

Traditional symbols and social constructs in M. Irata's *Momuhuto*: A literary sociology perspective

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Citation: Aminudin, M.F., Alade, S., Widyastuti, S.H., & Wiyatmi. (2024). Traditional symbols and social constructs in M. Irata's *Momuhuto*: A literary sociology perspective. *Notion: Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Culture*, 6(2), 218–231.

<https://doi.org/10.12928/notion.v6i2.11149>

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: 16-07-2024

Accepted: 22-10-2024

Keywords:

Traditional symbols

Social constructions

Literary sociology

Short story of *Momuhuto*

Indonesian literature

ABSTRACT

This descriptive qualitative study aims to explore the traditional symbols and social constructions of Gorontalo society as reflected in M. Irata's short story *Momuhuto*. Employing literary sociology perspective, the data were elicited through key quotations within the text, analyzed through document analysis. The study highlights on how the short story reflects philosophical meanings behind traditional symbols and how social norms are depicted. The results indicate that *Momuhuto* presents meaningful symbols – such as purification rituals – emphasizing Gorontalo society's dedication to preserving its traditions. Despite the influence of modernization, the traditional leaders play a significant role in maintaining cultural identity and social harmony. The study infers that *Momuhuto* not only preserves cultural heritage but also cultivates social awareness through literature. The study further suggests that literature generally assists preserve cultural identity in the face of social change. Future studies can explore how literary works from different cultures reflect the balance between modernization and tradition, presenting comparative views into how various societies navigate these obstacles while maintaining their heritage.



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I. INTRODUCTION

Literary works become intricate and powerful tools for expressing social, political, and cultural dynamics that exist in society. When exploring imaginative literature, it is crucial to consider the three primary literary genres: prose, poetry, and theater. Every genre makes a distinct contribution to our comprehension of the world by presenting varied methods of storytelling and expression, allowing readers to interact with the complexities of existence from many viewpoints (Aziz, 2021). Prose fiction, like short stories, gives authors the freedom to craft a complex narrative universe full of memorable characters, symbols, and moments that encapsulate the essence of human existence (Halabi, 2022). Manugeran et al. (2022) alluded that besides as a means of entertainment, literary works can be used as a social criticism, which may be used as tools to review old ideas, reveal novel ideas, and encourage social change in society. In addition, social criticism in literary works that contain social conflict in daily life assists in comprehending and evaluating social structure as well as providing a normative critical perspective toward contemporary society and its culture in various aspects (Bianchin, 2019; Bielskis, 2023; Sembiring et al., 2024). Literature can offer an in-depth and subjective perspective on a historical event. Beyond merely serving as entertainment, literary works also function as valuable tools for criticism and reflection, allowing readers to engage with and respond to various societal issues. By weaving narratives that highlight historical and social contexts, literature enables a deeper understanding and critical analysis of the world around us (Apriyani & Rosly, 2024).

Literary works as a metaphor for life are able to show the representation of conflicts in daily life and give insight to groups that might be underrepresented publicly (Krismawati, 2021). The writers can express their personal point of view about social realities through short stories and offer the readers to consider different points of view. Literary works can be stated as influential tools to enhance both social awareness and transformation. The short story as a type of fiction prose have a huge capacity to reveal and build social constructions. Short story can elaborate various aspects of life and its culture through short and in-depth storytelling. Short story writers employ characters, settings, and plots to reflect and criticize existing social problems. They can show power dynamics, relationships among individuals and social structures that exist in society. The writers can also formulate how social norms are formed, maintained, and changed. Short stories can invite the readers to reflect and understand the social construction that does exist around them through drawing the conflicts, moral biases and social interactions.

In the context of Indonesian writers, literary sociology is usually described as a study of the relationship between literary works and a country's society, culture and social reality. Generally, the sociology of Indonesian literature also involves the analysis of how literary works reflect or influence the social and cultural dynamics in that country. In the

study of literary sociology, there are five things that should be considered in determining how objective the relationship between literary works and society is seen from various views. First, understanding literary works through their social aspects. Second, understanding the whole literary works by considering their social aspects. Third, understanding the literary works as a whole by considering the social background of the society. Fourth, literary sociology learns the relationship of literature and society from two point of view. Fifth, literary sociology seeks to identify the types of interdependence that exist between society and literature (Burhanudin, 2024; Lafame, 2020; Ratna, 2003; Yudin, 2023).

The study of literary sociology focuses on how literary works reflect and construct social reality. Additionally, literary sociology examines how literary works can reflect the social condition, cultural, and economic conditions at that time. It also depicts how literary works contribute to readers' understanding and perception of social world. In other words, the concept that refers to how people interact, construct and understand their world through social and cultural interactions is called social construction. Through the lens of literary sociology, social construction is examined through literary works to understand how norms, values, and social structures are depicted and questioned. Such an analysis will assist readers to understand how literary works influence social views and cultural transformations.

This study employs a literary sociology approach. This approach can be used to examine and consider literature from societal aspects where literary sociology is often viewed as socio-cultural products not as a result of aesthetic ones (Mukti et al., 2018). This approach uses text analysis to depict and determine the structures and then uses this approach to understand the social phenomenon that occurred outside of literature (Damono, 2003). Literary sociology also considers how literature can be beneficial as a tool to change society. Literary works can criticise injustice, examine both identity and social power and invite the readers to understand and change the existing social structures.

Momuhuto is one of the short stories selected in the short story anthology by the participants in the 2016 Gorontalo Province of General and Students short story competition. The title of this short story was also selected as the title of a short story anthology book. Momuhuto is believed to be a representation of traditional customs in the lives of the Gorontalo people. The writer of this short story, Muhammad Irata, comes from Gorontalo. Many of his writings raise many cultural and social elements. As a writer from Gorontalo, he has a different writing view, enabling him to address local issues in a unique and deep analysis. Through his works, he concentrates on visualizing the habits of people in Gorontalo and how they adapt to the times.

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A short story entitled *Momuhuto* by Irata can be a part of fundamental things from Indonesia's literary treasures because of his attention to both cultural details and his storytelling abilities. He uses a short story as a tool to elaborate, explore and record the lives of Gorontalo people by showing the complex and unique local culture. The traditional symbols used in *Momuhuto's* short story show local traditions and values. In this short story, Irata succeeds in presenting crucial elements of Gorontalo's social structure, such as relationships among people, traditional roles in daily life and complex social dynamics.

The short story, *Momuhuto* by Irata talks about Saripa, a Gorontalo girl, who experiences many difficulties because of the ritual habit of *Momuhuto*. In Gorontalo, this ceremony is a procession of sacrificing or self-purification for mature girls. In this short story, Saripa feels that she gets a curse in her life because when she was doing the *Momuhuto* procession, there are a series of customs that were not implemented perfectly and appropriately. Saripa believes that this what makes her experiencing many obstacles in love, including being abandoned by her lovers. In fact, she almost becomes an old maid. This story ends with Saripa still feeling cursed and not getting her desired mate. In general, this short story defines and explores the conflict between tradition and destiny in which how belief in curses can affect an individual's life. This short story shows how traditional customs influence the perceptions and actions of a group of people by showing daily life and social interactions.

Several previous studies aim to examine the same topic which the study conducted by Rismawati et al. (2021) employed the semiotic approach of Charles Sanders Peirce. The results of this descriptive qualitative study with data sourced from the novel "*Tiba Sebelum Berangkat*" by Faisal Oddang indicate a presence of cultural aspects in terms of symbols within that novel. In the same vein, Dewi (2016) conducted a study entitled "*Symbols of Balinese Customs' Power in the Novel Incest by I Wayan Artika*". This study defines symbols of Balinese customs' power including symbols of cultural idealism, physical symbols, and symbols of social activities. These symbols strengthen the life views of Balinese society and as a means of communication and reinforcement of social relationships. Another study compiled by Suci (2022) aims to show a construction of social reality within Oetimu community. This study identifies the externalization process, objectivity and internalization in the novel that reflect inherited beliefs, life-style changes, and people's self-awareness. The present study is similar to these previous studies in which employ a descriptive qualitative analysis approach and utilizes theory and semiotic approach to define the meaning of those literary works. The data of these previous gathered from the novel which were analysed qualitatively to determine whether the current study elicits the data from a short story entitled "*Momuhuto*."

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Fiction, specifically short story of *Momuhuto*, significantly reflects the social dynamics of Gorontalo community. This study investigates how M. Irata's short story plays as a medium for illustrating the traditional symbols and social structure of Gorontalo society. The primary concerns of this study is the insufficient comprehension of how literature reflects and shapes social realities, specifically Gorontalo culture. While existing literary works tend to focus on broader literary analysis, there is a lack of specific research on exploring the relationship between traditional symbols and social constructions in local stories. This can be crucial as it highlights the role of literature in preserving cultural identity and fostering social cohesion amid modernization. Employing a literary sociology framework, this study seeks to examine the connection between traditional symbols and social constructions in Gorontalo society as reflected in *Momuhuto*. It also purposes to highlight M. Irata's contributions to portraying the cultural landscape of Gorontalo through his story.

II. METHOD

The study adopts descriptive qualitative combined with a literary sociology approach to analyze how traditional symbols and social constructions of Gorontalo society are depicted in the short story of *Momuhuto* by M. Irata (2016). Semi (2012) alluded that descriptive qualitative research collects and presents data in words or images to accurately define phenomenon. This approach fits to examine cultural elements within literary works. The object of the study is *Momuhuto*, selected for its rich the depict of cultural life in Gorontalo. The short story serves as a case study to elaborate how literature depicts social structures and traditional symbols. The data were elicited through document analysis, where key quotations related to rituals, social hierarchies, and cultural symbols were identified and classified into thematic groups. The data analysis aligns with Azwar's (2009) descriptive qualitative analysis approach, systematically explaining facts and organizing data into themes related to cultural context in Gorontalo. A literary sociology framework was applied to interpret how the themes reflect social norms. To ensure the validity, triangulation was employed and peer review was conducted with the native people of Gorontalo to minimize the biases. In the final part, the conclusions are drawn based on the thematic synthesis, addressing how traditional symbols and social constructions are reflected in *Momuhuto* and contributing to the understanding of cultural reflection in Gorontalo society.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Symbols come from the Greek word "symboion" from "symbollo" (drawing conclusion means giving an impression). Symbols or signs as a means of mediation to create and convey the message, construct a belief system that is adhered. Syarifuddin (2003) stated that the term of symbol has actually been widely used in science and philosophy,

especially used in defining the cultures. Culture is a way of thinking and feeling that is manifested in daily life, or in the form of human social interactions done through symbols.

The symbols used in this study are traditional symbols done in the blessing ceremony. In short story of Momuhuto, there are various traditional symbols used to depict the richness of Gorontalo's traditions and cultures. Here are some forms of traditional symbols used:

The Ceremony of Momuhuto (Mayang Pinang Water – Washing)

The description of the ceremony

Momuhuto is a *mayang pinang* water – washing ceremony performed during Gorontalo muslim girl – forming ceremony. This process involves pouring water through the cracks of the hanging *mayang pinang* that aims to purify who are about to step into adulthood.

a. The Stage of Ceremony

Rubbing *Bada'a* (scrub powder): Before the sprinkling, the girl's body is rubbed with *Bada'a* that consists of *totapo talangngilala* (egg tree bark), *antayu pale yilahumo* (water-soaked rice), nutmeg, turmeric and galangal. The following is a quote from the short story:

"That morning, before the momuhuto ceremony, the girl needs to be smeared with bada'a, a type of rubbing powder. Saripa's body is adorned with fine dust from pulverized plant components. Spread it all over her face, hands, back and legs. Her body color is a golden hue and is marred by unsightly blemishes. Every inch was covered with powder. She almost threw up. However, she had to be patient in order to get an abundance of flowers, for it was believed that through this act she could catch a glimpse of her soul mate." (p. 4)

Water sprinkling of *mayang pinang*: water is poured through the cracks of *mayang pinang* which is hung on the seated girls. This is performed by *Hulango* (the village witch) as a symbol of purification. This illustration can be seen in the following:

"Momuhuto is a ceremonial parade that takes place during the mome'ati ritual for Gorontalo Muslim women. It is similar to Molihu lo limu, which means a bath made of kaffir lime or lemon. However, at the age of two, she immersed herself in a bathtub filled with lemons. She had to repeat the procedure after her groin area bled fresh blood. Momuhuto, also known as betel nut flower bathing, is a ceremonial practice that represents a special act of purification for royal princesses. Murba girls are raised in the region known as the veranda of Medina." (p. 3)

"She supports his back with a pile of tumula and sugar cane, while also holding a delicious banana. Another Hulango drips water through the hole of a hanging betel

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nut. Next comes the much-anticipated parade, where she will finally discover the identity of her soul mate. Through the egg" (p. 9)

Giving the holy sign (*Momonto*); After the sprinkling, the girl is given a holy mark in the form of red herb that is applied to the forehead, neck, shoulders, and the grooves of the hands and feet as a symbol of abandoning bad characteristics. The following is an excerpt reflected in the short story of *Momuhuto*:

"The bestowal of the sacred symbol, known as momonto, signifies the permanent abandonment of the girl's dishonorable attributes. Saripa currently resides in the village of Huwali. It awaits every solemn ceremony that must be approached with the utmost seriousness. Outside, an arid breeze almost entered the room. The aroma is very strong. The girl was captured outside the room before the sacred mark procession was completed." (p. 5)

b. The Use of Symbolic Objects

Philosopher's Plates: In the blessing process, the girl has to step on seven philosophical plates containing various symbolic objects such as soil, corn, rice, coins, plohungo leaves, bako hati lo umonu (fragrant herbs), and mayang pinang stems. This can be seen in the following quote:

"One dish contains a little soil and po'otoheto grass. One dish consists of corn. A single dish with a generous portion of rice. The value of a plate of coins may vary. One plate has polohungo leaves. One serving of bako liver lo umonu, a deliciously aromatic dish. One serving of bulewe consisting of betel nut sticks." (p. 6)

Rough stones and Herbs: Rough stones are used to grind the herbs consisting of natural ingredients that is believed to have magical and purifying powers.

c. Traditional Clothing

Batte Khas Nou lo Hulondhalo

The girls wear batte, typical Gorontalo batik cloths, that symbolize beauty and elegance of Gorontalo women. The following is an excerpt reflected in the short story of *Momuhuto*:

"Eighteen years ago. Saripa's white and beautiful body was adorned with Nou lo Hulundhalo's vibrant trademark batte. A renewed dermis. Her hair flowed endlessly. The weather outside is scorching hot. A gust of arid wind blew" (p. 2)

***Walimomo* clothing**

Special clothing worn by the girls during the procession that shows the transition from childhood to adulthood.

The Meaning or Philosophical Value of Traditional Symbols in *Momuhuto* Short Story by Muhammad Irata

Signs are present in the daily life in which they can be present in a variety of forms in the forms of symbols, signs, codes, icons and signals. As Ayuni says (2020), even all aspects of life are full of signs and it is by means that human can think, without signs we cannot communicate or interact. Regarding signs or symbols, this is related to semiotics, which is a scientific discipline that studies about signs and symbols. Typically, the use of a sign in the form of a symbols that implies a certain meaning.

There are several symbols found in this short story in which these traditional symbols have deep philosophical meaning and values, some of these symbols are as follows:

a. Self- Purification Symbol

Momuhuto: It symbolizes self-purification and readiness to enter adulthood. The sprinkling of mayang pinang water is believed to cleanse the sins and remove bad characters. Giving the Holy Sign (*Momonto*): It implies that the girl should keep away from bad traits and keep herself pure.

b. Symbol of Togetherness and Obedience

Multi-Party Participation means the procession involves many parties, including the *Hulango*, traditional leaders, and families, demonstrating the significant of togetherness and traditional observance. The Role of Traditional Leaders and Village Elders: They have a crucial role in maintaining and implementing the custom in which reflecting the values of respect for the authority and knowledge of ancestors.

c. Symbol of Sacrifice and Patience

Rubbing *Bada'a* (scrub powder): This process requires patience and perseverance as the girl has to endure the pain in order to undergo the purification process. Initiation and Transition reflect through the various stages of the ceremony, the girls demonstrate sacrifice and willingness to undergo the changes and new responsibilities of being mature woman.

The Social Construction in Society of the Use of Traditional Symbols in *Momuhuto* Short Story by Muhammad Irata

Social construction is a literary sociology approach in which it contains the understating that society is a human product. Based on Berger and Luckman (as cited in Mufidun, 2022) social construction uses dialectic process that human experienced through three moments: externalization, objectivity, and internalization. These moments do not always take place in a sequence of time, but it can be said that the three moments are correlated one another to build social construction.

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Social construction of Gorontalo society toward traditional symbols as reflected in the short story draws how traditions and values are maintained and valued:

The Role of Traditional Leader and Villager Elder

a. Traditional Authority: The traditional leaders and village elders have high authority in doing and supervising traditional ceremonies. They are respected as a guardian of tradition and the knowledge of ancestors. This can be seen in the following quote:

"Usually, the Hulango and Hatibi elders are occupied throughout this period. They receive payment there. What else but humming classical poetry. During the be'ati initiation ceremony. In addition, there is a lemon bath procession." (p. 5-6).

b. Advice and Guidance: *Hulango* and traditional leaders give advice and guidance to the girl who undergoes the ceremony, showing the importance of obedience and respect for traditional values. The evidence can be seen from the following statement:

"The Qadi or imam will appear before them. To provide guidance for girls to show obedience to God, their parents, and their nation in the future." (p. 7).

Views on Women and Purity

The ceremony of *Momuhuto* emphasizes the importance of women's dignity and purity. Mature girls who undergo this ceremony are encouraged to comply with the norms and ethics set by the society. The following statements below are the evidence found in the short story of *Momuhuto*:

"Saripa, the holy woman, her makeup almost smeared with her tears. She lay on the terrace, resembling a bride without a partner. Other than that, the only person involved was her mother. Her face showed a strong desire to escape to a distant location. I recently escaped from a respected reception. Her mother had calmed her down. Hulango. Oh, it was a bit embarrassing for her. The increased sensation of constriction in the chest, to be more precise." (p. 7).

"The Momuhuto ritual highlights the importance of virginity and female dignity. Girls participating in this ceremony are required to adhere to community norms and ethical standards." (p. 9).

Social Impact and Custom Violation

Saripa's case emphasizes the importance of cultural consequences of violating customs in Gorontalo community, in which adhering to tradition, such as *Momuhuto*, has become crucial for maintaining one's dignity and self-worth. First part focuses on how public ridicule, symbolized by "*As the young men burst out laughing,*" turns Saripa's personal misstep into a source of collective scorn. Her effort to cover up her personal struggles in the context of social expectation enacted on women to adhere to

conventional roles, particularly in terms of marriage. The illustration "her mind has been in a state of turmoil, like a fish eye seeing a boil" underscores Saripa's weakness, as he inability to meet the social expectations continues to haunt her even after 18 years, demonstrating the long lasting effects of social stigma. The next part illustrates Saripas's failed attempt to seek pleasure in rituals of religion and shows that violating *Momuhuto* has consequences that run beyond one's own guilty. Her shame is enhanced when her failure becomes public, as seen by the statement "*Momuhuto became the subject of discussion,*" Her anger depicts frustration with a society that continues to judge her, despite her efforts to conform. In Gorontalo culture, *Momuhuto* and other ritual serve as social controls, and disobeying them not only causes personal distress but also negative public perception for long time, emphasizing the close relationship between social harmony and customs. The proof can be seen from the following statements:

"The experience evoked tremendous emotions in her. As the young men burst out laughing. She would playfully jump up and down. Because Ma Sisa's hair and body were damp from the mayang pinang spell, she would reprimand the children by twisting her ears. She effectively hid her troubles even though eighteen years had passed. She was almost an unmarried woman at a certain age. For the past week, her mind has been in a state of turmoil or chaos. Similar to a fish eye seeing a boil. Just anticipating her failure. Burning" (p. 1)

"I ended up accidentally spilling the Saripa. Experiencing emotional distress following the advice given by the Qadhi. She recited the shahada and recited the Quran, even though the holy book was not her origin. She remained completely unaffected. Momuhuto became the subject of discussion. Ah, the perfect match. Hulango moved away. Saripa is quite angry" (p. 7)

Social Dynamics and Conflict

Conflict among Individuals: The short story draws the raised conflict that occurred because of custom violations, such as that experienced by Saripa and Ma Sisa. This conflict shows that there is a complex social dynamic in the society that highly respect customs and traditions. The following statement found in short story of *Momuhuto* can be seen below:

"She has a vivid memory of the episode. Always fond of the video footage that endlessly replayed and tormented her. She placed herself atop a dudangata, a coconut tree, facing east, under a hanging bulewe, an areca palm tree in bloom. She remembers leaning on mounds of earth and vegetation, including sugar cane and bananas. Another Hulango dripped water through the hole of a hanging betel nut. Next comes the much-anticipated parade, where she will finally discover the identity of her soul mate. Through an egg. Far away? Is it close? The eggshell cracked on the back side of her hand." (p. 8 - 9)

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Restoration and Forgiveness: Despite the conflict, this short story shows the restoration and forgiveness process, in which the society attempts to solve the problems wisely and fairly. The proof can be seen from the following statement:

"A virtuous man will be accompanied by a virtuous woman. The voice suddenly diminished. Somewhat quiet. The voice was hoarse. Soon, there was complete silence. What is the quality of Ma Sisa's voice? An immoral man will associate himself with an immoral woman. It is a predetermined outcome" (p. 10)

Based on the results of data analysis, it is obtained that the text includes the use of traditional symbols and social construction of Gorontalo society through quotations contained in the short story of Momuhuto authored by M. Irata. It depicts the implementation of customs in the lives of Gorontalo people. The depiction of customs in which there are cultural aspect and the use of traditional symbols is closely related to the social construction of Gorontalo society.

This is in the same view with Ritzer and Stepnisky (2019) that elaborates how the social reality is formulated through interaction process involving traditional symbols. These symbols do not only reflect the social reality but also these create through meaningful social interactions. Therefore, the use of symbols is closely related the social construction of society. Through traditional symbols, society can convey and maintain cultural values and create community identity.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the use of traditional symbols and the social constructions of Gorontalo community in Muhammad Irata's short story named *Momuhuto*. It can be concluded that traditional symbols such as *Momuhuto* ceremony, *bada'a* (scrub powder), *momonto* (holy mark) and traditional clothing represent essential aspects of Gorontalo culture. These symbols are not only ritualistic but also are deeply embedded with the philosophical meanings. The *Momuhuto* ceremony, for instance, that symbolizes self-purification and the transition to adulthood, while the various stages of rituals emphasize values of sacrifice, patience and obedience. The involvement of multiple participants in the ceremonies depicts the importance of togetherness and respect for ancestral traditions.

The social constructions reflected in the story highlights the critical role of traditional leaders and village elders in guiding and overseeing these ceremonies. Their authority represents the preservations of cultural knowledge and ensures the norms in society, specifically concerning women's chastity and moral conduct are maintained. It also depicts the consequences of failing to adhere these customs, showing the social impact of such violations and processes of restoration and forgiveness within the community. This study also offers broader implications for the field of literary sociology. The rich

symbolism in *Momuhuto* gives insight into how literature can illustrate and preserve cultural identity while also criticizing social norms. These findings offer opportunities for further studies. For example, future studies can compare the use of traditional symbols in *Momuhuto* with those in other regional or cultural literary works to explore commonalities and differences in how cultural identity and social norms are represented through literary works. The comparative analyses could deepen our understanding of how literary works serve as both a reflection of society and a tool for cultural preservation and transformation.

Additionally, the study suggests the potential for assessing how traditional customs, as reflected in the literary works, evolve in response to modern social changes. By exploring these issues, researchers can gain further perspectives into how cultural symbols continue to influence identity and social constructions in contemporary times. In this way, *Momuhuto* not only enriches the understanding of cultural traditions in Gorontalo but also serves as insightful case study for examining the broader role of literature in shaping and reflecting social realities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express the gratitude and heartfelt thanks to both Professors, Sri Harti Widyastuti and Wiyatmi of *Literature Study and Learning* course subject from Yogyakarta State University for their valuable guidance and support throughout this study. We also express our sincere appreciation to the Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) and the Indonesian Education Scholarship (BPI) of Higher Education Financing Center (BPPT) Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of Indonesia for their financial support, which made authors' doctoral studies possible. The assistance and encouragement from all participants for this article.

DECLARATION

Author contribution: The first author and second author are responsible for this article. The first author was responsible for translating and constructing the idea, while the second author provided data analysis and template formatting. Both the third and fourth authors were responsible for guidance, advice, and assistance during the writing process.

Funding statement: This research was entirely funded by the authors of this article.

Conflict of interest: All of the authors declare no conflict of interest related to the manuscript.

Additional information: No additional information is provided for this article.

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