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ELEMENTARY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF DIGITAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: STORY ENGAGEMENT, MULTIMODAL MEANING-MAKING, AND READER RESPONSE

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Abstract

This study explored how elementary school students experienced selected forms of digital children's literature. A qualitative case study was conducted with ten fourth-grade students aged 9–11 at a public Islamic elementary school (madrasah) in Bone, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The case focused on students' engagement with Nilam Si Tabib on Let's Read and their individual choices between two YouTube stories: Malin Kundang and Pohon yang Sombong. Participants were purposively selected based on their willingness to participate and reading ability as assessed by their teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observations and analyzed thematically using an approach informed by three initial domains while allowing codes and subthemes to be developed from the data. The findings were organized into three dimensions: story engagement, multimodal meaning-making, and reader response. Participants described curiosity about story development and varied willingness to follow stories, while observations showed differences in their attention to written text, illustrations, and audiovisual features. Students reported that illustrations could support their understanding, and their responses included emotional reactions, imaginative involvement, and reflections on narrative values. Some participants also reported that printed storybooks made story plots easier to understand. These findings provide a context-specific account of how students experienced selected digital stories, rather than evidence of a general transition from print to digital reading or of improved comprehension. The study suggests that digital and printed children's literature may be considered complementary resources for literacy experiences.

Keywords: Digital Children's Literature; Multimodal Meaning-Making; Reader Response; Story Engagement; Elementary School Students.
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INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have expanded the formats through which children encounter literary narratives, including digital picturebooks and audiovisual stories presented on online platforms (Farrar et al., 2024; Junyanti & Umaya, 2024; Serafini & Pantaleo, 2022). However, these formats should not be treated as equivalent forms of reading (Farrar et al., 2024). Digital picturebooks, such as those accessed through reading applications, invite children to engage with written language and illustrations, whereas audiovisual stories on platforms such as YouTube foreground spoken narration, sound, moving images, and animation (Kurniawan et al., 2024; Maylita et al., 2024). Although printed children's picturebooks also combine verbal and visual modes, digital formats may alter the configuration, salience, and temporal coordination of these modes, as well as the ways children engage with a story (Farrar et al., 2024; Serafini & Pantaleo, 2022). In this study, digital children's literature refers operationally to children's literary narratives accessed through digital platforms, specifically illustrated digital stories on Let's Read and audiovisual story videos on YouTube, including Riri and Indonesian Fairy Tales (Pradhan & Dey, 2025). These formats are grouped not because they offer identical reading experiences, but because they provide digitally mediated encounters with children's narratives through which different forms of engagement and meaning-making can be examined (Farrar et al., 2024; Serafini & Pantaleo, 2022). Accordingly, rather than assuming a general transition from print to digital reading, this study focuses on how elementary school students experience selected digital children's stories, particularly in terms of story engagement, multimodal meaning-making, and reader response (Hunt, 2005; Nikolajeva, 2014).

In elementary education, children's literature provides opportunities for language development, imagination, empathy, character formation, and emotional engagement (Farrar et al., 2024; Hafizah et al., 2022; Nikolajeva, 2014; Nurjamana et al., 2025). Beyond entertainment, literary narratives can support children's literacy development and engagement with social and moral values (Hunt, 2005; Nurjamana et al., 2025). However, the ways children encounter and make meaning from literary narratives may vary according to the representational and navigational features of the medium (Gacumo et al., 2026; Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). Printed picturebooks, for example, can integrate written language, illustrations, and complex visual relationships (Al Farisi et al., 2025; Kaliakatsou & Skounaki, 2026; Mckay, 2025), while digital story formats may additionally incorporate spoken narration, sound, animation, and interactive navigation (Bus et al., 2023; Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). These features do not necessarily make digital stories more interactive or effective than printed books; rather, they offer different perceptual and navigational affordances for presenting narrative information and directing readers' attention (Gacumo et al., 2026; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). Depending on how these features are designed and used, they may support children's interpretation of characters and events or

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introduce competing stimuli and cognitive load that affect how children attend to and make sense of a story (Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020).

Research on digital storytelling has explored the potential of visual, auditory, and animated features to support children's engagement with narratives and their interpretation of story events (Bus et al., 2023; Gacumo et al., 2026). Digital reading applications such as Let's Read and audiovisual story channels on YouTube provide different opportunities for children to encounter literary narratives, combining, in varying configurations, written language, illustrations, spoken narration, sound, and moving images (Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020; Moon, 2025; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the presence of these features should not be equated with increased engagement or deeper literary understanding (Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). Their contribution may depend on factors such as the narrative coherence between story content and multimedia elements, the relevance of animation and sound (signaling/spatial contiguity), the design of interactive features (hotspots), and the socio-pedagogical context in which children engage with the story (Bus et al., 2023; Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022). When visual and auditory elements complement the narrative (parallelism or plaited-braid relationships), they may help sustain attention, clarify story events, and support emotional responses to characters (Al Farisi et al., 2025; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). Conversely, when these elements compete with the narrative or draw attention away from its language and sequence of events (seductive details/split-attention effect), they may encourage fragmented attention or a less sustained engagement with the story (Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022). This tension raises an important question about children's experiences of digital children's literature: how do students engage with stories presented through different digital formats, and how do they experience the visual, auditory, and narrative elements that shape their responses? (Gacumo et al., 2026; Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020; Nikolajeva, 2014). Addressing this question requires attention not only to the potential affordances of digital storytelling but also to how children themselves describe and demonstrate their multimodal meaning-making, embodied engagement, and reader responses within specific contexts.

Research on digital children's literature and technology-supported literacy in primary education has extensively addressed the development of digital learning media, the pedagogical integration of reading applications, and measurable literacy outcomes (Abni et al., 2024; Darusman, 2024; Istihari, 2024; Junyanti & Umaya, 2024). These empirical studies provide a valuable foundation for understanding the educational applications of digital media (Abni et al., 2024; Junyanti & Umaya, 2024). However, these studies do not, by themselves, establish how children qualitatively experience literary narratives as they navigate distinct digital story formats (Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). In particular, further attention is needed to understand how children's attentional allocation and story engagement relate to the ways they process and construct meaning from visual, verbal, auditory, and kinetic semiotic resources (Al Farisi et al., 2025; Gacumo et al., 2026). Moreover, critical gaps remain regarding

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how these multimodal encounters shape children's emotional resonance, imaginative evocation, and personal reader responses (Farrar et al., 2024; Gacumo et al., 2026; Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022; Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020). While frameworks in multimodal literacy and digital storytelling offer essential theoretical perspectives (Gacumo et al., 2026; Mckay, 2025), understanding these dimensions demands close examination of children's situated encounters within specific platform affordances and narrative designs (Moon, 2025; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020), rather than assuming that digital delivery inherently leads to uniform shifts in literary engagement or narrative interpretation (Müller-Brauers et al., 2020).

Against this background, the present study explores elementary school students' experiences of selected digital children's literature through an integrated analytical framework focusing on story engagement, multimodal meaning-making, and reader response (Gacumo et al., 2026; Mckay, 2025; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). Rather than treating these dimensions as isolated variables, the study investigates their dynamic interrelationships within students' accounts and observed interactions with digital stories (Bus et al., 2025) (Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). Here, story engagement refers to how students allocate attention, follow narrative trajectories, and manage narrative versus operative demands (Müller-Brauers et al., 2020); multimodal meaning-making concerns how they interpret intermodal relationships among verbal text, visual illustrations, movement, and auditory cues within a kineikonic ensemble (Al Farisi et al., 2025; Gacumo et al., 2026); and reader response encompasses their emotional, imaginative, and personal connections with characters and story events (Farrar et al., 2024; Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022). These complementary dimensions allow for an examination of whether digital story affordances,such as animated illustrations, spoken narration, and navigation controls, support narrative involvement or introduce competing stimuli that induce cognitive load (Bus et al., 2023). Drawing on qualitative interviews and observations of ten fourth-grade students at an elementary school in Bone, South Sulawesi, the study examines experiences with illustrated digital stories accessed through Let's Read (Bus et al., 2023) and audiovisual story videos on YouTube, including Riri and Indonesian Fairy Tales (Hafizah et al., 2022; Kurniawan et al., 2024; Sagita Krissandi et al., 2023). Its contribution lies in offering a contextually grounded account of how narrative engagement, multimodal meaning-making, and reader response intersect in children's localized encounters with digital story formats, without presuming a linear transition from print to digital reading or assuming that digital features automatically enhance literary engagement (Müller-Brauers et al., 2020).

Based on this background, this study aims to explore the transformation of children's literature reading experiences from print to digital texts for elementary school students. The research questions in this study are:

1. How do elementary school students experience selected digital children's literature?

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2. How do students engage with digital children's stories and make meaning from their narrative, visual, and auditory features?
3. What emotional, imaginative, and personal responses do students express when engaging with digital children's stories?.

METHODS

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore ten fourth-grade students' experiences of selected digital children's stories at MIN 3 Bone, a public Islamic elementary school in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Data were collected in May 2026. The participants were purposively selected based on their willingness to participate and their reading ability, as assessed by their teachers. They comprised five girls and five boys aged 9–11 years. The school provided internet access for teachers and students, and participants accessed the stories using mobile phones. Their prior experience with YouTube stories was generally high, whereas their familiarity with the *Let's Read* application varied. These differences were considered when interpreting their experiences. The case was bounded by the students' experiences with selected digital stories in this school context. The study aimed to develop an in-depth, context-specific understanding rather than statistical generalisation. The school granted permission for the study, and oral assent was obtained from the participating children. Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Prior digital-story use	Frequency
Subject 1	Male	Smartphone; YouTube animation	Daily
Subject 2	Female	Smartphone; YouTube and occasional e-books	Weekly
Subject 3	Female	Smartphone; YouTube animation	Daily
Subject 4	Male	Smartphone; YouTube animation	Daily
Subject 5	Male	Smartphone; YouTube and occasional e-books	Daily
Subject 6	Female	Smartphone; YouTube Shorts	Daily
Subject 7	Female	Smartphone; YouTube Shorts	Daily
Subject 8	Male	Smartphone; YouTube and occasional e-books	Weekly
Subject 9	Male	Smartphone; YouTube Shorts	Weekly
Subject 10	Female	Smartphone; YouTube Shorts	Daily

The sample size was considered in relation to the study's focused aim and context-specific case rather than statistical representativeness. The ten participants were purposively selected to provide accounts of their experiences with selected digital children's stories, and each

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contributed interview and observation data. This rationale is consistent with the concept of information power, which considers the relevance of the sample to the study aim, the specificity of the sample, the use of established theoretical concepts, the quality of the data, and the analytical approach (Malterud et al., 2016). Given the participants' existing familiarity with digital stories, the findings should be interpreted within this context and should not be assumed to represent children with different levels of prior exposure.

Data Collection

Data were collected through interviews, observations and exposure procedure. Data collection involved two sessions, lasting approximately 10 minutes and 15 minutes, respectively. Students accessed the stories individually using mobile phones. All participants accessed *Nilam Si Tabib* through the *Let's Read* application. They also selected one of two YouTube stories according to their preferences: *Malin Kundang* from the *Riri Cerita Anak Interaktif* channel or *Pohon yang Sombong* from the *Indonesian Fairy Tales channel*. Thus, while all participants encountered the same Let's Read story, their YouTube exposure varied according to their individual choices. At the beginning of the activity, the researcher provided initial instructions and then allowed students to interact with the stories independently. Observations focused on students' attention to completing the stories, interest in the narratives and other stories, responses to the application, emotional reactions in relation to story content, enthusiasm, and overall engagement. These observations provided contextual information for interpreting students' interview accounts. Because students selected their own YouTube stories, their experiences were interpreted in relation to the particular stories and platforms they encountered, rather than as directly equivalent responses to identical materials.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences of digital children's stories. The interview guide was informed by three initial analytical dimensions: story engagement, multimodal meaning-making, and reader response. Story engagement concerned students' interest in stories, attention to narrative events, willingness to follow stories to completion, and curiosity about other stories. Multimodal meaning-making focused on students' perceptions of how illustrations, animation, and other audiovisual elements contributed to their experience of a story. Reader response addressed students' emotional reactions, preferences for particular characters, personal interpretations, and imaginative connections with story events.

The interview guide included questions about students' previous experiences with digital stories, preferred story types and platforms, reasons for continuing to read or watch a story, perceptions of illustrations and animation, emotional responses, favourite characters, and imaginative involvement in the narrative. Questions were phrased in age-appropriate Indonesian, with adjustments to accommodate local speech patterns and dialectal expressions. The three analytical dimensions informed the development of the interview questions but were

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not treated as predetermined findings. Students were encouraged to describe their experiences in their own words. Because the interpretation of children's responses may be influenced by adult perspectives and assumptions about digital media, the findings were interpreted in relation to the students' own accounts and the available observation records. The researcher's interpretations were considered alongside the contextual information provided by the school teacher during the translation of students' responses.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using a theory-informed thematic approach. Story engagement, multimodal meaning-making, and reader response were established before the analysis, drawing on the relevant literature and the interview guide, and served as initial analytical dimensions. These dimensions provided an organising framework for examining students' experiences without restricting the analysis to predetermined categories. The analysis involved familiarisation with the interview responses and observation records, identification and coding of relevant data segments, examination of relationships among codes, and the development and review of more specific patterns within the three analytical dimensions. For example, within story engagement, the analysis examined students' accounts of continuing to follow a story, their curiosity about story endings or additional stories, and the aspects of a story they associated with their interest. Within multimodal meaning-making, attention was given to students' descriptions of illustrations, animation, and audiovisual elements. Within reader response, the analysis considered students' emotional reactions, character preferences, and imaginative connections with the narratives. These examples illustrate the intended analytical focus; the final subthemes were retained only where supported by the data.

Interview responses and observation records were considered together to develop a contextualised interpretation of students' experiences. The two sources were treated as complementary forms of evidence rather than as requiring complete agreement. Where students' verbal accounts differed from, or were not fully reflected in, their observed responses, such differences were considered in relation to the available evidence. The findings were interpreted in relation to the participating students, the selected stories, the platforms they accessed, and the conditions of data collection. The analysis was intended to understand how students experienced particular forms of digital storytelling, rather than to establish causal effects or demonstrate the general superiority of digital stories over printed literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explores elementary school students' experiences enjoying digital children's literature through several digital platforms, namely the *Let's Read* app, the *Riri Cerita Anak Interaktif* YouTube channel, and the *Indonesian Fairy Tales* YouTube channel. Based on interviews and observations, it was found that the transformation of children's literature from print to

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digital not only changes the medium of storytelling but also changes how students enjoy, understand, and respond to stories. Students no longer simply read text but also enjoy the visual, audio, and animation elements contained in digital children's literature. This multimodal experience influences students' engagement with the story and forms a different emotional response than reading a printed book.

Results

The analysis examined participants' experiences across three initial analytical domains: story engagement, multimodal meaning-making, and reader response. These domains served as sensitizing concepts informed by the study's conceptual framework, while the subthemes were refined through analysis of the interview and observation data. Table 2 presents the resulting coding framework, including the subthemes, illustrative evidence, and the number of participants whose data supported each subtheme. Participant counts are reported to indicate the distribution of patterns across the ten cases, rather than to quantify the importance of a theme. A contrasting account concerning printed storybooks is also presented where supported by the data.

Table 2. Analytical Domains, Subthemes, First-Order Codes, and Supporting Data

Domain	Subtheme	First-order codes	Source	Participants (n/10)
Story engagement	Sustained narrative attention	Watching until the end; continuing to follow the story	I, O	5/10
	Anticipation of story development	Wanting to see more; wanting to know the ending	I	6/10
	Interest in plot and characters	Finding the story exciting; liking particular characters	I	5/10
Multimodal meaning-making	Visual salience	Finding illustrations attractive; attending to visual details	I, O	7/10
	Perceived attentional appeal of motion and sound	Finding animation engaging; responding positively to audio	I, O	2/10
	Perceived support for following the story	Reporting that illustrations help explain the story	I	3/10
	Attention to written text and illustrations	Reading text while looking at illustrations; attending more to images than text	O	5/10
Reader response	Emotional responses	Reporting happiness or curiosity; laughing or smiling during a story	I, O	6/10

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Domain	Subtheme	First-order codes	Source	Participants (n/10)
	Relationship with characters	Liking characters because of their actions or qualities	I	3/10
	Imaginative involvement	Imagining oneself inside the story	I	4/10

***Story Engagement*: Sustained Attention, Anticipation, and Interest in Digital Stories**

Participants described different levels of interest in following stories, particularly their curiosity about what would happen next and their tendency to finish a story once they began reading. Subject 2 reported consistently reading stories to the end and remaining curious about their continuation. Subject 5 similarly expressed a strong interest in discovering how stories ended. These accounts suggest that story engagement was reflected in participants' expressed willingness to continue following a narrative, rather than in a uniform pattern across all students.

Interview with Subject 2

Researcher : What do you usually do once you start reading a story?

Subject 2 : "I always finish a story once I start reading, without stopping halfway."

Researcher : What makes you want to continue reading?

Subject 2 : "I'm always curious about what happens next, especially when the pictures are good and the colors are bright."

Subject 2's account links sustained reading with curiosity about narrative development. Although the participant also mentioned illustrations, the central pattern here is the desire to discover what happens next, rather than the visual appeal of the story.

Interview with Subject 5

Researcher : What do you enjoy about reading stories?

Subject 5 : "I really like reading stories and am always curious to find out the ending or what happens next."

This account reinforces the role of anticipation in participants' descriptions of story engagement. However, the data also show variation. Subject 4 reported that they rarely read stories and generally preferred other activities, although colorful illustrations and an interesting storyline could sometimes prompt curiosity about what happened next. Subject 9 likewise reported that reading stories was not part of their usual daily routine. These accounts qualify the more enthusiastic responses and show that sustained interest in stories was not shared equally by all participants.

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Taken together, the interviews suggest that story engagement involved curiosity about narrative development and a willingness to continue reading, while participants differed in their reading habits and interest. These findings represent self-reported experiences and preferences; they do not establish a measured level of engagement or demonstrate that digital delivery caused greater interest.

Multimodal Meaning-Making: Attending to Visual, Written, and Audiovisual Modes

Participants described different ways of engaging with the modes through which digital stories were presented. Subject 2 connected interest in a story with its illustrations and colors, while Subject 10 expressed a preference for stories featuring animation, sound, and interactive features. These accounts reflect participants' perceptions of digital storytelling rather than evidence of objectively improved comprehension.

Interview with Subject 2

Researcher : What makes a story interesting to you?

Subject 2 : "I always finish a story once I start reading, especially when the pictures are good and the colors are bright."

Researcher : How do you find the story's plot when reading digitally or in print?

Subject 2 : "Even though I read stories on my phone or tablet almost every day, I feel that the plot is easier to understand when I read a printed book."

Subject 2's account highlights the perceived appeal of illustrations while also showing that digital reading was not necessarily considered easier to understand than print. This variation cautions against treating digital formats as uniformly advantageous.

Interview with Subject 10

Researcher : What do you enjoy about digital stories?

Subject 10 : "I really enjoy digital stories that have animation, sound, and interactive features."

This response illustrates the participant's preference for audiovisual and interactive features. However, the preference alone does not establish that these features improved comprehension or produced stronger engagement than printed stories.

Observations further distinguished the two digital contexts. During YouTube story viewing, students displayed observable responses such as laughing, smiling, and commenting on characters. During Let's Read, some students attended to both written text and illustrations, while others focused more on images than text. These observations indicate different patterns

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of engagement with audiovisual storytelling and illustrated digital text. The available evidence describes students' observed behavior and reported perceptions; it does not establish a causal effect of any particular mode on comprehension.

***Reader Response*: Emotional, Imaginative, and Moral Engagement**

Participants' responses to stories included emotional reactions, imaginative involvement, and reflections on the values conveyed by characters. These responses concerned how students related to narrative content and were analytically distinct from their attention to the modes of presentation discussed in the previous section.

Interview with Subject 10

Researcher : Which character in the story do you like best?

Subject 10 : "Malin Kundang."

Researcher : Why do you like that character?

Subject 10 : "Because the story is sad and makes me feel sorry for him."

Subject 10's response illustrates sympathy toward a character in a tragic narrative. The stated reason relates to the sadness of the story, suggesting that the participant's emotional response was associated with the narrative content. The excerpt does not, however, establish whether the response was shaped by the digital medium or whether the participant interpreted the story's moral message in a particular way. Imaginative involvement was expressed by Subject 7, who described sometimes feeling as though they were inside a story.

Interview with Subject 7

Researcher : Do you ever imagine yourself in the story?

Subject 7 : "Yes, sometimes it's like you're in the story."

This account illustrates imaginative involvement, in which the participant mentally places themselves within the story world. It differs from Subject 10's expression of sympathy: one concerns imagined participation, while the other concerns an emotional response to a character.

Moral interpretation also appeared in participants' broader accounts of reading. Subject 3 explained that they tried to imitate the good behavior of story characters in everyday life. Similarly, Subject 7 described children's stories as teaching positive values and said they tried to follow the good behavior of characters. These accounts indicate that some participants connected stories with values they considered relevant to their lives. However, they represent participants' reported interpretations and intentions, rather than independently observed

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evidence of changes in behavior. Taken together, the findings show variation in reader response, encompassing sympathy, imaginative involvement, and reported moral reflection. These responses should not be attributed solely to digital delivery, as the available data do not separate the influence of narrative content from that of the medium.

Overall, the findings reveal three related aspects of participants' experiences with digital children's literature: story engagement, multimodal meaning-making, and reader response. Participants described curiosity about narrative development and varying willingness to follow stories, attended to written text, illustrations, and audiovisual features in different ways, and expressed emotional, imaginative, and moral responses to story content. These experiences varied across participants and reflected both their individual reading habits and their responses to particular stories and modes of presentation. The findings describe participants' reported experiences and observed behaviors rather than establishing causal effects of digital media or superiority over print-based reading.

Discussion

The findings illustrate how ten fourth-grade students experienced selected formats of digital children's literature through written text, illustrations, and, in YouTube stories, moving images and sound (Venneker et al., 2025). Participants described illustrations as visually appealing, and some reported that images helped them follow or understand a story (Mckay, 2025). Observations also showed differences in how students attended to written text and illustrations in Let's Read and responded to audiovisual features during YouTube story viewing (Venneker et al., 2025). These findings suggest that children's experiences were shaped, in part, by how different modes were presented within the selected digital formats (Gacumo et al., 2026). This interpretation is consistent with research emphasizing the role of multimodal representation in children's meaning-making and engagement with digital texts (Al Farisi et al., 2025; Apriliyana, 2025; Bock, 2016; Farrar et al., 2024; Gündoğmuş, 2024; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020; Perera & Nilaweera, 2025; Serafini & Pantaleo, 2022; Swart et al., 2024). Rather than indicating a general transformation from print to digital reading, the findings highlight differences in the orchestration of modes and platform affordances across particular formats (Gacumo et al., 2026; Venneker et al., 2025). Printed picturebooks can also support multimodal meaning-making through the interaction of written language, illustrations, and visual sequencing (Al Farisi et al., 2025; Kaliakatsou & Skounaki, 2026). The selected digital formats, however, offered different configurations of these resources, including audiovisual presentation in YouTube stories (Venneker et al., 2025). In this situated case, digital children's literature can therefore be understood as one context in which children encounter stories through technology-mediated forms of representation, consistent with discussions of children's literature in relation to digital culture (Fitriyani et al., 2024; Junyanti & Umaya, 2024; Kurniawan et al., 2024; Pradhan & Dey, 2025; Venneker et al., 2025).

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Regarding story engagement, participants' accounts indicated variation in their curiosity about narrative development and their willingness to continue reading or viewing a story (Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022; Moon, 2025). Some participants described wanting to know what happened next or finishing a story once they had started, while others reported that reading stories was not part of their usual routine (Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022). These differences suggest that story engagement in this case was not uniform across participants (Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022; Moon, 2025). Curiosity about the ending and interest in characters were salient in some accounts, whereas illustrations, animation, and sound were mentioned as appealing features in others (Bus et al., 2023; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020; Venneker et al., 2025). For example, one participant associated continuing a story with curiosity about what would happen next, while another described moving images and sound as making a video less boring (Bus et al., 2023; Venneker et al., 2025). Such accounts suggest that narrative anticipation and perceived media features were associated with participants' expressed interest, rather than demonstrating that digital features caused engagement to increase (Müller-Brauers et al., 2020; Venneker et al., 2025). This interpretation is consistent with research examining engagement in digital storytelling and the potential role of interactive and multimodal features in children's reading experiences (Bus et al., 2023; Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022; Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020). Nevertheless, the present study does not establish that digital stories are more engaging than printed texts or that engagement necessarily leads to deeper comprehension. The use of digital platforms may also be familiar to children whose everyday activities include digital media, as discussed in previous research (Holmarsdottir et al., 2025; Junyanti & Umaya, 2024; Moon, 2025), but the current data do not establish that familiarity with digital habits caused the responses observed in this study.

The findings concerning students' attention to visual and audiovisual features reveal a tension in multimodal meaning-making (Al Farisi et al., 2025; Gacumo et al., 2026). On the one hand, illustrations, animation, and sound were described as appealing, and some students reported that images helped them follow a story (Gacumo et al., 2026; Mckay, 2025). On the other hand, observations during *Let's Read* showed that some students focused more on illustrations than on written text. These patterns may reflect productive multimodal meaning-making when visual information supports the narrative, but they may also raise questions about how much attention students allocate to written language (Al Farisi et al., 2025; Farrar et al., 2024; Gacumo et al., 2026; Mckay, 2025). The present study cannot determine whether students' attention to images displaced verbal processing or affected comprehension, as neither reading processes nor comprehension outcomes were measured directly. Nevertheless, this possibility is relevant to multimedia learning research, which suggests that the relationship between verbal and visual information matters. When visual and auditory features are coherent with the narrative, they may support the integration of information; when additional elements are irrelevant or distracting, they may impose extraneous cognitive demands (Bus et al., 2023;

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Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022; Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). Experimental evidence also indicates that animations with low relevance to story content can draw children's attention away from essential information and compromise comprehension (Bus et al., 2023; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). These findings underscore that the presence of multiple modes alone does not guarantee deeper meaning-making. Rather, the contribution of visual and audiovisual features depends on their relationship to the story and how readers attend to them. In the present study, the observations identify differences in students' attention, but they do not establish shallow processing or reduced textual comprehension. The findings therefore invite a more balanced interpretation of digital literacy experiences: multimodal presentation may offer additional ways to engage with a story, while close attention to written language remains an important aspect of meaning-making.

The findings on reader response show that participants' experiences of digital stories involved emotional, imaginative, and moral responses to narrative content. For example, Subject 10 expressed sympathy for Malin Kundang because the story was sad, while Subject 7 described sometimes imagining being inside a story. Other participants reported that stories conveyed positive values and that they tried to imitate characters' good behavior. These accounts illustrate different reader-response processes: emotional identification with a character, imaginative involvement in a story world, and personal interpretation of the values conveyed by a narrative (Efendi et al., 2026; Hafizah et al., 2022; Nikolajeva, 2014; Nurjamana et al., 2025; Rambe et al., 2025). Observations of students laughing, smiling, or commenting on characters during YouTube viewing further document their visible responses during story engagement. However, these behaviors do not establish the precise emotions experienced or demonstrate that animation or sound intensified them. The findings are therefore best interpreted as evidence of how participants responded to story content in digitally mediated contexts, rather than as evidence that digital delivery itself produced emotional connection (Gacumo et al., 2026; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020; Venneker et al., 2025). This interpretation aligns with reader-response perspectives that recognize readers' personal experiences and emotional interpretations as part of meaning-making (Farrar & Simpson, 2024; Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022; Nikolajeva, 2014; Serafini & Pantaleo, 2022). Previous studies have also examined children's engagement with digital storytelling and the role of multimedia presentation in narrative experiences (Bus et al., 2023; Colton & Lowien, 2025; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020; Rohmiasih et al., 2022; Serafini & Pantaleo, 2022; Utami et al., 2024; Veyis et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2025). The present study adds a context-specific account of the forms these responses took among the participating students, including sympathy for a character, imagined participation in a story, and reported reflection on moral values (Fitriyani et al., 2024; Junyanti & Umaya, 2024; Pradhan & Dey, 2025; Sagita Krissandi et al., 2023). Because the study did not systematically compare emotional responses across print and digital conditions, it cannot establish whether digital presentation changed the nature or intensity of those responses. Its contribution lies

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instead in documenting the varied ways these students interpreted and responded to stories encountered through selected digital formats.

Although participants expressed interest in digital stories, their accounts also revealed continued interest in printed storybooks. Five of the ten participants expressed interest in print: Subjects 1, 3, 6, and 7 explicitly preferred printed storybooks, while Subject 2 reported that story plots were easier to understand in print despite frequently reading stories on a phone. Participants referred to colorful illustrations, perceived ease of following the plot, and reading experiences in the school library. These accounts provide a counterpoint to participants' enthusiasm for audiovisual features in digital stories and show that preferences varied across individuals. This finding should not be interpreted as evidence of media replacement or population-level preference, as the study was not designed to compare print and digital reading systematically. Rather, it suggests that printed and digital formats may offer different perceived affordances within these participants' literary experiences (Anafiah, 2025; Farrar et al., 2024; Gacumo et al., 2026; Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020; Serafini & Pantaleo, 2022; Venneker et al., 2025).

This interpretation is consistent with research discussing the development of children's literature in digital formats (Junyanti & Umaya, 2024; Kurniawan et al., 2024; Muthoharoh & Prastyaningsih, 2020; Nisya & Sutrisna, 2024; Serafini & Pantaleo, 2022) and the use of digital platforms as resources for children's literacy and literary experiences (Holmarsdottir et al., 2025; Mahawarni & Suyatno, 2024; Mineri, 2022; Moon, 2025; Pradhan & Dey, 2025; Sun, 2023; Waryanti et al., 2021) (Mahawarni & Suyatno, 2024; Mineri, 2022; Waryanti et al., 2021). However, the availability of digital platforms does not establish that digital literature is superior to print (Maylita et al., 2024; Simanungkalit, 2025). The contribution of the present study is to document how interest in digital storytelling coexisted with appreciation of printed storybooks among the participating students.

The findings offer preliminary implications for elementary literacy instruction, particularly because some participants focused more on illustrations than written text, expressed interest in audiovisual features, and reported different preferences for print and digital stories. Teachers could use guided questions to direct attention to textual evidence and invite students to predict what happens next; discuss how illustrations, animation, and sound contribute to a story's meaning; and use reflective prompts to help students explain their emotional responses to characters and interpret narrative values (Derana & Huda, 2024; Efendi et al., 2026; Hafizah et al., 2022; Nikolajeva, 2014; Rambe et al., 2025; Tarigan, 2008). These strategies are proposed implications rather than demonstrated effects of the present study. They also connect with research suggesting that multimedia features may support meaning-making when relevant to the narrative but may distract attention when poorly integrated (Bus et al., 2023; Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020).

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Accordingly, printed and digital children's literature may be integrated as complementary resources, with the choice of format guided by learning objectives and the characteristics of each story rather than a general shift toward digital media (Kaliakatsou & Skounaki, 2026; Maylita et al., 2024; Simanungkalit, 2025). Previous reviews and meta-analyses have examined the potential of digital reading applications and the importance of designing multimedia features in relation to narrative content (Bus et al., 2023; Kucirkova & Kamola, 2022; Müller-Brauers et al., 2020). More broadly, research has discussed the design of digital storybooks and literacy in multimodal environments (Al Farisi et al., 2025; Bock, 2016; Nurjamana et al., 2025; Serafini & Pantaleo, 2022). In light of these findings, the proposed use of guided questioning, multimodal discussion, and reader-response reflection warrants further testing through intervention research. Given the single-school setting and the sample of ten students, the present study provides context-specific insights rather than evidence of the effectiveness of these teaching strategies.

Taken together, the findings show that the participating students' experiences of digital children's literature encompassed curiosity about story development, varied ways of attending to textual and visual information, and emotional, imaginative, and moral responses to narrative content. These dimensions were interconnected but varied across participants, alongside continued interest in printed storybooks. The study therefore contributes a context-specific account of how elementary students experience selected digital story formats, rather than evidence that digital media are superior to print or produce better literacy outcomes. Further research involving multiple settings and instructional interventions is needed to examine how different story formats and guided teaching practices relate to children's engagement, meaning-making, and reader response.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a context-specific account of how ten fourth-grade students experienced selected forms of digital children's literature through Let's Read and YouTube story videos. The findings were organized into three dimensions: story engagement, multimodal meaning-making, and reader response. Participants described varying levels of curiosity about story development and willingness to follow stories, while observations documented differences in their attention to written text, illustrations, and audiovisual features. Their responses also included emotional reactions, imaginative involvement, and reported reflections on narrative values. Although some participants perceived illustrations as helpful for following a story, others reported that printed storybooks made story plots easier to understand. These findings indicate that students' experiences varied across individuals and story formats. Rather than demonstrating a general transformation from print to digital reading, this study contributes a context-specific understanding of how story engagement, multimodal meaning-making, and

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reader response were expressed in students' experiences of selected digital stories. The findings also suggest that digital and printed children's literature may offer complementary reading experiences, although their comparative contributions to literacy development require further investigation.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The study involved ten students at a single school, all of whom had some experience with digital stories. Consequently, the findings offer context-specific insights and may not be transferable to other educational settings or groups of children without consideration of contextual differences. The study also did not include a systematically observed print-reading condition involving stories matched to those presented digitally. Furthermore, the materials differed in platform, narrative content, and presentation: all participants accessed Nilam Si Tabib through Let's Read, but each selected one of two YouTube stories. Therefore, differences in students' experiences cannot be attributed solely to the medium. The brief exposure period, the potential influence of novelty, the researcher's presence during observation, and the reliance on interviews and observed behaviors further constrain the interpretations that can be drawn. In addition, the study did not independently assess reading comprehension, story recall, or changes in literacy skills. Future research could address these limitations through within-participant comparisons of matched print and digital stories, repeated reading sessions, more detailed analyses of children's attention to and interaction with multimodal features, and the integration of comprehension and recall measures with qualitative interviews. Such research would provide a stronger basis for examining how different story formats relate to children's engagement, meaning-making, and reader response.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

AH was responsible for writing the manuscript, analyzing the data, and conducting the final editing. AW contributed to the development and preparation of the research instruments and data analysis. MM was responsible for developing the manuscript narrative and conducting the final editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work. All the writers, agreed to the final version of the paper and say there are no problems, with the way this study is being shared.

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