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The Star

Malaysians are reading more books

By **YUEN MEIKENG**

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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

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

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

While the initial data shows we are reading more, Salasih 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,” Salasih 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, which includes access to digital content like audio books, ebooks, emagazines, journals, newspapers, databases, and government publications.

“Such usage of u-Pustaka is even higher than those who accessed physical reading materials last year.

“The u-Pustaka usage clocked in at 5,996,951 last year, compared with 86,226 by those who used our physical library services.

“This shows that online reading material is becoming more dominant among users today,” Salasiah says.

More libraries to come?

With the need to improve our reading culture, it makes sense to make reading material more available, be they physical or digital.

Salasiah says there are plans by the government to increase the number of libraries throughout the country, including in rural areas.

“The government also intends to set up at least one library in each parliamentary and state constituency.

“However, it has yet to fulfil such plans following constraints in terms of allocations and availability of sites,” she says.

As of today, there are 340 public libraries, including state, district, town, and community libraries.

“Another 1,112 are village libraries for the benefit of those in rural areas.

“The setting up of these libraries is one of the efforts by the government to provide such learning facilities to boost the literacy rate in society,” Salasiah says.

There are also several digital libraries such as in Tasek Gelugor, Penang, and at the Kedah digital state library to support sustainable development goals.

“The government also welcomes smart partnerships with the private sector and non-governmental organisations in developing library facilities for the people,” Salasiah adds.

Through it all, the NLM is constantly striving to increase the reading habit among Malaysians by holding various activities and programmes to encourage the habit.

On its study of the people’s reading profile, Salasiah says the findings will be important in supporting the vision of the National Reading Decade, which is to create a reading society by 2030.