

*Lu Bolehin Mereka Baca Itu?*

# You Let Them *Read What?*

Indonesian Constructs of Innocence, as  
Examined Through Children's Literature  
Censorship

Literary Theory

Psychology

Politics

Child Studies



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# Abstract

Though the censorship of children's literature is a widely researched and discussed topic in the Global North, relatively little attention has been given to the topic in other countries. This paper examines the dominant reasons behind the censorship of children's literature in Indonesia, considering its unique religious and conservative cultural context in contrast to the Global North. It is also the first paper to document the current availability of children's books in the country's bookstores and school libraries. A qualitative analysis of the children's books recorded found that sexual content and violence do not seem to be stringently censored in stores and libraries. However, queer books are uniquely targeted and silenced, particularly in local bookstores.

This paper proposes an alternate model of how adults perceive innocence and children's literature in Indonesia. Whereas North American societies typically justify censorship through a model of childish innocence and adult corruption, Indonesian society categorizes certain topics like queerness as beyond adult corruption, resulting in censorship to protect the supposedly innocent society. As such, censorship for the sake of innocence in Indonesia is performed for two reasons: because adults perceive children as innocents, and because the government perceives society as innocents that must be protected from the supposedly corruptive nature of queerness. In all, this paper will challenge dominant theories of innocence and children's literature censorship by proposing alternate models to suit the South-East Asian context.

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# Introduction

*“The exposure of truth sometimes results in tragedy... However! No matter how tragic the truth may be, it would be an even greater tragedy to avert one's eyes from it.”*

— *Miles Edgeworth (Ace Attorney 1)*

## Children’s Literature Censorship: A Brief History

According to a 2025 report made by the American Library Association (ALA), 2452 unique titles were targets of censorship in the United States of America in 2024. Children’s literature remains one of the most contested genres regarding book bans, with ALA data showing that children’s books like *Captain Underpants* by Dav Pilkey and *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins were among the 100 most contested books between 2010-2019. Oftentimes, children’s books are contested for the inclusion of topics that are believed to be inappropriate for children, such as violence or sexuality.

Though the protection of a child’s supposed innocence may intuitively feel like a universal moral duty, it is a relatively recent concept that only emerged with the rise of the middle class in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. As Philippe Ariès argues in his 1960 work *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* [Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life], prior to the rise of the middle class, most children, like adults, were part of the labor force. As such, there was a smaller distinction between children and adults. Once the middle class began to grow and children’s participation in the labor force became less necessary, middle-class children began receiving formal education. Because of this, children were progressively seen as more innocent because they had yet to complete their education and participate in the workforce. This created a clearer separation between the supposedly innocent child and the supposedly corrupt adult.

As a result, the separation between children’s and adults’ literature grew more distinct, leading to a “moral preoccupation” with the content of children’s books by publishers and authors. This led to a period between 1900 and 1965 where most publishers exclusively published heavily sanitized children’s books with moral lessons. It was only

after the Second World War when contested topics like romance, sex, and violence began to reemerge in children's and young adult literature. It is believed that the rise of the "problem novel," which often discussed such topics, was a result of the Second World War making clear that such topics were present in children's lives (MacLeod, 1983).

Calls for the censorship of children's literature have persisted until today, especially with the rising inclusion of queer topics into children's books. Though conservative groups are often spotlighted for the censorship of queer topics in children's books, liberal groups also often advocate for the supposedly progressive censorship of racist and sexist texts. Even if the call for censorship from both groups may seem distinct, their actions are deeply rooted in the will to shape the social morality of the children consuming books (MacLeod, 1983).

## The Social Context of Indonesia

### **Religious Conservatism in Indonesia**

The most dominant religion in Indonesia is Islam, with 87% of the population identifying as Muslim according to a 2023 report by Pew Research Center. Though Indonesia has been a secular country since its independence in 1945, religion still plays a relatively strong role in society. One example of religion's influence in Indonesia is in determining who can and cannot access basic government services. To receive a national ID card, Indonesian citizens must identify with one of the 6 officially recognized religions (Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism), or otherwise risk not being able to access a variety of necessities, including employment (Stirling, 2024).

Scholars suggest that Islamic organizations in Indonesia were once less conservative. However, this shifted when the authoritarian New Order regime in Indonesia fell in 1998. Once the authoritarian leader Suharto resigned, experts note that Indonesian Muslims took a "conservative turn", characterized by a "[rejection of] all modern, liberal, or progressive interpretations of Islamic teachings" in favor of established social

doctrines (Zulfadli, 2024). This shift likely occurred because of the New Order's failure to improve the quality of life and welfare of its citizens, a displeasure which ultimately culminated in riots that left 1,200 dead in May 1998 and the resignation of Suharto (Utama, 2023).

As Indonesia shifted towards a democratic model of governance following the fall of the New Order, many local conservative Muslim groups began to increase in influence, leading to an overall shift towards conservatism in the country. Furthermore, other religious groups in Indonesia, like Christianity and Catholicism, remain largely conservative in comparison to countries in the Global North. Though conservatism in other religious groups in Indonesia has not been officially documented by scholars, many Christians and Catholics in Indonesia adopt a conservative perspective on issues like abortion and queer rights.

### **Collectivism and Nationalism in Indonesia**

Like most Asians, Indonesians place a large emphasis on collectivism and group harmony, even at the cost of their freedom of speech. Surveys found that 67% of Indonesians think that harmony is more important than speaking out on one's opinion. Indonesians also display a very collectivist brand of nationalism, with 90% of surveyed Indonesians believing that supporting Indonesia while others criticize it is incredibly important to national identity. This was the highest percentage amongst all the Southeast Asian countries in the survey (Pew Research Center, 2023). In essence, supporting the country and its culture is seen as incredibly important to national identity, even if an individual personally disagrees.

Religion, and by extension conservatism, is also a particularly important part of national identity in Indonesia. This is most clearly suggested by the first principle of *Pancasila*, the foundational philosophy in Indonesia: "Belief in the One and Only God" ("*Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa*", translation mine). This is also reflected in the Pew Research Center survey, where 81% of Indonesians believe that being part of the dominant religion, Islam, is a necessary part of being Indonesian.

As such, due to the importance of religion to national identity and an unwillingness to speak out against dominant societal beliefs, the Indonesian government and society has remained largely conservative. This results in an absence of more progressive ideas in the country, especially in relation to queerness and sex.

### **Queerness and Indonesia**

Queerness remains a contentious topic in Indonesia. Queer men are frequently victims of police raids justified under Indonesia's anti-pornography laws, with raids happening as recently as May 2025 (Amnesty International, 2025). Furthermore, the Indonesian Commission for Broadcasting (*Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia*) has also released official bans against the broadcasting of "men who act like women" ("*pria yang kewanitaan*", translation mine, 2016). However, despite the overwhelmingly homophobic atmosphere of Indonesia and the number of laws that seek to target the queer community, the government has not officially implemented any laws in the country that specifically reference the LGBTQ+ community by name.

Queerness is rarely brought up officially or politically in Indonesia. Though some low-ranking politicians will make homophobic statements to garner political support, this is rarely done by established politicians who have significant influence on legislation and policy. Aceh is the only province in Indonesia that has laws that explicitly ban queerness and publicly persecutes individuals for their queerness. Though there have been multiple attempts at passing bills that explicitly criminalize queerness at a national level, all these bills have failed.

The topic seems to remain unspoken in Indonesian society: despite roughly 90% of Indonesians surveyed by Pew Research Center opposing the legalization of gay marriage, the country seems to be largely silent about their homophobia in public. When gay men are arrested for having "sex parties", the police refuse to mention the individuals' queerness, instead citing their breach of pornography laws as a reason for arrest (Amnesty International, 2025). Similarly, when attempting to reduce the number of gay-presenting men on television, a ban is placed on "men who act like women", rather than specifically naming gay men or trans people. Though in other countries

this could be done to prevent discrimination lawsuits, such a motivation would not apply in Indonesia, where there are no laws protecting individuals from discrimination on the basis of sexuality. Thus, discussions surrounding queerness have been socially censored by both governmental and societal forces, regardless of whether the discussions are supportive or homophobic, and despite the absence of government legislation banning discussions of queerness.

## Censorship in Indonesia

In three separate Indonesian articles about the censorship of children's literature, censorship is described as "*pengawasan isi konten*" (Tribunnews, 2019; Jam Berita, 2019; Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia, 2015). This definition can be roughly translated to "the supervision of content," though the word "pengawasan" (supervision) typically suggests that the act is done in a protective manner for the greater good, such as a parent supervising a child (translation mine). In contrast to this relatively positive definition, the Oxford English Dictionary defines censorship as "to examine a book ... in order to ... suppress ... material deemed to be obscene, blasphemous, [or] politically unacceptable...". Evidently, within the Indonesian social context, censorship carries a connotation that is more positive than in the Global North.

The three major pillars driving Indonesian censorship seem to be religious conservatism, collectivism, and nationalism. This is made clear through various bills that have been passed in the country regarding the role of books in society. For example, in a bill about libraries passed in 2007, the first preambulatory clause states that the role of libraries is to develop the potential of the nation by making individuals believing and pious towards God, as well as to support the implementation of national education ("*...perpustakaan sebagai wahana belajar sepanjang hayat mengembangkan potensi masyarakat agar menjadi manusia yang beriman dan bertakwa kepada Tuhan Yang Maha Esa, berakhlak mulia, sehat, berilmu, cakap, kreatif, mandiri, dan ... mendukung penyelenggaraan pendidikan nasional*", translation mine, UU No. 43, 2007). Another bill, passed in 2017, suggests similar nationalist ideas. It states in its 4<sup>th</sup> clause that the role of books is to strengthen

Indonesians' feelings of love for their country so that their national identity and character can be developed ("*...menumbuhkan dan memperkuat rasa cinta tanah air serta membangun jati diri dan karakter bangsa melalui pembinaan Sistem Perbukuan*", translation mine, UU No. 3, 2017). Such bills make it clear that the selection and censorship of books will be largely based on nationalist and religious ideals in the country.

Interestingly, Indonesia has a different means of censorship in comparison to the Global North. Government officials in the Global North tend to issue public statements on what kinds of books they seek to review and censor in schools. An example of this is the American Department of Defense Education Activity publicly stating that it would review books in school libraries that did not adhere to the Trump administration's recent executive orders on "gender ideology" and "racial indoctrination" (Tsui and Rose, 2025). In contrast, the Indonesian government generally remains silent on their specific criteria for censorship, aside from their public crackdown on pornography in both children and adult spaces (Mutiara, 2017; Paat, 2024).

## Current Gaps in Censorship Literature

A majority of scholarly research and news coverage on censorship is centered around countries in the Global North. Conversely, there has been limited scholarly focus on the censorship of literature in Asian countries apart from China. Furthermore, whereas countries like the United States of America and Canada have national movements dedicated to fighting the censorship of literature, many Asian countries lack the political climate and motivation to fight censorship in a public manner.

This paper uses Indonesia as a case study to examine the reasons behind censorship in countries outside of the Global North. Indonesia serves as a particularly interesting case study in comparison to the Global North because censorship is mainly driven by collectivist ideologies. It also serves as a unique comparison to its more heavily studied Asian counterparts, like Mainland China, because censorship is done through less overt means. By focusing on the Indonesian context, this paper will challenge some dominant theories in children's literature censorship that were modelled on the

Global North, and suggest alternative models that can apply to Indonesia and other similar countries.

Through a multidisciplinary lens combining literary studies and psychology, as well as fieldwork data collected in Indonesia, this paper aims to fill this scholarly gap through answering the following research questions:

1. What standards are used to censor and select children's literature in Indonesia?
2. Considering Indonesia's methods of censorship, do prevailing children's literature theories of childhood innocence and adult corruption apply in Indonesia? If not, what alternative theories can be proposed to suit the Indonesian context?

# Why Do We Control Children's Literature?

## Childhood as a Time of Innocence

Children's literature is a regular target of censorship primarily because many adults conceptualize childhood as a time of innocence, believing children should be shielded from topics that are deemed too mature. This belief is primarily driven by our idea of the "happy [and] uncomplicated child", in contrast to the corrupt adult (Tesar, 2014).

Adults' expectations about the content of children's literature are also informed by the kinds of children's books we have been exposed to throughout our lives. As Chombart de Lauwe argues in *A monde autre: l'enfance* [Another World: Childhood], school texts "mostly offer images of an archaic society. The young reader is not associated with the modern world in which s/he lives, but with an image of life 'from another time', ... which reinforces the myth of happy past times, of a golden age" (translation by Lopes Coelho, 2022). Because such "representations of the idealized child" have remained dominant in children's literature, adults have internalized the "idealized child", the innocent child "from another time", as the standard for children's literature, without considering that those expectations are highly unrealistic for the real child.

Empirical findings in psychological research support the theory that child-directed censors are motivated by adults' conceptions of innocence. One study examined the circumstances in which adults approved of censorship aimed at children (Anderson and Masicampo, 2017). The researchers found that, regardless of political background, the main reason why individuals approved of child-directed censorship is because they believed it would protect the sanctity of the child. However, if the child was perceived as already being exposed to immoral behavior, individuals were less likely to justify censorship using sanctity. This suggests that the conception of a child's innocence is largely based on what content adults assume that children have already been exposed to. Perhaps, by allowing children to be exposed to supposedly immoral topics in children's literature, adults may feel personally complicit in the corruption of the child.

Studies on the relationship between conservatism, religion, and endorsement of sanctity have also been done in countries with a similar cultural context as Indonesia.

For example, a study on college students found that Korean participants tended to score higher on sanctity in the Moral Foundations Questionnaire than American participants, suggesting a greater emphasis on avoiding corruption and remaining innocent. The authors argue that this may be a result of South Korea's higher levels of collectivism, as sanctity is categorized as a moral foundation that binds groups together (Kim et al., 2012). Reynolds et al. (2020) also found that individuals who rated their belief in God more highly are more likely to endorse binding moral foundations, including sanctity. As such, it is possible that due to Indonesia's religious and collectivist context, they may be more likely to endorse censorship on the basis of sanctity and may be more motivated to protect it as a moral foundation.

Attitudes towards censorship of children's literature in Indonesian society seem to support prevailing theories and empirical evidence on adults' conceptions of childhood innocence. In multiple articles on the topic, government officials have justified the need for a censor so that parents would feel less "*resah*" (TribunNews, 2015; Jam Berita, 2019; Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia, 2015). "*Resah*", though lacking a direct English translation, is a feeling that is a mix of both anxiety and fear. The word choice seems to suggest a moral panic in Indonesia about exposing children to supposedly non-innocent literature, perhaps because adults feel morally complicit in the supposed corruption of children through literature. Though the articles do not specifically state what content causes parents to feel fearful and anxious, considering Indonesia's political climate, it is likely content related to sexuality, queerness, and violence.

## Control of the Child

The censorship of children's literature has also long held a political purpose. For example, the localization of children's literature in post-World-War-2 Eastern Europe often involved verbal and visual branding "to suit... political purposes" and "dominant cultural values" (Pitkasalo and Oittinen, 2024; Venuti, 2003). The use and censorship of children's literature as a vocational tool is especially prevalent during "political and nationalist turning points", where children's books are used "as a mediator of values and ideologies" (Pitkasalo and Oittinen, 2024).

This is particularly evident in Indonesia, where children's literature primarily serves an educational purpose rather than to cultivate an appreciation for the arts. Several governmental bills clearly establish the educational role of children's literature, such as a bill about the book system which states that the role of books is "... to push Indonesia into becoming a global actor" ("*... mendorong masyarakat berperan dalam tingkat global...*") and to "strengthen the character of the nation" ("*... membangun ... karakter bangsa melalui pembinaan Sistem Perbukuan...*", translation mine, UU No. 3, 2017). This bill also expresses the use of books in Indonesia as a means of promoting nationalist values, emphasizing that it would only promote "books that fit the values and identity of the Indonesian nation" ("*buku yang memuat nilai-nilai dan jati diri bangsa Indonesia*", translation mine).

The use of books in Indonesia to spread the country's values implies a government interest in censoring books that go against such values. Books that disrupt the country's conservative interpretation of major religions are particularly at risk. By controlling access to books, the government can use children's literature as a way to control the ideologies that children develop, effectively limiting the development of beliefs that do not align with the government. This ultimately results in a continuous cycle of censorship and conservatism.

This argument could also be extended to the parents that choose books for their children, who ultimately "[act] as gatekeepers [that echo] the customs, values and ideologies of... society" (Pitkasalo and Oittinen, 2024). Many Indonesian parents with minimal exposure to media outside of Indonesia tend to echo conservative values that align with the government and wider Indonesian society. As such, they act as an additional layer of censorship for their children.

A prominent example of censorship by an Indonesian parent can be seen in an X post published by an Indonesian parent warning other parents about a specific book that her child bought (Figure 1). The photos attached to the post show the content of the book, which include discussions of a character's non-binary identity, and another character's two-spirit identity. The poster argues that parents should closely check the books their children buy because they "may not be age appropriate or follow the values we have" ("*belum tentu sesuai usia/dengan nilai yang kita jalani*", translation mine).

The parent clearly believes that children's books have significant potential in shaping their child's beliefs, further showing the educational role that children's books play in Indonesia.

This post also reflects the idea of protecting the "happy [and] uncomplicated child" (Tesar, 2014). The parent states that queerness isn't "age appropriate" for children, suggesting that queerness, like sex, is an impure topic that the innocent child should be protected from. Because of this, the parent's motivation to censor such books is rooted both in wanting to control the values that their child adopts, but also because their own conservative beliefs push them into believing that showing their child queer characters would make them complicit in the supposed corruption of the child's innocence.



Figure 1 An Indonesian parent's cautionary post on X (Ariotedjo, 2025)

## Silence as Censorship

Censorship is often paradoxical, as it tends to bring public attention towards those books that are banned. As Kenneth Kidd (2009) argues in his seminal paper "Not Censorship but Selection": Censorship and/as Prizing", censorship often fails in the Global North because the act of challenging the book provides it with value.

However, Kidd's theory fails to apply in Indonesia. As previously discussed, censorship in Indonesia is typically done through silencing a topic, rather than through publicly banning the book. Whereas banned book lists are adapted into reading lists in the Global North, the absence of such lists in Indonesia allows censorship to remain relatively unnoticed by Indonesian citizens. The Indonesian government also does not specifically state any criteria for their censorship, aside from pornography.

The only reported instance of the government publicly censoring a children's book occurred in 2017, where the children's book *I Am Brave Enough to Sleep Alone* ("*Aku Berani Tidur Sendiri*", translation mine) was investigated for containing pornographic material (Mutiara, 2017). The book, which included visual imagery of a child masturbating, was a clear violation of Indonesia's 2008 law against pornography, especially considering its context within a children's book. Aside from this instance, the media silence surrounding the censorship of children's books is evident: when phrases like "book censorship" ("*sensor buku*") or "children's book censorship" ("*sensor buku anak*") are searched on Kompas, Indonesia's leading local newspaper, no relevant results come up.

Furthermore, as seen in the X post (Figure 1), Indonesians typically avoid saying words that explicitly acknowledge queerness, even if it is to criticize it. Instead, parents simply refer to queerness as a value that doesn't align with their own. The belief that queerness is a sin may also be a factor in this phenomenon. There may be a strong element of shame in mentioning queerness, both because of the conservative notion that queerness is impure, and because any mention of it could disrupt the social harmony that is prioritized in a collectivist society like Indonesia.

Silence surrounding controversial topics in Indonesia, like queerness and sex, is not only an effective form of censorship, but could also be a way for Indonesian adults to convince themselves that such topics deserve to be silenced. As Perry Nodelman (1992) argues, by producing children's books that are "almost totally silent on the subject of sexuality", we convince ourselves that "children with such concerns *are* abnormal" (emphasis in original). Once these children become parents themselves, the social reinforcement of the abnormality of queerness and sex in children's literature results in them enacting the same sort of censorship on their children. This leads to a

vicious cycle of demonizing queerness and sex, and the endless silence on such topics.

This cycle may also motivate parents and adults to censor such content out of their own discomfort for the subject. As Nina Christensen (2003) argues, the censorship of children's literature may be done not to protect "a possible child audience but the adult critic" who refuses to confront sexuality as a reality of life. By censoring these topics from an early age, parents and adults remove the possibility of being confronted with these topics by their children, creating an effective protection against their own discomfort.

# Barriers to Diverse Literature: Bookstores in Indonesia

## Methodology

To further investigate the censorship of books in Indonesia, I chose to analyze the content of books available in major Indonesian bookstores and school libraries. This methodology has not been applied in Indonesia before.

I selected 3 major bookstores in Jakarta to determine the current literary landscape for Indonesian children: Gramedia, Periplus, and Kinokuniya. These stores were selected based on availability across multiple regions of Indonesia, and because each store caters to slightly different demographics, as outlined in Table 1.

|                           | <b>Gramedia</b>                           | <b>Periplus</b>                    | <b>Kinokuniya</b>                   |
|---------------------------|---|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Origin</b>             | Indonesia                                 | Indonesia                          | Japan                               |
| <b>Main consumer base</b> | Indonesians                               | Indonesians                        | Indonesians and foreigners          |
| <b>Primary stock</b>      | Indonesian books, with some English books | Exclusively imported English books | Imported English and Japanese books |

*Table 1 Notable characteristics of bookstores*

For the purposes of this paper, I decided to only collect data on imported English books. Indonesian books that are published are often already heavily censored by publishing companies, the government, and social pressures, thus I believe that looking into Indonesian books would not yield results that are relevant to my research. Imported English books, on the other hand, face relatively less censorship than Indonesian books at the point of production, resulting in content that would be more divisive than Indonesian books. As such, the selection and censorship of imported English books was a point of interest for me in this research.

Among the imported English books, I collected data from books that were shelved under young adult or older childhood sections (sometimes labelled as “intermediate” or “young readers”). Though Gramedia did not specifically differentiate between young adult and older childhood sections in their labelling, books for those age groups were clearly sorted into different shelves. The content of the books on these shelves allowed me to infer which age groups they were for.

I visited each of the bookstores in Grand Indonesia, Jakarta’s largest mall. This was done for convenience as each of the identified bookstore chains had their biggest stores in Grand Indonesia.

At each bookstore, I took photos of books that matched my inclusion criteria. Using the photos, I inputted the book’s name, author, and the bookstore where I found it into an Excel sheet. Book series were coded as 1 book. This resulted in a table of 555 books.

Once all data from the books had been inputted, I proceeded to conduct a content analysis of each book. To do this, I used crowd-sourced content warning data from Storygraph, my own knowledge of specific books, and individualized research on each book. This allowed me to generate a list of typically censored content that was available in each book.

## Results

| <b>Content of interest</b>              | <b>Number</b> | <b>% of books</b> |
|---|---------------|-------------------|
| <b>Queer representation (overt)</b>     | 21            | 3.78              |
| <b>Queer representation (non-overt)</b> | 25            | 4.50              |
| <b>Violence</b>                         | 220           | 39.64             |
| <b>Sexual content</b>                   | 99            | 17.84             |
| <b>Suicide/self-harm/mental health</b>  | 74            | 13.33             |
| <b>War</b>                              | 79            | 14.23             |
| <b>Abuse</b>                            | 81            | 14.59             |
| <b>Misogyny/sexism</b>                  | 44            | 7.93              |
| <b>Death</b>                            | 259           | 46.67             |
| <b>Racism</b>                           | 66            | 11.89             |
| <b>Bullying</b>                         | 103           | 18.56             |

|                       |     |       |
|-----------------------|-----|-------|
| <b>Ableism</b>        | 24  | 4.32  |
| <b>Alcoholism</b>     | 57  | 10.27 |
| <b>Homophobia</b>     | 38  | 6.85  |
| <b>None available</b> | 177 | 31.89 |

Table 2 Summary of content warnings in young adult and children's books in Gramedia, Periplus, and Kinokuniya

Because of the conservative religious influences in Indonesia, I originally hypothesized that there would be low numbers of books containing violence and sexual content. However, based on the collected data, 39.64% of books contained some amount of violence. 17.84% of the books containing sexual content was particularly surprising, particularly because pornography is the only specific criteria for censorship that the Indonesian government has publicly announced.

### Sexual content

| <b>Bookstore</b>  | <b>Number of books with sexual content</b> | <b>% of total books in store</b> |
|-------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| <b>Kinokuniya</b> | 87   | 20.57                            |
| <b>Gramedia</b>   | 2  | 3.77                             |
| <b>Periplus</b>   | 11   | 9.82                             |

Table 3 Books containing sexual content, separated by store

Notably, most books with sexual content were found in the young adult section of Kinokuniya, which was the only non-Indonesian bookstore sampled. Upon individual analysis of the content of the books in question, some books seemed to be shelved under the young adult section because they had been published as young adult books despite containing dark romance elements that would typically be found in new adult books. However, some other books containing dark romance elements, such as *Still Beating* (Jennifer Hartmann), were not published as young adult books and were still shelved as young adult in Kinokuniya. Based on the fieldwork data, it seems that the Indonesian government is not as strict in their censorship of pornography and other sexual content in children's literature as they publicly state.

## Violence

| Bookstore  | Number of books with violence | % of total books in store |
|------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Kinokuniya | 182                           | 43.03                     |
| Gramedia   | 12                            | 22.64                     |
| Periplus   | 39                            | 34.82                     |

Table 4 Books containing violence, separated by store

Though Kinokuniya was the store with the highest percentage of books containing violence, upon individual analysis of the books, Gramedia and Periplus had books with significantly more concerning violent content compared to Kinokuniya.

Periplus had a notable amount of manga adaptations about the Second World War originally written by Japanese authors, such as Dazai Osamu and Ryuunosuke Akutagawa. Their books were not shelved in the young adult's section, but in the section for older children. These books contain explicit suicidal ideation, misogyny, and violence. The choice to place these books in the children's section may purely be because the story had been adapted into a manga format.

Gramedia also had similar instances of mangas being shelved into the children's section despite their content. *Tatsuki Fujimoto Before Chainsaw Man: 17-21* (Tatsuki Fujimoto) was shelved in the children's section, despite the author's well-known tendency to include body horror in his work. Furthermore, the cover of the book had "for adults" written on it, making its content unambiguous even prior to opening the book.

Despite Periplus and Gramedia's apparent efforts to reduce the number of young adult and children's books containing violence, it is apparent that their method for sorting books falls victim to the generalization that manga and other comics are always suitable for children, despite their violent content.

## Queer representation

| <b>Bookstore</b>  | <b>Number of books with queer representation (overt and non-overt)</b> | <b>% of total books in store</b> |
|-------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| <b>Kinokuniya</b> | 46   | 10.87                            |
| <b>Gramedia</b>   | 0  | 0                                |
| <b>Periplus</b>   | 0  | 0                                |

*Table 5 Books containing queer representation, separated by store*

My most significant finding whilst sampling the bookstores was the total absence of queer content in the two Indonesian bookstores sampled. When coding for queer representation, both overt representations (queerness being the main topic of the book) and non-overt representations (presence of queer characters, but no exploration into queerness) were included.

For most books with non-overt representations of queerness, it would be difficult to know that there are queer characters in the book unless it had been read in its entirety. Gramedia and Periplus having no queer books at all in their children's and young adult sections suggests stringent censorship and commercial regulations over the distribution of queer books, either at the level of the bookstore, or at the level of the government. As such, it is evident that the government's biggest factor for censorship is queer content.

## Indonesian Bookstores and Queerness



Figure 3 Screenshot of conversation with Periplus admin (Tapakatuy, 2025)



Figure 2 Conversation between poster and anonymous Indonesian independent bookstore (Meirinasoe, 2025)

Despite the general attitude of the Indonesian government and society to queer topics, queer books were once widely available in bookstores that primarily stock imported English books, like Kinokuniya and Periplus. The collections were primarily made up of Boys' Love (BL) and Danmei books, two genres of East Asian gay fiction that are incredibly popular among women in South-East Asia. Though the collections themselves lacked diversity, especially in terms of non-East-Asian queer books, they were readily available for purchase online and in-store. They were also publicly displayed in-store at Kinokuniya and Periplus. It is unclear whether the popularity of these books among Indonesian women is because they have become more accepting towards queerness, or because they see this as a means of distancing themselves from reading heterosexual romances that often reflect Indonesia's deeply patriarchal norms.

However, on 17 January 2025, several users on the social media platform X noted that many popular BL and Danmei books were being silently taken down from Periplus' physical locations and online store. When Periplus staff were asked about the situation, individuals were told that the books were "privately taken down because someone

reported that they didn't like these types of books" (*"sudah resmi ditakedown karena ada laporan orang yg tidak menyukai buku jenis tersebut"*, translation mine, figure 2). At this point, it was unclear who had reported the books, and whether Periplus would ever make the books available for purchase again.

The censorship of queer books at Periplus was not an issue localized to the store. Upon reaching out to independent bookstores, individuals found that indie bookstores were facing the same censorship of their books. As one owner of an online indie bookstore said, "We can't [do pre-orders for Danmei books]. Books containing LGBT+ content have been restricted, ... so our boxes [of imported Danmei] haven't left customs yet" (*"udah ngga bisa [kak]. Karena dari forwarder juga lagi restricted yang ada unturnya LGBT+, bisa bikin masuk redline dan ngga keluar keluar box [nya]"*, translation mine, figure 3). At this point, none of the Periplus employees had made any specific statement on why the books were being taken down, just that the books would temporarily be unavailable at Periplus.

One day after the incident was popularized on X, a Periplus employee provided a specific reason for the removal of BL and Danmei books in Periplus, stating that "as a business, we have to follow the rules of the government. Please pray that we can continue to provide the best [service]" (*"sebagai badan usaha, kami wajib untuk mengikuti aturan pemerintah. Mohon do'anya supaya kami tetap bisa memberikan yang terbaik ya kak"*, translation mine, Dirgawangy, 2025). Though Periplus has never made an official announcement on the issue, it was made quite clear through their customer service representatives that government censorship was involved in the removal of queer books.

9 days after the incident was popularized on X, a user on X received an update from a Periplus customer service representative about the availability of BL and Danmei. Though the books were now available for purchase again, they came with certain terms:

"[Danmei books are available for purchase] with certain conditions. First, you have to message the Periplus customer service representative for the Danmei book, and if you

want to buy the book you have to show your national ID card because the terms state that you must be above 21 to buy these books”

(“Dengan syarat kakk (sic) pertama harus WA admin periplus untuk buku Danmeinya kakk, dan bila kakk mau beli harus menunjukkan KTP karena syarat pembelian buku tersebut harus diatas 21 tahun ya kakk”, translation mine, Dirgawangy, 2025)

Though the return of BL and Danmei books was seen as a positive thing to users online, the age-gating of such books is notable in Indonesia’s sociolegal context. Under current legislation, individuals must be over 21, with ID proof, to purchase alcohol, purchase cigarettes, and enter clubs. However, socially, this rule is functionally non-existent, especially for women. This suggests that, under Indonesia’s current sociolegal framework, purchasing queer books is seen as more dangerous and deserving of constraint than underage smoking, drinking, and clubbing.

# Barriers to Diverse Literature: School Libraries in Indonesia

## Methodology

|                              | School 1                                   | School 2  |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Religious affiliation</b> | Strictly Christian                         | Christian, but relatively less strict than school 1 |
| <b>Country affiliation</b>   | Indonesia                                  | Singapore   |
| <b>Student population</b>    | Majority Chinese-Indonesian and Indonesian | Majority Chinese-Indonesian                         |
| <b>Relative tuition fees</b> | Up to ~30,000 CAD per year                 | Up to ~25,000 CAD per year                          |

I selected two international K-12 schools in Jakarta to sample for my paper. I chose these schools primarily because they had a large collection of English books in their libraries. Furthermore, I was interested to see if the presence of many foreign teachers in these schools would influence the kind of books present in their libraries. School 1 exclusively employs foreign teachers to teach grades 3 to 12. School 2 has an even distribution of foreign and local teachers across all grade levels.

My sampling and analysis method in the school libraries was similar to the method I used in the bookstores. However, because each library had almost 1500 books in their collections, I decided to systematically sample the available books by sampling and coding every third book in the relevant sections of the library. Furthermore, because I had narrowed down my three points of interest to sexual content, violence, and queer representation when sampling the bookstores, I only coded the library books for these topics to save time. In total, 444 books were sampled from School 1, and 454 books were sampled from School 2.

## Results

Overall, I found that the libraries from both schools primarily stocked young adult books and classics. This resulted in a sample that seems to be more mature than the samples from the bookstores.

### Sexual content

| School   | Number of books with sexual content | % of total books sampled |
|----------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| School 1 | 87                                  | 19.37                    |
| School 2 | 87                                  | 19.16                    |

*Table 6 Books containing sexual content, separated by school*

Originally, I hypothesized that both schools would have limited books with sexual content because of both schools' religious affiliations. I believed this hypothesis would be supported, as both libraries had a minimal number of romance books. However, I was surprised to find that more than 19% of the books sampled in both schools had sexual content.

More surprisingly, in School 1, a large majority of the books with sexual content were coded as such due to inclusions of rape and sexual violence in the sampled books. Most of the books that included rape and sexual violence were shelved as historical fiction or classics. This may have occurred because many international schools in Indonesia tend to place large importance on the Western literary canon, deeming it as the gold standard for reading. As such, any interest in censoring sexual content may be overridden if the content is contained within a classic.

Alternatively, it is also possible that the school chose to have books containing sexual violence in the library to accurately reflect the violence that occurred during instances of war and colonialism. Most Indonesian adults above the age of 30 lived through Indonesia's most recent mass rape and have witnessed the impacts of such violence on their community. As such, the need to educate minors on violence that is closely

related to Indonesia may be seen as more important than the pressure to maintain their innocence.

## Violence

| School   | Number of books with violence | % of total books sampled |
|----------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| School 1 | 318                           | 71.62                    |
| School 2 | 270                           | 59.47                    |

*Table 7 Books containing violence, separated by school*

Most books sampled in School 1 included violence, which was a larger number than anticipated. This is likely because of the school's emphasis on war-related books. During my visit to their library, I found that all the fiction books were separated by genre. Genres like historical fiction, dystopian, war and refugees, and classics made up a large portion of the library's books, likely contributing to the high percentage of books that have violent aspects.

School 2 had a lower proportion of violent books compared to School 1. However, both libraries exceed the percentage of violent books found in the bookstores sampled. This is likely because the schools had a larger focus on stocking books for high school students, whereas the bookstores stocked books for children and teenagers.

## Queer representation

| School   | Number of books with queer representation | % of total books sampled |
|----------|---|--------------------------|
| School 1 | 21  | 4.73                     |
| School 2 | 11  | 2.42                     |

*Table 8 Books containing queer representation, separated by school*

Like the bookstores sampled, School 1 had a limited number of books with queer representation, with none of the books sampled having overt queer themes or

characters. The censorship of overtly queer books may be suggested by the library's inclusion of James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, but the absence of *Giovanni's Room*, despite both books being recommended by the international exam board that the school is part of. There seems to be limited reasons as to why Baldwin's more famous work would be excluded from the library aside from its overtly queer themes. Though *Go Tell it on the Mountain* does have characters that are implied to be queer, it may have passed censorship because it is less overt than *Giovanni's Room*, and because the Christian setting of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* was better aligned with the school's religious affiliation. It is also possible that the censorship of queerness was seen as less important than stocking a supposed Western classic in the school library.

School 2 also had a limited number of queer books, with none of the books available being overtly queer. Though queer books have likely been censored by the school, it is also possible that the lack of queer books is because School 2's library collection is relatively outdated in comparison to School 1. Furthermore, many of School 2's books are donated by parents and alumni rather than bought by the school. As the parents and alumni of School 2 are predominantly Christian, it is likely that very few queer books are donated to the library to begin with. As such, rather than being a purposeful case of censorship, the lack of queer books may be because they do not receive queer donations to begin with.

## Limitations and Future Directions

The biggest limitation of my research is the diversity of the bookstore and school library samples. The lack of diversity in my sampling is because of the limited time I had to collect data. In the future, I would like to collect data from a more diverse set of schools and collect bookstore samples from more locations in Indonesia.

I also recognize that I mainly collected library data from expensive private schools, making my sample unrepresentative to most of Indonesia. Unfortunately, school libraries in Indonesia are often very small, and only the most expensive schools in the country have English book collections large enough for me to sample. Furthermore, gaining access to national schools posed a logistical problem for me, as I lacked any pre-existing contacts and connections to those schools.

My qualitative analysis process also lacked specificity. As my coding of books was dependent on crowd-sourced content warnings from Storygraph, I was not able to determine the extent to which certain books contained specific content. For example, a book with an implied sex scene and a book with an explicit sex scene would both be tagged on Storygraph as having sexual content, even if the degree of sexual content was vastly different. If my methodology could be replicated with a larger team, more research could be done into each book so that the qualitative analysis done would be more specific.

This paper could also be further supplemented by interviews with librarians, bookstore curators, and government officials, who may be able to provide insight into why certain books are stocked. I was unable to do this because I did not have approval from the Research Ethics Board. Furthermore, discussing queerness in a positive light to high-ranking government officials could possibly pose a danger to my safety.

Future research on this topic could apply my research methodology to different countries outside of the Global North and Indonesia. Though my conclusions may be generalizable to South-East Asian countries with similar sociopolitical environments, there are likely to be notable differences in each country's censorship policies. As such, more detailed research into countries outside of the Global North is still necessary.

## Reckoning with Innocence

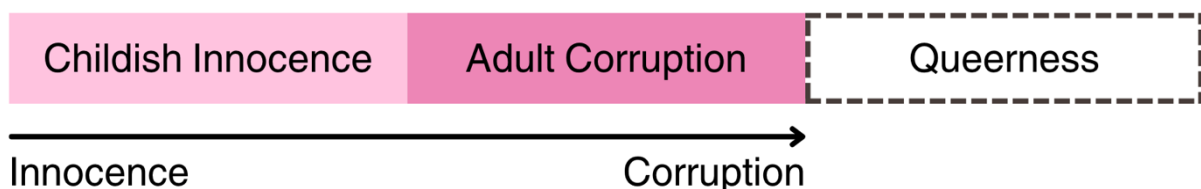


*Figure 4 The Global North Innocence Framework*

In the Global North, the idea of the innocent child is typically discussed in contrast to the idea of the corrupt adult. Whereas the innocent child must be protected from topics like violence, sex, and queerness, the corrupt adult is allowed to witness such things because they are already no longer innocent.

One notable feature of this social construct is that all ideas can be categorized as either for the innocent child or for the corrupt adult. Even in instances where certain topics, like queerness, are censored, the corrupt adult will still explicitly discuss such topics, even if their purpose is to condemn them. Despite the corrupt adult viewing queerness as something to be censored for both adults and children, queerness remains in the category of adult corruption, since adults are supposedly allowed to discuss it and condemn it.

Though such distinctions are merely social constructs, the framework is a helpful means of understanding how individuals choose to censor and select books in the Global North. This framework of innocence, and the assumption that people believe all topics fall into either childish innocence or adult corruption, is what most scholarship on children's literature is based upon.



*Figure 5 The Indonesian Innocence Framework*

Though the Global North Innocence Framework is applicable in most countries where research on children's literature censorship is conducted, it seems to be non-generalizable to countries with different sociopolitical environments, including Indonesia. Outside of the Global North, even if the concept of the innocent child and the corrupt adult is still present, there is a notable silence surrounding queerness, even among adults. As such, within an Indonesian context, I propose that the framework needs to be extended to include topics that people perceive to be beyond adult corruption, such as queerness.

The idea that certain concepts should be completely censored seems to be supported by several government officials. One politician, Sutan Hendra, stated that the censorship of books is done primarily to "avoid making [people] fearful and anxious" ("*tidak menimbulkan keresahan*", translation mine, TribunNews, 2015). The secretary of the Commission for the Protection of Children in Indonesia (Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia) echoed similar sentiments, suggesting that "[Indonesian] society isn't ready to receive information at that level of sophistication, so [the information] needs to be contained by laws and censorship" ("*pada dasarnya masyarakat juga tidak siap menerima kecanggihan informasi sehingga perlu dibendung dengan peraturan dan badan sensor*", translation mine, Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia, 2015).

The overarching narrative of protecting society, including adults, from topics they are not ready to face yet seems to reflect how censorship of children's literature is commonly done in the Global North to protect the supposed innocence of children. However, in this case, the promotion of censorship is done to protect the supposed innocence of adults as well, a phenomenon that is absent in the Global North. As such, when conceptualizing a model of innocence in Indonesia, it would be inaccurate to suggest that there is merely a division between the innocent child and the corrupt adult.

In the Indonesian Innocence Framework, the government takes on the regulatory role that adults in the Global North Framework are assigned. As such, the government exists beyond the binary of the innocent child and corrupt adult.

The government views both the child and adult as the innocents, with queerness as something that is beyond adult corruption. As such, the government can easily justify

the silencing of queerness by arguing that censorship is necessary to protect the supposedly innocent society. Such a justification would be particularly effective in a religious country like Indonesia, where sanctity and purity continue to be prioritized.

It is important to create a distinction between how censorship and innocence are constructed in different countries, because it has significant implications on how anti-censorship advocacy should be conducted. In the Global North, most anti-censorship advocacy for books is focused on arguing that certain topics, like queerness, should be made accessible for the innocent child. However, this approach cannot be applied to a country like Indonesia, where queerness is categorized as beyond the scope of even the corrupt adult. Instead, it would be more effective if anti-censorship efforts focused on pressuring the government to reduce censorship of queerness in adult spaces first, before attempting to advocate for queer content in children's spaces.


Creating a framework for censorship and innocence that is culturally-informed is becoming increasingly important as the censorship of books continues to heighten globally. Anti-censorship advocacy must be informed by culturally relevant scholarship in order to be effective, and a larger push for international research on the topic is necessary.

## Conclusion

Theories of innocence and the censorship of children's literature have long been proposed in the Global North, but such theories need to be continuously interrogated and tested in international contexts. Data collected from various Indonesian bookstores and schools, as well as how censorship is framed in local news outlets, demonstrates how queerness is silenced in Indonesia, rather than merely censored. Though research into Indonesian censorship, especially in the context of children's literature, is merely in its infancy, it is a topic that cannot be overlooked anymore. This is especially true considering the government's recent push to rewrite history books to sanitize recent government-sanctioned atrocities. As my paper demonstrates, the censorship of children's literature continues to be a powerful tool in Indonesia to demonize queerness and sex, and deeper understanding of the topic is necessary to prevent harmful narratives from proliferating.

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