

Digital Reading Practices and Urban Narratives: Exploring Medan's Cityscape in Contemporary Literature

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Medan's urban identity is constructed and reimagined through both print and digital literary practices, addressing the lack of research on Indonesian peripheral cities in urban literary discourse. While studies on Jakarta or other major metropolises dominate, Medan despite its vibrant multicultural and historical character remains underrepresented. Adopting a constructivist-interpretive paradigm, the research employs textual analysis and digital ethnography to examine selected works by Titan Sadewo, Ika Natassa, Hasan Al Banna, and Lucya Chriz, as well as digital reading platforms such as @beyondthepage.mdn and KleioBuku. Data were collected through document analysis, online observation, and interviews with members of local literary communities. Findings reveal that Medan's cityscape operates as a dynamic narrative construct shaped by memory, modernity, and participatory digital culture. Digital reading spaces foster interpretive collaboration between readers and writers, transforming passive consumption into active co-authorship. By situating Medan within both literary and digital frameworks, this study expands the field of Indonesian urban and literary studies, offering new insights into how digital media reshape representations of place, identity, and cultural belonging.

Keywords: *Constructivist-Interpretive Paradigm, Digital Literature, Medan, Reading Practices, Urban Identity, Urban Narratives*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the global shift toward digital literary practices has transformed how readers interact with texts, authors, and cultural spaces. Platforms such as Wattpad, Instagram literature, and online book communities have redefined reading as a participatory, networked experience rather than a solitary act. In Indonesia, this transformation is evident in the growth of digital reading platforms and literary collectives that merge online and offline engagement. Within this context, the evolution of urban literature is deeply intertwined with technological progress, particularly the emergence of digital reading platforms. Cities are no longer represented solely through printed narratives but are continually reimagined in digital spaces that invite interactive reinterpretation.

The evolution of urban literature is deeply intertwined with technological progress, particularly the emergence of digital reading platforms. In literary works, cities often serve not just as settings but as dynamic reflections of the complex social, political, and cultural forces shaping their identity (McNamara, 2014); (Tambling, 2018). The Indonesian city of Medan, currently undergoing rapid urbanization, has lately attracted literary attention – especially as authors employ both traditional print and digital media to articulate its multifaceted urban landscape. Yet despite its rich socio-cultural dynamism, Medan remains under-represented in

the broader field of urban literary studies, which tends to focus on major global metropolises (Siregar, 2021); (Nasution, 2019).

As (Harahap, Rizky, & Hasan, 2021) observe, digital reading platforms present a new dimension of engagement: the reader's relationship with text goes beyond passive consumption, becoming an active part of interpretive meaning-making. Meanwhile, (Ridanpää, 2015) argues that digital platforms enable peripheral cities such as Medan to transcend geographic margins and gain visibility in global literary discourse. The integration of digital reading practices into urban literary studies thus opens up a distinctive vantage point on how cities like Medan are imagined, narrated, and read by contemporary audiences.

In this study, I will examine how Medan's urban identity is represented in both print and digital literary formats. Specifically, this research aims to map the construction of urban identity through narrative representation, and to explore how evolving digital reading practices have reshaped both the consumption and production of these urban narratives.

The representation of cities in literature has been a central focus in urban studies, especially as cities become increasingly complex and interconnected through globalization. Urban literature often emphasizes the role of the city not merely as a backdrop but as a character that shapes the identities and experiences of its inhabitants. Harvey (2001) notes that "the city, in literature, becomes an active participant in shaping the narrative, influencing the lives of its characters and the unfolding of events" (p. 22). However, while cities like New York, London, and Paris dominate the literary landscape, cities in Southeast Asia, such as Medan, remain largely underexplored.

As (Siregar, 2021) highlights, "Medan, as a multicultural and rapidly urbanizing city, has been underrepresented in urban literary studies, despite its cultural, economic, and historical significance" (p. 50). The city's urban identity, shaped by migration, colonial history, and economic changes, offers a rich site for literary exploration. In the past, urban narratives about Medan were limited primarily to local stories in print. However, with the rise of digital platforms, authors from Medan now have new opportunities to represent their city in creative ways. (Nasution, 2019) points out, "The digital age offers a new mode of engagement with Medan's urban identity, where online platforms allow for an expansive, interactive representation of the city that reaches a global audience" (p. 205).

The role of digital reading practices in shaping the perception of urban identity has been increasingly studied in the last decade. (Ridanpää, 2015) emphasizes that "digital literature democratizes access to urban narratives, making them accessible to a broader, more diverse audience, thereby reshaping how urban identities are portrayed and consumed" (p. 14). This is particularly significant for cities like Medan, where traditional forms of literary representation may not fully capture the vibrancy and complexity of the city's identity.

Community-driven literary movements in Medan, such as those fostered by local organizations like Komunitas Ngobrol Buku and Medan Membaca, have also played a crucial role in the digital representation of the city. (Maulina & Fardeni, 2023) argue that "the digitalization of literature in Medan provides a platform for local voices to narrate the city's urban identity and history, offering alternative perspectives that challenge mainstream narratives" (p. 112). Through digital storytelling, local authors contribute to a more nuanced and diverse portrayal of Medan's social and cultural landscape, making the city's literary identity more accessible and relatable to contemporary readers

METHOD

This research is grounded in the Constructivist/Interpretive paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed through cultural, historical, and textual contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within this framework, the study explores how meanings and identities are produced in literary representations of Medan, particularly as mediated through both traditional print and digital reading practices. The goal is not to measure but to interpret – the researcher acts as an interpreter of meaning rather than a detached observer (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

This study adopts a constructivist-interpretive qualitative design, which views meaning as socially constructed through interactions between texts, readers, and cultural contexts. The research explores how Medan's urban identity is represented and negotiated in both print and digital forms of literature.

The corpus consists of four main literary authors and two digital platforms. The literary data include novels and short stories by Titan Sadewo (2022, 2025), Ika Natassa (2015, 2016, 2022), Hasan Al Banna (2011, 2021), and Lucya Chriz (2014). These texts portray Medan's urban experiences through diverse themes modernity, gender, faith, and memory. The digital data comprise posts, reader comments, and event documentation from @beyondthepage.mdn and KleioBuku on Instagram. These materials capture how readers and writers engage with Medan's literary imagination in online spaces.

The authors were chosen because their works explicitly feature Medan as a setting or symbolic landscape of urban life. The two digital platforms were selected for their active role in promoting Medan-based literature and facilitating participatory reading practices. Together, these sources represent both institutional (published literature) and grassroots (digital community) forms of urban storytelling.

Data were analyzed through textual and discourse analysis, combined with thematic coding. Literary texts were closely read to identify recurrent motifs, spatial imagery, and narrative structures that construct urban identity. Digital content (captions, threads, and user interactions) was examined to trace patterns of reader engagement and interpretive dialogue. Triangulation across textual and digital data ensured interpretive depth and validity.

Guided by constructivist-interpretive principles (Creswell & Poth, 2018) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), this study assumes that meaning is *co-constructed* through the interaction between authors, readers, and digital platforms. Rather than treating texts as static objects, the analysis interprets them as evolving cultural processes in which participants collectively shape the representation of Medan's identity. Thus, interpretation itself becomes a collaborative act within the broader digital-urban literary ecosystem.

The corpus for this study includes literary works that feature Medan as a central or symbolic setting. Selected texts represent a combination of print and digital literature, focusing on themes of migration, modernity, gender, and urban transformation. The works are: 1) Titan Sadewo – *Celakalah Orang-Orang yang Jatuh Cinta* (2022) and *Simulasi Sakaratul Maut* (2025), which capture the everyday affect of urban alienation and experiment with poetic language to express Medan's socio-cultural hybridity. 2) Ika Natassa – *Critical Eleven* (2015), *The Architecture of Love* (2016), and *Heartbreak Motel* (2022), which reflect the dynamics of digital modernity, relational anxieties, and urban cosmopolitanism relevant to the Indonesian middle class. 3) Hasan Al Banna – short stories and essays exploring historical memory, neighborhood identity, and postcolonial urban experience in Medan, as published in local anthologies and cultural journals. 4) Lucya Chriz – *Tiga Garis Aku, Kamu, Takdir* (2014), which offers a feminist perspective on women's experiences and spatial consciousness in Medan's evolving cityscape.

In addition to literary texts, the study incorporates digital literary communities and book culture networks as part of the cultural ecosystem that shapes urban narratives: 1) @beyondthepage.mdn, an Instagram-based reading community in Medan, curates serialized micro-fiction and interactive discussions that engage with the city's literary imagination. 2) KleioBuku, an online bookstore and literary hub based in Medan, which formerly operated a physical space for book launches, reading circles, and cultural discussions. Its hybrid online-offline presence exemplifies how digital and physical literary practices intersect in shaping reading experiences and promoting local authors.

While this study primarily focuses on texts, it also involves purposive sampling of respondents from Medan's literary communities to gain insight into contemporary digital reading practices. These respondents include: 1) Local writers whose works appear on digital platforms (e.g., Wattpad, blogs, or community publications). 2) Members of KleioBuku and Beyondthepage.mdn who participate in book discussions or online literary engagement. 3) Literary organizers and curators involved in promoting Medan-based authors.

Their perspectives provide contextual understanding of how urban identity is negotiated in both textual and social spaces. Data are gathered through: 1) Document analysis, focusing on literary texts (novels, poetry, and short stories) and digital content (posts, comment threads, and online discussions). 2) Semi-structured interviews with selected respondents to understand reader–author interaction and digital engagement with Medan's narratives. 3) Observation notes from online events, book discussions, and community archives to document how literature circulates and is interpreted digitally.

Procedures: 1) Data collection involves gathering both print and digital materials produced between 2014–2025, ensuring contemporary relevance. 2) Coding and categorization follow a thematic framework derived from literature on urban representation, digital reading, and cultural identity. 3) Triangulation combines textual, visual, and ethnographic data to strengthen interpretive validity. 4) Ethical considerations, including informed consent for interviews and privacy of online community content, are maintained throughout the study.

The study applies thematic and interpretative analysis. Key analytical categories include: 1) Urban Imagery – how Medan's physical and symbolic spaces (streets, markets, landmarks) embody broader social meanings. 2) Social Dynamics – migration, multiculturalism, gendered space, and socio-economic contrasts. 3) Digital Engagement – how online platforms mediate reading, interpretation, and circulation of urban narratives.

The analysis draws from hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1991) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986) to interpret how literary texts construct meanings of place and belonging. Texts and digital artifacts are coded according to recurring themes, metaphors, and spatial representations. Findings are synthesized to map how Medan's identity is imagined and negotiated through both traditional and digital literary forms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main findings of the study, organized into four interrelated themes that reflect how Medan's urban identity is constructed through both literary and digital practices: (1) memory and urban nostalgia, (2) modernity and cultural hybridity, (3) reader–writer interactions, and (4) the merging of literary and social media spaces. These themes collectively demonstrate how Medan's cityscape is narrated as a dynamic cultural construct shaped by collective memory, digital participation, and hybrid authorship.

Memory and Urban Nostalgia in Medan's Literary Imagination

Medan's urban identity is often narrated through acts of remembering. Literary works such as *Sampan Zulaiha dan Cerita Lainnya* by Hasan Al Banna and *Celakalah Orang-Orang yang Jatuh Cinta* by Titan Sadewo depict the city as a repository of memory, nostalgia, and loss. These texts use architectural landmarks, riverbanks, and old neighborhoods as mnemonic symbols that preserve historical consciousness amid modernization. This aligns with Ricoeur's (1991) notion of narrative memory, where storytelling functions as a form of cultural remembrance. In this sense, Medan's literature transforms urban space into a living archive one that records not only material change but also emotional continuity among its inhabitants.

In Titan Sadewo's *Celakalah Orang-Orang yang Jatuh Cinta* (2022), Medan's streets and cafés become metaphors for emotional alienation and postmodern anxiety. His use of fragmented syntax and surreal imagery mirrors the dissonance of urban life, where love and despair coexist within a disintegrating social order. Meanwhile, *Simulasi Sakaratul Maut* (2025) situates the city as a spiritual metaphor portraying Medan as a liminal space between life and afterlife, reality and illusion. These poetic experiments articulate the existential condition of young urban citizens caught between faith and hyperreality.

In Ika Natassa's works, particularly *The Architecture of Love* (2016) and *Heartbreak Motel* (2022), the notion of the city expands beyond Medan to include Jakarta and New York as comparative cosmopolitan spaces. Yet, the aesthetic of digital narration short chapters, conversational tone, and social media intertext – reflects how urban identity is now produced through digital mediation. The portrayal of relationships, success, and loneliness resonates

with digitally literate readers from Medan who experience urban modernity through mediated imagination rather than direct physical immersion.

Hasan Al Banna's *Sampan Zulaiha dan Cerita Lainnya* (2021) reclaims local history by depicting old neighborhoods, ports, and riverbanks as repositories of collective memory. His stories foreground how the city's Islamic heritage, colonial traces, and diasporic voices coexist within one narrative geography. Through this approach, Al Banna reconstructs Medan's identity as a palimpsest of voices layered, plural, and politically charged.

In Lucia Chriz's *Tiga Garis Aku, Kamu, Takdir* (2014), urban identity is examined from a gendered perspective. Her female protagonists navigate city spaces cafés, campuses, offices as extensions of emotional and psychological confinement. The text reimagines Medan as a "womaned city," where urban consciousness becomes intertwined with the struggle for emotional agency and public voice. This aligns with contemporary feminist urban theory that views spatial mobility as a metaphor for autonomy (Massey, 2019).

Modernity and Cultural Hybridity in Digital Storytelling

A recurring theme across the analyzed texts is the tension between tradition and modernity. Authors such as Ika Natassa and Lucia Chriz represent Medan and other Indonesian cities as hybrid urban spaces shaped by both local culture and global digital influence. *The Architecture of Love* and *Heartbreak Motel* demonstrate how digital aesthetics short chapters, conversational tone, and intertextual references to social media reflect a cosmopolitan sensibility grounded in the experience of digital modernity. This hybridity is also evident in Sadewo's experimental narratives, where poetic fragmentation mirrors the dissonance of postmodern urban life. These literary forms show how contemporary Medan writers negotiate identity within the shifting boundaries of technology, gender, and spirituality.

Reader-Writer Interactions and Participatory Reinterpretation of Place

Digital literary communities such as *@beyondthepage.mdn* and *KleioBuku* illustrate how the production and interpretation of literature have become collaborative. Readers engage with texts through comments, reflections, and creative reinterpretations of urban scenes, effectively transforming reading into a dialogic process. Observation of online discussions shows that participants often reframe Medan's urban imagery in relation to their personal experiences, exemplifying what (Abidin, 2021) calls *networked intimacy*. This participatory reinterpretation indicates that meaning is co-constructed consistent with the study's constructivist-interpretive framework where readers and writers together shape the evolving narrative of the city.

The Merging of Literary and Social Media Spaces

The interaction between literature and digital culture has blurred the boundaries between artistic expression and everyday digital communication. Platforms like *@beyondthepage.mdn* and *KleioBuku* operate as hybrid spaces where literary discussion merges with visual storytelling and community-building. Instagram posts, captions, and live sessions function not merely as promotional tools but as extensions of literary performance. Through these media, Medan's urban identity is continuously rewritten not just by professional authors but also by digital readers who engage visually, emotionally, and interactively. This merging of literary and social media spaces expands the traditional definition of authorship and foregrounds digital participation as an integral component of Indonesia's contemporary urban literary culture.

Synthesis

Across these four themes, Medan's cityscape emerges as a dialogic and participatory construct. The convergence of memory, modernity, and digital participation demonstrates that urban identity is both historically grounded and technologically mediated. The findings affirm that literature in the digital age functions not only as artistic representation but also as a form of cultural co-creation positioning Medan as an important case within Indonesia's evolving urban and digital humanities discourse.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined how Medan's urban identity is constructed, represented, and reimagined through both traditional literary works and emerging digital reading practices. Drawing upon the constructivist-interpretive paradigm, it reveals that the city's identity is not a fixed cultural artifact but a dialogic construct constantly reshaped by the interactions among authors, readers, and digital communities. Analytically, the findings underscore three key dynamics in contemporary Indonesian urban literature. First, *memory and nostalgia* operate as narrative strategies through which writers negotiate belonging and historical consciousness. Second, *modernity and hybridity* reflect how digital storytelling redefines local identities through global aesthetics. Third, *reader-writer interactions* highlight a participatory mode of authorship where interpretation becomes collaborative and communal. Together, these dynamics illustrate that Medan's literary culture functions as both text and social network a living ecosystem of meaning-making across print and digital spaces. Looking forward, the study's contribution lies in expanding the scope of Indonesian urban and digital literary studies beyond metropolitan centers such as Jakarta. By situating Medan within the discourse of digital urbanism, this research demonstrates how regional cities participate in the national and global literary imagination through grassroots digital engagement. Future research may deepen this inquiry through comparative analyses of other Indonesian cities (e.g., Surabaya, Makassar) or through longitudinal ethnographic studies of online reader communities. Such work could enrich understanding of how local narratives evolve within transnational networks of reading, authorship, and cultural identity in the digital age.

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