Research Article

Philippine Literary Resources that Appeal to Gen Z Audiences' Motivation to Read and Learn

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ABSTRACT

Reading motivation significantly shapes how individuals engage with texts, influencing academic achievement, language development, and critical thinking. This study examined how Philippine literary resources influence the reading and learning motivation of Generation Z (Gen Z) students, who are often more immersed in digital and global content than in local literature. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the study explored how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fostered through engagement with culturally grounded narratives. An exploratory qualitative design was used, with seventeen purposively selected Gen Z students participating in semi-structured interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to interpret their insights and lived experiences. Findings revealed that Philippine classical literature fosters emotional and psychological resonance through relatable characters, cultural values, and timeless themes. Students demonstrated growing autonomy in literary interpretation, competence in dealing with linguistic complexity, and relatedness through shared cultural meaning. They developed greater comprehension, critical awareness, and civic reflection as they connected literary experiences with personal and social realities. While limited by a small and homogenous sample, the study adopts a cautious interpretation of literature's transformative potential and emphasizes the contextual factors that shape student motivation. Overall, the findings

underscore the value of integrating culturally relevant texts and dialogic approaches in instruction to sustain intrinsic reading motivation and holistic learner development.

1. Introduction

Philippine literature has long served as an essential component of Filipino learners' education. It encompasses a rich and diverse collection of works—ranging from folktales and historical narratives to modern texts reflecting lived experiences. However, its pedagogical potential remains underutilized in contemporary classrooms. Many literary works fall into obscurity due to students' limited engagement and exposure [1].

Recent studies reveal that today's Filipino youth, particularly those belonging to Generation Z, are increasingly immersed in globalized media and digital culture, resulting in diminished interest in traditional reading materials [2]. This generational shift has transformed reading habits: rather than engaging deeply with print-based literature, many students now encounter textual narratives through short-form videos, memes, and fan fiction shared on social media. While these digital spaces promote creativity and accessibility, they may also fragment sustained reading focus and weaken students' connection to culturally grounded literary traditions. Consequently, educators struggle to use Philippine literature as a medium for cultivating national identity and transmitting moral and historical values [3].

Nevertheless, emerging scholarship suggests that culturally resonant literature can play a critical role in re-engaging young readers. When learners encounter stories that mirror their social realities and emotional experiences, they demonstrate stronger cognitive and affective involvement [4,5]. Dela Cruz and Reyes [6] emphasized that local literature enables the development of moral reasoning, while Valdez et al. [7] found that such texts nurture empathy and civic awareness. However, most prior research has focused on Western or global texts, leaving a significant gap in understanding how Philippine literary works—rooted in local culture, language, and history—shape motivation and identity formation among Gen Z students [8,9].

Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [10,11], this study posits that learners experience optimal motivation when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. Literature, when aligned with readers' values and contexts, can satisfy these needs by offering opportunities for personal interpretation, mastery of meaning, and emotional connection. As Lin [12] noted, motivation deepens when students interact with texts that resonate with their sense of self, while Henderson [13] highlighted the importance of emotional relevance in sustaining reading engagement.

Given this theoretical and cultural grounding, this study explores how Philippine literary resources influence the reading and learning motivation of Generation Z students. Specifically, it examines how classical and modern Filipino narratives—when meaningfully integrated into educational contexts—can foster intrinsic motivation, cultural appreciation, and personal development amid a rapidly evolving digital reading environment.

2. Literature review

Reading motivation plays a central role in students' sustained academic engagement and personal development. Scholars such as Wigfield and Guthrie [14], Permatasari and Wienanda [4], and Webber et al. [5] emphasized that highly motivated readers are more likely to perform well academically, engage deeply with texts, and persist in learning tasks. Research by Michael and Kyriakides [15] and Vaknin-Nusbaum and

Tuckwiller [16] similarly supports the connection between motivation, frequent reading habits, and cognitive development.

Beyond academics, literature has been linked to emotional and moral development. Lacuata [17], Dela Cruz and Reyes [6], and Valdez et al. [7] demonstrated that reading can cultivate empathy, cultural appreciation, and ethical awareness. These studies collectively affirm that reading literature contributes not only to academic competence but also to values formation and identity exploration—especially during adolescence.

However, motivating young people to read remains a growing challenge. Studies by Gallagher [18], Martin-Chang et al. [19], and Wilkinson et al. [20] reveal that many adolescents see reading as tedious or irrelevant, especially when texts fail to reflect their realities or interests. Recent findings also suggest that digital media has redefined how Gen Z experiences narrative content. Many now engage with stories through platforms such as TikTok, Wattpad, and YouTube adaptations, which provide quick emotional gratification but often discourage sustained literary reflection [5]. This shift highlights the need to recontextualize traditional reading instruction and to integrate culturally and emotionally relevant texts that can compete with digital immediacy. Heath et al. [21] argued that the perceived disconnection between students and reading materials further discourages engagement.

Most prior studies focus on general reading behaviors or Western literary texts. There is limited research on how Philippine literature, in particular, affects Filipino youth motivation. This gap is significant. Texts rooted in Filipino culture, language, and history may provide more relatable contexts that enhance emotional engagement and foster cultural identity. Unfortunately, curriculum shifts in higher education—such as the removal of dedicated Philippine literature courses—may reduce students' exposure to culturally resonant works [22].

Durante [23] emphasized that Philippine literary texts, when taught meaningfully, offer students not only national pride but a space for critical reflection and civic engagement. Balmeo et al. [24] noted that Rizal's works, though historical, remain emotionally and politically relevant for today's learners. Similarly, recent research [25,26] shows that motivation among Filipino students is enhanced when instruction links classroom learning to students' cultural and social contexts. This finding aligns with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that fulfilling learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhances intrinsic motivation [27].

Integrating SDT with literary pedagogy allows for a richer understanding of how reading culturally familiar texts can satisfy these needs. When students freely interpret literary works through their personal experiences (autonomy), succeed in analyzing complex language and themes (competence), and find cultural or emotional resonance within stories (relatedness), motivation to read deepens. This aligns with Lin [12], who observed that emotional relevance and self-reflection promote reading persistence. Furthermore, reader-response theorists such as Rosenblatt [28] and Iser [29] argue that meaning emerges through the interaction between reader and text—a process that complements SDT's emphasis on active engagement and self-determined learning.

Thus, this study contributes to bridging motivational psychology and Philippine literary pedagogy. While previous works have separately explored reading motivation or cultural relevance, few have integrated Self-Determination Theory within the framework of literary reception among Filipino youth. To address this theoretical gap, the present study examines how Philippine literary texts—particularly those that mirror Gen Z's moral, emotional, and digital realities—stimulate intrinsic motivation, foster identity formation, and encourage academic engagement.

2.1. Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Ryan and Deci (2020), which posits that individuals have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are met, learners are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation—engaging in tasks because they find them meaningful and fulfilling rather than externally imposed.

Recent studies confirm the relevance of SDT in literacy research. De Smedt et al. [30] empirically established that autonomous and controlled forms of reading motivation are distinct constructs, reinforcing that intrinsic engagement, rooted in inherent satisfaction or perceived value, is the most optimal type for sustained literacy development.

In the context of literary reading, SDT provides a valuable lens for understanding how Philippine literature can fulfill these psychological needs. Literary texts that mirror students' lived experiences, emotions, and social realities promote self-reflection and internalized learning motivation, bridging affective and cognitive dimensions of reading engagement.

Autonomy

Autonomy emerges when learners interpret and respond to literature based on personal meaning rather than external obligation. In Philippine literature, autonomy is evident when students connect characters' struggles, such as Don Juan's perseverance or Maria Clara's restraint, to their own emotional or moral experiences. This self-directed interpretation cultivates intrinsic motivation, consistent with De Smedt et al.'s [30] finding that autonomous motivation enhances literacy outcomes. Literary engagement thus becomes an act of personal agency, allowing readers to internalize lessons rather than passively receive them.

Competence

Competence develops when readers successfully decode the linguistic, historical, and symbolic complexity of texts such as Florante at Laura or Noli Me Tangere. As students gain confidence in analyzing figurative language and cultural nuances, they experience a sense of mastery and self-efficacy, key components of intrinsic motivation. Fountoulakis et al. [31] demonstrated that engaging with literature strengthens critical thinking, comprehension, and analytical skills, aligning with SDT's emphasis on competence as a driver of sustained learning. This interplay between cognitive challenge and accomplishment transforms literature into a training ground for intellectual growth.

Relatedness

Relatedness is realized when students feel emotionally and culturally connected to the narratives they read. Characters such as Elias, Sisa, and Ibarra serve as moral and emotional mirrors, allowing Gen Z readers to see reflections of their community and identity. In today's digital age, this relatedness also extends into intermedial spaces where literature is reimagined through film, animation, and online storytelling. Hrytsak et al. [32] noted that technological innovations have created multisensory communication spaces, where engagement with adapted texts depends on readers' media literacy and ability to navigate complex intermedia codes. Thus, relatedness in modern reading is both cultural and digital, rooted in shared symbols across media platforms.

By integrating SDT with contemporary perspectives on media literacy and positive psychology, this framework situates literary engagement as a holistic motivational process. Autonomy empowers self-expression; competence reinforces mastery and intellectual growth; and relatedness sustains emotional and cultural connection. Together, these constructs explain how Philippine literary texts, whether traditional or digitally adapted, can foster intrinsic motivation and meaningful learning among Generation Z readers.

In this study, SDT guided both data collection and interpretation. The analysis identified how participants' engagement with Philippine literature fulfilled autonomy through personal reflection, competence through comprehension and analysis, and relatedness through emotional and cultural resonance, across both traditional and digital reading contexts.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to investigate the themes and qualities in Philippine literary works that influence Generation Z students' motivation to read and learn. Exploratory qualitative research is appropriate for underexplored topics and provides rich, conceptual insight into complex sociocultural phenomena [33,34]. This design allowed for in-depth examination of the participants' lived experiences, with emphasis on how literary engagement intersects with motivation, identity, and academic development [35,36].

3.2. Participants and sampling

A purposive sampling method was employed to recruit participants with relevant experience and knowledge. Inclusion criteria were: (1) Born between 1997 and 2012 (Generation Z); (2) Familiarity with Philippine literary works; (3) Enrollment in or recent graduation from secondary or tertiary education; (4) Ability to articulate reading motivations and preferences; and (5) Willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. From 36 screened individuals, 17 were selected for one-on-one interviews, consistent with best practices for qualitative data saturation [37,38]. Data saturation was reached when recurring themes began to repeat across interviews and no substantially new insights emerged during the final three sessions. This aligns with the principle that saturation depends on information redundancy rather than participant number [39].

While the sample provided rich, contextualized narratives, it was relatively homogeneous in terms of academic level and geographic location, with most participants drawn from tertiary institutions in Mindanao. This limited diversity constrains the generalizability of findings. Future studies are encouraged to include participants from a wider range of regions, schools, and linguistic backgrounds to enhance representativeness and cross-cultural validity.

3.3. Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview guide was developed following Kallio et al.'s [40] five-step model. This included literature review, question development, expert validation, pilot testing, and refinement. Open-ended core questions and follow-up prompts encouraged rich, reflective responses [41]. Expert reviewers from social psychology, education, and literature evaluated the tool, and revisions were made after pilot testing for clarity and alignment [42,43].

Refer to Table 1 for sample interview questions aligned with the study objectives.

Table 1. Final interview guide questions after expert validation and pilot testing

Objectives	Interview Questions
1. To explore the features and themes of Philippine literary resources that resonate with Gen Z readers and influence their motivation to engage in reading and learning.	1. What specific elements or themes in Philippine literature do you find most appealing or relatable as a Gen Z reader? 2. Can you describe a particular Philippine literary work that motivated you to read more or sparked your interest in a certain topic? 3. How do the language, characters, or storytelling styles in Philippine literature influence your motivation to continue reading and learning?

Objectives	Interview Questions
2. To examine the perspectives and experiences of Gen Z individuals regarding how Philippine literature builds their interest in academic and personal development.	1. In what ways has reading Philippine literature influenced your views or interests in your academic subjects or career goals? 2. How do you think Philippine literary works contribute to your personal growth or self-understanding? 3. Can you share an experience where a Philippine literary piece inspired you to learn something new or pursue a personal goal?

Table 1. (*Continued*)

3.4. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected via semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, which allowed participants to freely express their experiences in their preferred language. Ethical protocols—including informed consent, confidentiality, and secure data handling—were rigorously applied [44]. Interviews were audio-recorded using encrypted devices, and notes were taken to log observational data in Excel spreadsheets. Interviewers used probing and clarifying questions to draw out deeper responses [45].

The interview guide was designed not only to explore students' literary preferences but also to capture experiences related to SDT constructs, autonomy (personal meaning-making), competence (mastery of comprehension), and relatedness (cultural and emotional connection). This ensured theoretical alignment between the study design and the research objectives.

3.5. Data analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's [46] six-phase model: (1) Familiarization with the data; (2) Generation of initial codes; (3) Searching for patterns; (4) Reviewing themes; (5) Defining and naming themes; and (6) Synthesizing insights. Codes were generated inductively while being informed by SDT constructs. This process was guided by the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, emphasizing researcher subjectivity as a resource for interpretation [47].

For example, codes reflecting students' self-directed reading choices were grouped under autonomy; codes describing intellectual challenge and mastery under competence; and codes indicating empathy or cultural identification under relatedness.

This theory-informed coding approach integrated both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (framework-driven) logic, following guidance from Yuwono and Rachmawati [48] on combining qualitative reasoning. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process, with researchers documenting analytic decisions and reflecting on how their own literary experiences could influence interpretation [49].

To ensure methodological rigor, analytic procedures followed the standards applied in prior local studies using thematic interpretation [50]. Credibility was further enhanced through peer debriefing among co-authors, ensuring consistency and dependability of findings.
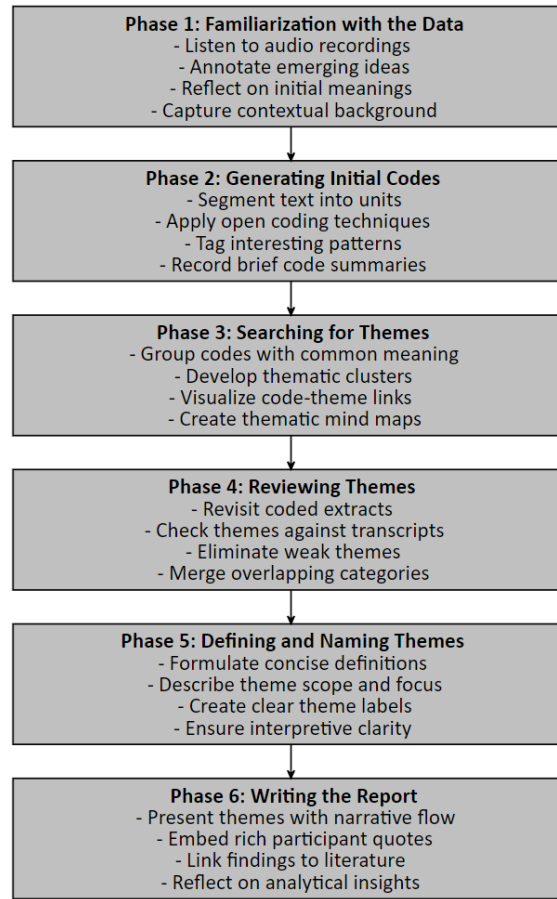
Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data
- Listen to audio recordings
- Annotate emerging ideas
- Reflect on initial meanings
- Capture contextual background

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes
- Segment text into units
- Apply open coding techniques
- Tag interesting patterns
- Record brief code summaries

Phase 3: Searching for Themes
- Group codes with common meaning
- Develop thematic clusters
- Visualize code-theme links
- Create thematic mind maps

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes
- Revisit coded extracts
- Check themes against transcripts
- Eliminate weak themes
- Merge overlapping categories

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes
- Formulate concise definitions
- Describe theme scope and focus
- Create clear theme labels
- Ensure interpretive clarity

Phase 6: Writing the Report
- Present themes with narrative flow
- Embed rich participant quotes
- Link findings to literature
- Reflect on analytical insights

Figure 1. Workflow of data analysis process

4. Results

Objective 1: To explore the features and themes of Philippine literary resources that resonate with Gen Z readers and influence their motivation to engage in reading and learning.

Theme 1: Relatable Characters and Narratives

There was a growing acknowledgement of how timeless literary characters can reflect contemporary challenges. Despite the antiquity of Ibong Adarna, the participant discerns in Don Juan's repeated trials a symbolic reflection of their own perseverance in an academically demanding environment. His resilience in the face of betrayal and adversity is not perceived merely as a simple plotline but rather as a metaphor for the student's ongoing negotiation with academic stress, societal expectations, and internal pressure.[1]

> "Even though Ibong Adarna is really old, I still connected with Don Juan's struggles. He kept getting hurt but didn't give up, and that feels like surviving school pressure today."

These reflections indicate that readers actively relate their personal circumstances to those of classical heroes. In doing so, they exercise interpretive autonomy, the ability to assign meaning that feels personally relevant rather than simply reproducing classroom analysis.

There was also a recognition of culturally embedded behavioral expectations, particularly the norm of emotional restraint within familial settings common in Filipino households. Maria Clara's silence becomes an archetype for internalized emotional labor, suggesting that Gen Z readers do not simply consume

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literature for narrative entertainment but actively engage with it as a reflective tool for examining emotional dynamics within their personal and sociocultural realities.[2]

> "I saw myself in Maria Clara's character in Noli Me Tangere. Her silent suffering reminded me of how sometimes we keep emotions hidden in front of our families."

Here, literature functions as a mirror for emotional awareness. The reader's empathy toward Maria Clara reveals a search for personal understanding and emotional competence, an indication that classical texts still foster psychological insight among young audiences.

Some drew a connection between Crisostomo Ibarra's revolutionary advocacy for systemic reform and the current sociopolitical landscape marked by educational disparity and social injustice. This acts as a framework for understanding continuity between past and present struggles, which then helped facilitate civic awareness among younger individuals.[2]

> "Though it's historical, I feel like Crisostomo Ibarra's fight for education and justice in El Fili still applies now, especially with all the inequality around."

Such responses show a developing sense of relatedness: students view historical characters as moral companions in their own civic reflections. By linking literary struggles with modern inequities, they experience cultural continuity that reinforces reading motivation.

For example, Basilio, a symbol of enduring trauma, is not romanticized but recognized as a realistic figure who continues to function amid deep psychological wounds.[3]

> "When I read about how Basilio dealt with loss and tried to keep going, it hit me. He's like a lot of us just trying to make sense of things despite pain."

These insights suggest that readers use literature to process emotional challenges, validating their resilience and affirming that perseverance is a shared cultural narrative.

Theme 2: Emotional and Psychological Resonance

Gen Z readers extract contemporary relevance from classical narratives, specifically through emotional and psychological links. For example, the depth of Simoun's suffering, particularly following the loss of his beloved, reflected their personal experiences with grief, abandonment, or unfulfilled longing. Such emotion demonstrated how classical literature could evoke introspection in young readers, drawing them into the psychological depth of its characters.[4]

> "I was emotional while reading El Fili. Simoun's loneliness and pain were too real, especially when he lost the one person he loved."

Participants repeatedly emphasized that emotional engagement motivates them to persist with lengthy or complex readings. Recognizing their own feelings in Simoun's despair allowed them to perceive literature as emotionally validating rather than purely academic.

Some found an emotional and ethical connection between the injustices depicted in Noli Me Tangere and those still observed in modern society. For them, reading this literature activated a strong awareness, encouraging them to draw connections between past and present struggles. Such reading encouraged empathy, critical awareness, and reflection, enhancing their civic and emotional literacy.[2]

> "Noli Me Tangere made me reflect on how my generation deals with injustice. It gave me goosebumps because it still happens now."

The emotional charge in these accounts illustrates competence in moral reasoning. Students interpret social issues through affective understanding, showing that emotional resonance deepens cognitive engagement.

There was also a highly personal psychological identification with Florante's symbolic imprisonment, interpreted through the lens of mental health, particularly anxiety. The metaphorical connection between the literary event and mental confinement emphasized the text's psychological accessibility to modern readers.[5] Similarly, the tragedy of Sisa served as both an emotional stimulus and a reflective medium for understanding societal attitudes toward mental health.[2]

> "That scene where Florante gets imprisoned felt like how I deal with anxiety, trapped and unsure, but still hoping someone will understand."

> "Reading about Sisa broke my heart. It made me think about how mental health issues were seen then and how they still go unnoticed today."

These examples show how literature provides a vocabulary for articulating emotional states that are often difficult to express. By identifying parallels between literary suffering and personal anxiety, readers experience both catharsis and insight.

As the reader engaged more critically and introspectively, they began to uncover layers of emotional complexity. It also suggested that Gen Z readers are capable of finding profound personal meaning in texts that at first seem disconnected from their realities.[5]

> "Florante at Laura felt distant at first, but when I looked deeper, I realized Florante's heartbreak and confusion were exactly what I felt during my first breakup."

This shift from surface-level reading to introspective engagement marks a development of autonomy in interpretation. Emotional recognition becomes a gateway to self-directed meaning-making, blending affective and analytical competence.

The readers appeared to engage with the material on a level that transcended plot comprehension, while exploring broader philosophical or societal implications. This emotional resonance presented the ability of historical texts to activate timeless questions about human existence, morality, and societal norms.

> "Some old stories didn't just entertain me. They made me sit in silence after reading, thinking deeply about life and society."

Overall, emotional resonance transforms reading into reflective practice. Students articulate empathy, moral evaluation, and personal growth, demonstrating that classical literature continues to shape socio-emotional literacy when approached through introspection.

Theme 3: Theme of Self-Discovery

Some readers noted that the internal conflict and identity struggles they faced as a member of Gen Z were not unprecedented, but rather part of a longstanding human narrative reflected in classical literature. This means that self-discovery has always been a developmental rite of passage, deeply woven into both literature and life.[5]

> "Florante at Laura taught me that confusion and searching for identity aren't just modern problems. They've always been part of growing up."

Participants described moments of realization that connected their personal identities with those of historical protagonists. These experiences demonstrate relatedness—the perception of belonging to an ongoing human story that transcends time.

Some revealed a deep existential awakening prompted by interaction with the characters created by José Rizal, particularly those who embodied nationalistic ideals and civic responsibility. This moment of reflection can be considered a marker of self-discovery, where literature became a mirror for the reader's unresolved questions about civic engagement.[3]

> "José Rizal's characters made me want to ask, 'What am I doing for my country?' I didn't expect an old book to challenge my sense of purpose."

Such realizations point to competence in ethical reflection. The act of questioning one's role in society suggests that reading promotes self-evaluation tied to civic identity, a motivation sustained by perceived moral mastery.

Consequently, this level of reflection exemplified the transformative power of literature to shape not only thoughts but also actions. They presented a movement from self-interest to broader social consciousness, implying a political and moral awakening.[2]

> "Reading Noli Me Tangere made me think about who I want to be, not just in school but in how I treat others and stand for something."

Rather than viewing literature as transformative in itself, participants framed it as a prompt for dialogue and awareness, an opportunity for internal negotiation of values and goals.

They deconstructed the myth of perfection often associated with protagonists in classic texts. This engagement allowed the reader to humanize Don Juan and see their own personal experiences shown in his struggles, thus positioning literature as a space for self-evaluation. Through literature, the reader came to validate their own imperfection as part of the human condition.[1]

> "Those old characters weren't perfect. I loved that, because it made me reflect that making mistakes is also part of finding yourself."

> "I realized that even Don Juan had to go through mistakes and failures before finding the right path. That reminded me of my own journey."

Through these realizations, students displayed autonomy in constructing meaning and relatedness in empathizing with flawed heroes. Literature thus becomes both a mirror and a guide for personal development, linking private identity work with collective heritage.

Objective 2: To examine the perspectives and experiences of Gen Z individuals regarding how Philippine literature builds their interest in academic and personal development.

Theme 1: Literature as a Tool for Academic Engagement

There was potential for academic transformation wherein classical literature functioned as a gateway toward higher-order thinking. Initially engaging with the text at a surface level, students admitted to approaching the reading process through rote memorization, likely in response to traditional classroom expectations. However, as comprehension matured, the learner began to decode the figurative language, identifying the metaphors and symbols embedded in the text. This transition showed a cognitive shift from passive reception to active analysis, a hallmark of academic growth.

"Reading Florante at Laura[5] made me better at analyzing texts in school. At first, I just memorized it, but then I started to understand metaphors and symbols."

This shift from memorization to meaning-making illustrates how literary study fosters the SDT dimension of competence, students experience success not through external reward but through internal mastery of interpretation. As they begin to uncover figurative depth, reading becomes self-reinforcing: comprehension itself is gratifying. Such growth in perceived capability motivates them to tackle more complex material, showing that even canonical works can cultivate self-efficacy when approached through inquiry rather than repetition.

For example, some mentioned how linguistic difficulty in classical Philippine texts became a catalyst for academic improvement. Through this process, comprehension skills were not only strengthened within the context of literature but extended across academic disciplines. Confronting unfamiliar linguistic structures required not only translation but also critical reflection on meaning, context, and subtext.

> "Old literature challenged me to improve my comprehension. It's not easy to understand the old Tagalog, so I had to work harder, and it helped my academic reading overall."

> "Even if the language is different, these works taught me how to interpret deeper meanings. That helped me not just in Filipino class, but also in subjects like Social Studies."

Here, difficulty becomes productive rather than discouraging. By persevering through the linguistic and cultural distance of classical language, learners build intellectual stamina—another marker of competence. Their comments suggest a movement from extrinsic compliance to intrinsic engagement, where satisfaction arises from overcoming challenge. This echoes SDT's claim that sustained motivation grows when tasks are optimally demanding and meaningful.

The contextual richness bridged the gap between literary study and historical understanding, allowing the student to connect emotionally and intellectually with historical events. This enhanced the authenticity of historical learning, making it more immediate and relevant to contemporary concerns. Classroom discussions, stimulated by the novel, likely promoted dialogic learning and peer exchange, which contributed to deeper understanding.[2]

> "When we tackled Noli Me Tangere in class, I got really involved in the discussions. It made our literature subject feel more alive."

Engagement through discussion demonstrates the SDT need for relatedness—learning that happens within a social network of peers and teachers. When students feel their ideas are heard and valued, they invest more effort in comprehension. Literature becomes a communal space for interpretation rather than a solitary task, fostering academic motivation anchored in social connection.

Lastly, for some literature that present unusual structure, their form served as an entry point into literary aesthetics, altering the student's engagement from passive reading to active literary appreciation. The appreciation for poetic structure suggested that the student became attuned to the mechanics of storytelling, recognizing how structure enhances meaning. This realization likely encouraged the student to adopt a more analytical stance in reading, not just in Filipino but across other text-heavy subjects.[1]

> "I used to think literature was boring until we studied Ibong Adarna. The way the story was written made me appreciate structure and poetry more."

Encountering rhythm, repetition, and symbolism through poetic form invited students to see reading as art rather than obligation. This aesthetic appreciation satisfies autonomy, as learners discover joy in exploring structure on their own terms.

Theme 2: Gateway for Character Formation

Literary resources might also be used as a gateway for character formation among Gen Z students. They did not merely consume the story but internalized its ethical implications, particularly the idea that advocating for reform and truth often involves risk and resistance. For example, Ibarra's defiance of the corrupt institutions in Noli Me Tangere prompted introspection in the participant about the relevance of moral convictions in contemporary society.[2]

> "I admired how Ibarra stood up for what he believed in, even when it was
> dangerous. It made me think about doing the right thing, even when it's hard."

The moral admiration voiced here shows how classical narratives cultivate competence in ethical reasoning. Students interpret principled action not as distant heroism but as a model of integrity they can emulate. This movement from narrative appreciation to moral evaluation demonstrates how literature prompts learners to see virtue as achievable rather than abstract, an outcome that strengthens both personal conviction and academic engagement.

For them, even classical literature had the capacity to generate profound psychological connection. The literature acted as an emotional witness, validating experiences that the reader may have felt isolated in. It showed how classical texts continue to communicate across time through emotional truths, not just moral instruction.

> "I didn't expect old literature to feel personal, but some lines hit me so hard
> they stayed in my head for days. It felt like someone understood me."

This response illustrates the SDT principle of relatedness—the reader experiences an emotional bond with the text that reduces feelings of isolation. Literature becomes a companion in navigating complex emotions, proving that even historical works can meet young readers' psychosocial needs. The emotional validation reinforces intrinsic motivation: students continue reading not for grades but for the comfort of recognition.

Unlike passive storytelling, the text catalyzed a self-reflection process in which the reader began reassessing their interpersonal behavior. The recognition of humility and patience as virtues emerged not from explicit didacticism but from emotional engagement with the character's trials. The reader viewed Don Juan not just as a literary figure but as a symbol of ideal conduct, which they aspired to emulate in daily life.[1]

> "The patience and humility shown by Don Juan in Ibong Adarna made me
> reflect on how I should treat others."

Here, the act of reflection reveals autonomy in moral learning. Rather than absorbing prescribed lessons, students choose which virtues to internalize. This sense of self-directed value formation enhances authenticity and ownership of ethical growth, a key condition for sustained motivation under SDT.

Similarly, some did not just sympathize with Sisa's suffering; rather, they began to recognize similar patterns of silent suffering in real-life contexts. This experience served as a catalyst for moral reflection and the expansion of empathetic capacity among young individuals, which are essential components of personal and social development. The story brought to light the often-invisible nature of mental health struggles, especially among the marginalized, prompting the reader to become more perceptive and compassionate.[2]

> "After reading about Sisa, I became more aware of how we often overlook
> people who are suffering silently. It made me more empathetic."

Empathy here bridges the personal and the civic. Readers translate compassion for a fictional figure into awareness of real social issues, a process aligning with relatedness and civic competence. Such moral imagination represents an advanced stage of reader engagement in which emotional response becomes ethical commitment.

They recognized that despite the antiquity of literature, the ethical values embedded in the narratives retained profound contemporary relevance. The literature served as a conduit through which the reader could encounter timeless virtues, such as honesty and integrity, and understand their applicability across generations.

> "The old stories made me realize that honesty and integrity are values that
> stand the test of time. They still apply to us today."

By drawing parallels between classical and modern morality, participants demonstrate the capacity to generalize ethical insight across contexts, evidence of competence in moral reasoning. Recognizing continuity between past and present values affirms that Philippine literature functions as a living moral archive, not merely a historical artifact.

Lastly, Elias's tragic arc, primarily marked by personal loss, ideological awakening, and ultimate sacrifice, became more than a narrative element. It transformed into a moral imperative for the reader. They internalized Elias's altruism as a call to examine their own capacity for compassion and social contribution.[6]

> "Characters like Elias made me think about sacrifice and service to others. It's
> not just a story, it's a reminder to care beyond yourself."

Internalizing Elias's altruism represents the synthesis of SDT's three needs: competence (understanding moral complexity), autonomy (choosing altruism as a personal stance), and relatedness (identifying with the collective good). Through such integration, reading becomes a transformative ethical exercise that motivates civic mindfulness rather than mere admiration for heroism.

Theme 3: Literature for Personal Reflection and Growth

Some Gen Z revealed how the character of Florante[5] served as a representation of their own internal struggle with identity and purpose. The story prompted introspection, not through explicit instruction, but through emotional resonance and implicit understanding.

> "When I read about the identity crisis of Florante, I saw my own confusion
> about who I am and what I want to be."

This sense of identification indicates autonomous motivation—students freely connect literary identity conflicts with their own self-exploration. Such voluntary engagement turns reading into self-dialogue, fulfilling literature's developmental role in adolescence. Recognizing one's reflection in a classical hero bridges historical and modern struggles for meaning, highlighting the timelessness of identity formation.

Some reflected on the literary journey of José Rizal's protagonists and Rizal himself served as a form of guidance for the respondent amid their academic and existential confusion. In Rizal's perseverance, whether depicted through Ibarra's reformist vision or Simoun's tragic transformation, the reader identified a narrative of endurance, purpose, and moral courage.[2, 4]

> "I felt lost in college, but Rizal's works gave me perspective: he went through
> hardships but still found purpose. That inspired me."

> "Those characters didn't have it easy. Their internal struggles reminded me of
> how I handle my own decisions and emotions."

Here, literature functions as mentorship. Students develop competence by drawing pragmatic lessons from adversity and by mapping characters' perseverance onto their own coping strategies. Rather than glorifying struggle, they extract transferable principles, resilience, purpose, and reflective control—that enrich both academic perseverance and emotional regulation.

Gen Z saw themselves not merely as a passive consumer of historical fiction but as a participant in an enduring ethical dialogue. Rizal's critique of colonial rule, church abuses, and social inequality resonated as a contemporary moral framework, provoking the reader to assess their own silence or action. This self-questioning reflected the capacity of literature to cultivate civic consciousness and moral awakening, leading the readers towards self-growth.

> "El Filibusterismo made me question my own passivity. Am I just watching
> injustice happen? It made me think about my role in society."

This moment of discomfort signals relatedness with collective ideals and autonomy in moral judgment. By interrogating their own inaction, readers transform empathy into agency. Literature thus becomes a participatory medium for moral reasoning, aligning personal awareness with social responsibility.

5. Discussion

This study analyzed the perceptions and experiences of Gen Z students regarding Philippine literary resources. Findings revealed that Gen Z readers strongly resonated with classical Philippine literature due to its emotional depth, relatable characters, and thematic relevance in navigating identity, civic responsibility, and mental health awareness. These texts did not simply inform academic growth but became tools for ethical reflection, emotional processing, and personal transformation.

Respondents frequently interpreted literary figures as more than historical or fictional symbols. For instance, Ibarra's[2] advocacy was seen not just as a plotline but as a catalyst for participants to consider their civic responsibilities. Similarly, Sisa's mental deterioration illuminated for many the overlooked realities of psychological suffering in present society. The depth of these interpretations demonstrates that Philippine literature, when engaged reflectively, fosters empathy, introspection, and moral awakening.

Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory, these responses highlight how autonomy, competence, and relatedness interact in literary engagement. Students' freedom to interpret texts in personally meaningful ways reflects autonomy; their sense of achievement in decoding complex language and themes indicates competence; and their emotional connection to characters and peers during discussion underscores relatedness. Together, these dimensions explain why reading became intrinsically rewarding rather than externally imposed—a shift that underpins authentic motivation and sustained learning.

Reading motivation emerged as a pivotal theme. Consistent with studies showing that reading engagement increases when learners find personal meaning in texts [4,5,14], students reported that narratives mirroring their own struggles—such as anxiety, injustice, or identity confusion—sparked a renewed interest in reading. These motivations were not externally imposed but internalized through emotional and psychological connections to the stories, aligning with Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness [15,16].

This alignment suggests that the enduring appeal of classical texts lies not in their prescribed academic value but in their ability to meet psychological needs. When readers perceive a sense of ownership over

interpretation, feel capable of understanding challenging material, and connect emotionally to narratives and characters, literature becomes a self-sustaining source of engagement. This finding extends SDT's application beyond general motivation research into the domain of literary learning, demonstrating that emotional and ethical identification can activate the same motivational mechanisms observed in other learning contexts.

Participants also revealed that their reading preferences were shaped by emotional resonance, not just literary appreciation. Characters like Simoun[4] or Florante[5] became reflective anchors for personal experiences, encouraging learners to critically examine their emotional responses and moral standpoints. These findings affirm Eekhof et al.'s [51] and van der Kleij et al.'s [52] claims that fiction can nurture adolescents' socio-cognitive development, identity formation, and perspective-taking. As one student reflected, reading classical literature "felt like someone understood me"—a sentiment that highlights the psychological intimacy and relevance of Philippine texts when taught meaningfully.

The emotional attunement evident in these responses also reflects positive psychology perspectives on learning, where emotional engagement amplifies cognitive and moral development [31]. In this context, literature acts as both a cognitive and affective exercise: by empathizing with characters, readers rehearse emotional regulation and perspective-taking, leading to deeper understanding of human complexity.

Importantly, students noted that engagement deepened when literature was no longer framed merely as academic content. The linguistic challenge of classical works, such as Florante at Laura[5] or Noli Me Tangere[2], became a gateway to cognitive development. Difficult Tagalog structures prompted students to reflect more deeply, improving comprehension and analytical reasoning—echoing findings from Barber & Klauda [53] and Guthrie et al. [54] on the connection between reading difficulty, motivation, and skill development.

These observations reinforce that perceived challenge can drive competence satisfaction when learners are supported in overcoming it. Instead of viewing linguistic barriers as discouraging, students reinterpreted them as opportunities for growth—aligning with De Smedt et al.'s [30] argument that intrinsic motivation thrives when tasks balance difficulty with perceived attainability. Thus, the act of deciphering archaic texts became both a cognitive workout and a motivational reward.

The study also highlights an important pedagogical implication: teaching literature through culturally reflective, emotionally anchored approaches cultivates not only academic growth but also ethical literacy. This affirms Dera's [55] and Iswanda's [56] assertion that perceived irrelevance of canonical texts may hinder student engagement, and that instructional design must draw upon learners' lived experiences. Literature became for these students a mirror of personal identity, a tool for critical reflection, and a bridge to self-understanding.

However, rather than positioning literature as universally transformative, it is more accurate to describe it as conditionally impactful—its influence emerges when learners encounter it through supportive, dialogic pedagogy. Emotional safety, cultural resonance, and relevance to personal realities determine whether literary engagement leads to ethical or civic reflection. This nuance prevents overgeneralization while acknowledging literature's potential as a developmental medium.

Recent theoretical developments, such as internality and intermediality [57], help explain this relevance. Internality—literature's ability to evoke deep emotional and psychological experiences—was evident in how students connected with characters like Elias[6] or Maria Clara[2]. Meanwhile, intermediality explains how Philippine literature now thrives beyond the page: in performances, social media reinterpretations, and

classroom dialogues. These intermodal experiences made the literature alive, immediate, and personally significant for Gen Z.

The digital context, often absent in prior literary motivation studies, surfaced as a defining factor for Gen Z engagement. Students frequently accessed summaries, analyses, or adaptations through social media platforms like TikTok or YouTube, which served as motivational gateways to classical texts. This demonstrates how intermedial experiences complement intrinsic motivation by situating traditional literature within contemporary cultural ecosystems. The fusion of print and digital media thus reinforces literature's accessibility and relevance in an attention-driven generation [58].

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings contribute to bridging Self-Determination Theory and literary reception studies. SDT explains the psychological processes sustaining motivation, while literary pedagogy contextualizes how these processes unfold in interpretive and emotional engagement. Integrating the two frameworks advances understanding of literature not just as text, but as an experiential space that fulfills learners' needs for agency, mastery, and connection.

It is important, however, to acknowledge methodological constraints. The study's limited and relatively homogenous sample restricts the generalizability of its conclusions. Future research should include participants from more varied regional, linguistic, and institutional contexts, and consider mixed-method approaches that pair qualitative insights with quantitative measures of motivation and engagement. Doing so would validate whether the observed patterns hold across broader populations and allow for stronger causal inference.

Finally, the study's findings underscore that motivation, ethical awareness, and identity formation can all be nurtured through literature when learners are allowed to read reflectively, emotionally, and introspectively. Rather than serving as a one-size-fits-all solution, literature functions as an adaptable pedagogical tool that encourages self-directed learning, cultural appreciation, and moral imagination. By shifting from passive instruction to dialogic engagement, educators can enhance rather than transform literature's role in developing socially aware, emotionally intelligent, and critically thoughtful individuals—an outcome that remains both realistic and pedagogically significant.

6. Conclusion

The perceptions and experiences of Gen Z readers about Philippine literary resources revealed a multifaceted view of reading motivation. Gen Z students found deep emotional, psychological, and cultural relevance in Philippine classical literature. Literature became more than just an academic subject; it became a reflective tool for understanding personal and social issues, including mental health, identity, and civic responsibility. Classical characters symbolized modern struggles such as grief, anxiety, and emotional burden, allowing readers to explore their own emotional complexities. In turn, these narratives helped spark empathy, critical awareness, and introspective learning, illustrating how historical texts continue to speak to the timeless aspects of the human condition.

Gen Z readers reported improved reading comprehension and critical thinking as they learned to deal with the linguistic and symbolic density of classical texts. Over time, their engagement transitioned from memorization to deep literary analysis, enhancing their skills not only in literature but across other subjects. Viewed through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, this development reflects the interplay of autonomy, competence, and relatedness: students felt free to interpret texts personally, capable of mastering their complexities, and connected to the shared cultural and emotional experiences they represent.

Rather than assuming literature to be inherently transformative, these findings suggest that its influence depends on how it is taught and contextualized. When students are encouraged to connect classical themes with their lived experiences and digital environments, literature becomes a catalyst for reflection and growth. The rise of online literary communities and multimedia adaptations demonstrates that Gen Z's engagement now extends beyond the printed page, merging traditional and digital literacies in ways that sustain intrinsic motivation.

While this study was limited by a small and relatively homogenous group of participants, the insights gained highlight the potential of qualitative inquiry to uncover the psychological dimensions of literary engagement. Future work can build on these findings by exploring more diverse contexts and using complementary methods to map broader motivational patterns.

Overall, Philippine literature continues to hold strong educational and developmental value when presented as a dialogic, emotionally resonant, and culturally grounded experience. By designing learning environments that nurture autonomy, competence, and relatedness, educators can foster readers who approach literature not as an obligation but as an enduring source of meaning, empathy, and self-understanding.

Footnote

1. Don Juan is a central character in *Ibong Adarna*, a 16th-century Filipino epic about a magical bird, known for his patience and virtue despite betrayal and hardship.

2. Maria Clara, Sisa, and Crisostomo Ibarra are characters in *Noli Me Tangere* by Dr. José Rizal. The novel critiques Spanish colonial rule and presents these characters as symbols of suffering, silence, and resistance.

3. Basilio is a character who appears in both *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. He symbolizes trauma, survival, and the burden of memory.

4. Simoun is the alter ego of Crisostomo Ibarra in *El Filibusterismo*, showing his transformation from idealist to revolutionary following personal tragedy.

5. Florante is the protagonist of *Florante at Laura* by Francisco Balagtas. His imprisonment and emotional trials symbolize broader struggles with identity, oppression, and moral growth.

6. Elias is a character in *El Filibusterismo* by Dr. José Rizal, representing revolutionary sacrifice and altruism in the face of injustice.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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