

Interactive Literature: Shifting Reading Patterns in the Era of Apps and Digital Platforms

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ABSTRAK

Perkembangan teknologi digital dan aplikasi mobile telah mengubah secara signifikan cara masyarakat berinteraksi dengan literatur, dari teks cetak statis menuju pengalaman membaca interaktif dan multimodal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana literatur interaktif dalam aplikasi dan platform digital membentuk pola membaca, pemahaman, partisipasi, serta pengalaman estetis. Metode yang digunakan adalah systematic literature review (SLR) dengan pengumpulan artikel terbitan 2019–2025 melalui berbagai basis data bereputasi. Proses seleksi mengikuti protokol PRISMA dan hasil penelitian dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan tematik. Dari 1.280 artikel yang teridentifikasi, sebanyak 48 artikel memenuhi kriteria inklusi dan dianalisis lebih lanjut untuk memberikan gambaran global mengenai praktik membaca interaktif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga temuan utama. Pertama, navigasi interaktif melalui cerita bercabang, tautan, dan multimedia mendorong pergeseran dari pola membaca linear menuju non-linear, meskipun sebagian pembaca merasa terbebani. Kedua, interaktivitas meningkatkan keterlibatan, motivasi, dan retensi kosakata, serta memperkaya pengalaman estetis, namun efek terhadap pemahaman mendalam masih bervariasi. Ketiga, faktor demografis dan literasi digital memoderasi hasil, di mana pembaca muda dan berpengalaman digital lebih mampu memanfaatkan fitur interaktif dibandingkan kelompok lain. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa literatur interaktif memperluas, bukan menggantikan, tradisi membaca, serta menawarkan peluang partisipasi dan kreativitas dengan tantangan mempertahankan pemahaman kritis.

Kata Kunci: Literatur interaktif, Pola membaca digital, Pemahaman, Budaya partisipatif

ABSTRACT

The rapid rise of digital technologies and mobile applications has significantly reshaped how people interact with literature, shifting reading from static print to interactive, multimodal experiences. This study investigates how interactive literature in apps and digital platforms alters reading patterns, comprehension, participation, and aesthetic experience. Using a systematic literature review (SLR), articles published between 2019 and 2025 were collected from major databases, screened through a PRISMA protocol, and synthesized using thematic analysis. A total of 48 eligible studies were reviewed to capture global perspectives on interactive reading practices. The findings reveal three main themes. First, interactive navigation through branching narratives, hyperlinks, and multimedia shifts reading from linear to non-linear, promoting agency but sometimes overwhelming readers. Second, interactivity enhances engagement, motivation, and vocabulary recall while enriching aesthetic immersion; however, its effects on deep comprehension remain inconsistent. Third, demographic and digital literacy factors moderate outcomes, with younger and digitally experienced readers navigating interactivity more effectively, while cultural and socioeconomic contexts shape participation styles. The study concludes that interactive literature expands rather than replaces traditional reading, offering opportunities for participatory and creative engagement while raising challenges for sustaining critical comprehension. These insights provide a foundation for future educational applications and design of digital reading platforms.

Keywords: Interactive literature, Digital reading patterns, Comprehension, Participatory culture



INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has profoundly reshaped literacy practices and reading behaviors in recent decades. Whereas reading was once almost exclusively associated with linear engagement with printed books, it has now shifted toward digital and interactive modes, mediated by mobile applications and online platforms. The emergence of new media environments such as Wattpad, Dreame, Hooked, or Radish demonstrates that literature is no longer a static text but has become a multimodal experience that combines words with audio, visual effects, animations, and branching story features that allow readers to choose narrative directions. This phenomenon signals a movement from passive consumption toward active participation, where readers are no longer merely recipients of meaning but co-creators of narrative (Jenkins, 2021). Such a trend has been reinforced by the rise of digital-native generations who have grown up surrounded by technologies, making their literary practices demand interactivity, speed, and instant emotional engagement (Green et al., 2022). These transformations prompt fundamental questions: does interactive literature strengthen contemporary literacy culture, or does it instead contribute to superficial and fragmented reading experiences?

Scholarly work has shown that digital literacy requires more than the traditional skills of reading and writing. According to Lankshear and Knobel (2020), literacy in the digital era involves the ability to navigate, interpret, and interact with multimodal texts. Schwabe et al. (2021) similarly argue that reading on digital devices with interactive structures alters cognitive patterns, shifting from linear processing to networked associations a cognitive process impossible in traditional print media. In addition, Pianzola et al. (2020) highlight how the community practices of Wattpad users extend beyond reading to include commenting, discussion, and fanfiction creation, thereby illustrating a participatory turn in reading culture. Hence, interactive literature should not merely be regarded as a technological novelty; it also represents a cultural and social transformation that redefines what it means to be literate in the 21st century.

Yet, such transformations do not unfold without tensions. While some studies highlight the benefits of interactivity in enhancing engagement and improving recall, especially among children (Takacs et al., 2020), other research warns that excessive use of multimedia elements that are not relevant to the story can distract readers and reduce comprehension quality (Bus et al., 2020). This indicates that the effects of interactive reading cannot be generalized and may depend on design choices, the relevance of interactivity, and readers' characteristics. The popularity of "chat fiction" apps among adolescents further illustrates these tensions. Presented in the form of instant messaging dialogues, these stories encourage fast, episodic reading driven by suspense (Thomas, 2021). While this may foster new reading practices, it remains unclear how such formats affect depth of comprehension or critical literacy skills. These unresolved questions mark the presence of important research problems: how do interactive navigation patterns in digital literature shape comprehension and aesthetic experiences? And what implications might this have for broader literacy development?

Research gaps are particularly visible when we examine the existing literature. Much of the scholarship has remained focused on comparisons between print and digital reading rather than exploring interactivity as an analytical category. For example, Peras et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review on print versus digital reading comprehension and engagement but did not address branching narratives that require readers' active participation. Likewise, Spjeldnæs (2024) examined how digital

affordances influence adult recreational reading but did not consider how readers navigate branching structures within interactive literature. Takacs and Bus (2022) conducted a meta-analysis on interactive storybook apps and found potential benefits for comprehension, but their focus was restricted to early childhood populations, leaving adolescents and adults who are increasingly dominant in digital reading communities understudied. Moreover, demographic and sociocultural variables such as age, digital literacy background, and access to technology are often overlooked. Van Moort (2022), for instance, stresses the importance of socioeconomic context in online reading practices, yet this perspective has not been systematically applied to interactive literature. Another noticeable gap is the lack of longitudinal studies capable of tracing how readers adapt when transitioning from traditional linear texts to interactive forms: do they develop critical digital literacy over time, or do they primarily engage in shallow and fragmented consumption?

Against these gaps, the present research seeks to offer novelty and add empirical depth to the field. First, it moves beyond the medium comparison (print vs. screen) to specifically focus on readers' interactive navigation patterns how they make narrative decisions, how they interact with multimedia, and how these choices shape comprehension and meaning-making. This attention to navigation represents a relatively unexplored dimension in interactive literature research. Second, the study combines cognitive and aesthetic perspectives, analyzing not only comprehension outcomes (such as recall and inference) but also emotional engagement, immersive experiences, and the creative aspects of reader-text interactions. Third, the research situates interactivity within demographic and digital literacy differences, thereby explaining variations in reading outcomes based on factors such as age, digital familiarity, and reading habits. This aligns with van Moort's (2022) sociocultural approach while extending it to interactive digital narratives. Finally, the study grounds itself in widely used platforms such as Wattpad and branching-story apps, ensuring that the findings are not only theoretically relevant but also practically applicable for designers, educators, and cultural policymakers.

Based on these considerations, the research sets out with the following objective: to analyze how interactive literature within apps and digital platforms reshapes readers' patterns from linear to non-linear engagement and to examine its implications for comprehension, participation, and aesthetic experience in the digital age.

METHODS

This study applies a qualitative research design with a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, which is considered appropriate to achieve the objective of analyzing how interactive literature within apps and digital platforms shifts reading patterns and influences comprehension, participation, and aesthetic experiences. Data collection was carried out through major academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Wiley, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis Online, using keywords including "interactive literature", "digital reading patterns", "apps and reading comprehension", and "participatory reading". The inclusion criteria required that articles (1) were published between 2019 and 2025, (2) were peer-reviewed journal publications or edited volumes, (3) explicitly discussed interactive or digital reading practices, and (4) were written in English. Studies focusing solely on traditional print reading or non-interactive e-books were excluded. From this process, a final corpus of articles was selected to provide both conceptual and empirical perspectives across various disciplines and regions.

The data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Extracted information from each study such as research design, platform analyzed, forms of interactivity, and outcomes on comprehension and engagement was coded and synthesized into broader thematic categories. These themes were organized to highlight key shifts: from linear to non-linear reading, from passive consumption to participatory engagement, and from print to multimodal digital environments. Descriptive mapping was first conducted to show the scope of existing research, followed by thematic synthesis and critical interpretation connecting findings with established theories of digital literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2020), participatory culture (Jenkins, 2021), and socio-cultural approaches to online reading (van Moort, 2022). By integrating multiple perspectives and ensuring methodological rigor through transparent selection criteria, this approach provides a robust framework to address the research objective and generate insights applicable to both theoretical debates and practical design of digital reading platforms.

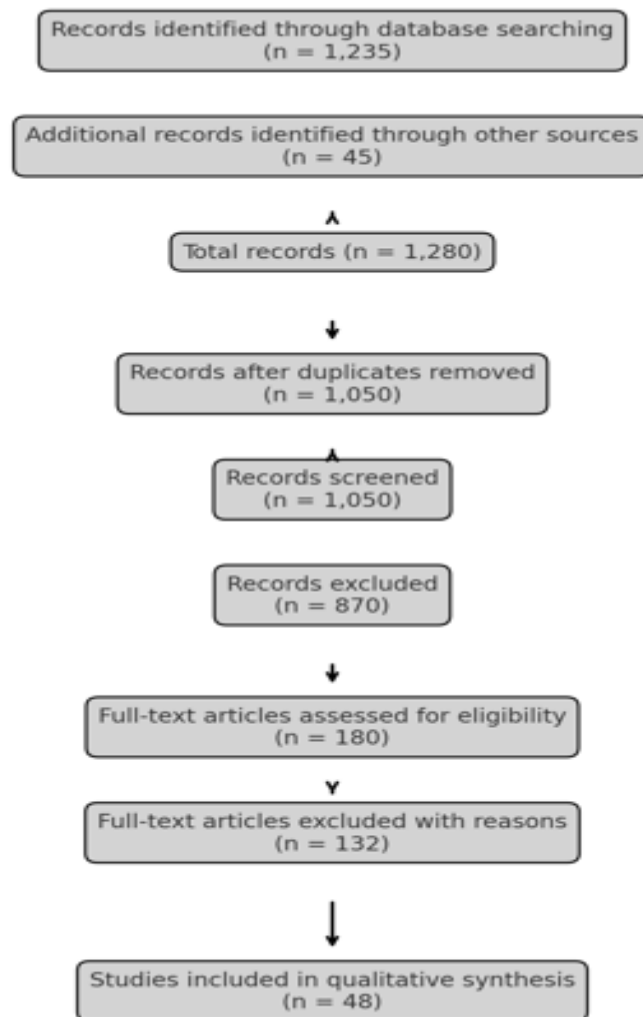


Figure 1. Graph of Research Methods

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the systematic literature review process outlined in the PRISMA diagram, a total of 1,280 records were initially identified from six academic databases. After removing duplicates and applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 48 studies were retained for full qualitative synthesis. These studies represent diverse contexts of

interactive and digital reading practices across different populations, including children, adolescents, university students, and adult readers. The final synthesis reveals three major themes: the shift in reading patterns shaped by interactive navigation, the cognitive and aesthetic consequences of such practices, and the moderating role of demographic and literacy factors.

The first major finding concerns the **shift in reading patterns resulting from interactive navigation**. Interactive features such as branching storylines, embedded multimedia, and hyperlinked structures encourage readers to adopt non-linear approaches rather than traditional linear progression. A study by Kim and Kim (2021) demonstrated that college students using interactive e-books engaged more deeply in navigation strategies, including backtracking and exploring multiple narrative paths, which contrasted with the single-direction reading typical of print. Similarly, Chen et al. (2020) observed that adolescents reading interactive fiction apps exhibited exploratory behavior, often revisiting prior decisions to test alternative outcomes. This aligns with Day et al. (2024), who found that choice-based narratives promoted active exploration, thereby reinforcing the role of agency in digital reading environments. However, the same studies caution that not all readers fully embrace branching opportunities: many revert to the default path or follow majority recommendations due to cognitive load or fear of narrative disorientation (Scharer & de Bruyckere, 2022). These findings support the research objective that interactive navigation reshapes reading patterns toward non-linear engagement, albeit moderated by readers' comfort with complexity.

The second theme relates to **the impact of interactivity on comprehension and aesthetic experience**. A growing body of evidence suggests that while interactive elements enhance motivation and engagement, they do not automatically guarantee deeper comprehension. In a meta-analysis, Li (2024) showed that multimedia features significantly improved vocabulary retention and story recall for younger readers but were less effective in fostering inferential comprehension or critical reflection. Complementing this, Liao et al. (2024) reported that digital readers frequently engaged in surface-level processing, as interactivity encouraged rapid transitions between segments rather than sustained contemplation. Yet, when designed appropriately, interactive features can serve pedagogical purposes: Jørgensen et al. (2024) demonstrated that integrating interactive digital literature into English language teaching increased students' motivation and willingness to engage with texts that they otherwise found challenging. On the aesthetic side, interactive literature provides immersive experiences not attainable in print. Rettberg (2021) examined digital works such as *Pry*, where multimodal interaction created a synesthetic reading experience, blurring the boundary between reading and gaming. Similarly, Wang et al. (2024) highlighted the potential of augmented reality storybooks, which engaged children's visual and tactile senses, generating excitement and a sense of co-presence within the story world. These findings emphasize that interactivity enriches the **aesthetic dimension** of reading, offering multisensory engagement that fosters enjoyment and creativity, even when cognitive comprehension gains are modest. Thus, interactive literature should be valued not only for its informational outcomes but also for its cultural and affective contributions.

The third theme involves the **moderating influence of demographic and digital literacy factors**. Evidence indicates that readers' age, prior digital experience, and literacy practices strongly shape how they navigate and benefit from interactive

literature. Subaveerapandiyan and Priyanka (2022) found that Indian university students, despite being digitally literate, still preferred print for in-depth philosophical or long narrative reading, while reserving digital apps for shorter and more interactive texts. Ho et al. (2023) reported that Hong Kong children's fluency in digital word recognition correlated positively with prior exposure to touchscreen devices, suggesting that familiarity with interfaces can facilitate successful navigation. Bresó-Grancha et al. (2022) further noted that university students accustomed to digital sources read faster on screens without sacrificing comprehension, though they acknowledged greater cognitive effort. Cultural contexts also matter. A study by Choi and Yi (2021) revealed that Korean adolescents engaged differently with interactive narratives compared to Western counterparts, favoring collectivist participation through shared commentary features rather than individualistic exploration of narrative branches. This underscores how cultural norms mediate participatory reading practices. Likewise, Sun and Gao (2023) highlighted socioeconomic disparities: students from urban schools had higher exposure to interactive platforms and therefore exhibited more sophisticated navigation strategies, while rural students often struggled with cognitive overload. Such findings affirm the moderating role of demographics and literacy environments in shaping the outcomes of interactive reading.

Synthesizing across these themes, the results demonstrate that **interactive navigation fundamentally transforms reading patterns, shifting them from linear to non-linear structures, while simultaneously influencing comprehension and aesthetic engagement**. However, these effects are not uniform. For comprehension, interactivity provides benefits at the level of vocabulary and memory recall but can hinder deeper inferential skills unless supported by careful design (Li, 2024; Liao et al., 2024). For aesthetic experience, interactivity enriches enjoyment and immersion, broadening the scope of what it means to read in the digital age (Rettberg, 2021; Wang et al., 2024). Moderating variables age, digital literacy, cultural background, and prior exposure determine the extent to which readers navigate effectively and reap cognitive or aesthetic rewards (Ho et al., 2023; Subaveerapandiyan & Priyanka, 2022). These findings directly respond to the research objective, affirming that interactive literature in apps and digital platforms reshapes reading patterns, while also revealing the complexity of its cognitive, affective, and sociocultural impacts. Nevertheless, limitations remain. Much of the reviewed literature is cross-sectional or experimental in controlled environments, lacking longitudinal perspectives that could illuminate how interactive reading influences literacy development over time. Additionally, while most studies examined children or students, fewer addressed adult readers or professional contexts. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and diversify populations to capture the evolving impact of interactive literature more comprehensively. Despite these limitations, the synthesis highlights the urgent need to reconceptualize literacy as a multimodal, participatory practice that is no longer confined to print or linear forms.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that interactive literature within apps and digital platforms has fundamentally reshaped reading patterns by shifting them from linear to non-linear modes of engagement, with branching narratives, hyperlinks, and multimedia features encouraging exploration and personalization of texts. The findings reveal that such interactivity enhances engagement, motivation, and short-term recall, particularly in vocabulary acquisition, while also enriching the aesthetic dimension of reading through

immersive, multisensory experiences that blur the line between reading and play. However, the benefits for deep comprehension, such as inferential reasoning and critical reflection, remain inconsistent and highly dependent on the design of interactive features and readers' ability to manage cognitive load. Furthermore, demographic and digital literacy factors, including age, prior exposure to digital platforms, and cultural background, play a moderating role in how readers navigate interactive texts and derive cognitive or aesthetic benefits, with digitally experienced readers exploiting features more confidently than those less familiar. Overall, interactive literature represents not a replacement but an expansion of traditional reading, offering new opportunities for participation, creativity, and cultural engagement while posing challenges for sustained comprehension. By focusing on interactive navigation as the key driver of these changes and highlighting the moderating influence of demographic variables, this research contributes to understanding the complexity of digital-age literacy and underscores the need for future designs and educational practices that balance engagement with depth of understanding.

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