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Information literacy behind bars: inmates' information experience during prison rehabilitation

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Abstract

Introduction. This study investigates inmates' information literacy experiences during prison rehabilitation from a relational perspective. It examines how inmates encounter, interpret, evaluate and share information within a correctional facility where information access is restricted and social interaction is institutionally regulated.

Method. This study used an interpretive qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve inmates participating in rehabilitation programmes in a correctional facility in Central Java, Indonesia.

Analysis. Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. Coding focused on participants' accounts of meaning, trust, agency, emotion, responsibility and constraint. Relational information literacy was used as an interpretive lens to explore how information practices were shaped by the prison environment.

Results. Five themes were identified: information as moral and existential re-orientation; learning whom to trust in a constrained information environment; agency through discipline, selectivity and compliance; emotional and embodied labour; and ethical circulation and responsibility.

Conclusion. Information literacy in prison is not limited to accessing or using information sources. It is experienced as a relational, moral, emotional and ethical practice through which inmates navigate constraint, assess trust, regulate action, and participate in rehabilitation.

Introduction

People experience information differently depending on the social and institutional environments in which they live. In correctional facilities, this interaction with information occurs under conditions of restricted access, institutional monitoring, and limited freedom of movement. Inmates often rely on rehabilitation programs, correctional officers, instructors, fellow inmates, and family members to obtain information that helps them understand their situation, participate in programs, and prepare for life after release. These conditions make correctional facilities a distinctive information environment in which information is not only accessed and used, but also carefully interpreted, negotiated, and evaluated.

Within Library and Information Science, these diverse ways of engaging with information are commonly examined through the concept of information literacy. While earlier approaches often understood information literacy as the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively (Badke, 2010), later scholarship have emphasised the social, contextual, and experiential nature of information practices (Doyle, 1992; Limberg et al., 2012). This study adopts the relational perspective introduced by Bruce (1997), which focuses on the different ways individuals experience and interact with information in their everyday lives. Rather than viewing information literacy solely as a set of technical skills, this perspective conceptualises it as a dynamic and lifelong learning process shaped by experience, context, reflection, and ethical engagement with information (Bruce, 2008).

Previous relational information literacy studies have shown that people's experiences of information are shaped by social relationships, institutional expectations, community networks, and everyday practices. However, less attention has been given to information literacy in environments where information access is institutionally restricted and social interaction is closely regulated. Correctional facilities are especially important in this regard because information, misinformation, trust, silence, and sharing may carry consequences for safety, rehabilitation, and social relationships.

This study was conducted in a correctional facility in Central Java, Indonesia, where inmates participated in rehabilitation programs intended to support personal development and social reintegration. Rehabilitation programs in the Indonesian correctional system include personality and independence development activities. Examples of personality development activities are religious education and counselling. Examples of independence development activities are vocational training, creative activities, and institutional support roles. Through these programs, inmates encounter various forms of information that may shape how they understand themselves, others, and their future lives.

Despite the importance of information in rehabilitation, inmates' information literacy experiences remain underexplored, particularly from a relational perspective. Existing studies have examined inmates' information needs, prison learning, religious guidance, and information literacy skills (Akin, 2023; Basuki et al., 2025; Canning & Buchanan, 2019; Chandani & Wa, 2020), but less is known about how inmates interpret, evaluate, negotiate, and apply information in their everyday rehabilitation experiences. Addressing this gap, the present study asks: How do inmates experience and interpret information literacy from a relational perspective during their rehabilitation period in a correctional facility in Central Java, Indonesia?

By focusing on inmates' lived experiences and interpretations of information, this study contributes to relational information literacy and information behaviour research. It extends information literacy research into a highly constrained institutional environment and offers insights into how inmates engage with information as active meaning-makers who navigate trust, emotion, discipline, and ethical responsibility during rehabilitation.

Literature review

Relational perspective of information literacy

Information literacy has been conceptualised through various perspectives, ranging from skills-based approaches to more contextual and experiential understandings. Earlier approaches often emphasised individuals' abilities to identify information needs, locate relevant sources, evaluate information, and use it effectively. While these approaches remain useful in educational and professional contexts, they tend to frame information literacy as a set of measurable competencies that can be transferred across settings.

The relational perspective offers a different understanding. Rather than defining information literacy as a universal set of skills, Bruce (1997) conceptualises it as the different ways individuals experience using information. From this perspective, information literacy is understood through people's relationships with information, their contexts, and the meanings they construct through information use. This makes the relational perspective particularly useful for exploring information literacy in everyday life where information practices are shaped by social relationships, institutional structures, and personal experiences.

Bruce's (1997) relational perspective also highlights that information literacy involves more than finding or evaluating information. It includes reflection, learning, meaning-making, and the ethical use of information. Later work on informed learning further emphasises that people learn through engaging with information in context (Bruce, 2008). Therefore, information literacy is not only about what people know, but also about how they use information to understand themselves, others, and the world around them.

Several studies have demonstrated the usefulness of this perspective in different contexts. For example, Demasson et al. (2016) showed how serious leisure participants experience information as a part of learning and identity formation. Heriyanto et al. (2022) examined lecturers' information literacy experiences in remote teaching and found that information literacy was shaped by institutional demands, pedagogical responsibilities, and adaptation to changing teaching conditions. Similarly, Sayyad Abdi et al. (2024) demonstrated that humanitarian migrants' information literacy experiences were shaped by social relationships, trust, language, and settlements contexts.

These studies show that information literacy is deeply contextual and experiential. However, most relational information literacy studies have been conducted in environments where individuals retain relatively broad access to information sources and social networks. Less attention has been given to environments where access to information is restricted, social interaction is regulated, and information use carries heightened consequences. This study addresses that gap by examining information literacy in a correctional facility.

Information literacy in constrained and marginalised contexts

Information literacy in constrained or marginalised contexts highlights issues of access, trust, vulnerability, and social power. In such contexts, information is not always easily available, and individuals may depend heavily on interpersonal networks or institutional intermediaries. This makes information literacy not only a matter of individual capability, but also a relational and situated practice shaped by available resources and social conditions. Research on migrants, refugees, and other marginalised communities has shown that information practices are often mediated through trust, social relationships, and informal sources. Sayyad Abdi et al. (2024), for instance, found that humanitarian migrants rely on people, organisations, and community intermediaries to navigate unfamiliar information environments. Their study highlights that information literacy in marginalised contexts is shaped by uncertainty, dependency, and the need to interpret information through trusted social relationships.

Similarly, relational and socio-cultural approaches to information literacy emphasise that people do not engage with information in isolation. Their information practices are embedded in social relationships, institutional norms, and everyday circumstances. This is particularly important in environments where formal information channels are limited or where individuals may not have full control over the information available to them.

In such contexts, information literacy may involve careful judgement about who to trust, when to seek information, and how to use information without increasing risk. It may also involve emotional and ethical dimensions, such as managing anxiety, avoiding misinformation, or deciding whether information should be shared with others. These dimensions are often overlooked in skills-based approaches that assume individuals have relatively free access to information sources and the autonomy to choose among them.

Correctional facilities represent an important but underexplored example of a constrained information environment. In a correctional facility, access to information is shaped by institutional rules, security concerns, and surveillance. Inmates may rely on officers, instructors, fellow inmates, or family members as information sources. Information may also circulate informally, creating both opportunities for learning and risks of misunderstanding. These conditions make the relational perspective especially useful because it allows researchers to examine how information literacy is experienced under conditions of constraint.

Information, learning, and rehabilitation in correctional facilities

Correctional facilities are not only spaces of confinement, but also spaces of rehabilitation and learning. In Indonesia, correctional institutions provide personality development and independence development programs intended to support inmates' moral awareness, personal growth, vocational skills, and social reintegration. Through these programs, inmates encounter information in various forms, including religious instruction, vocational knowledge, procedural information, advice from officers, and peer learning.

Previous research has shown that information and learning play important roles in prison life. Canning and Buchanan (2019) noted that interpersonal communication is important in meeting inmates' information needs within correctional environments. This suggests that inmates' access to information often depends on relationships with people around them, rather than solely on formal information systems. Akin (2023) also examined learning within correctional facilities and showed that educational activities can support personal development behind bars. In the Indonesian context, Basuki et al. (2025) examined religious learning in correctional institutions and highlighted the role of religious guidance in supporting moral transformation.

Research specifically addressing inmates' information literacy remains limited. Chandani and Wa (2020) investigated information literacy skills among inmates in Welikada Prison, Sri Lanka. Their study provides an important starting point by showing that inmates engage with information sources in prison contexts. However, the study conceptualised information literacy primarily as the ability to use sources and relied on a survey method. As a result, it did not fully capture how inmates experience information, how they make meaning from it, or how information shapes their learning, emotions, relationships, and future orientations during rehabilitation.

This gap is significant because rehabilitation programs are not simply channels for transmitting information. They are social and institutional spaces where inmates encounter, interpret, negotiate, and apply information in relation to their past experiences and future hopes. Information may support moral reflection, emotional regulation, trust-building, practical learning, and preparation for reintegration. Understanding these processes requires an approach that can capture the relational and experiential dimensions of information literacy.

By applying the relational perspective, this study examines inmates not as passive recipients of information or as individuals lacking information skills, but as active meaning-makers who engage with information within institutional constraints. This perspective enables the study to explore how inmates experience information literacy through rehabilitation programs, social interaction, trust, emotional engagement, and ethical responsibility. In doing so, the study contributes to the literature by showing how information literacy can be understood in the context of a highly constrained correctional environment.

Building on this literature, the present study investigates how inmates experience and interpret information literacy during rehabilitation, with particular attention to the relational, emotional, and ethical dimensions of information practices in a correctional facility.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore inmates' experiences of information literacy within a correctional facility. The study was guided by an interpretive paradigm, which assumes that human actions and meanings are shaped by social and cultural contexts (Quinlan, 2017). Consistent with this paradigm, the relational perspective of information literacy was used as the theoretical lens to examine how individuals experience and interpret information in their everyday lives (Bruce, 1997).

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterned meanings across participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand how inmates described, interpreted, and made sense of information during their rehabilitation period within a highly constrained institutional environment.

Research setting and ethical approval

The research was conducted in a medium-security correctional facility in Indonesia. Access to the research site and participants was granted following formal approval from the Vice Dean for Research and Academic Affairs, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro, and the Head of the Central Java Regional Office of the Directorate General of Corrections. Institutional details will be anonymised for journal submission. Permission was also obtained from the correctional facility authorities to conduct interviews on site.

The study involved adult incarcerated participants and was designed to minimise potential risks related to psychological discomfort, coercion, and confidentiality. The interviews focused on participants' experiences of educational and rehabilitation programs rather than on criminal histories or other sensitive personal data. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained before data collection, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and identifying details were removed from the transcripts.

Participant recruitment

This study used purposive sampling to recruit participants who could provide rich and relevant accounts in relation to the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participant recruitment was conducted in collaboration with prison staff. Prison officers identified inmates who were actively participating in rehabilitation programs and introduced them to the research team.

Although prison staff assisted in identifying eligible participants, participation was voluntary and the interviews were conducted by the research team, not by correctional officers. Participants were informed that their decision to participate or withdraw would not affect their status, access to programmes, or relationship with the correctional facility.

Participants were selected to reflect variation in age, program involvement, and institutional roles, allowing the study to capture a range of information experiences. This approach ensured

that recruitment was procedurally appropriate within the institutional context while minimising coercion. A total of twelve inmates participated in the study.

To provide greater transparency while preserving anonymity, Table 1 summarises participants' rehabilitation programme involvement or institutional roles using non-identifying participant codes.

Participant	Age range	Programme / Role	Programme type
P1	41–49	Religious programme	Personality development
P2	35–40	Sarung goyor production	Independence development
P3	25–34	Kitchen assistant	Institutional support role
P4	35–40	Religious programme	Personality development
P5	50–55	Religious programme	Personality development
P6	41–49	Religious programme	Personality development
P7	41–49	Religious programme	Personality development
P8	50–55	Religious programme	Personality development
P9	25–34	Music activity	Creative / skill-based activity
P10	25–34	Registration assistant	Institutional support role
P11	25–34	Administration assistant	Institutional support role
P12	41–49	Plant care	Independence development

Table 1. Participant profile

The table does not include names of offence-related information in order to protect participants' confidentiality. The profile information is limited to characteristics relevant to the study's focus on information literacy experiences during rehabilitation.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. An interview guide was developed to elicit participants' experiences of engaging with information during incarceration. The interviews explored how participants encountered and used information in rehabilitation programs, whom they relied on as information sources, how information shaped their emotions, identities, and future orientations, and how constraints within the prison environment influenced their information practices.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face within the correctional facility. They were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterned meanings across participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The analysis was iterative and interpretive, focusing on variation in how participants experienced information rather than on frequency or skill assessment.

The relational perspective informed interpretation but did not operate as a fixed coding framework. Themes were developed through iterative engagement with participants' accounts.

First, all interview transcripts were read multiple times to achieve immersion in the data. An initial codebook was developed through early engagement with the transcripts and informed by relational information literacy literature. Codes were treated as sensitising concepts (Hoonaard et al., 2008), allowing flexibility for refinement as the analysis progressed.

Second, transcripts were coded iteratively with attention to participants' accounts of meaning, emotion, responsibility, action, and constraint. The analysis combined inductive attention to

participants' narratives with the relational perspective as an interpretive lens. Codes were merged, expanded, or refined as new insights emerged, and coding decisions were documented through analytic memos.

To illustrate the analytic process, Table 2 presents examples of selected excerpts, initial codes, analytic meanings, and related final themes.

Example initial code	Analytic meaning	Final theme
Moral self-reflection	Information prompts reflection on past actions and self change	Information as moral and existential reorientation
Trust in authorised expertise	Credibility is judged through authority and awareness of risk	Learning whom to trust in a constrained information environment
Intentional non-knowing	Limiting information is used as a strategy for safety and role clarity	Agency through discipline, selectivity, and compliance
Emotional endurance in learning	Learning requires managing shame, patience, and repeated practice	Information literacy as emotional and embodied labour
Verification before sharing	Sharing information involves ethical responsibility and concern for consequences	Information literacy as ethical responsibility

Table 2. Example of initial code and theme development

Third, codes were clustered into candidate themes representing distinct ways of experiencing information in prison. Rather than being organised around information sources or program types, themes were developed around relational meanings such as trust, responsibility, discipline, emotional regulation, and ethical information sharing. Constant comparison across cases was used to identify similarities and differences in participants' experiences.

Finally, candidate themes were reviewed for internal coherence and distinction from one another. As the analysis progressed, no substantively new experiential patterns emerged, indicating thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Each final theme was defined analytically and supported by illustrative quotations.

Analytic rigour

Analytic rigour was supported through repeated reading of transcripts, iterative coding, analytic memo-writing, and cross-case comparison. Coding decisions and theme development were discussed within the research team to refine interpretation and ensure that themes were grounded in participants' accounts. Because the study adopted an interpretive qualitative design, statistical inter-coder reliability was not used. Instead, trustworthiness was pursued through transparency of the analytic process, careful documentation of coding decisions, and the use of illustrative quotations to show how interpretations were developed from the data.

Findings

This section presents five themes developed from twelve in-depth interviews with incarcerated participants. The themes show how information literacy was experienced through moral reflection, trust, disciplined agency, emotional and embodied learning, and ethical responsibility. Although many participants described rehabilitation positively, their accounts also revealed boredom, risk, hesitation, and constraint as part of their information experiences.

Theme 1: Information as moral and existential re-orientation

Participants consistently experienced information not as neutral knowledge or practical instruction, but as a moral and existential force that reoriented how they understood themselves,

their past actions, and their imagined futures. Information encountered during incarceration functioned as a catalyst for ethical reckoning rather than cognitive acquisition.

For several participants, engagement with information was described as an emotionally disruptive moment that prompted deep self-examination. One participant reflected that encountering religious teachings in prison felt like a sudden awakening, forcing him to confront aspects of his life that had previously been ignored:

When I heard it, it felt like being slapped... it made me think, where had my life been all this time? Here, I only started thinking about everything. (Participant 1)

In this account, information operates as a moral mirror, exposing contradictions between past behaviour and newly recognised values. Here, information reframed his understanding of self and responsibility. This re-orientation was not immediate or comfortable; it involved regret, emotional vulnerability, and the unsettling recognition of past mistakes.

Importantly, this moral re-orientation was also future-oriented. Participants often linked what they learned in prison to imagined responsibilities beyond incarceration, particularly toward family members. One participant explained that learning to pray and read religious texts was meaningful precisely because it shaped how he envisioned his role after release:

So that when I leave, I will have something to bring with me... for my wife and children. If I do not learn here, what will I become outside? (Participant 7)

Here, information is experienced as moral capital, something accumulated for sustaining ethical conduct and social roles in the future. The prison environment created a temporal pause that intensified this reorientation, allowing participants to reassess their trajectories in ways they felt were unlikely outside incarceration.

However, this process was not uniform across participants. Others experienced moral re-orientation more gradually, through repetition, routine, and disciplined practice. Learning to read religious texts, attend prayers regularly, or reflect on shared teachings slowly reshaped participants' sense of self over time. In these cases, information did not arrive as a sudden insight, but as a steady moral recalibration embedded in daily practice.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that information literacy in prison emerges as an existential process of re-becoming, in which learning is inseparable from moral reflection, emotional disruption, and future-oriented responsibility. Rather than equipping participants with skills, information enables them to reinterpret incarceration itself as a moment of ethical interruption, an enforced pause in which alternative ways of living become thinkable.

Theme 2: Learning whom to trust in a constrained information environment

Participants experienced information literacy in prison as a process of learning whom to trust. In an environment characterised by restricted access, surveillance, and high interpersonal risk, trust emerged as a central epistemic concern. Information was rarely detached from the people who conveyed it; instead, its credibility was judged relationally, through ongoing observation, responsibility, and consequence.

For participants involved in high-stakes contexts, such as healthcare assistance, trust was closely tied to formal authority and recognised expertise. One participant working in the prison clinic emphasised that medical information could not be improvised or casually shared:

If it was not the doctor who taught me, I would not dare. This is about medicine, about sick people. A small mistake could be dangerous. (Participant 8)

In this account, trust is inseparable from risk awareness. The participant's information practice is shaped by an acute understanding of potential harm. Knowing who is authorised to provide information becomes a crucial form of literacy, protecting both the self and others from unintended consequences.

In other contexts, trust was built less on institutional position and more on moral consistency and observable behaviour. Several participants described relying on peers whose actions aligned with ethical or religious values, rather than those who merely appeared knowledgeable. One participant explained:

I trust people who seem consistent... whose behaviour is good, whose worship is regular. Not just because they are good at talking. (Participant 1)

Here, information credibility is evaluated through character and conduct. Trust is earned gradually, through repeated observation, reflecting an information environment in which deception or exaggeration is perceived as a real risk.

In vocational and creative settings, trust was grounded primarily in demonstrated competence. Participants involved in music production and other skill-based activities described learning through collaborative correction and shared practice:

If someone plays the wrong note, we remind them straight away. We trust each other because we all know how to do it. (Participant 9)

In this case, trust is practical and provisional, established through visible outcomes rather than moral or institutional authority. What matters is not who someone is, but whether their guidance works.

Across these accounts, trust was neither automatic nor uniform. Participants demonstrated epistemic caution, often cross-checking information, limiting reliance on single sources, or deliberately withholding judgement until credibility had been established. For some, mistrust functioned as a protective strategy rather than a deficiency, enabling them to navigate complex social dynamics without exposing themselves to unnecessary risk.

Taken together, these experiences indicate that information literacy in prison involves the ongoing calibration of trust under constraint. Rather than evaluating information in isolation, participants learned to assess credibility through relational cues, authority, morality, competence, and consequence. In this way, knowing whom to trust becomes a foundational literacy practice, shaping not only what information circulates, but how safety, responsibility, and social order are maintained within the prison environment.

Theme 3: Agency through discipline, selectivity, and compliance

Participants' accounts revealed that agency in prison was enacted through discipline, selectivity, and careful compliance. Within a tightly regulated institutional environment, participants learned that how much one knows, when one asks, and what one avoids knowing are as important as acquiring information itself. Information literacy, in this sense, involved navigating limits rather than overcoming them.

Not all participation began with a strong rehabilitative intention. Participant 11 explained that he accepted an administrative support role partly because he was bored and wanted an activity outside the cell. He recalled being offered the role even though it provided no payment:

it does not matter if I do not get anything, the important thing is to have an activity. (Participant 11)

This account complicates a purely positive reading of rehabilitation. His engagement with information did not begin from an explicit desire to become “information literate”, but from accepting an available institutional role. Through that role, however, he entered a structure information environment in which he learned routines, followed instructions, observed administrative procedures, and gradually understood how institutional information should be handled. Agency therefore emerged not from full autonomy, but from taking up a limited role and learning how to act meaningfully within it.

Several participants described deliberately restricting their own information engagement as a way to maintain safety and stability. A participant responsible for kitchen operations explained that not all information was necessary, or desirable, to know:

There are things I do not need to know. My task is just to follow the rules. That is safer. (Participant 3)

Here, agency is exercised through intentional non-knowing. Rather than indicating passivity or lack of curiosity, selective ignorance functions as a protective strategy, enabling the participant to perform his role effectively without exposing himself to institutional or interpersonal risk.

Participants in administrative and support roles similarly emphasised adherence to procedures as a form of informed action. One participant described learning as a gradual process of following instructions precisely:

We are given directions, so we follow them. If we want to learn, we learn slowly. We cannot do things carelessly. (Participant 10)

In this account, compliance is not opposed to learning; it is the condition under which learning becomes possible. Knowing how to comply, what steps to follow, whom to report to, and when to remain silent constitutes a practical and situated form of information literacy.

The need for disciplined agency was especially visible in roles involving interpersonal and physical risk. Participant 3, who worked in the kitchen, explained that the kitchen brought together people with different characters and required careful emotional control because sharp tools were present. When conflict could not be managed through conversation, he preferred to report the matter to officers rather than allow it to escalate:

There are many different characters here...we have to control our emotions. In the kitchen there are sharp tools, so if emotion cannot be controlled, I report it to the officers rather than let it become a conflict. (Participant 3)

In this case, information literacy involved knowing the limits of one's role, recognising risk, and choosing the safest channel for action.

Importantly, participants articulated a nuanced awareness of institutional boundaries, recognising that exceeding one's informational role could carry consequences. One participant involved in food and logistics management noted that access to certain information was intentionally limited, and that respecting these limits was part of his responsibility. In this way, constraint itself became informative, signalling where agency could and could not be exercised.

Across participants, discipline emerged as both an information practice and an ethical stance. Repetition, routine, and patience were described as ways of learning to live within the institution, reducing emotional volatility and social friction. This disciplined engagement with information allowed participants to maintain a sense of control, even when broader autonomy was unavailable.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that information literacy in prison involves a reconfiguration of agency. Participants exercised agency by calibrating engagement, limiting exposure, and complying strategically with institutional norms. Information literacy thus emerges as the capacity to act meaningfully within constraint, preserving safety, dignity, and continuity in an environment where misjudgment can carry serious consequences.

Theme 4: Information literacy as emotional and embodied labour

While Theme 1 focused on how information reoriented participants' moral self-understanding and future imagination, this theme focuses on the emotional and bodily work required to sustain learning in practice.

Participants' accounts revealed that engaging with information in prison involved substantial emotional and embodied labour. Learning was experienced as something that required managing feelings, enduring discomfort, and repeatedly disciplining the body. Emotions such as shame, fear, calm, pride, and patience actively shaped how participants approached, persisted in, or withdrew from learning.

For participants encountering new forms of knowledge, particularly religious learning, early engagement was often marked by emotional vulnerability. Several participants described feelings of embarrassment and fear when first attempting to read religious texts or perform unfamiliar practices. One participant recalled:

At first, I felt very embarrassed... I read it wrong, I pronounced it wrong. But over time, I became patient and kept repeating it. (Participant 4)

In this account, shame functions as both a barrier and a motivator. Persistence required emotional endurance, and learning progressed only through repeated exposure to discomfort. Information literacy here involved learning how to remain present despite feelings that might otherwise discourage participation.

Over time, participants described a shift in emotional experience, as disciplined practice produced a sense of calm and confidence. One participant explained that gaining fluency in reading religious texts brought emotional stability:

After I could recite properly, I felt calm. I became more confident. (Participant 5)

This transition illustrates how emotional labour is cumulative. The repeated bodily act of reading, reciting, or practicing does not merely transmit information, but gradually reconfigures emotional states, enabling participants to associate learning with reassurance rather than anxiety.

Embodiment was also central in vocational, creative, and agricultural activities. A participant involved in gardening articulated how caring for plants became a lesson in patience and attentiveness:

From just a stem, then leaves started to come out... that made me happy. Taking care of it taught me patience. (Participant 12)

Here, information emerges through bodily interaction with living materials over time. Knowledge is not received instantaneously, but grown, requiring attentiveness to subtle changes and acceptance of slow progress. The body becomes both the site and the instrument of learning.

Vocational learning also showed how information literacy was embodied through careful, repetitive practice. Participant 2, who learned sarung goyor production, described learning from the beginning through direct practice: installing threads, following patterns, and gradually understanding each stage of production. He explained that errors in the pattern of thread

arrangement would affect the whole result: “If the pattern is not right, the result will be different...the colour will be different and the final product will be different.” (Participant 2). For him, learning required attentiveness, patience, and bodily control, because the work could easily go wrong when concentration was lost.

Across participants, emotional regulation itself emerged as a form of information practice. Learning when to slow down, repeat an action, accept correction, or pause engagement was described as essential to sustaining participation in prison programs. Rather than being an obstacle to learning, emotions became resources to be managed, shaping how information was taken up and transformed into meaningful practice.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that information literacy in prison is sustained through emotional endurance and embodied repetition. Learning requires participants to tolerate vulnerability, cultivate patience, and gradually align bodily practice with emerging understanding. Information literacy thus appears not as a moment of comprehension, but as an ongoing labour of feeling and doing, deeply shaped by the affective and physical constraints of incarceration.

Theme 5: Information literacy as ethical circulation and responsibility

Whereas Theme 2 focused on how participants judged the credibility of information sources, this theme focuses on what participants did after accepting information as trustworthy, particularly how they shared, withheld, or transmitted it responsibly.

Beyond personal learning and self-transformation, participants experienced information literacy as a matter of ethical responsibility toward others. Participants described a heightened awareness of the consequences of information circulation within the prison environment. Knowing when, how, and to whom information should be passed on emerged as a central literacy practice.

Several participants articulated a strong sense of moral accountability when sharing religious or instructional information. One participant explained:

Before telling my friends, I asked the ustadz first. I was afraid of being wrong, because if it was wrong, it could mislead others. (Participant 6)

In this account, information literacy extends beyond understanding content to include ethical judgement about transmission. The participant’s concern is not merely correctness, but the potential moral impact of misinformation on others. Literacy here involves restraint, verification, and a willingness to delay sharing until credibility is assured.

This sense of responsibility was especially pronounced among participants occupying intermediary roles, such as clinic assistants, administrative helpers, or program coordinators. These participants were acutely aware that information they handled could affect others’ wellbeing, access to services, or emotional security. One participant described the importance of carefully teaching procedures to those who would replace him:

They have to be taught slowly. When I go home, there has to be someone to continue it. Otherwise, things will become difficult. (Participant 8)

Here, information literacy is experienced as custodianship, a duty to ensure continuity, accuracy, and stability within the institutional system. Teaching others is framed as responsibility to prevent confusion, disruption, or harm.

Administrative roles also positioned some participants as intermediaries between inmates, families, and institutional procedures. Participant 10 described registration work as involving

information about inmates' rights and obligations, including remission, conditional release, family visits, and participation in rehabilitation programmes. He explained:

We tell them about what is required...their obligations, their rights, remission, conditional release...but also their obligation to take part in rehabilitation.
(Participant 10)

This account shows that ethical circulation was not limited to religious or moral information. It also involved institutional information that affected inmates' access to rights, services, and family contact. In this role, information literacy meant communicating information carefully, within appropriate boundaries, and with awareness of its consequences for others.

Importantly, ethical circulation also involved deciding not to share information. Participants described situations where withholding information was perceived as the more responsible action, particularly when information could provoke conflict, false hope, or misunderstanding. In this way, silence and selectivity functioned as ethical practices, reinforcing earlier themes of disciplined agency.

Across accounts, participants recognised that information in prison is rarely neutral. Because access is uneven and consequences are amplified, information can shape others' emotions, behaviour, and expectations in powerful ways. As a result, participants learned to treat information as something that carries moral weight, requiring careful consideration before it enters collective circulation.

Taken together, these experiences indicate that information literacy in prison involves an ethics of care and responsibility, oriented not only toward the self but toward the wellbeing of others and the stability of shared systems. Literacy is enacted through verification, teaching, withholding, and stewardship, practices that sustain social order and mutual protection within a constrained environment. In this way, information literacy emerges as a collective and ethical accomplishment, grounded in awareness of relational consequence rather than individual competence.

Discussion

This study explored inmates' experiences of information literacy from a relational perspective during rehabilitation in a correctional facility in Central Java, Indonesia. The findings show that information literacy in prison is not simply a matter of accessing, evaluating, or using information sources. Rather, it is experienced through moral reflection, trust, disciplined agency, emotional and embodied learning, and ethical responsibility. Importantly, these experiences were not uniformly positive or straightforward. Participants' engagement with information was also shaped by boredom, limited choices, institutional boundaries, interpersonal risk, and the need to act carefully within a regulated environment.

Reframing information literacy in a constrained environment

The findings extend relational information literacy research by showing how information literacy operates in a highly constrained institutional setting. Previous studies have demonstrated that information literacy is shaped by context, social relationships, and lived experience (Bruce, 1997; Demasson et al., 2016; Heriyanto et al., 2022; Sayyad Abdi et al., 2024). This study supports that position but extends it by examining a context in which access to information is institutionally restricted, social interaction is monitored, and information may carry serious social consequences for safety, trust, and rehabilitation.

In this setting, information literacy was not expressed primarily through independent searching or technical evaluation of sources. Instead, it was enacted through careful judgement, selective engagement, procedural compliance, moral reflection, and relational trust. Inmates learned not

only what information to use, but also whom to trust, when to ask, when to remain silent, and how to act responsibly with information. This challenges skills-based understandings of information literacy that assume relatively open access to information sources and individual autonomy in choosing among them.

This study also contributes to information behaviour research by showing how information practices are formed under constraint. Inmates' information behaviour was shaped not only by information needs, but also by institutional rules, available roles, interpersonal relationships, and the risks attached to information circulation. Correctional facilities therefore offer an important context for understanding how people encounter, interpret, restrict, and share information when autonomy is limited.

Information literacy as moral and existential reorientation

One central finding is that information literacy was experienced as moral and existential reorientation. Participants did not describe information only as something that helped them complete tasks or solve practical problems. Information encountered through religious learning, advice, and rehabilitation programmes, and interpersonal interaction prompted participants to reflect on past actions, reconsider their identities, and imagine different futures.

This finding resonates with Bruce's (1997, 2008) relational perspective, which understands information literacy as part of broader process of learning, reflection, and meaning making. It also aligns with studies showing that information literacy may support identity formation and personal transformation in everyday life contexts (Demasson et al., 2016; Yates & Partridge, 2014). However, this study extends those insights by showing how such reorientation occurs within a correctional environment, where reflection is intensified by confinement, routine, and separation from ordinary life.

Religious and moral information played an important role in this process, but the findings also show that reorientation was not always immediate or dramatic. For some participants, change emerged gradually through routine, repetition, and participation in available programmes. This is important because it avoids romanticising rehabilitation as a simple process of personal transformation. Information literacy in this context involved slow moral recalibration, shaped by both personal reflection and institutional structure.

Trust as a central information practice

The findings also show that trust is central to inmates' information literacy experiences. Participants did not evaluate information separately from the people who conveyed it. Instead, they assessed credibility through relational cues, such as institutional authority, moral consistency, demonstrated competence, and awareness of consequences.

This supports previous research showing that information practices in marginalised or constrained contexts are strongly mediated by interpersonal relationships and trusted intermediaries (Canning & Buchanan, 2019; Sayyad Abdi et al., 2024). In this correctional setting, inmates relied on officers, instructors, religious teachers, health workers, and fellow programme participants as information sources. However, trust in prison was not automatic. It was negotiated differently across context. Medical information required moral and interpretive authority and vocational and creative information required demonstrated competence.

This finding contributes to relational information literacy by highlighting trust as an epistemic practice. Knowing whom to trust becomes part of knowing how to engage with information. In a correctional environment, where misinformation or misplaced trust may produce harm, credibility judgement is not only cognitive but also relational, moral, and practical.

Agency within institutional constraint

The findings also sharpen the study's contribution to understanding agency. In many information literacy frameworks, agency is associated with autonomy, independent searching, and active choice. In the correctional environment, however, participants' agency was enacted through discipline, selectivity, and compliance. Participants exercised judgement not only by seeking information, but also by deciding what not to know, when not to ask, and how to remain within appropriate institutional boundaries.

This does not mean that inmates were passive. Rather, their agency took a constrained form. Some participants entered rehabilitation roles not because of an explicit desire for self-transformation, but because the role offered activity, structure, and relief from boredom. Yet through these roles, they entered information environments in which they learned procedures, followed instructions, observed institutional routines, and gradually understood how information should be handled. This shows that information literacy may emerge not only through deliberate information seeking but also indirectly through situated participation. This shows that information literacy may emerge indirectly through situated participation, not only through deliberate information seeking.

The kitchen and administrative examples further show that information literacy in prison involves risk management. Participants had to recognise the limits of their role, manage interpersonal tension, and choose appropriate channels for action. In this context, compliance could function as informed action rather than mere obedience. Intentional non-knowing, selective engagement, and reporting concerns to officers were ways of preserving safety and maintaining institutional order. This finding suggests that information literacy in constrained environments should be understood as the capacity to act meaningfully and responsibly within limits.

Emotional and embodied dimensions of information literacy

The findings further demonstrate that information literacy in prison is emotional and embodied. Participants described learning as involving shame, fear, boredom, patience, calm, pride, and confidence. They also described learning through bodily repetition, practice, observation, and routine. These findings support relational and experiential approaches to information literacy, which emphasise that information engagement is not only cognitive but also affective and situated (Bruce, 1997, 2008; Heriyanto et al., 2022).

The findings strengthen this point by showing that emotional and embodied learning were not limited to religious practice. Vocational learning, such as sarung goyor production, also required bodily attentiveness, patience, and repeated practice. Participants had to learn patterns, sequences, materials, and techniques through direct engagement with tools and tasks. Mistakes in thread arrangement or pattern recognition could affect the final product, showing that information literacy was enacted through careful bodily practice.

This finding contributes to information literacy research by showing that learning to engage with information may require emotional endurance and embodied discipline. In correctional rehabilitation, information literacy is not simply a moment of understanding. It is sustained through repeated practice, correction, hesitation, adjustment, and persistence.

Ethical circulation and responsibility

Another important contribution of this study is its finding that information literacy in prison is experienced as ethical responsibility. Participants were aware that information could affect others' wellbeing, emotions, expectations, access to services, and moral understanding. As a result, they emphasised verification, careful teaching, selective sharing, and sometimes withholding information.

This finding resonates with Bruce's (2008) emphasis on the ethical use of information and with studies showing that information literacy involves both individual competence and responsibility toward others (Adi et al., 2025). However, the correctional context intensifies this ethical dimension. Because information access is uneven and consequences are amplified, sharing information irresponsibly may lead to confusion, conflict, false hope, or harm.

The findings clarify that ethical circulation was not limited to religious information. Participants in administrative and institutional support roles also handled information about rights, obligations, remission, conditional release, family visits, and programme participation. These examples show that information literacy involved communicating institutional information carefully and within appropriate boundaries. In this sense, inmates could become information intermediaries who helped maintain continuity, order, and access for others.

This extends relational information literacy by foregrounding care, stewardship, and collective responsibility as central dimensions of information practice. In prison, being information literate involves understanding not only whether information is accurate, but also how it should move, who may be affected by it, and when restraint may be more responsible than disclosure.

Implications for information literacy research and rehabilitation practice

The findings have two main implications. First, for information literacy research and information behaviour research, the study demonstrates the value of examining information literacy in constrained and marginalised contexts. Such contexts reveal dimensions of information literacy that are often less visible in open environments, including strategic silence, cautious trust, emotional endurance, intentional non-knowing, and ethical restraint. These findings support the need to move beyond universal skill models and attend more closely to situated information experiences.

Second, for correctional rehabilitation practice, the findings suggest that rehabilitation programmes should not be understood merely as mechanisms for delivering information or training skills. They are also spaces in which inmates interpret information, form trust, manage emotions, learn institutional routines, reflect on identity, and develop responsibility toward others. Recognising inmates as active interpreters may help correctional institutions design programmes that are more meaningful and responsive to lived experiences.

Facilitators, officers, instructors, and peer participants also play important roles as information intermediaries. Their credibility, consistency, and ability to guide information sharing can shape how inmates engage with rehabilitation programmes. Attention to trust, emotional difficulty, embodied practice, and ethical circulation may therefore strengthen the rehabilitative value of prison-based learning activities.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in one correctional facility in Central Java, Indonesia, and the findings are shaped by the specific institutional arrangements, programmes, and participant experiences at that site. Second, the study relied on interview data, which captured participants' reflections but did not include direct observation of information practices. Third, because the interviews focused on rehabilitation experiences, the study did not explore other potentially sensitive areas of prison information life in depth, such as legal information seeking, family communication difficulties, or conflict-related information, or informal rumours.

Future research could examine information literacy across different correctional facilities, including facilities with different security levels, populations, or rehabilitation models. Comparative studies could also explore how gender, sentence length, educational background, or type of programme participation shapes inmates' information experiences. Longitudinal research

would be valuable for understanding how information literacy developed during incarceration influences reintegration after release.

Conclusion

This study explored inmates' information literacy experiences during rehabilitation from a relational perspective. The findings show that information literacy in prison is not limited to accessing, evaluating, or using information sources. It is experienced through moral reflection, relational judgement, disciplined agency, emotional and embodied learning, and ethical responsibility.

The study contributes to relational information literacy research and information behaviour research by showing how information literacy operates in a highly constrained institutional environment. Inmates' engagement with information was shaped not only by rehabilitation programmes, but also by boredom, limited choices, institutional rules, interpersonal risk, and the need to act carefully within prescribed roles. These findings suggest that information literacy under constraint may involve practices that are often less visible in open information environments, including intentional non-knowing, cautious trust, procedural compliance, emotional endurance, and responsible withholding of information.

Practically, the findings suggest that rehabilitation programmes should recognise inmates as active interpreters of information and intermediaries of information, rather than passive recipients of instruction. Religious, vocational, creative, administrative, and institutional support activities can become meaningful information environments when they foster trust, reflection, careful communication, emotional confidence, and responsibility toward others.

Future research could examine information literacy experiences across different correctional facilities, security levels, inmate groups, and rehabilitation models. Comparative and longitudinal studies would be valuable for understanding how information literacy developed during incarceration influences social reintegration after release. Further studies may also explore less visible aspects of prison information life, such as legal information seeking, family communication, rumours, and conflict-related information.

Overall, this study demonstrates that prison is not simply a setting of information deprivation. It is also a complex information environment in which inmates learn to interpret, limit, negotiate, and circulate information in ways that are shaped by constraint, responsibility, and hopes for life beyond incarceration.

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