



MODES OF IMAGINATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN NARRATIVE PRACTICE OF CONTEMPORARY WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

Imaginative processes in fiction writing are often discussed in terms of creativity, yet less is known about how imagination functions as a mode of consciousness shaped by cultural environments. This study investigates how imaginative consciousness emerges in the narrative practices of six Indonesian fiction writers who are active across digital and print platforms.

Employing a narrative-phenomenological approach, the research draws on Sartre's theory of imagination and Strinati's theory of popular culture to examine the writers' lived experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using open coding. The findings reveal that imagination is structured through sensory perception and internalized cultural symbols. Two dominant modes of imaginative consciousness emerge from the data: a reflective mode, linked to planning, character design, and narrative structuring; and an affective mode, marked by emotional flow, spontaneous associations, and memory. These modes are shaped by popular culture, including digital reading trends, audience responses, and symbolic references. The study offers a grounded understanding of imagination in fiction writing as a dynamic interplay between subjective experience and cultural influence. It highlights how fiction writers navigate between self-expression and symbolic mediation within contemporary literary environments.

Keywords: imaginative consciousness; narrative practice; fiction writing; reflective and affective modes; popular culture; narrative phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

The writing ecosystem in Indonesia is shifting rapidly. Access to digital tools, the popularity of online platforms, and the growing interest in diverse narrative forms—especially among young writers—have brought new energy to literary production. This wave of change is further supported by literacy communities and government-led programs that promote national reading culture (Suryadi & Suswanto, 2024). As digital platforms such as blogs, social media, and interactive fiction websites become more common, the boundaries of storytelling begin to expand. Writers are no longer limited to the printed page; they now create stories that include visuals, sound, hyperlinks, and even direct interaction with readers (Petrelli & Wright, 2009; Suryadi & Suswanto, 2024).

Building on this transformation, technology plays a major role. It not only offers tools for writing and distribution, but also changes the way writers see themselves and their craft. Many experiment with digital formats, bending genres and breaking narrative conventions to explore new aesthetics (Joshi, 2023). At the same time, students and novice authors are rethinking what counts as “good writing” under the influence of these technologies (Nobles & Paganucci, 2015). In academic circles, digitization encourages collaboration and interactivity, changing how citations, feedback, and reader engagement work (Safonova & Safonov, 2021).

One clear sign of this disruption is the rise of Wattpad and similar platforms, which challenge traditional publishing models. These online spaces are not just for content sharing—they also shape how writers interact emotionally with readers, explore their identities, and experiment with genre expectations (Parnell, 2021). The relationship between authors, readers, and publishers is no longer fixed; it is now participatory, fluid, and open-ended (Petrelli & Wright, 2009). Virtual writing communities have emerged as spaces for growth, offering both emotional support and practical feedback (Sassi et al., 2023). Meanwhile, self-publishing and e-book technologies empower writers to bypass old gatekeepers and build direct, dialogic relationships with audiences (Laquintano, 2010).

These changing platforms not only affect where and how writing circulates—they also reshape the inner processes of creativity itself. In the midst of this evolving scene, imagination begins to take on a different role. It is no longer seen merely as the act of inventing stories from thin air. Increasingly, imagination is understood as a mode of consciousness—a way of sensing, interpreting, and negotiating meaning through symbolic structures. As Sartre (2002) asserted, imagination is not passive representation but an active, intentional engagement with the world. We imagine not simply to escape reality, but to reshape and reframe what reality could mean.

This imaginative act is deeply symbolic: it draws upon memory, emotion, culture, and language to construct meaning. Imaginative consciousness, therefore, is not an abstract or isolated process; it unfolds within symbolic fields saturated by cultural forms that shape how individuals feel, think, and narrate (Polyakov, 2016; Volkova et al., 2020). These symbolic pressures do not merely inspire the imagination—they condition and organize its expressions. In this way, imagination becomes the site where personal experience intersects with collective signs and shared cultural codes, producing narratives that are new yet deeply rooted in the familiar (Storey, 2018; Strinati, 2004).

For fiction writers, this imaginative consciousness unfolds in moments of creation. Sometimes it is planned—structured through outlines and research. At other times, it flows freely through emotional associations and spontaneous imagery. It moves between reflection and affect, between deliberation and surrender. And as they write, authors do not only draw from their own lives, but also from the cultural material surrounding them: genres, tropes, media icons, trending narratives. All of these shapes how stories are imagined, not just how they are written.

Despite the growing interest in imagination across disciplines, several unresolved issues continue to limit its theoretical and empirical clarity. For instance, Kind (2021) challenges the coherence of unconscious imagination, arguing that existing theories lack sufficient motivation for positing imaginative processes beyond awareness. Similarly, Barrett (2022) highlights the difficulty of capturing the affective texture of imaginative experience, particularly when it is emotionally rich but elusive in structure. These limitations point to a broader uncertainty in how imaginative consciousness is defined and operationalized in lived experience.

Even integrative efforts, such as those proposed by Andrews-Hanna & Grilli (2021), while advancing a multifaceted model of the imaginative mind, still fall short of capturing how imagination is culturally mediated or experientially situated. Asma (2022) likewise identifies the absence of a refined taxonomy for imaginative processes, calling for closer attention to how imagination fails, resists, or is shaped by external symbolic constraints. Similarly, Brčić (2022) argues that despite correlations between creativity and altered states of consciousness, we still lack conclusive scientific explanations of how these states generate narrative meaning.



These gaps underscore a critical need to reconceptualize imagination not simply as a mental module or neurological state, but as a dynamic form of consciousness entangled in affective, symbolic, and cultural processes. Moreover, few studies have traced how this imaginative consciousness unfolds within the creative routines of actual fiction writers, especially in non-Western contexts where digital and popular cultures introduce additional symbolic pressures.

This study addresses these limitations by focusing on the lived experiences of Indonesian fiction writers—authors who write both in print and across digital platforms, and who constantly navigate between personal memory, market trends, and cultural symbolism. By adopting a narrative-phenomenological approach, this research explores how imagination operates as both a reflective and affective mode of consciousness, and how it is shaped by the symbolic fields in which writers are embedded. In doing so, this study offers not only an empirical contribution to the phenomenology of writing, but also a conceptual bridge between theoretical gaps in imagination studies and the concrete practices of literary creation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Imaginative consciousness is a multifaceted mode of awareness that enables individuals to transcend immediate perception and mentally construct alternative realities. It serves as a bridge between internal subjectivity and the external world, allowing experience to be reconfigured into symbolic, often surreal, yet meaningful forms of expression (Didenko et al., 2023). As a cognitive architecture, imaginative consciousness integrates episodic memory and future planning—traits with deep evolutionary roots not only in humans but also across non-human vertebrates (Zacks et al., 2022). This suggests that imagination is not merely an artistic embellishment but a biologically grounded capacity for projecting and reconfiguring temporal experience.

Operating as a pre-noetic force, imaginative consciousness synthesizes emotion, sensory input, and conceptual thought into cohesive verbal or artistic forms. This integrative function reflects what Pulvirenti & Gambino (2022) describe as the organic vitality of the imaginative faculty—a natural, embodied intelligence capable of shaping both aesthetic vision and existential orientation. Recent studies also emphasize its role in mediating how people interpret, resist, or reframe reality through fantasy and symbolic engagement (Volkova & Kamin, 2023). As such, imaginative consciousness functions not only as a mental faculty, but also as a dynamic process that structures identity and enables individuals to critically inhabit their lived experience (Aldea, 2020).

Narrative practice frames writing as a reflective act through which individuals interpret, reconstruct, and assign meaning to lived experiences. It is not merely a method of expression, but a process of subject formation—a way to shape one's sense of self through storytelling. As Bogdanova (2024) argues, narrative engagement fosters personal development by enabling self-awareness, purposeful direction, and a coherent articulation of life events. In contexts such as education and clinical practice, narrative writing is increasingly recognized as a transformative activity that nurtures empathy, professional insight, and ethical responsiveness (Dhungel, 2022).

Crucially, narrative practice encourages reflexivity, allowing individuals to critically examine both their own stories and those of others. This reflective process promotes ethical relations and mutual understanding, particularly within institutional settings where diversity of

perspective is vital (Chung & Norvell, 2025). Beyond reflection, narrative also serves a restorative function—it facilitates healing, reintegrates fragmented identities, and restores a sense of agency, especially in trauma-informed contexts (Kirkland & Price, 2022). Through its capacity to weave together emotion, memory, and meaning, narrative becomes both a method of inquiry and a medium of relational depth.

Popular culture operates as a symbolic field that continuously shapes imaginative consciousness by mediating how meaning is created, distributed, and internalized in everyday life. Unlike high art or specialist discourse, it invites the participation of ordinary individuals who imbue cultural products with personal significance, thereby extending the emotional and cognitive scope of their lived experience (Hurova, 2022). This participatory dynamic allows for the re-appropriation of meaning across various media—literature, film, digital platforms—where cultural artifacts are not only consumed but reinterpreted in light of wider sociohistorical contexts and individual identities (Đukić, 2022).

At the same time, popular culture intersects with broader structures of perception, influencing how individuals understand politics, norms, and collective values. It functions as both a mirror and a mold: reflecting prevailing ideologies while also enabling their transformation (Aistrope, 2020). As such, the symbolic pressure exerted by popular culture is not coercive but affective—it resonates with audiences by offering shared symbols, genres, and narratives that inform how people feel, think, and narrate their worlds. Its affective strength lies precisely in this capacity to structure everyday meaning-making through emotional resonance and semiotic accessibility (Barrett, 2022; McKee, 2022).

METHOD

This research employed a narrative phenomenological approach to explore how contemporary Indonesian fiction writers experience and articulate imaginative consciousness. The study focused on capturing the lived meanings behind their creative processes—particularly how imagination is experienced, narrated, and influenced by symbolic elements drawn from popular culture.

Six participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their active involvement in both print and digital literary platforms. The participants varied in gender, genre preference, and professional background, ensuring diversity in imaginative orientation and narrative style. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, using semi-structured prompts that encouraged reflective storytelling rather than descriptive accounts. The conversations took place over online calls and were recorded, transcribed, and member-checked to ensure validity.

The data were analyzed through a layered reading process that involved identifying experiential patterns within each participant's narrative. The interpretation followed a noetic-noematic structure, distinguishing between the intentional acts of imagining and the objects or meanings being imagined. Through iterative analysis, two core modes of imaginative consciousness emerged: reflective and affective. The reflective mode involved conscious planning and narrative structuring, while the affective mode was marked by emotional intensity, spontaneity, and memory-driven imagery. These modes were not seen as binary oppositions but as fluid dimensions within the creative consciousness of each writer.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The creative process of contemporary fiction writers unfolds within a complex interplay of emotional cues, memory, and symbolic forms. From the narrative accounts collected, a

recurring tension emerged between moments of conscious construction and moments of immersive affective flow. Participants described writing not as a fixed technique but as a shifting state of awareness—sometimes deliberate and structured, other times spontaneous and emotionally driven. This duality revealed two distinct but interrelated modes of imaginative consciousness: reflective and affective (see Figure 1). These modes were not experienced as separate phases, but as overlapping tendencies that coexisted and interacted dynamically throughout the act of writing.

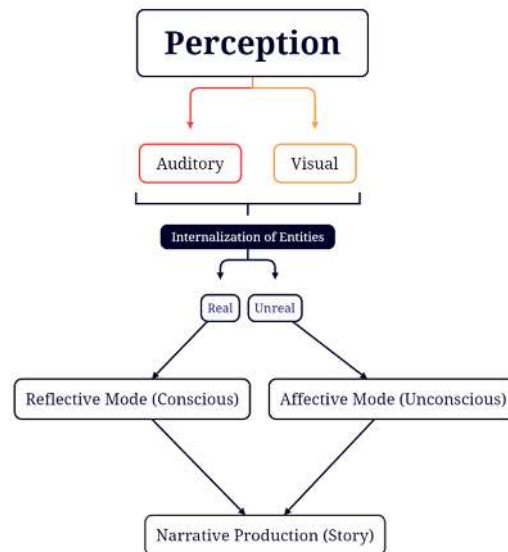


Figure 1 Modes of Imaginative Consciousness in the Creative Process of Fiction Writer

In the reflective mode of imaginative consciousness, writers engage with storytelling as a deliberate and structured act. Participants in this study described imagination as a conscious craft—shaped by outlines, thematic scaffolding, and disciplined attention to symbolic coherence. Narrative planning often preceded the writing act, involving character development, genre positioning, and the integration of personal themes with broader cultural codes. One writer explained how they “interrogate genre conventions” to subvert expectations, while another emphasized “rigid planning and research” to preserve narrative integrity. This conscious structuring involved not only cognitive control but also strategic selection of intertextual references—drawn from literature, film, and even digital memes.

These insights resonate with recent studies that frame narrative awareness as a reflective process with deep implications for both self-understanding and social engagement. Writers consciously utilize genre and symbolic materials to deepen emotional resonance and explore complex themes, particularly in collective and community-based learning contexts where storytelling fosters empathy and shared identity (Charley, 2022). Metacognition also plays a central role in creative composition, enabling authors to monitor and refine their own cognitive strategies while writing. In digital storytelling, for instance, students develop enhanced metacognitive abilities that support narrative planning, evaluation, and reflection (Lavrysh et al., 2023). Moreover, embedding metacognitive practices in writing pedagogy has been shown to encourage critical self-awareness and challenge ingrained biases, leading to more nuanced and ethically grounded narratives (Alvarado Gómez, 2022; Charley, 2022).

Altogether, the reflective mode reflects how narrative consciousness, symbolic literacy, and metacognitive regulation intersect to foster imaginative control. Here, imagination is not

escapist—it is a functional force that structures stories with intention and clarity, making space for innovation while staying grounded in the symbolic field (Brockmeier, 2020; von Thienen et al., 2023).

In contrast to the reflective mode, the affective mode of imaginative consciousness unfolds as an immersive, intuitive flow. For many of the participating writers, imagination was described not as something they planned, but something that “came over them” during moments of heightened emotion, memory, or mental stillness. They wrote from dreams, from fragments of personal experience, or from the mood evoked by a piece of music or a recurring image. One participant spoke of writing “as if haunted by a feeling I couldn’t explain,” while another described the process as “tracing shadows of past sensations.” In this mode, imagination seems less guided by conscious intent and more by affective resonance—narratives rise from embodied impressions, emotional echoes, and fleeting mental images.

This aligns with research suggesting that emotional states and autobiographical memory significantly shape narrative generation. Emotional intelligence (EI) enables individuals to navigate affective experiences more skillfully, which in turn enhances both originality and emotional coherence in creative output (Kuška et al., 2020; Sundquist & Lubart, 2022). Emotions are not only triggers but also scaffolds for memory: emotionally charged experiences tend to be more vividly remembered, giving narrative content greater depth and authenticity (Pedroso Pereira et al., 2021). The affective landscape of writing—marked by oscillations between joy, frustration, uncertainty, and euphoria—has also been shown to influence identity formation and narrative structure, particularly in emotionally loaded contexts such as thesis writing or autobiographical fiction (Rantala-Lehtola & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2022).

Importantly, negative emotions, often viewed as disruptive, are frequently associated with heightened creativity. Suzic (2021) argues that unresolved frustration or emotional tension can act as catalysts for imaginative breakthroughs. In our findings, this was reflected in narratives born out of confusion, grief, or longing—stories that were not outlined but emerged suddenly, intensely, and with unexpected coherence. The affective mode, then, is not chaotic but profoundly structured by the emotional unconscious. It becomes a passage through which the writer’s inner world flows into symbolic form—where fiction becomes a residue of feeling shaped into narrative logic.

In the creative process of fiction writing, the boundaries between reflective and affective modes of imaginative consciousness are often fluid rather than fixed. Writers frequently shift between conscious structuring and spontaneous expression, allowing their narratives to emerge through a dynamic interplay of reason and emotion. This phenomenon is well captured by Dual Process Theory (DPT), which proposes that human cognition operates via two distinct systems: a fast, intuitive process (Type 1) and a slow, deliberate analytical process (Type 2) (Augusto, 2024). Within this framework, imagination is not confined to one mode but oscillates between intuitive-emotional surges and calculated narrative decisions. For example, improvisational theatre exemplifies this duality, where performers actively switch between structured planning and chaotic spontaneity, utilizing both automatic and deliberate cognitive processes to elevate creativity (Brett, 2022).

In the same way, fiction writers may begin with affective cues—memories, moods, or imagery—and later refine them using thematic logic or genre-based constraints. Emotional context plays a crucial role here, as affective states are known to stimulate innovative output, particularly when writers encounter constraints or unresolved tension (Perchtold-Stefan et al., 2022). The Dual Pathway to Creativity Model further supports this integration, suggesting that



ideation emerges through a combination of persistence and cognitive flexibility, enabling writers to explore diverse narrative possibilities (Peterson & Pattie, 2024). These findings confirm that imaginative consciousness is not bifurcated but inherently dynamic, shaped by a dialogic flow between intentional design and emotional resonance.

In the evolving landscape of fiction writing, popular culture serves not only as a reservoir of symbols but also as a dynamic field that informs how imagination operates. Through symbolic repertoires, intertextual references, and cultural semiotics, writers engage with popular culture to construct stories that resonate with contemporary audiences. As Werner (2022) notes, popular culture—especially within digital environments—encompasses multimodal texts that blend visual, linguistic, and emotional cues, shaping identity and perceptions of authenticity. This interplay becomes fertile ground for narrative imagination, allowing writers to create fictional worlds that echo cultural ideologies and emotional truths.

Imaginative engagement with popular media often involves metonymic layering, where symbols are condensed to evoke deeper meaning (Feng, 2022). Intertextuality further enriches this process, as writers weave connections across media—referencing films, memes, literature, or genre tropes—to create textured narratives that invite reader participation (Diedrichsen, 2020). Such strategies are central to digital storytelling, where meaning is co-produced between author and audience. Semiotic studies of transmedia franchises reveal how narrative coherence is maintained through shared codes, even as stories stretch across platforms (Furs, 2023). Tavares (2024) underscores this by showing how ideological continuity and creative flexibility coexist within these systems, giving authors a symbolic grammar to negotiate meaning. In this context, popular culture becomes more than background—it acts as a living archive of symbols, genres, and emotions that writers draw upon to build affective resonance and cultural relevance.

Jean-Paul Sartre's exploration of imagination remains profoundly relevant in today's digitally mediated creative culture. For Sartre, imagination is not a secondary copy of reality but a central structure of consciousness—an intentional act that allows individuals to negate the given and reconfigure what is possible (Rae, 2025; Wellner, 2022). This philosophical position resonates with the dynamics of contemporary digital environments, where perception, memory, and creativity are increasingly entangled with algorithmic systems. In such spaces, imagination is no longer a private act but a participatory one, shaped through networks, feedback loops, and social mediation.

This participatory character of digital creativity aligns with what Sartre would call the *praxis* of imagination—an embodied, expressive action rather than passive reflection. As Kovalenko, Melyakova & Kalyntsky (2020) argue, digital authorship transforms creation into an interactive process, where the artist and audience co-constitute meaning. Whether through fan fiction, serialized storytelling, or real-time reader engagement, fiction today unfolds within collaborative spaces that challenge the idea of the solitary author.

Moreover, a phenomenological reading of contemporary narrative—especially within digital fiction—reveals structural shifts that mirror Sartre's emphasis on intentionality and transformation. Multilinear and interactive narratives offer readers agency, allowing them to navigate plots in non-linear ways, reshaping the temporality and causality of the story world (Richardson, 2022). These forms extend Sartre's notion of imaginative freedom into aesthetic structures that resist closure and invite continuous reimagination.

What emerges is a field saturated with symbolic pressures. Writers today must negotiate not only their internal vision but also the demands of platforms, genre conventions, and

audience expectations. Borges (2020) and Kovalenko, Melyakova & Kalyntsky (2020) both point out that digital fiction imposes new constraints—visual, performative, and algorithmic—that frame how imagination is expressed. Revisiting Sartre in this context reveals the tension between imaginative agency and symbolic saturation. Writers are still engaging in acts of transcendence, but the field they navigate is layered with signs, systems, and social meanings that shape the very possibility of imagining otherwise.

In the context of contemporary fiction writing, popular culture is no longer a backdrop—it is a symbolic ecosystem in which imagination circulates. Writers do not simply draw from personal memory; they tap into genres, tropes, memes, and archetypes that already exist in the cultural ether. This aligns with Dominic Strinati's (2004) observation that popular culture operates through repetition and familiarity, constructing meaning not through originality alone, but through the reorganization of shared signs. Writers become cultural mediators—navigating between individual creativity and collective symbols.

Strinati's contribution lies in the way he conceptualizes popular culture as both product and process. It is not merely a reflection of society but a field where ideology, emotion, and aesthetics converge. In this sense, culture does not just reflect imagination—it organizes it. As Storey (2018) emphasizes, symbolic forms in mass media shape how individuals perceive identity, morality, and even desire. Writers immersed in this field are continually negotiating with these codes, either by reinforcing dominant ideologies or attempting to subvert them through narrative reconfigurations.

In this symbolic field, fiction writing becomes a process of selection and recombination. Participants in this study often described how media references emerged spontaneously during writing, even without deliberate intention. Characters echoed television archetypes; settings drew from cinematic landscapes; plot devices mimicked trending narratives. This suggests that popular culture is not just a source of inspiration, but a structuring condition—a frame that conditions imaginative expression even before conscious planning begins.

Importantly, this cultural mediation is not deterministic. Writers retain agency by selectively appropriating symbols, redefining them within their stories. Some participants reflected on how they “bent the genre,” others reimagined stereotypical characters into more complex figures. This act of creative negotiation affirms what Strinati noted: popular culture is a terrain of struggle, not conformity. It is where hegemony and resistance meet—where the imagination is both constrained and catalyzed by symbolic abundance.

Seen through this lens, imaginative consciousness is not only personal but social. It is formed in dialogue with the cultural material that surrounds the writer. As fiction writers move between reflective planning and affective spontaneity, they are also moving through layers of cultural mediation—absorbing, reinterpreting, and sometimes challenging the narratives that structure everyday life.

CONCLUSION

Imaginative consciousness in fiction writing is far from a singular mental event; it emerges as a dynamic interplay between reflection and affect, self and culture, structure and spontaneity. The findings of this study show that fiction writers do not simply generate ideas from within—they engage imagination as a mode of consciousness that is always mediated by symbols, emotions, memory, and cultural forms. This challenges narrow notions of imagination as a purely individual, autonomous faculty. Instead, writing becomes a lived practice of navigating symbolic pressures while preserving narrative agency.



The reflective mode allows writers to work with clarity, control, and metacognitive awareness. Planning, outlining, and intertextual referencing become tools to manage and shape meaning. In contrast, the affective mode gives space for vulnerability and emotional immersion, where imagination flows from memory traces, unresolved emotions, and embodied experiences. These two modes are not separate—they oscillate and co-exist, revealing the dual rhythm of creative consciousness.

Within this continuum, popular culture plays a critical role as both a symbolic field and a reservoir of narrative material. It offers the tropes, genres, and representational codes through which imagination operates. Fiction writers in the digital age do not just write stories—they reassemble shared meanings, bend familiar genres, and encode contemporary anxieties and hopes into their narratives. In doing so, they participate in shaping cultural discourse.

Revisiting Sartre and Strinati through this lens enables a renewed understanding of creative agency. Sartre's view of imagination as an intentional mode of engagement resonates strongly when situated within today's participatory media environment. Similarly, Strinati's insights into cultural mediation help explain how writers are simultaneously constrained and empowered by popular culture. What emerges is a portrait of the writer as a symbolic navigator—someone who draws from cultural memory while forging paths into fictional futures.

This study contributes to the growing recognition of imagination as a complex consciousness-embedded process. It offers a conceptual model that moves beyond static definitions, mapping how fiction writers move across modes, mobilize cultural resources, and compose meaning. Future research might further explore how these modes are shaped across genres, languages, or platforms, or how they intersect with identity, ideology, and emotional labor in the act of storytelling. Ultimately, to understand how we imagine is also to understand how we narrate our place in a world saturated with signs.

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