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BE it for school, learning or just to enjoy a good story, Malaysians are reading more books today – an extra five books a year.

Malaysians are now reading an average of 20 books annually, compared with 15 in 2014, based on early findings from a government study made available to *Sunday Star*.

As it turns out, we also love to curl up with a good book as an escape from reality.

Fiction is the top choice of borrowed reading material in print and online from the National Library of Malaysia (NLM) last year, making up 34.5% compared with other genres.

The spike in reading, though, is based on initial data collected as of May, from an ongoing study conducted by the NLM and the National Unity Ministry.

The study, which aims to discover the current reading profile of Malaysians, began on March 6 and is targeting 100,000 respondents in its survey.

The final results of the study will be known after the survey ends on June 30.

“But from the data so far, we can see that the reading culture among Malaysians is improving with the growing number of books read in a year,” NLM director-general Salasiah Abdul Wahab says in an interview.

She says similar studies on reading habits were carried out in 1996 and 2005; each study showed that Malaysians aged 10 and above only read an average of two books a year.

The next round of research in 2014 found that the number increased to 15 books yearly.

However, this study is now almost 10 years old.

“As such, the main objective of the current study is to paint a picture of Malaysia’s latest reading habits.

“The lack of new data on our reading culture has led many to

# Malaysians are reading more books

We are now reading an average of about 20 books a year – an increase from 15 in 2014, says the National Library of Malaysia. But academicians believe the reading culture in this country needs to be strengthened further.



**Feeding the mind:** Academicians echo the need for improvement in Malaysia’s reading culture, saying that the habit should be sown early, especially during childhood. — 123rf.com

reference the 2014 study, which may not be relevant anymore, seeing that there’s a trend of Malaysians preferring to read online material,” explains Salasiah.

She adds that the current study is not only to determine how many books are read, but it will also identify reading habits by finding out the average frequen-

cy and time taken by Malaysians to read printed and electronic materials in a day.

“While the initial data shows we are reading more, Salasiah believes there’s still a need to strengthen this habit in the country.

“The reading culture must continue to be inculcated to increase the literacy rate.

“It should also be fostered to create an information-savvy society, in line with the government’s Malaysia Madani aspirations,” she says, referring to the concept which aims to create a civilised and developed nation in terms of mentality, spirituality, and infrastructure.

Academicians also echo the need for improvement, saying

that the reading habit should be sown early, especially during childhood.

## Getting lost in the story

In the meantime, it’s heartening to note the growing interest among Malaysians in reading, with many preferring to immerse themselves in the world of fiction.

A total of 695,488 works, including physical and online works, were borrowed by the public from the National Library last year. Of this total, the top five genres were fiction at 34.5%, arts at 13.3%, technology at 12.8%, applied science technology at 12.8%, and religion at 10.2%.

“This shows that Malaysians are interested in these subjects, more so than others,” Salasiah adds.

Even overall statistics across genres show that the amount of reading material borrowed from the library has gone up this year compared with 2019.

Between January and April this year, 190,113 works were borrowed from the NLM, according to statistics on the library’s website. It is an increase from 128,754 within the same period in 2019, based on news reports.

Another trend is that more people are using the NLM’s virtual library services, or u-Pustaka,

## Keep libraries and the love of reading alive

MORE online services to read digital content, holding weekly activities like reading competitions, and fun events about films based on books – such are some of the suggestions mooted to keep libraries alive and encourage more people to pick up reading in today’s society when many are glued to their smartphones and social media.

Malaysian Academic Association Congress president Prof Dr Ahmad Ismail believes the reading habit among Malaysians is still wanting despite years of campaigns to promote it.

“Reading here does not equate to looking at messages on our phones or surfing the Internet for information.

“As an academican, we have to read. I always advise my students to read three to five articles a day in their respective fields so that they can analyse or use them in their research or thesis,” shares Prof Ahmad, whose expertise is in wildlife and ecotoxicology.

gests that we read a few pages a day on topics that are of interest to us.

“Such reading must have a purpose, like for entertainment by reading a storybook or learning through scientific articles, or hobby books,” he says.

While the Internet has made it so easy to access information, Prof Ahmad says libraries are still relevant for those looking for specific publications.

To further engage readers, he suggests that libraries hold activities like reading contests on the number of books read a month and awarding a reader of the month, and storytelling activities based on books.

“Perhaps such events can be a collaboration between public libraries and the private sector or individuals,” Prof Ahmad says.

He notes that it would be interesting to hold events on

local community level,” he says.

Supportive of the idea for more physical libraries, he says each district should have one as reading must start at the grassroots level.

Malaysians are now reading an average of 20 books a year, according to the National Library of Malaysia’s initial findings on a study of the reading profile in the country (see story above).

It is an increase from the average of 15 books annually in 2014.

The library’s statistics also show that fiction is the top genre of reading material borrowed last year, followed by arts and science.

To this, Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia (PAGE) chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim says fiction is a good start to inculcate reading habits among Malaysians.

“In terms of language, English

reading more material on social media than in books.

“International benchmarking tests like the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa), which tests the reading literacy of 15-year-olds, did not give a very positive outlook for Malaysia,” she says.

While Malaysia had notably better performance, we were still at the bottom of the list when compared to the 11 developed countries assessed in Pisa 2018.

She suggests that there should be intervention programmes in schools to ensure that children reach the appropriate level of reading proficiency.

Another way is to enable disadvantaged households to have free, easy access to books.

“They should be encouraged to take children’s books, and for the parents to read to their children from a young age,” she says.

information they need through the Internet and social media.

“Reading among students is only related to a certain subject for the purpose of passing their examinations only or to complete their homework,” he believes.

With information available at a tap of our smartphone today, Fouzi says it is time for more libraries to turn digital, or increase access to online content.

He also proposes for the National Library to widen its survey on Malaysia’s reading profile to schools to gain more diverse input.

“Families who visit the library regularly already have started the habit of reading. The interest in reading is a culture that is started and applied by the family.

“If this culture is