

Book reading culture **wanes** with rise of technology

➤ Most Malaysians now prefer surfing the internet, scrolling social media feeds for information, entertainment: Expert

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PETALING JAYA: There is an assumption that the reading culture is already lost in Malaysia, but the reality is quite the opposite.

Malaysians continue to read a lot, but rather than paperbacks and hard covers, they are now gripped by what they get on social media.

“Just take the train in Kuala Lumpur or the suburban areas and you will see commuters glued to their smartphones, reading everything from news to social media feeds,” assistant professor Dr Thanaseelen Rajasakran said.

Sadly, the same cannot be said for the book reading culture. A 2019 study by the International Islamic University and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia revealed that overall, Malaysians do not read books very much.

“A typical Malaysian reads only two books a year,” Thanaseelen said, citing the study.

“The same study further noted that 80% of Malaysian university students are reluctant readers. Although they can read, they choose not to.”

Just across the Johor Causeway, the reading habit is a lot more ingrained.

A 2020 study revealed that 64% of those

surveyed in Singapore read two to 10 books a year.

Thanaseelen, who lectures at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, said the reading pattern in Malaysia could have been influenced by several factors, including the internet.

“Most youngsters prefer surfing the internet and visiting social media sites. There are also environmental factors, such as family and friends that may influence reading habits.

“A 2010 Universiti Sains Malaysia study showed that family strongly and positively influences the reading habit and interest among students.”

He said lack of motivation, peer pressure and entertainment are the other factors. For instance, the allure of entertainment on TV or online videos could draw people away from books.

Thanaseelan said parents could help inculcate the reading habit in their children, but they must start them young.

“This practice should continue at school where teachers must nurture the love of books in children by getting them to read various genres by different authors, including literature and philosophy,” he pointed out.

“This will provide the child with differing

perspectives and help the mind mature as well.”

However, Baby Boomers and GenX-es still prefer physical books,” he added.

Universiti Putra Malaysia senior lecturer Dr Tham Jen Sern noted that studies have revealed that only 20% of Malaysians read regularly while 80% are categorised as “reluctant readers” – mostly students who only read for exams.

However, a World Bank study shows that Malaysian adults actually have a high literacy rate – at 94.9%. Those aged 15 and above can read and write a short and simple statement about their everyday life.

Tham said despite the high literacy rate, people continue to shun books because technological advancements have pushed them towards social media.

“When we are engrossed with technology, inculcating the reading habit becomes challenging,” he told *theSun*.

Parents are partly to blame. For instance, some parents would give their children a smart device to keep them entertained, Tham pointed out.

But all is not lost. As we mark World Book Day this Friday, Malaysians can rest assured that the reading culture can see a renaissance, and the best way forward is to start by getting children to read.

On the personal side, Tham said he prefers physical books to e-books.

“Nothing feels better than holding and flipping the pages of a book,” he added.