

Integration of Social Interaction and Psychological Needs: A Maslow-Based Analytical Model for Children's Literature

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Abstract

This study aims to develop an integrative analytical model that connects social interaction and psychological needs in children's literature using the framework of Abraham Maslow. While previous studies have examined social relations and psychological development separately, limited attention has been given to how these dimensions interact systematically within narrative structures. This research employs a qualitative interpretive approach combined with cross-case analysis of ten contemporary Indonesian children's novels by Sherina Salsabila. Data were collected through close reading and document analysis, and analyzed through coding relational domains (interpersonal, familial, and environmental) and mapping them onto hierarchical psychological needs. The findings reveal consistent patterns across texts. Interpersonal relations are primarily associated with belongingness needs, particularly through peer interaction and social acceptance. Familial relations are predominantly linked to safety needs, reflecting emotional support and parental roles. Meanwhile, environmental interactions correspond to higher-level needs, including esteem and self-actualization, especially in contexts involving aspiration, community participation, and symbolic engagement with nature. These patterns demonstrate that social interaction in children's literature functions as a structured mechanism for fulfilling and negotiating psychological needs. This study concludes that children's narratives serve not only as representations of social reality but also as frameworks of psychological development. The proposed integrative model contributes theoretically by linking relational structures to psychological needs and offers a transferable analytical framework for future research. The findings highlight the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding children's literature across cultural contexts.

Keyword: children's literature; social interaction; psychological needs; maslow; cross-case analysis

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature has long been recognized as a significant medium for representing social experience and shaping children's understanding of the world. Through narrative structures, characters, and conflicts, literary texts construct complex depictions of interpersonal

relationships, family dynamics, and broader social interactions that mirror children's everyday realities. Previous studies have emphasized the role of children's literature in conveying moral values, social norms, and emotional development, particularly through themes of friendship, empathy, and familial bonding (Nikolajeva, 2014; Stephens, 2010). In this sense, children's narratives function not only as entertainment but also as a formative space where social meaning and identity are negotiated. This perspective is further supported by Nurhayati (2016), who argues that realistic fiction in children's literature particularly in the works of Sherina Salsabila reflects children's lived experiences through everyday social interactions, thereby reinforcing the relevance of narrative as a medium for understanding social reality.

At the same time, psychological approaches have increasingly been employed to examine children's developmental processes as represented in literary texts. Among these, the framework proposed by Abraham Maslow has been widely used to understand human motivation and the hierarchical structure of needs, ranging from basic physiological requirements to self-actualization (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1970). Within the context of childhood development, this framework provides a useful lens for analyzing how individuals seek safety, belongingness, esteem, and personal growth. Several studies have applied Maslow's theory to literary works to interpret character motivation and emotional development (Taormina & Gao, 2013; Wahyuni, 2020). However, such applications tend to remain general and often focus on individual characters rather than systematically examining the relational structures embedded within the narrative.

Despite the growing body of research on both social interaction and psychological development in children's literature, these two strands of scholarship remain largely disconnected. Studies focusing on social relations typically emphasize descriptive categories such as peer interaction, family roles, and community engagement, without sufficiently exploring their psychological implications (Nodelman, 2008; Trites, 2018). Conversely, psychologically oriented analyses often employ theoretical frameworks without grounding them in the structural dynamics of social interaction within the text. As a result, social interaction and psychological needs are frequently treated as separate analytical domains, leading to a fragmented understanding of how children's literature represents developmental processes.

More critically, there is a lack of an integrative analytical model that systematically links patterns of social interaction in children's narratives with hierarchical psychological needs. Existing studies have not adequately demonstrated how interpersonal, familial, and environmental relations function as mechanisms through which psychological needs are fulfilled, negotiated, or disrupted. This limitation restricts the explanatory power of current approaches and overlooks the dynamic interplay between social structures and psychological development in literary representation.

Addressing this gap, the present study aims to develop an integrative model that connects social interaction and psychological needs in children's literature using a Maslowian framework. By employing a cross-case analysis of contemporary Indonesian children's novels, this study seeks to map relational domains interpersonal, familial, and environmental onto the hierarchical structure of human needs. In doing so, this research not only advances interdisciplinary dialogue between literary studies and psychology but also offers a conceptual framework that can be applied to diverse cultural contexts. Ultimately, this study positions

children's literature as a critical site where social interaction and psychological development are deeply intertwined, providing new insights into the function of narrative in shaping children's experiences and identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on children's literature has consistently highlighted its role as a medium for representing social interaction and transmitting cultural values. Scholars have emphasized that narratives for children are not neutral, but are constructed spaces where social norms, relationships, and identities are negotiated (Nodelman, 2008; Nikolajeva, 2014). In particular, interpersonal relationships such as friendship, empathy, and conflict have been identified as central elements in shaping children's understanding of social belonging and moral development (Stephens, 2010). These studies demonstrate that children's literature functions as a reflection of social reality, yet they often remain descriptive in nature and do not fully explore the underlying psychological dimensions of these interactions.

Beyond interpersonal relations, family dynamics have also received significant attention in the study of children's narratives. The family is frequently portrayed as the primary site of emotional development, where values, discipline, and identity are formed (Trites, 2018). Research has shown that representations of parental authority, sibling relationships, and extended family structures play a crucial role in constructing children's emotional worlds and behavioral patterns (Coats, 2013). However, while these studies acknowledge the importance of family relationships, they tend to focus on thematic interpretation rather than examining how these relational structures function in fulfilling psychological needs.

In addition to social and familial dimensions, environmental interactions such as children's engagement with nature, animals, and broader communities have been explored as important aspects of narrative development. These interactions are often associated with imagination, exploration, and learning processes that contribute to children's cognitive and emotional growth (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2013). Studies have also suggested that environmental settings in children's literature can serve as symbolic spaces where personal aspirations and identity formation are articulated (Bland, 2018). Nevertheless, existing research has not systematically linked these environmental interactions to broader frameworks of psychological development.

From a psychological perspective, the theory developed by Abraham Maslow remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding human motivation and development. Maslow conceptualizes human needs as a hierarchical structure, ranging from physiological needs to safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1970). This framework has been widely applied in various disciplines, including education, psychology, and organizational studies, to explain how individuals strive to fulfill different levels of needs (Taormina & Gao, 2013). In literary studies, Maslow's theory has been used to analyze character motivation and emotional progression, offering insights into how fictional characters reflect human psychological processes (Wahyuni, 2020). However, such applications often focus on individual characters rather than examining relational systems within narratives.

More recent scholarship has attempted to bridge literature and psychology through interdisciplinary approaches. For instance, cognitive and developmental perspectives have

been used to analyze how children process narratives and construct meaning from literary texts (Nikolajeva, 2014; Zunshine, 2006). These approaches highlight the importance of mental processes such as empathy, theory of mind, and emotional engagement in reading experiences. While these studies provide valuable insights into the reader's perspective, they tend to overlook the structural role of social interaction within the text itself as a mechanism for psychological development.

Methodologically, cross-case analysis has been employed in literary studies to identify patterns across multiple texts and to generate broader theoretical insights (Yin, 2018). This approach allows researchers to move beyond single-text interpretation and develop comparative frameworks that capture recurring themes and structures. In the context of children's literature, cross-case analysis can be particularly useful in identifying consistent patterns of social interaction and their implications for psychological development. However, the integration of such methodological approaches with psychological theories remains limited.

together, the existing body of literature reveals three main limitations. First, studies on social interaction in children's literature tend to remain descriptive and lack psychological depth. Second, applications of Maslow's theory in literary analysis are often generalized and not systematically linked to relational structures within the text. Third, there is a lack of methodological integration that combines cross-case analysis with psychological frameworks to produce a coherent analytical model. These limitations underscore the need for an integrative approach that connects social interaction, psychological needs, and narrative structure within a unified framework.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach with cross-case analysis to examine the relationship between social interaction and psychological needs in children's literature. Qualitative design is appropriate for interpreting narrative meaning and relational structures within texts (Creswell & Poth, 2018), while cross-case analysis enables the identification of recurring patterns across multiple works (Yin, 2018). The analysis is guided by the framework of Abraham Maslow.

The data consist of ten contemporary Indonesian children's novels by Sherina Salsabila, selected through purposive sampling based on the presence of diverse social interactions (interpersonal, familial, and environmental) and their relevance to children's experiences. The variation across texts supports comparative analysis and model development. Data were collected through close reading and document analysis. Relevant textual excerpts representing social interactions were identified, extracted, and organized into a coding matrix. This approach allows systematic examination of textual data and is widely used in qualitative research (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis was conducted in three stages: (1) coding relational categories (interpersonal, familial, environmental), (2) mapping these categories onto psychological needs (safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization), and (3) cross-case comparison to identify patterns and construct an integrative model. This process follows qualitative analysis procedures emphasizing categorization and pattern identification (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

RESULTS

The results of this study are presented based on a cross-case analysis of ten selected children's novels. The analysis focuses on three relational domains—interpersonal, familial, and environmental and their corresponding psychological needs derived from Abraham Maslow. The findings are summarized in Table 1, which illustrates the dominant relational patterns and associated psychological needs identified in each novel.

Table 1. Cross-Case Mapping of Social Interaction and Psychological Needs in Children's Novels

No	Novel Code	Dominant Relational Domain	Key Relational Pattern	Associated Psychological Needs
1	PH	Interpersonal	Peer empathy and collective support	Belongingness
2	CS	Interpersonal & Environmental	Friendship and imaginative interaction	Belongingness, Self-actualization
3	MK	Familial	Strong parental control and guidance	Safety
4	LYD	Familial	Emotional bonding between child and parent	Safety, Belongingness
5	MD	Interpersonal	Personal reflection and peer interaction	Belongingness, Esteem
6	KPPK	Familial & Environmental	Extended family and community engagement	Safety, Esteem
7	BB	Familial	Sibling conflict and rivalry	Safety, Belongingness
8	CL	Environmental	Aspirational interaction with environment	Self-actualization
9	RB	Environmental	Social participation in community literacy	Esteem, Self-actualization
10	LU	Environmental	Symbolic interaction with animals and nature	Self-actualization

The table shows that interpersonal relations are primarily associated with belongingness needs, particularly through peer interaction and social acceptance. Familial relations are predominantly linked to safety needs, especially in contexts involving parental roles and emotional support. Meanwhile, environmental interactions tend to correspond with higher-level needs, including esteem and self-actualization, especially in narratives involving aspiration, community participation, and symbolic engagement with nature.

Across the dataset, variations in relational patterns indicate that each novel emphasizes different configurations of social interaction, which are consistently aligned with specific categories of psychological needs. These patterns form the basis for the integrative model developed in this study.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented in Table 1 demonstrate that social interactions in children's literature are systematically aligned with hierarchical psychological needs, supporting and extending the theoretical framework of Abraham Maslow. The cross-case mapping shows a consistent pattern in which different relational domains correspond to specific levels of psychological needs. This indicates that social interaction in children's narratives functions not

merely as a representational element, but as a structured mechanism through which psychological needs are fulfilled and negotiated.

Interpersonal relations are predominantly associated with belongingness needs, as evidenced in several cases in Table 1. For instance, in PH (Petualangan Hati), peer empathy and collective support are directly linked to belongingness, while in MD (My Diary), peer interaction combined with personal reflection extends this need toward esteem. Similarly, CS (Cinderella & Snow White) demonstrates that interpersonal interaction, when combined with imaginative engagement, contributes to both belongingness and self-actualization. These findings reinforce previous research emphasizing the importance of peer relationships in children's development (Nikolajeva, 2014; Stephens, 2010), but further extend it by showing that such interactions operate as functional mechanisms within narrative structures. In this context, belongingness emerges as a dynamic process shaped through cooperation, empathy, and even conflict.

Familial relations, as shown in Table 1, are consistently linked to safety needs, particularly in MK (Mami Kepo), LYD (Love You Dad), and BB (Big Brother). In MK, strong parental control reflects the role of family in establishing psychological stability, while in LYD, emotional bonding between child and parent simultaneously fulfills safety and belongingness needs. In contrast, BB highlights sibling conflict and rivalry, which, although situated within the familial domain, introduces tension that potentially disrupts the sense of security. These variations indicate that family functions both as a stabilizing and destabilizing force, thereby complicating the traditional view of family as solely supportive (Trites, 2018; Coats, 2013). This finding suggests that children's literature represents family not only as a source of protection but also as a site of emotional negotiation.

Environmental relations are strongly associated with higher-level needs, particularly esteem and self-actualization. This pattern is clearly visible in CL (Cita-Cita Langit), RB (Rumah Baca), and LU (Legenda Ular Putih). In CL, aspirational interaction with the environment reflects self-actualization, while RB demonstrates how participation in community literacy contributes to both esteem and self-actualization. Similarly, LU highlights symbolic interaction with animals and nature as a pathway to self-actualization. These findings align with previous studies on the role of environment in fostering creativity and development (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2013; Bland, 2018), but extend them by demonstrating that environmental engagement functions as a narrative mechanism for higher-order psychological fulfillment.

The integrative pattern observed across Table 1 reveals a structured relationship between relational domains and psychological needs: interpersonal relations correspond to belongingness, familial relations to safety, and environmental relations to esteem and self-actualization. This consistent alignment across multiple cases (PH, CS, MK, LYD, MD, KPPK, BB, CL, RB, LU) forms the basis of the integrative model proposed in this study. Unlike previous studies that apply Maslow's theory at the level of individual characters (Taormina & Gao, 2013; Wahyuni, 2020), this research demonstrates that psychological needs can be systematically mapped onto relational structures within narratives. This shift from character-based analysis to structure-based analysis represents a significant methodological contribution.

Furthermore, the use of cross-case analysis strengthens the robustness of these findings by identifying recurring patterns across multiple texts (Yin, 2018). The consistency of these

patterns suggests that the proposed model is not limited to individual narratives but has broader applicability in the analysis of children's literature. However, variations across cases such as the dual role of family in LYD and BB or the combined relational domains in CS and KPPK also indicate that psychological needs are not fulfilled in isolation but through overlapping relational dynamics.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The dataset is limited to selected Indonesian children's novels, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the analysis focuses on textual structures and does not incorporate reader-response perspectives. Future research could expand this model by applying it to cross-cultural datasets or integrating reader-based approaches to examine how these relational and psychological patterns are interpreted by audiences.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that social interactions in children's literature are systematically connected to hierarchical psychological needs, as conceptualized in the framework of Abraham Maslow. By integrating interpersonal, familial, and environmental relational domains with levels of psychological needs, this research moves beyond descriptive literary analysis toward a more structured and theoretically grounded interpretation. The findings confirm that interpersonal relations primarily facilitate belongingness, familial relations provide the foundation for safety and emotional regulation, and environmental interactions contribute to higher-level needs such as esteem and self-actualization.

The primary contribution of this study lies in the development of an integrative analytical model that links social interaction and psychological needs within narrative structures. This model offers a novel perspective by operationalizing psychological theory at the structural level of literary analysis rather than limiting it to character-based interpretation. As such, it provides a transferable framework that can be applied to a wide range of children's literary texts across different cultural contexts.

However, this study is not without limitations. The analysis is confined to a selected corpus of contemporary Indonesian children's novels, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other literary traditions. Additionally, the study focuses solely on textual analysis and does not incorporate reader-response perspectives, which could provide further insight into how psychological meanings are interpreted by audiences.

Future research is recommended to expand the scope of this model by including comparative cross-cultural studies, as well as integrating reader-response approaches to examine how children engage with and interpret social and psychological dimensions in literary texts. Further methodological refinement could also explore the integration of additional psychological frameworks to complement and extend the Maslowian approach. Such developments would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of children's literature as a dynamic space where social interaction and psychological development intersect.

In conclusion, this study underscores the value of interdisciplinary approaches in literary research and highlights the importance of viewing children's narratives not only as representations of social reality but also as structured mechanisms of psychological meaning-making.

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