

*The Reading Habits Among Library Users in Rural and Urban Areas of Sarawak, Malaysia*

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**Abstract**

In 2014, the Sarawak State Library commissioned a research to investigate library users' reading habits and leisure time activities in the state of Sarawak. The study was conducted at seven town and fourteen village libraries, involving 843 respondents. This study found out that 81% of the library users in Sarawak were self motivated to read. 97% of the users were interested in reading and read on their own; were self-influenced (81%); loved reading materials in their own language (90%); loved to read books about their cultures (94%); enjoyed going to library (93%); and their habit was reading (73%). The library users read comparatively less outside the library; preferred reading materials in Malay and English languages; and loved to read books written in their mother tongues and about their cultures. 67% of library users were satisfied with the Internet provision and they utilized the Internet to gain knowledge (57%), pleasure (46%) and for academic work (45%). While a great majority (88%) thought that the Internet enhanced academic competence, a reasonable number (64%) indicated that they were not sure about the library electronic resources. The comparative study on rural and urban library users provided significant differences. The users of urban libraries enjoyed better access to information resources as compared to rural users. The main causes of the problem were limited number of quality academic reading materials; obsolete collections; library staff attitude; lack of community engagement; and lack of online services and flexible operating hours. Replications of high impact initiatives; enhancement of resource sharing; recontinued programmes; and rebranded programmes can rectify these issues.

Keywords: Reading habits, urban library services, rural library services, Internet provision and access, community involvement, information resources

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## **Background to the Study**

A study done in 2010 indicates that Malaysians read 8 to 12 books a year (NST, 2014). This is a huge improvement compared to 2005, when Malaysians were reported to have read only 2 books in a year. Nevertheless, this figure is way behind developed countries, whose citizens read 20 books a year. It is hoped that the reading habits among Malaysians would continue to grow and eventually match that of developed countries.

Compared to the other states in Malaysia, the administrative set up of public libraries in Sarawak is unique. It is decentralised in nature. There is the Sarawak State Library in the southern region of Sarawak with its regional centre further north in Miri, then there are the public libraries under the purview of the local authorities all over the land, and the mobile libraries operated by the Ministry of Local Government. In total there are 270 public libraries of various categories – 1 State Library, 1 regional library, 49 district libraries, 212 village libraries and 7 mobile libraries.

These public libraries operate on their own with their own funds and grants from the Sarawak State Government. The Sarawak State Library plays advisory and coordinating roles over these libraries. Quite frequently, technical assistance is also extended to these libraries.

Hence, the library development and services in Sarawak is slightly not uniform. The well-to-do local authorities prosper, while the poorer ones lag behind. Such administrative setup definitely influences the reading habits of public library users.

Occasionally, market surveys are conducted by the National Library of Malaysia to investigate the reading culture among Malaysians. However, a formal study focusing on information-seeking behaviours and reading habits in Sarawak has never been done before. It is high time that a research was conducted to uncover factors that need further enhancement; issues and concerns that require rectification or mitigation efforts; and trends that entail proper addresses pertaining to reading habits in Sarawak.

## **Literature Review**

At 93%, the Malaysian literacy rate is one of the highest in the world (Odekon, 2006). However, the reading habits among Malaysians are considerably low, judging by the number of books they in a year - twelve books. Reading has become an indispensable activity which is vital for the knowledge society comprising knowledge workers of a country. Palani (2012) has discussed the various benefits and methods of improving the reading habits. The author explains that reading shapes good personalities, brings new ideas, develops positive thinking, and inspires right attitude.

Shahriza & Hasan (2007) defines reading habit as a kind of real experience and involves many complex skills. According to Kaur & Thiyagarajah (1999), reading habits refer to regular tendencies in reading behaviours. Mohini et al. (2012) state a good reading habit is necessary for a healthy intellectual growth that would in turn inspire creative and innovative minds. Reading can increase our knowledge, at the

same time, it also builds maturity and character, sharpens our thinking, and widens our awareness in variety issues such as social, economic or political (Teh, 2013).

The education system is among the few factors that influence reading habits. Pandian (2000) argues that students in Malaysia only read for the sake of passing examinations and fulfilling the school requirements. Most of the time, students would read specifically to seek and gain information in order to get excellent academic achievements (Pandian, 1997). Education system needs people to read a lot of academic reading; this is because they need to read for knowledge on their subjects, to complete their academic task and for their academic excellence (Fairbain & Fairbain, 2001). According to Dent & Goodman (2015) there is a strong and positive correlation between reading frequency and academic achievements. Another study on reading and achievement relationship in Ghana (Owusu-acheaw & Larson, 2014) confirmed that reading habit has influence on academic performance and there is a relationship between reading habit and academic performance. In 2013 the Borneo Post reported that there was sharp decline in reading habits among young working adults who have completed their tertiary education. Among the policy makers, information professionals and educationists, this is a major concern.

The encouragement and presence of other people is another factor that affects reading habits. Pandian (1997) argues that when we are exposed to people who read regularly, we will develop a positive attitude towards reading. According to Yusof (2010), family members, peers and close friends have strong and positive influence on reading habit. In a study on rural libraries in Ghana, Dent (2008) highlighted the importance of role of families in shaping up the reading interest of family members. When interest in reading is built up in an individual, it drives that individual to read on his own, as opposed to assigned reading says Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007).

Noorhidawati & Forbes(2008) and Saikia (2013) stress that printed books are the most preferred library materials among library users. The presence of the digital age, however, warrants the utilization of electronic resources in the library. The major advantage of electronic resources is faster and wider access to information. Hence, these resources can be used to promote library use. Another factor that can be used to promote library is people involvement or community engagement.

According to Massachusetts Library Association, Youth Services Section (2005) involving young people in the planning and delivery of library services or in planning purchases can ensure that their interests and needs are addressed and has been found to play a crucial role in attracting their peers to the library. Lakshmi et al. (2011) argues that in any type of library, the user plays a vital role in planning, designing and introducing new information services and in assessing the quality of remaining services, facilities and their utilities. Arranging materials by genre or identifying materials of interest to young people can spur the use of the library collections says Sissons (1997).

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objectives of the study are to

- a) to investigate the reading mindset and leisure activities of library users;

- b) to determine the extent of the reading habits based on diverse influences;
- c) to identify emerging needs of library users; and
- d) to realign and restructure reader development strategies.

## **Research Methodology**

A mixed method comprising qualitative and quantitative approaches is employed in this research. The questionnaire consisted of 96 open-ended questions and 15 close-ended questions. There are 843 respondents selected from 21 public libraries of various categories, representing the 7 selected administrative districts in Sarawak.

Data are gathered via face-to-face interviews conducted at the selected libraries. The raw data are subsequently coded and tabulated in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to be analysed. Data analyses include, but not limited to, frequency analysis and cross-tabulation analysis.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **a) Demographics**

In terms of gender, there are more females than males - 60.9% are females and 39% are males. Most of the users are teenagers. 51.2% of them are in the age range of 11-19 years. Next, the age range of 20-29 years at 20.7%, the age range of 10 years and below at 10.5% and finally, the age range of 40 years and above at below 10%.

In terms of marital status, most of the users are single - 76.9% of them are single and 21.8% are married. This is obvious since generally most of the users are teenagers. Ethnically, the biggest group are the Malays at 37.8%, followed by the Ibans at 31.6%, Chinese at 15.1% and finally, the Melanau at 7.8%.

In terms of academic achievements, a reasonable majority belongs to the primary school level (35.5%), while the upper secondary school level constitutes 23.2% and lower secondary level, 19.9%. This clearly shows a great majority of the library users are young students. Majority of the users are from the private sector at 49.7% followed by those from the public sector at 43% and finally, others at 7.3%.

### **b) Library membership**

Surprisingly, most of the library users are not members of the library. Only 49.3% of the users are members of the library, while 50.71% are non members. There is a clear indication that the library promotion needs to be intensified. The users enjoy going to the library because of the reading materials (64.5%), the conducive environment (18.5%), the activities (13.3%), the Internet/computers (5.8%), interest (3.1%) and finally, the facilities (2%).

In terms of frequency of going the library, most of the users (22.1%) visit their libraries once a week, while 20.8% of them visit the library on alternate days. At every visit to the library, most users (43.9%) spend 1-2 hours, while 30.5% of them spend 2-3 hours and 14.5% spend only an hour.

#### c) Purposes of going to the library

A great majority of the users go to their libraries to obtain information (71.3%), to increase knowledge (61.7%) and to study (51%). This indicates that users regard the library as a knowledge and information hub and storehouse. At the library, the users read books of their interest (81%); read their own books (35.2%); read newspapers (27.5%); read magazines (38.3%); have discussion with friends (45.8%); borrow and return books (37%); access the Internet (26.7%) and relax (25.9%). This suggests that the library is well used by the public.

#### d) Sources of information

The sources of information that users seek in the libraries are varied. The main ones are the reference collection or section at 67.1%, followed by the magazines at 37.4%, the newspapers at 31.8%, reference librarians or officers at 30.8% and finally, the Internet at 30.1%. This clearly suggests majority of the users are independent.

#### e) Motivation

It is heartening to note that most of the user (81.1%) are self-influenced and self-motivated to read. Other influences include friends or peers at 50.1%; mother at 49.0%; teachers at 42.1%; father at 41.5%; siblings at 26.1%; relatives at 16.3%; and library staff at 9.1%. This clearly indicates the users' close associates influence them to read. Unfortunately, the library staff is not part of this close association, indicating a concern that needs to be address accordingly.

#### f) Preferred languages

In terms of the languages of the reading materials, most users (90.2%) prefer Bahasa Melayu or Malay, while 58% of them prefer English. The other languages are Iban (15.3%) and Chinese (14.8%). The main reasons for liking these languages are because they are good at it; they can understand better; because of academic requirement; they feel motivated; and because more reading materials are available in these languages. This suggests the majority languages are instrumental for their enhanced reading.

#### g) Favourite pastimes

Contrary to common belief that the social media is topping the chart of favourite pastimes among Sarawakians, the most favourite hobbies of the library users are reading at 73.4%, listening to music at 68.9%, browsing the Internet at 64.7%, and watching television at 57.9%. All these are closely related with their reading passion and interest to seek knowledge. Some other hobbies are using email (41.8%), hanging out with friends (35.2%), shopping (34.9%), playing computer games ( 33.5%), cooking (31.9%), travelling (30.4%) and writing (diary, blog and poetry) (23.0%).

#### h) Duration of reading

Most of the users read for one hour (33.2%) and 2 hours (26.8%). 23.2% of the users reads for less than 1 hour and 11.2% of them reads for 3 hours. This response substantiates the above response that the majority read for pleasure.

#### i) Started reading

A majority, (33.8%) of the users started visiting the library at the age range of 7-9 years old, followed by the age range of 12 years and above at 27.0%. Some (21.9%) users started between the ages of 10-12 and some (14.3%) between the ages of 4-6. This confirmed the demographic responses on age. A substantial number of users (46.4%) started reading between the age 7-9 years old. 25.7% and 12.6% of users started reading between the age of 4-6 years old and 10-12 years old respectively. This finding indicates the users start to read when they are in primary schools, which is considered slightly late.

#### j) Reasons for liking the library

A significant majority (84.9%) of the users likes going to the library because of the books or library materials followed by 57.3% because of the conducive environment and 54.9% because of the air-conditioned environment. Other reasons for liking the library are because of the magazines at 53.3%, the newspapers at 44.8%, the Internet at 41.4% and the discussion area at 13.6%. This suggests that the public libraries are well-utilised for the acquisition of information and knowledge.

#### k) Customer service

Though a great majority (81.7%) of the users say that library staff is user-friendly, a reasonable number (18.3%) users indicate that library staff is not very welcoming. This finding clearly suggests that customer service is a reasonable concern that needs some kind of improvement or enhancement.

#### l) Library collections

Even though majority (46.6%) of the users state that there is adequate reading materials in their libraries, 30.5% of them say that the reading materials are insufficient. 22.6% of them has mixed feeling or unsure. In term of rating for library collections, 50.5% of the users rate them as good, 33.7% rates them as average, 9.9% rates them as excellent and 5.9% rates them as poor. These responses implies that some kind of improvements are needed to rectify the “insufficient” as indicated by 30.5% of the users and the “average rating” by the 33.7% of the users.

#### m) Circulation

Some of the users (20%) borrow 2 books, a few more (12.6%) borrow 1 book, while others (12.8%) borrow 3 books in a month. However, 32.8% of them do not borrow books at all. These are the non-members who read their own books; those who use the library materials in-house; and those who use the library facilities only. Books

borrowed range from fictions at 41.1%, academic at 26%, comics at 19%; scientific at 12.9%, adventure at 11.2% and cook or recipes at 8.5%.

In terms of book loan or lending period, a significant number of users (76.8%) are satisfied with the loan period, yet a few others (23.2%) are not. This suggests that the loan period needs improvement. While majority of the users (73.6%) are satisfied with the number of books issued, a reasonable number (26.4%) show concern and are not satisfied. This suggests that there is need to increase the maximum number of books that can be borrowed at one time.

#### n) Retrieval

Most users (69.6 %) can locate reading materials with ease, while a few others (16.5%) have difficulty in retrieval. 13.8% of them are unsure or have mixed feeling. This clearly suggests that there are minor issues that need to be addressed. Further probing revealed that the library materials are easily located as they are properly catalogued, labelled and arranged.

#### o) Information and communications Technology (ICT)

While majority of the users (78.7%) show satisfaction about computers in their libraries, a reasonable number (12.6%) are not satisfied. The rest have mixed feeling. Further probing revealed that the causes of this dissatisfaction are there are not computers provided; the computers are stolen or not working; and not enough computer. A significant majority of the users (69.4%) say that the Internet provision is satisfactory, but the rest (30.4%) are not satisfied. This suggests that there is plenty room for the ICT infrastructure to be improved.

Some users (56.6 %) utilize the library Internet service for gaining general knowledge; a few others (45.4 %) utilize it for pleasure; another few (45.0 %) utilize it for academic purposes; and others (18.4 %) utilize it to do job related things. This information indicates positive use of the Internet in the library.

#### q) Operating hours

A great majority of the users are satisfied with the opening hours of their libraries. However, a reasonable number (14%) show concern and are not happy with the opening hours. This clearly suggests that the library opening hour must be improved in terms of length and timing.

#### r) Community engagement

A large majority (77.0%) of the users do not participate in the library activities at local, state or national level. Further probing revealed that they do not participate as they are not interested; they lack the time; they lack information; and they are not given the opportunity. This is surprising, alarming and a major concern that needs to be addressed accordingly. A fair number of users (22.4%) however do participate in activities organised by their libraries.

s) Users' suggestions

The top 10 suggestions from the users on how to improve the library services are:

- a) Provision of quality reading materials. 79% \*
- b) Update, expand and diversify collections 63% \*
- c) Improve customer service 59% \*
- d) Enhance community engagement 59% \*
- e) Improve library accessibility. 57% \*
- f) Improve facilities - printing and photocopying 53% \*
- h) Meet the demand of the community 51% \*
- g) Provision of online services 49% \*
- i) Flexible service hours. 45% \*
- j) Reaching out to the community 43% \*

\* Multiple responses set

These suggestions reaffirm earlier discussion that the library materials need improvement in terms of diversity, depth and remit. They also reconfirm earlier findings that customer service and community involvement on the library activities need enhancement.

s) Urban and rural comparison

The differences between the readings habit of users in the urban and rural areas of Sarawak are summarised below:

<b>Urban</b>	<b>Variables / Elements</b>	<b>Rural</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> More Non members	Category of Users	<input type="checkbox"/> More Members
<input type="checkbox"/> 2-3 hours	Time Spent in the Library	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2 hours
<input type="checkbox"/> Once a week	Frequency of Visit	<input type="checkbox"/> Once a week
<input type="checkbox"/> Weekends	Preferred Library Days	<input type="checkbox"/> Weekdays
<input type="checkbox"/> Self <input type="checkbox"/> Friends	Reading Influences	<input type="checkbox"/> Self <input type="checkbox"/> Friends and mother
<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2.5 hours	Length of Reading Time	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour
<input type="checkbox"/> 12 years old	Started going to the Library	<input type="checkbox"/> 7-9 years old

As discussed earlier, strategies and action plans to instil reading habits among the library users at an earlier age are required to handle the late "Started going to the Library" issue face by both the urban and rural libraries. There are more non members using libraries in the urban areas and this situation needs to be addressed accordingly via appropriate action plans as well.



## **Recommendations**

### a) Awards

The library users' self-influenced and self-motivated reading habits need to be commended and recognised in a variety of award schemes such as praises, gifts, displays, promotion, awards and publicity. Such schemes can further propel them to enhance their positive attitude towards reading and motivate them to promote reading to their peers and family members.

### b) Nurturing

The library users' great positive reading habits and passion for reading indicate that they have an excellent baseline to be further nurtured and strengthened. This can be accomplished through the constant and consistent provision of quality and user-specific reading materials. Such nurturing is capable of creating a positive ripple effect when nurtured users start to enhance their reading interest and motivate others to have positive attitude towards reading.

### c) Competency building

The library staff needs to interact more with users to add value to the healthy reading culture. This necessary means the need to use more interpersonal skill and customer service competency. Most library staff speaks both Bahasa Melayu and English, but there is need to teach them local dialects to attract more patrons.

### d) Structured activities

Though library activities or programmes are conducted periodically, there is a need to improve these programmes by redesigning and structuring them to meet the needs of different categories of users. This definitely involves engaging the communities in determining what they require and expect of their libraries.

### e) Community engagement

In developing and implementing the library services, it is necessary to involve the communities to which the library services are targeted to. Only they know what is best for them. Many a time, library services failed to meet their objectives because the needs and expectations of the target groups are not taken into consideration in the design and development stage of the services.

### f) Enhancement of ICT

While some users are satisfied with the Internet provision, a fair number is unhappy with the Internet connectivity. In addition to that, reasonable majority of the users are not sure about the presence electronic resources. Most users believe the Internet enhances their academic competence. This clearly suggests that there is strong need to update the provision of the Internet and ICT in the library.

#### g) Enhancement of library resources

The library collections need to be enhanced in terms of variety, format, depth and remit of the subject areas. It was found that users expect constant replenishment of reference books and provision of books on their subjects of interest. Meeting their expectations in terms library collections will further motivate and boost up their reading interest.

### **Action Plans**

The study has highlighted areas that need to be improved further and issues that need to be alleviate to improve the service quality of public libraries in Sarawak. Various strategies and action plans have been determined to handle these areas or issues.

#### a) Replication of high impact initiatives

Since its establishment in 2000, the Sarawak State Library has embarked on various programmes to elevate its service quality in terms of delivery, contents and coverage. These high impact programmes are made possible via collaborations and community engagement exercises. Held annually, each of these initiatives on average can draw 1,500 to 3,000 participants or beneficiaries at one time. Already successful at the state level, the strategy now is to replicate these programmes at the town and district levels and subsequently to the rural communities.

The Children Literature Festival can attract up to 3000 participants at one time and it has been successfully organised since 2004. Both the Local Culture Competition and the Knowledge Camp attract 1,500 participants each. The most recent high impact programme was the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) Carnival or the Makers Movement which attracted 2,000 participants. This programme was co-organised with schools, the local authorities, non-government organisations and the US Embassy via its Lincoln Corner Sarawak.

#### b) Resources sharing

Resource sharing has been part and parcel of the Sarawak State Library. It is one of the approaches to reduce cost of operations, eradication of duplication of efforts and maximisation of resources. Enhancement of resource sharing in term of bulk loan service to the town and district libraries can to certain extent solve the problem of inadequate library resources in some of the public libraries. Bulk loan service involves lending of library resources in large quantity to eligible recipients, which in turn lend these resources to their users.

The expansion and intensification of the inter-library loan between the public libraries can also help to alleviate the problem. Consortium purchase of online resources is among the best option to rectify scarce electronic resources among the public libraries in Sarawak.

#### c) Enhancement of on-going programmes

There are initiatives put in place to by the Sarawak State Library to develop the human resource of public libraries in Sarawak. Staff of these libraries is given basic trainings in library management in stages. These trainings comprise of workshops, attachments and bench-marking visits inland and abroad. Obviously from findings of the study, the development of human resource in terms of customer service and service delivery needs to be improved further.

The ubiquitous library programme, commonly known as “U-Pustaka”, is a resource sharing platform involving major state libraries, a number of special libraries and the National Library of Malaysia. Through this web-based platform, library resources can be identified, requested and borrowed from almost anywhere and anytime in Malaysia. The great advantages and benefits of U-Pustaka can be extended to the town and district libraries as part of the resource sharing programmes. This entails greater collaboration effort between the Sarawak State Library and the public libraries.

#### d) Recontinued programmes

The research suggests the necessity to acknowledge active users and active collaborators for their efforts and participations. There is a need to nurture library users to further enhance their interest in reading and habit of going to the library. Recontinuing some of the adjourned or halted programmes to handle this situation is just about the right time. These programmes include the giving of awards and recognition to the most frequent users or frequent borrowers. The Home Library Competition and the Public Library Competition, which were held annually in the past, will be revived, intensified and fine-tuned as well.

#### e) Rebranded programme

The study highlights that library users in the rural areas started reading an the age of 7 - 9 years old, while those in the urban areas started reading at 12 years old. At this juncture, it is necessary to introduce a reader development early intervention programme. This programme instils reading habits at the earliest possible stage - in the womb and the first six months after birth. The Sarawak State Library has been embarking on one such programme at a small scale at the headquarters level. This programme, which has been rebranded twice from “born To Read” to “Every Book A Child” to the current one “The Reading Seeds”, will be enhanced accordingly and extended throughout Sarawak. Collaboration and community engagement are again critical success factors in the successful implementation of rebranded programme.

### **Conclusion**

The study has uncovered areas of concern pertaining to the reading habit of library users in Sarawak. Major areas of concern include low membership among library users and their lack of participation in activities organised by their libraries. The remit and diversity of the library collection is another area that raises concerned. The provision of ICT and Internet connectivity, especially in the rural areas of Sarawak

are also issues that need to be addressed accordingly. Based on the success of a number of initiatives and programmes of the Sarawak State Library, action plans have been identified to improve these weak spots and to alleviate areas of concerned.

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