations, and literacy-based games strengthen social bonds and cultivate an active learning community. According to Sudarman (2024), the process of knowledge sharing within this community occurs

through three stages: individual knowledge exchange, knowledge storage through community media such as google drive and social media platforms, and the creation of new knowledge that is subsequently applied in everyday life.

Therefore, the Semarang Book Club represents a relevant locus for examining how symbolic interaction shapes values of solidarity and critical thinking among adolescents in Semarang. This study highlights two key dimensions: first, how symbolic interaction processes within a literacy community generate shared meanings of texts and social experiences; and second, how these processes give rise to solidarity values and critical thinking that strengthen adolescents’ character.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This study was conducted in the Book Club Semarang community, which regularly holds activities at Taman Indonesia Kaya, Semarang City. The community was established on November 27, 2022, and has actively organized literacy-themed activities in Semarang up to the present. This aligns with the community’s vision of “Positioning Semarang as a Center of Literacy.” The research site was selected purposively due to its distinctive characteristics and the researcher’s access, which enabled in-depth observation and data collection. The primary reason for selecting this site was the community’s active engagement in regular reading activities, book discussions, and social interactions among its members. The community also consists of members with diverse ages and educational backgrounds.

This study employed a qualitative research approach. A qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to explore social phenomena contextually, with a focus on the meanings participants attribute to their experiences. Data were collected using three techniques to obtain holistic and in-depth data. First, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore participants’ personal experiences and the meanings they assigned to activities within the Book Club Semarang

community. Interviews involved one community founder, four staff members, and ten community members, consisting of five senior high/vocational high school students and five university students. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The criteria for community members included adolescents aged 10–24 years, active participation in Book Club Semarang activities for at least three months, and willingness to participate in interviews.

Second, participant observation was conducted to obtain detailed insights into community activities. The researcher participated in community activities over a period of 1.5 months. Third, document analysis was carried out using relevant materials such as community portfolios, activity photographs, event archives, and other supporting documents.

The trustworthiness of qualitative data was ensured using established trustworthiness criteria. To ensure credibility, source and method triangulation were applied. Thick description was provided to support transferability. To ensure dependability and confirmability, the researcher maintained detailed records throughout the data collection process, documented reflective notes during data collection and analysis, and engaged in discussions to validate the consistency of data interpretation.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke. The thematic analysis followed six stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that symbolic interaction within the Book Club Semarang community is formed through repeated social practices that are collectively constructed and shared among its members. These interactions emerge in various community activities, such as silent reading,

book review sessions, and the social relationships developed among members.

Community members perceive reading as a reflective activity rooted in personal experience. One participant stated that reading within the community encouraged them to relate the content of the book to their own life experiences. This reading experience does not remain at the individual level but becomes the initial basis for interaction when personal interpretations are shared and discussed with other members within the community setting.

Furthermore, books are not understood by community members as passive reading objects or as sources of a single, fixed truth. Instead, members view books as products of human thought situated within specific contexts, open to interpretation and debate. During discussions, participants expressed that differing perspectives enrich their understanding of the text and stimulate deeper dialogue.

Discussions are perceived by members as spaces of symbolic interaction that bring together diverse perspectives. Through dialogue and the exchange of meanings, understanding of the reading material is no longer individual but collectively constructed. Members reported becoming more open to differing interpretations and more confident in expressing their own viewpoints.

Symbolic interaction within the Book Club Semarang community is also consciously facilitated by community staff. Staff members play a role in organizing activities and maintaining the continuity of interaction by sharing activity schedules through a WhatsApp group prior to events such as Baca Buku Bareng (BBB), Baca Buku Regional (BBR), Kanca Maca Bareng (KMB), and Book Online Sharing Session (BOSS). This practice helps members understand the flow of activities and encourages active participation in each meeting.

The findings also show that repeated patterns of interaction contribute to the formation of social values among

community members. Members reported a sense of acceptance, safety, mutual respect, and the development of a sense of belonging and collective identity. In addition, critical thinking skills develop through discussions that encourage members to ask questions, accept differing opinions, and engage in meaning negotiation when interpreting reading materials.

Reading and Discussion as Processes of Mind Formation

According to George Herbert Mead, the human mind is not understood as something that exists from birth but is dynamically formed through social interaction. Mead emphasizes that the mind is a synthesis of actions performed by actors toward themselves or others (Husin et al., 2021). The meanings attributed to books that develop within the Semarang Book Club community indicate that reading is not positioned as a passive activity or mere entertainment. Research findings show that reading activities within the community extend beyond individual engagement; reading is understood as a reflective process shaped by life experiences and subsequently shared within a social forum. This perspective aligns with symbolic interaction theory, which seeks to explain how individuals interact and create meaning within social contexts (Aisyah et al., 2025). Community members do not merely read books; rather, they read with the awareness that their understanding will be communicated to discussion partners. This practice aligns with the concept of the mind, in which individuals develop their thinking through interaction with others (Syafriani & Susanti, 2026). Within community practice, the routine of silent reading followed by book review sessions creates opportunities for members to engage in what Mead describes as the process of symbol internalization or internal conversation. Prior to collective discussion, each member forms an initial meaning by reading and reflecting on the book individually. Silent reading in this context is not simply about

completing the text, but about consolidating understanding in preparation for sharing with others. Thus, reading is not a passive act of perception, but a reflective commitment that enables readers to “think about their own thinking” and subsequently express the outcomes of that reflection through social interaction.

The research data indicate that club members experience significant changes in the way they process information after regularly participating in community activities. One community member, for instance, noted that reading novels helped to “refine the way they imagine and conceptualize problems.” Similarly, another member reported reading “more deeply” because their interpretations would later be reviewed and discussed with other members. From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce Mead’s idea that the mind is a product of structured symbolic interaction. During the reading process, members do not merely absorb texts but internalize the author’s symbols, including words, concepts, arguments, and narratives. This process continues in discussion settings, where the internalized symbols are tested, enriched, or even revised through feedback from other members.

Consequently, each member’s mind is continuously renewed and developed through repeated cycles of reading, reflection, and discussion. It can therefore be concluded that the Semarang Book Club functions as a laboratory of social thought. Within this space, reading and discussion are not final ends, but mechanisms that transform passive modes of thinking into active ones, shifting members from information consumption toward the production of meaning.

The Formation of Self-Awareness through Interaction within the Community

The formation of self-awareness among members of the Semarang Book Club community does not occur automatically but develops through repeated processes of

social interaction among members and community staff. George Herbert Mead explains that the concept of the self refers to the human capacity to view oneself as an object from the perspective of others, a capacity that can only be developed through social experience. This concept consists of two dimensions: the “I,” which is spontaneous and creative, and the “Me,” which is shaped through the internalization of social norms and the expectations of others (Anjellina et al., 2025). Research data indicate that members’ motivation for joining the community includes an effort to “search for self-identity,” as the community structurally provides a constant and reflective social mirror. This process confirms Mead’s concept of the “I” as a spontaneous and subjective dimension of the self.

Additional research data reveal a consistent pattern in which members do not attend merely to participate in book discussions but also use the discussion space as an arena for negotiating their identities. When one community member realized that “many people think differently from us,” this realization did not simply reflect a difference of opinion but marked a moment of self-reconstruction. Awareness that one’s perspective is not the only valid one compels individuals to question and expand the boundaries of their self-concept. This process therefore confirms Mead’s concept of the “Me,” which refers to the self shaped by the expectations and responses of others. In each discussion session, the spontaneity of initial viewpoints (the “I”) is tested and reshaped through feedback from other members, eventually crystallizing into a more complex social identity (the “Me”).

Thus, the Semarang Book Club functions as an incubator of identity in the digital era, which often offers shallow and fragmented forms of identity. Through structured reading and discussion activities, the community not only cultivates critical thinking but also builds a bridge between personal and social identities, connecting “who I am as a reader” with “who I am as a

member of a community.” The self-awareness formed through these interactive processes is dynamic and responsive, continuously evolving through sustained participation in community discourse. It is through this process that the capacity for role-taking, or the ability to adopt the perspectives of others, is further developed.

Role-Taking in the Construction of Solidarity Values and Critical Thinking

According to George Herbert Mead, the ability to engage in role-taking is a fundamental foundation of social life that enables individuals to understand others’ perspectives and to coordinate actions collectively. This process is dynamic, as meaning is continuously reconstructed through thought and actions are adjusted based on others’ responses (Adji et al., 2025). In the context of the Semarang Book Club, this ability is developed through two interrelated stages. First, members practice understanding characters and authors’ perspectives presented in books. Second, they directly apply this skill in understanding fellow members during discussions.

Research findings indicate concrete role-taking practices within this community. One community member, for example, explicitly described their effort to understand a “villainous” character in a novel by considering that “the character is evil because they are under pressure in their world.” This statement reveals a complex mental process in which the member does not merely judge the character superficially but actively attempts to reconstruct the social and psychological conditions that shape the character’s actions. A similar process is observed when other members try to understand why an author develops a particular argument or why fellow members hold different interpretations of the same text. This pattern demonstrates that the community functions as a social simulator, where members can practice understanding “the other” within a relatively safe context

before applying these skills in more complex social interactions.

This process becomes a crucial foundation for the development of social solidarity, as members learn to manage differences of opinion in a constructive manner. Field findings indicate that members who were initially reluctant to speak or lacked confidence in expressing their views gradually became more confident in articulating their perspectives after several discussion sessions, supported by both staff and fellow members. This finding aligns with educational research showing that participation in group discussions oriented toward the exchange of perspectives can simultaneously enhance critical thinking and social skills, as participants are encouraged to consider and reflect on diverse viewpoints before formulating their responses (Costley, 2021).

Role-taking within this community is directly connected to the formation of solidarity based on mutual understanding, rather than merely solidarity grounded in shared interests. When members are able to understand why others hold particular interpretations based on their experiential backgrounds, a deeper sense of respect and connectedness emerges. Role-taking also contributes to the development of critical thinking, as individuals in social dialogue are not only expected to express their opinions but are also required to evaluate, validate, or redefine ideas in response to feedback from discussion partners. Activities such as book reviews, question-and-answer sessions, and critical responses from other members provide a social context that stimulates deeper reflection, ultimately training members to think more analytically and to remain open to diverse evidence and arguments.

Thus, within the Book Club Semarang community, role-taking is not merely a communication technique but a fundamental foundation for the formation of solidarity and critical thinking skills. Through symbolic interactions that involve mutual understanding, responsiveness, and the

consideration of others' perspectives, community members not only build strong social relationships but also develop reflective and critical capacities that they can carry beyond the community. This finding indicates that community practices do not only shape intellectual abilities but also cultivate a social culture that enriches members' experiences as socially engaged and critically thinking individuals.

The Role of Community Actors in the Formation of Members' Self-Awareness

Community actors, particularly the founders and staff, play a strategic role in the process of forming members' self-awareness within the Book Club Semarang community. The findings indicate that staff members do not merely carry out administrative tasks, but act as facilitators of symbolic interaction who influence how members perceive themselves and understand their social roles. Drawing on Mead's symbolic interactionism, individuals develop the self through social processes that involve interpreting symbols and understanding others' perspectives. In this context, community actors function as significant others, whose influence is crucial in shaping individuals' self-concepts and personal values. This role is evident when staff facilitate introductory sessions, encourage shy members to speak, and provide positive responses that enhance members' self-confidence.

The proactive actions of staff in inviting members to express their opinions, asking about their reading experiences, and initiating dialogue demonstrate deliberate efforts to create a safe and supportive social space. This is important because without a conducive interactional environment, members may become withdrawn, feel inadequate, or hesitate to speak. According to Mead's theory, individuals learn not only through direct experience but also through observing how others interact. When staff display friendliness, openness, and respect for differing viewpoints, members tend to imitate and internalize these interactional

styles. As a result, the friendly and non-judgmental attitudes practiced by staff become a foundation that allows members to feel secure in expressing their ideas and in receiving feedback.

Thus, the role of community actors extends beyond merely mediating activities and becomes an integral part of members' self-development. Interactions facilitated by the founders and staff influence not only the quality of discussions but also help members develop a stronger understanding of who they are in a social context, how they are perceived by others, and how they can contribute meaningfully to the community. Therefore, the role of community actors is a key element in understanding how self-awareness is formed through symbolic interaction within community social networks.

Internalized Values within the Book Club Semarang Community

The social values internalized by members of the Book Club Semarang community are not merely a set of explicit norms, but rather the result of repeated and meaningful symbolic interaction practices. The findings indicate that mutual respect, openness to differing viewpoints, and a shared awareness of the importance of reflective dialogue have become unwritten norms that are collectively embraced by members. This process reflects the concept of the generalized other in George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism, which refers to the representation of collective norms that guide members in understanding actions and social expectations within a group. Mead emphasized that individuals internalize not only the perspectives of significant others, but also broader shared norms and values that prevail within a community. In the context of Book Club Semarang, this internalization occurs organically through shared experiences in reading activities, book reviews, and egalitarian discussions.

When community members feel heard and respected, values such as empathy,

tolerance, and appreciation for alternative perspectives become embedded in their self-identities. This finding aligns with field data indicating that members perceive Book Club Semarang not merely as a space for reading, but also as an environment where they are acknowledged, listened to, and treated as equals. This sense of psychological safety strengthens the internalization of social values and ultimately fosters sustained commitment to participation in community practices.

Thus, the process of value internalization within Book Club Semarang offers a concrete illustration of how Mead's generalized other operates in a contemporary context. Values that initially emerge from key community actors are gradually adopted, adapted, and eventually transformed into shared internal guidelines that shape members' behavior without the need for external supervision. This process not only explains the consistency of the community's culture despite membership turnover, but also demonstrates how interest-based communities can function as effective agents of value socialization beyond formal institutions such as family and school.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Book Club Semarang community functions as an effective non-formal social space for constructing values of solidarity and critical thinking among adolescents through processes of symbolic interaction. The interactions that emerge within the community are not spontaneous, but are formed through repeated and collectively interpreted social practices, such as silent reading, book reviews, and collective discussions. These activities serve as primary mediums through which members construct meaning, negotiate differing viewpoints, and develop shared understanding.

The findings reveal that solidarity is constructed through social experiences that emphasize acceptance, mutual respect, a

sense of safety, and the formation of collective identity. The solidarity that develops is not based on uniformity of opinion, but on members' ability to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives. At the same time, critical thinking skills are cultivated through dialogical discussions that encourage members to reflect on texts, articulate arguments, and openly evaluate and negotiate meaning.

This study also highlights the important role of community actors, particularly founders and staff, as facilitators of symbolic interaction who create an inclusive and supportive discussion climate. The presence of community actors as significant others contributes to the development of self-awareness, self-confidence, and active engagement among members in discussion and social learning processes. Overall, this research reinforces the view that interest-based literacy communities can function as agents of value socialization that complement the role of formal education. Communities such as Book Club Semarang not only promote literacy development and critical thinking skills, but also shape adolescents' social character through meaningful and sustained symbolic interactions.

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