CURRENT ISSUES OF IMPROVING THE CULTURE OF READING IN THE AGE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY



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Annotation. This article examines the current challenges in improving the reading culture in the context of Malaysia due to the rapid growth of information technology. As digital technology evolves, challenges such as digital distraction, language diversity, access to reading materials, the educational system, and reading proficiency become barriers to fostering a reading culture. This article discusses on how these challenges impact the lifestyle changes in Malaysia and seeking to bridging the gap through initiatives that help to foster reading habits. Reading is not just a hobby but an activity that enhances knowledge sharing, personal growth, improves literacy, and improve critical thinking in readers. Malaysia consists of diverse citizens from different races, cultures, languages, and religions. This creates a unique and multicultural environment that shapes the reading habits in Malaysia. Despite discussing the challenges posed by digital technology, this paper also explores the opportunities that can be implemented from these challenges to enhance the reading culture. It suggests a practical solutions to bridge the gap and establish a sustainable reading culture.

Keywords: Reading, Culture, Information Technology, Issue

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia Overview

Malaysia is located in Southeast Asia, comprise of Peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak and Sabah. It has a rich cultural diversity with various ethnic groups including Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous groups. This cultural diversity is a result of different traditions, languages, festivals and foods which give this country a wonderful blend of identity. The official language in Malaysia is Malay, and at the same time, many other languages are used within its country such as Mandarin, Tamil, and some ethnic dialects. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2024), there are 34.1 million citizens, with a 2% increase in the population. The motto of Malaysia is “Unity in Diversity” which reflects its composition to balance its cultural differences while creating a unified identity. Malaysia is playing a major role in the area economically, with big industries such as manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism. The differences of geography in different part of Malaysia had provide different challenges and experience to ponder.

Reading Develops Literacy

Abeeleh & Al-Sobh (2021) define reading as a dynamic process in which the reader actively participates in the creation of meaning and manipulates reading strategies in order to create meaning for interpretation from a text or message. Besides simply reading the materials, it involves evaluating all the information with critical thinking and using rationality to draw conclusions. These are fundamental skills for enhancing the quality of education in the country. They reflect the qualities needed to become a leader in the family, organization and the nation.

According to The Reading Agency (2015), Moyer’s data (2007) has consistently shown that reading produces a positive impact where a person who likes to read has the ability to recognize himself and others. In addition, a person who likes to read will find it easier to learn and assimilate with the culture of a different society. So, to create healthy relationships, reading is a medium for us to develop our understanding of other cultures and assimilate with different cultures. Finally, reading can make a person have better quality

in communicating with other people who have different views, whether in politics or others. Imagine that a person does not know any of the topics discussed, it is difficult for a person to get along because that person has limited communication. In this sense, communication is not only the knowledge in reading and knowing many words, but communication means the extensive knowledge in various topics.

Who invented reading? There is no definitive answer to this question. However, what we can confirm is that reading began to develop alongside the rise of civilization. In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, reading was a common practice, as evidenced by the discovery of many ancient manuscripts. According to Roy Macleod in his book The Library of Alexandria (2006), there were 400,000 mixed scrolls, 90,000 single scrolls, and 120,000 scrolls of classical poetry and prose. This indicates that reading has been a part of global culture since ancient times. Sadly, the library was eventually burned down resulting in the loss of some of the greatest human knowledge in history.

It is proven that students who see themselves as competent readers are most likely to succeed academically and perform better in their classes compared to students who struggle with reading (Murphy and Alexander, 2000). This means that reading is not only a tool for creating and constructing meaning but also a tool for developing cognitive skills such as concentration, improving memory, and expanding vocabulary. When we read, we dive into the knowledge of the writer, gaining a clearer understanding of the subject and discovering vocabulary that we rarely encounter in our daily lives. Every time we read, we are driven by new knowledge.

Information Technology

Information technology is widely refered to a computers and computer networks. But it also merged other information technologies such as television and telephones (Alagappa University, 2018). In the 21st century, information technology seems to be the answer to all questions. Slowly and steadily, information technology has influenced the conventional practices of humanity. Everything is now at our fingertips. People no longer need to go to food stalls or supermarkets to buy food or kitchen utensils since all activities can be done through technology. This is just the beginning. Nowadays, AI is being integrated into almost every technology we use. Life is becoming much easier as almost everything can be done quickly.

Information technology is powerful because people crave information and it makes it easy for them to access it. This has also changed the landscape of reading habits in today's era. Besides searching for food and kitchen utensils through online platforms, as mentioned before, it also influences how people search for information. There are both pros and cons to this development. While it makes life easier to find online resources, it also opens the door to straying away from reading habits. This paper will discuss the challenges in fostering a reading culture in the context of Malaysia.

CHALLENGES IN IMPROVING THE CULTURE OF READING IN MALAYSIA

Fundamentally, reading habits refer to the behaviors that reflect an individual's preference for reading materials and reading tastes (Sangkaeo, 1999). As mentioned by Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik (1999), Adolescents who are stepping into the adult world in the 21st century will explore the world of reading and writing more than any other generation in human history. This is due to the rapid explosion of information in this era. Furthermore, information such as books, e-books, and journal articles can now be accessed with just the tip of a finger.

Although all these resources can be easily found, they also contribute to other challenges. Since habit is not part of information literacy but rather an aspect of ethics, it is born from the heart to execute and the mind of the person to be resilient in maintaining the habit. There are several challenges that need to be highlighted and monitored to minimize or solve this issue in the context of Malaysia. Habit is not something that can be forced. It must come from a genuine desire to cultivate and maintain it.

There are five factors that need to be considered as the main challenges in improving the culture of reading in Malaysia. They are:

a) Digital Distraction
b) Language Diversity
c) Access to reading materials
d) Educational System
e) Reading Proficiency

Digital Distraction:

The rise of digital technology had brought a significant changes in our society. In the context of Malaysia, numerous obstacles in fostering a strong reading culture had become a challenge ▶

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where it had reach across technology, social, educational, and institutional environment. One of the primary concerns is digital distractions. The evolution of digital technology such as social media platform like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram had tied the new generation in the way they consume an information. Digital content from various social media offer a shortcut and fun information retrieval through video, memes and interactive pictures rather than immersing into books. According to Backlinko (2024), there are 3.065 billion monthly active users on Facebook and 1.6 billion on TikTok. Just on facebook only, it is 37.4% of human population. This is not a small amount, as it does not include infants. Just imagine if infants were also active on Facebook alone. The figure would exceed that.

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Leisure activity nowaday already become significant through digital platform where reading become the secondary choice when surfing the digital platform. People are more likely to engage in social activities and entertainment through apps or streaming services, while reading is often seen as a more conventional and outdated activity. While these platforms bring benefits, such as being accessible 24 hours a day, anytime and anywhere through smartphones and tablets, they also become addictive to their users. This is because all the notifications from these platforms cling to the user.

This trend not only decrease the time individuals commit to reading books but also affects the depth of their interaction with texts. If this issue prolong, in the future our new generation will lack of critical thinking. This happen because our generation are not equipped with interaction with texts which can enhance their idea and point of view in several subjects. To build a strong reading culture in Malaysia, the need of finding a solutions to balance the benefits of digital technology with the importance of traditional reading habits need to be enforce.

Meanwhile, the platforms in information technology cater to the needs of users. The advancement of technology has turned the impossible into the possible. Most things are now available in different languages and applications to translate words also exist. These developments create a major challenge for reading habits in terms of language

Language Diversity:

Another significant challenge is language diversity. Malaysia is a multiracial country with multiple of languages spoken across the diverse population. It has a mix of cultures and languages like Malay, English, Chinese, Tamil and other indegenous groups in the east of Malaysia. This brings beauty to its culture, but at the same time, another issue regarding language arose. If speaking in a different language creates confusion, just imagine reading a word in a language we are not familiar with. It would be a big challenge.

Firstly, it is hard for users to find books they enjoy in their own language. This happen because of the book published only available in certain language. Many Malaysians struggle to find books they want in their preferred language, as there is no translation available for the book. Meanwhile, the platforms in information technology cater to the needs of users. The advancement of technology has turned the impossible into the possible. Most things are now available in different languages and applications to translate words also exist. These developments create a major challenge for reading habits in terms of language.

In addition to that, not all publishers in Malaysia provide multilingual content in their publications. For example, if the content is in Tamil, there may be no translation available in other languages such as Malay, Mandarin, English or other indigenous languages. This creates a barrier to expanding the publication market and limits access to a wider community in Malaysia. There are many excellent publications for academic and leisure purposes, but they are only available to certain groups. This kind of limitation needs to be overcome.

Access to reading materials:

Access to reading materials remains a significant challenges in Malaysia. In many parts of Malaysia, it is hard to get books and learning materials especially in rural areas. The lack of quality reading material in the rural libraries and schools limiting the exposure to literature and educational resources. Rural area are not easily reach by normal vehicle because of the geographical condition in the area. Untill now, there are some area throughout Malaysia that still need development of basic necessity such as road. Once proper roads can connect the villages in rural areas to the main city, it will be easier to implement reading campaigns and provide support with quality reading materials. In 2020, almost 3 in 4 (73%) of the total 3,006 primary schools classified as small schools are located in rural areas (UNICEF, 2023). This means that there are still some children who have not reached basic necessities in certain rural areas. Since children are the next generation to lead this country, access to reading materials needs to be easily accessible.

Furthermore, in the context of suburban and urban areas, the cost of purchasing books is quite high, which becomes an issue for some

families when budgets are tight. They are forced to prioritize basic necessities over buying books. Rationally, everyone would make the same choice given the financial constraints. Malaysian Book Publishers Association (MABOPA) president and Malaysian Book Industry Chamber chairman Keith Thong explains that the cost of living is one of the factors contributing to the decline in reading habits (New Straits Times, 2022). COVID-19 is also part of the issue, as people struggle financially.

Another crucial challenge to accessing reading materials is the lack of library infrastructure in rural areas. This challenge emerges due to limited funding (Ahmad & Ismail, 2021). The lack of internet coverage and digital infrastructure decreases library usage. Users are more likely to spend their time at home or in other convenient places and engaging with digital technology. Libraries that cannot provide basic infrastructure or that are outdated will inevitably lose their users. Basic facilities and infrastructure are the first attraction before users can fully benefit from the reading materials in the library. If funding for basic infrastructure cannot be secured, day by day, libraries will lose their users. In the context of schools in rural areas, users may exist, but this does not mean that reading habits will develop, as schools cannot provide the necessary resources.

Educational System:

When we look at the educational system in Malaysia, it is focused on a textbook-oriented approach. Textbooks are a translation of basic principles and curriculum syllabus that serve as the main reference in the teaching and learning process in the classroom (Mohd Nazri et al., 2014). This curriculum seems to be perfect to adhere but at the same time it decrease creative learning and fun reading. When students focus solely on textbooks, they are limited to a narrow range of ideas and viewpoints. In reality, we learn much more from experiences outside the classroom. Books help us expand our understanding and improve our critical thinking which allowing us to engage with a variety of perspectives. In an effort to tackle the issue, programs such as Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca (NILAM) were established in 1999. This program allows students to keep track of how many books they have read. It is an excellent approach to raising awareness and fostering a reading culture. However, there are no tools to measure the effectiveness of the reading habit. Some students may simply list the books they have read, even if they have not finished reading it.

According to Profil Membaca Rakyat Malaysia 2022/2023, Malaysians currently read an average of 20 books per year but the overall reading culture remains underdeveloped compared to global standards. For example, many students mainly read for school and university but not for fun or self improvement. This habit is made worse by a lack of desire to read more than what is required for school and university. This issue prevent them from learning about different ideas and viewpoints which can actually help them in developing a new perspectives outside the wall of classroom.

Reading Proficiency:

According to Malaysia's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2022, the reading proficiency among Malaysians has declined in recent years. The declined is approximately 6.51% scores from 415 to 388 points. Since kindergarten, basic literacy skills are important especially for future academic success. Reading skills is a fundation to unlock the door of other disciplines. Meanwhile, reading proficiency is a process of evaluating the meaning of the context. While many people can read, not everyone can understand and interpret the meaning word by word. If the figures continue to decrease every year, it will be a nightmare for the country.

This significant decline in reading proficiency is a serious issue that needs to be tackle. If left unchecked, it could become a problem that cannot be solved in the future. One of the main factors contributing to the decline in reading proficiency is technological advancement. People today are surrounded by information technology and depend on it in their daily lives. Entertainment can easily be found on platforms such as social media, in video and picture formats. Information in these formats seems easier to comprehend and understand. However, the negative effect of this is that people may lack of creativity in understanding the information as their minds are not encouraged to think critically. There is a wise quote: 'If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. But if you give him a fishing rod, you feed him for a lifetime".

RESOLVING THE GAP

Clark and Rumbold (2006) outline several key areas where reading for pleasure produces benefits. This includes fluency in reading and ▸

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writing. Reading has been proven to make a person increase his level of knowledge in understanding a text and grammar. According to Shahan Choudhury and Richard Hudson (2022), reading has the potential to improve skills in reading comprehension. The more a person reads, the easier it is for them to understand a topic being read whether the reading material is fiction or non-fiction. Apart from making a person understand other cultures, reading also makes a person understand other human nature. This makes a person tend to have critical thinking in making decisions. This is because the more things a person knows, the easier it is for them to make the right decision. By organizing such a program that involves reading, public libraries give awareness to the community to continue refining their reading skills to foster the development of literacy and information.

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To cultivate a culture of reading in the digital technology era, everyone needs to participate in addressing this challenges. Challenges such as digital distractions, language barriers, access to reading materials, education system and reading proficiency require careful attention from all organization. By finding solutions that merge the advantages of information technology with traditional reading habits, we can enhance the reading culture in the future. Information technology is not a threat, but a tool to enhance library services and contribute to achieving SDG 4, Quality Education. Here are three solution to resolve the gap:

a) Librarians should be trained and provided with an information technology approach
b) Promote reading programs that encourage more collaboration
c) Regular books donations in fostering reading culture

There is an ancient quote: «If you cannot beat them, join them,» meaning that librarians need to utilize the strength of information technology in promoting eBooks that can be retrieved anytime and anywhere. This may reduce the need for users to physically visit the library, but it can increase the reading of eBooks

Librarians should be trained and provided with an information technology approach

Public library is an information hub for the community which supported by local, regional and nationwide. The purpose of public library is to offer the community with the access of knowledge and information resources. This includes a vast type of resources and services that being offered to the community in physical or digital format regardless their age, race, nationality, religion, language, education level and economic status. Because of that, librarians need to be equipped with skills in information technology.

The main reason why librarians need to be equipped with these skills is to become ambassadors of knowledge and promote library services in digital formats. Librarians need to see the opportunities in the midst of the challenges. There is an ancient quote: «If you cannot beat them, join them,» meaning that librarians need to utilize the strength of information technology in promoting eBooks that can be retrieved anytime and anywhere. This may reduce the need for users to physically visit the library, but it can increase the reading of eBooks. While librarians receive training, they will gain the confidence to teach users how to navigate all the online platforms the library offers. At the same time, users can share these skills with their family and friends. This will extend library use beyond the physical library building. Ultimately, this can foster a new way of increasing reading habits.

This initiative has been conducted regularly for librarians at the National Library of Malaysia (NLM). Training and briefings on digital exploration related to each subscribed database are executed. Librarians are well-informed about the usage and content of specific databases. This initiative not only enhances skills among librarians, but also fosters closer relationships with the vendors of the database providers. It is important to have a strong partnership with the database provider because both institutions share the same mission of educating and providing reading materials to the country.

Besides, NLM also caters to users by providing digital facilities integrated with conventional ones. There have been many improvements in terms of facilities, such as AR and VR, hypermedia corner and other digital resources to suit the needs of library users and to attract people to visit and experience library services. The provision of modern library facilities is essential for gaining more collaboration with other government agencies and NGOs.

According to Ayo-Olafare Funmilayo Racheal (2020), today's technology equips libraries with the ability to deliver highly customer-centric services to their users. To prepare a self-reliant community for the future, libraries should take a leading role in leading the use of these technological tools. At the very least, public libraries should involve themselves in teaching new users how to use the latest library services. This is because not all users are good at using the latest services, as they may still be stuck on conventional usage. Before educating users, the library itself must be equipped with up-to-date resources, including the provision of

basic infrastructure such as internet networks, electronic resources, and the latest library system management.

Promote reading programs that encourage more collaboration

Cambridge dictionary define campaign as a series of organized activities or events intended to achieve a result. Meanwhile, according to Brian Lavoie (2022), collaboration is defined as cooperation or efforts developed together with other organizations aimed at working on the same interests. Collaboration is likely to involve libraries or other entities such as government and private agencies. In other words, libraries should collaborate with entities that have similar objectives. This alignment is important to ensure success in achieving Sustainable Development Goal number 4.

One of the reading promotion programs set by the library in Malaysia annually is 'Jom Baca Bersama 10 Minit'. This program acts as an initiative in the library sector where it is conducted every year in conjunction with the celebration of World Book and Copyright Day. The main goal of this program is to improve the culture of reading in the community and also promote that reading is an important aspect of everyday life. This program marks the collaboration between the National Library of Malaysia (PNM) and Majlis Pengarah-pengarah Perpustakaan Awam Se-Malaysia (MPAM). Moreover, the program is attended by public sector personnel from various departments.

Another program that is conducted is 'Bacaan Kegemara Saya' and also emphasizes the cultivation of literacy in Jawi writing. Through this program, the library provides a wide spectrum and contributes to the enrichment of cultural and linguistic knowledge in the community. Other reading programs implemented include Karnival Baca Perdana, Kembara Ilmu, Program Membaca Bersama Pusat Pemulihan Dalam Komuniti (PDK), Seminar Literasi Maklumat, Klinik Doktor Jawi, Festival Kaligrafi Perpaduan, Majlis Sumbangan Buku Kepada Sekolah, Eksplorasi Digital, Bicara Novelis, Wacana Manuskrip Melayu, Festival Seni dan Sastera Kanak-Kanak and many more. All of these programs have been carried out to promote a culture of reading.

Regular Books Donations in Fostering Reading Culture

Books are essential in every aspect of education, information, creativity, and development, serving as tools for building social connections and communication (UNESCO, 2005). These items act as a bridge for social interaction and communication. They are a medium that fosters the pleasure of reading across all ages and cultures around the world. There are many genres available in the market that cater to the needs of different readers. Book donations serve as a bridge, carrying knowledge from one person to another. This activity can be considered a form of community engagement, as it is a public service initiative that does not involve any business transactions.

Research state that a product with the most attractive items attract the choice of the consumer. Furthermore, consumer will buy the selected items more than one time (University of Chicago Press Journals, 2008). The appraisal process needs to be done before donating the books to selected parties. Only books in good condition will be considered for donation. Even though the books are given to selected parties for free, courtesy should be maintained throughout the process, showing respect to the recipients of the books.

Another criterion for book donations is that libraries and schools need to conduct studies to determine which reading materials are most frequently read by users in that particular area. A survey needs to be done in that area so that the donated books will suit the users' needs. There are several other factors to consider, such as the genre and language of the books. By understanding the preferred genres and languages of a particular area, it can help enhance the culture of reading. This is because libraries can provide access to the reading materials that users actually need.

In the context of rural areas, it is difficult to access quality reading materials due to limited accessibility. Book donations are the most effective way to support the culture of reading. In many remote areas, libraries and schools do not have enough quality books to offer. The quality of books is an important aspect to consider. Old and torn books reduce users' interest in reading them. The appearance of a book plays a crucial role in attracting and promoting a reading culture especially for first-time readers. These donations in rural areas not only improve reading skills but also give users the chance to learn new things. Having access to more books and reading materials helps expand knowledge in that particular area. These activities will indirectly improve the culture of reading.

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CONCLUSION

Fostering a reading culture requires strong collaboration and support from all government agencies and NGOs. This is a long-term agenda and cannot be stopped. Even though there are challenges in fostering this culture, particularly with information technology, it should be seen as a companion to boost the culture to its fullest potential. The reading habit needs to be part of the lifestyle, especially in Malaysia. This country offers dynamic ways of creating unity in diversity. Due to this concept of a motto, it is important to think critically and understand different cultures and traditions. The way to achieve this is through reading, as people will learn from each page of books to explore the uniqueness of life. Many initiatives have execute by the National Library of Malaysia to foster reading habit to be part of the culture even though there are many challenges that need to be tackled. It is a way to make this institution more creative and equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to serve the nation in creating a well-read country.

The reading habit needs to be part of the lifestyle, especially in Malaysia. This country offers dynamic ways of creating unity in diversity. Due to this concept of a motto, it is important to think critically and understand different cultures and traditions

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