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#BOOKTOKMALAYSIA REIGNITES READING CULTURE AMONG MALAYSIANS



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By Nur Syuhada Nordin

KUALA LUMPUR (Bernama) – The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought about a paradigm shift in our lives. We began thinking differently, eating differently, living differently and even reading differently.

Interestingly, book sales and digital borrowings in Malaysia have been on a steady incline since the height of the pandemic with over a two-fold increase during the Movement Control Order (MCO) compared to pre-MCO.

Digital book borrowings from Malaysia's National Library (PNM) in March 2020 soared to nearly 40,000 books compared to 15,000 during other months.

In fact, according to a study on reading habits and book purchasing trends among Malaysians by Picodi.com Analysis team, a Polish e-commerce firm, Malaysia ranked sixth place from 41 countries as among the world's highest spenders on books online.

Studies have shown that Malaysians are not reading enough with less than three hours a week spent on this activity, a far cry from reading habits among citizens in India who allocate over 10 hours a week reading while Thais and China nationals spend between eight to nine hours a week.

Industry players attribute some of the enthusiasm to a community of book lovers making relatable content on BookTok, the huge book club that has sprung up on TikTok, a social media network targeted at young mobile phone users.

They said the BookTok phenomenon helps reignite the reading culture among Malaysians, especially among the younger generation and brought energy into the bookstores.



Siti Nur Hamizah Kamarudin.

BookTok, short for "Book TikTok," is a community of users on TikTok who are passionate about books and literature. By making entertaining videos centred on the books they read, they have created an inventive way of discussing, reviewing, and recommending books that have revolutionised the literary and publishing communities.

In Malaysia, #BookTok Malaysia has raked in 173.4 million followers as of May 9, hence showing that the reading culture in Malaysia is still alive.

#BookTok Malaysia is not merely focussed on book selling alone as it also leverages the social platform to review books in the market with a casual and enjoyable approach.

A content creator, Siti Nur Hamizah Kamarudin, 23, adopts a Point of View (POV) approach - which is often used by film or drama content creators - while giving her reviews on TikTok.

By re-enacting a certain plot of a book that she has reviewed, the fourth of five siblings would not have imagined that her reviews could attract the community's attention and encourage potential readers to read the actual book.

Siti Nur Hamizah, who is an assistant accountant, started giving book reviews through video blogging as well as Instagram. With TikTok becoming all the rage, she turned to the app to promote her content in 2021 and later tapped into the culture of 'BookTok' using the #BookTokMalaysia approach.

The community now has a plethora of influencers who discuss books and provide recommendations across various genres.

"This is just my side job and I find that #BookTokMalaysia followers prefer watching short form POV videos as they are entertaining and my viewership tends to be higher whenever I post videos on my reviews of heart-pounding thriller books.

'I fully agree that #BookTokMalaysia can attract the right audience as it is one platform that can bring together fans, book readers and TikTok users who can interact on many aspects of this book, and this can be regarded as an innovation in book reviews," she told Bernama.

This creative approach adopted by Selangor-born Siti Nur Hamizah, won praises and piqued the interest of a publishing firm and in fact, another company has asked her to provide reviews of their books in the market.

With four books for review in a month, Siti Nur Hamizah said she has targeted books related to horror and fiction novels on her review list and from her observation, the majority of book lovers who watched her POV videos are youth aged 18 to 25.



Noting that with one million viewers garnered for her book reviews via POV approach, she said that the positive development augured well for the nation's book industry as the platform has brought books to life in a whole new way and rekindled Malaysians' love and interest for reading.

In addition, the #BookTokMalaysia influencer has also inspired another book reviewer, Nurdayana Batrisya Mohamad Nasir, 22, to open a book cafe at Jalan Gombak after gaining support from a community of book lovers.

The cafe, which became operational in June 2022, serves as an avenue for book fans to discuss and share their thoughts on the latest books, their favourite books as well as to listen to Nurdayana Batrisya's reviews on the books that she has read.

"This cafe is a dedicated and inclusive meeting place for young people and book lovers who are here to read or gain insights into a book in a relaxed atmosphere while enjoying various types of food and drinks that are sold here.

"The cafe's decor which exudes a sense of comfort and appeal to today's youth is also an attraction with customers capturing moments by taking photos with their books in this cafe," she added.

Against this backdrop, she concurs with views that the social media has been instrumental in re-igniting the reading culture especially among the youth, noting that a customer has also thanked her for fuelling her interest in reading.

Nurdayana Batrisya said she never dreamt that her interest towards books since her younger days and her casual reading technique that appeals to a young audience, have pushed her into the spotlight.

CAPITALISING ON BOOKTOK'S POPULARITY

Local writer Lilian Li, 24, said #BookTokMalaysia helped promote her book, 'House of Koi.'

"I posted on TikTok that I am no longer selling my book in Malaysian bookstores and the community came to help me sell out my remaining copies. Many readers have reached out to tell me they have been searching for my book in bookstores and I am so glad they found me through #BookTokMalaysia.

"I think it benefits writers to share their stories and experiences as local writers. Knowing that people want to support and see more Malaysian stories makes local writers more inspired to keep writing and representing our culture," she said.

Publishers are also picking up on the influential trend. Karangkrak Mall's e-commerce head of department, Norhaslinda Izham said there can be no denying that the social media has effectively helped drive up sales.

"In fact, among publishing companies, we have long recognised the role BookTokMalaysia plays as a recommendation tool and its potential on TikTok before it became viral. This is because TikTok is an entertainment platform especially for youth with its ability to engage and expose them to the world of books in a subtle and interesting way.

"Realising its influence, we took the initiative by creating BookTok on our publishing company's website targeting at books that are most talked about on the social media," she added.

A senior lecturer of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Assoc Prof Dr Novel Lyndon said the approach can foster public interest towards scholarly or academic books that are known to be dense and are not easy to comprehend given the complex and jargon-laden analytical pieces written by experts in their field.

However, with creative reviews through the POV technique, social media influencers or content creators can make complex and analytical content written by the author palatable and easily consumable, hence diversifying the reading genres among the book lovers' community.

"For example, literacy books, if promoted on #BookTokMalaysia in an innovative and creative way, can pique readers' interest. The concept is to promote conventional books via digital technology," he added.