

A Survey of Online Reading Habits of Rural Secondary School Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study intends to determine if online reading has an impact on Malaysian rural secondary school students' reading habits. It employed a quantitative approach and the survey method was used. The sample consisted of 200 secondary school students. The respondents' gender, preferred language, access to the internet, place of access, frequency, duration, interests as well as websites accessed were investigated. They were also interviewed to verify the findings. The findings revealed that online reading is a highly potent strategy in enhancing reading habits among these students. Concerning gender and hours spent on online reading males appeared to read more hours than females. The gathered data provided interesting insights into online reading habits. The results are discussed and recommendations are finally

provided.

Keywords: Online reading habit, Secondary school student, Survey, Gender, Online material

1. Introduction

The widespread global use of the internet and the use of alternative reading resources notably using hypertexts and multimedia resources have made drastic changes in reading patterns (Liu, 2005). In normal language teaching and learning, students have been found to be unmotivated and uninterested in learning the language. Thus, educators are very concerned to integrate human and computer capabilities as efficiently as possible (Allum, 2002). According to Kos (1991), when children read for pleasure, they involuntarily and unconsciously improve their language skills. Bignold (2003) noted that the habit of reading improved children's reading skill. Therefore, the issue of reading whether it is for learning or leisure is important since it helps broaden young people's experiences and knowledge (Green, 2002).

1.1 Background of the Study

Many studies have been conducted to identify the nature of the reading habits of individuals. Among them are studies on reading that have been done on teenagers or young people (Wicks, 1995; Machet, 2004), on college students and adults (Gallik, 1999; Kirsch & Guthrie, 1984), and on specific cultures and society such as Malaysia (Long, 1984; Small et al., 1998; Abidin et al., 2011). The research on online reading is still new and progressing in the Malaysian context.

Most of Malaysian students are able to read efficiently after finishing their secondary education, approximately of eleven years in formal education. However, even equipped with literacy skills particularly reading skills, the reading habits of students are still at an unsatisfactory level (Mozihim, 2010). Reading habits among Malaysians recently surprised the Information, Communication and Culture Minister of Malaysia when he says that "reading has become an enveloping habit for Malaysians with most reading an average of eight to twelve books per year" (Teh, 2010). As the internet is a part of the technological and digital culture of the teenagers; therefore, online reading would better suit teenagers compared to reading printed materials or books.

2. Literature Review

Many studies have been done on reading and researchers are looking for changes in reading patterns due to the widespread use of the internet and the use of alternative reading resources notably using hypertexts and multimedia resources (Liu, 2005). Pandian (2000) raised two major concerns involving Malaysian readers. According to him, only 20% of the Malaysian populations are 'regular readers' and the rest are 'reluctant readers'. Students' purpose of reading is only to pass exams. Malaysian students were reluctant to read for information or pleasure. Pandian (2000) also says that if this phenomenon is left unattended, the future of Malaysia would eventually be directed by 'reluctant readers' who are 'retarded' in terms of knowledge, intelligence and maturity.

Many researchers are captured by the emergence of the new digital environment. With a vast and speedy amount of available digital information people, particularly the young, are spending more time reading electronic materials (Liu, 2005; Ramirez, 2003). More time is spent on skimming and browsing for information on the internet. As students spend time on

skimming and browsing for information, they develop a mode of thinking creatively and critically.

Liu (2005) says that the growth of electronic media may give negative implication to reading that people are less engaged in extensive reading and lack the ability to read deeply and sustain a prolonged engagement in reading. Some would still prefer printed documents when it comes to reading. Liu (2005) and Ramirez (2003) have provided strong evidence that people would print from the internet in order to engage further reading. According to Liu (2005), the age factor contributes to reading behavior on the internet. The younger generation spends more time reading the screen-based materials. Teenagers also read a range of online materials due to the availability of a large choice, efficiency, accessibility, low cost, and up-to-date nature. The different media revealed different reading patterns. A screen based reading behavior is emerging with an increasing amount of time spent on reading online. Skim reading, scanning and speed reading were evident that less time was spent on in depth reading leading to less comprehension and content absorption/recall levels (Herath, 2010).

The habit of reading is an essential life skill. Reading is not limited to increase in knowledge but it also builds maturity and character, sharpens thinking, and widens awareness in social, economic, political, and environmental issues. Reading is not a process that is inculcated overnight; it takes effort and hard work. Inculcating a reading habit pays off handsomely in our lives either directly or indirectly.

2.1 Related Theories

There are two major theories which are closely related to the research topic namely the constructivism theory and the cognitive theory of multimedia learning. Constructivism theory is a theory of knowledge or epistemology which argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and ideas. Information age and technology have caused us to reconceptualise the learning process and design new learning approaches. For example, the internet can be used as a powerful tool to allow students to construct complex knowledge bases. The internet facilitates knowledge exploration by students. Students can work independently to find information on the internet, create and build information through designing web sites, and communicate and share knowledge through the internet.

According to the constructivism theory, learning places the ultimate burden of learning on the learners as opposed to the tools employed to learn which includes teachers and technology. The constructivist teacher and a constructivist classroom are distinguished from a traditional classroom by a number of major qualities: the learners are actively involved in the teaching and learning process; the environment is democratic, interactive and student-centered.

The second theory is the cognitive theory of multimedia learning. Here, it is believed learning is an active process which includes filtering, selecting, organizing and integrating information. It proposes that a combination of words and pictures rather than words alone is an effective way to achieve multimedia learning. As for the classroom practice, the theory of multimedia can be applied to inculcate better and interesting reading habits. Thus, the classroom is no

longer a place where the teacher pours knowledge into passive students. Students play proactive roles seeking the information that they need.

A combination of these two theories contributes to online reading habits. Online information which is an integration of text, graphics and sound attracts the reader to pursue the internet as a source of information. Thus, information passes through the stages of filtering, selecting, organizing and integrating. The integration of text, graphics and sound enhances better reading habits among students. As teenagers these days are considered to be digital natives, what attracts them most to reading are the text, graphics and sound. Accordingly, Nithy (2011) claims that information is ubiquitous. Schools and teachers only need to facilitate learning instead of playing the role of 'information suppliers'. Students are independent with the changes in technology and education.

2.2 Significance of Study and Research Questions

No research has been carried out on online reading in rural Malaysian schools until to date. Besides, no research has focused on the relationship among gender, online reading and reading habits yet. Only studies on online activities of urban Malaysian adolescents were done by a few researchers (Tan et al., 2009). This study intends to investigate Malaysian rural students' online reading preferences. It is hoped that it could be an eye-opener and aid educators to best consider their teaching methods based on the students' needs. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the Malaysian secondary school students' preferred online materials?
- 2) What is these students' preferred language while reading online materials?
- 3) What are male and female students' online reading habits?
- 4) How many hours do students read online daily?

3. Methodology

This research is a descriptive study in which the sample students were chosen by a purposive sampling. For the analysis of data, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 15 was used.

3.1 Sampling

A total of 200 respondents took part in this study. They were Form Five students from 5 rural government schools in the district of Larut Matang and Selama, Malaysia. The 5 sample schools were similar in size and quality. Among the respondents 86 (43%) were males and the remaining 114 (57%) were females.

3.2 Instrument

The research instrument was adapted from Shen (2006). The instrument was then tested and revised with the following procedures. First, the items were generated based on the objectives of the study and research questions. Then, the questionnaire was peer-reviewed by ten secondary English school teachers and revised accordingly. Next, it was piloted to a group of 30 Form Five students with the aim of determining the reliability. The test yielded a value or

coefficient of 0.937. With this coefficient, the survey questionnaire is said to have internal consistency and be reliable (See the Appendix).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Computer Access

With reference to Table 1, out of the 200 respondents, only 75 of them have computers at home with access to the internet. The majority of the respondents use the computer at the cyber cafe (47%) followed by the use of computer at home (43.5%) and at their friends' houses (5%). The least usage of the computer is at school (4.5%).

Table 1. Category of respondents with access to the internet

Category		Frequency	%
	Yes	75	37.5
	No	125	62.5
N= 200			

4.2 Preference of Computer Activities

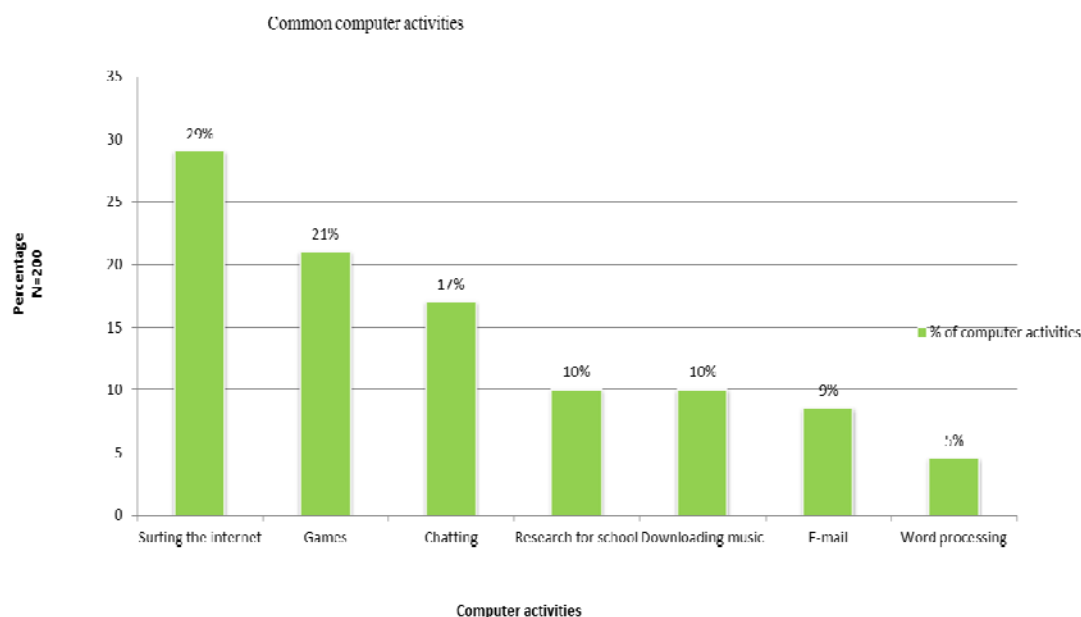


Figure 1. Ranking of Common Computer Activities

As Figure 1 indicates, there are seven common activities when using a computer namely games, surfing the internet, doing research for school, using word processing, e-mail, chatting and downloading music. Respondents chose surfing the internet as their most common activity with 29%. Games were chosen as the second highest activity on the computer with 21%. A group of students interviewed also voiced out that they learn better English through online games. They could understand the medium of instruction used in online games which is mainly in English. According to them, interest is important to enhance any habits. So this finding is indeed an eye-opener and teachers must know students' interests before they can

enforce any new strategy or idea. The third most common activity on the computer was chatting with 17%. Word processing was least common among students with only 4.5%.

4.3 Online Reading

There are seven options of reading materials given to students. Ranking in Figure 2 shows the students preferred the printed reading materials to online reading materials.

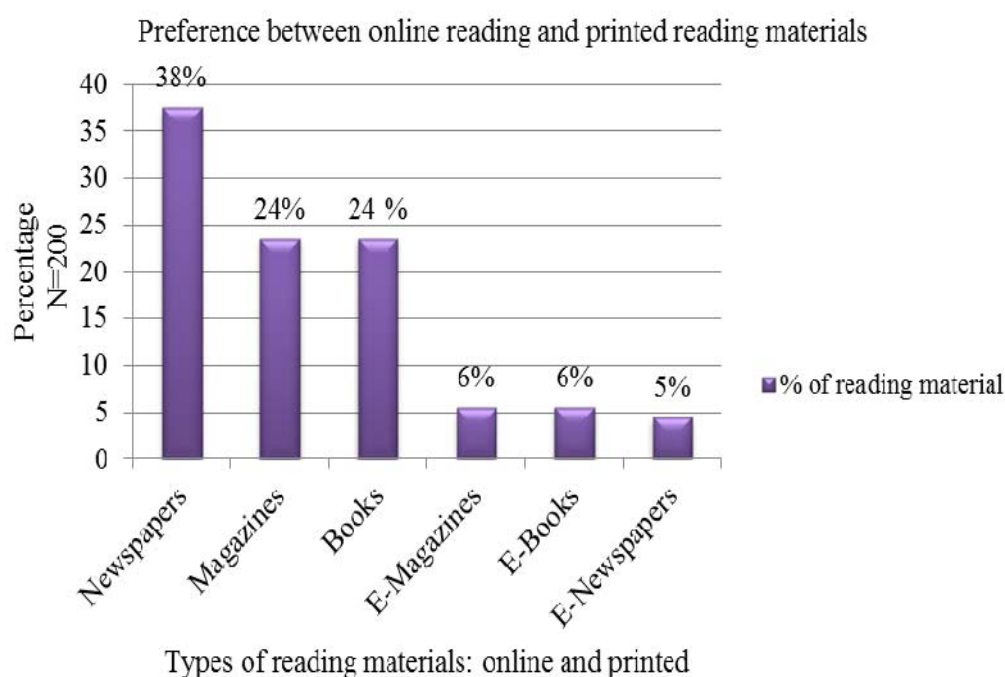


Figure 2. Preference of Online and Printed Reading Materials

4.4 Online Reading Materials

Table 2. Students' Preferred Online Materials

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
Online reading materials	%	%	%	%	%
Online news	31.5	37	21	7	3.5
Online magazines	27.5	39.5	22	8	3
E-books	36	35	22	5	2
Stories/novels	26	26	27	15	6
E-mails	19.5	26.5	26	19.5	8.5
Movie reviews	20	23.5	34.5	15.5	6.5
Horoscope	40	27.5	21	9	2.5
Comic strips or jokes	25.5	27	27.5	11.5	8.5
N= 200					

Table 2 indicates reading e-mails (8.5%) and comic strips or jokes (8.5%) are the most preferred online materials followed by reading movie reviews (6.5%). Students often read

e-mails (19.5%), watch movie reviews (15.5%) and read stories or novels (15%). However, the percentage in the rarely read column shows alarming results where 39.5% rarely read online magazines, 37% rarely read online news and 35% rarely read e-books. This also supports Pandian's report (2000) that "Malaysian students were reluctant to read for information or pleasure".

4.5 Preference of Language

A frequency test was carried out to find out the most preferred language in printed reading materials and online reading materials. The most preferred language in printed reading materials is Bahasa Melayu (83%). Only 17% of the students prefer to read English printed reading materials (Table 3). Findings on online reading materials show an outstanding figure of 79% that prefers reading online reading materials in English (Table 4).

Table 3. Preference of language for printed reading materials

Language	Frequency	%
English	34	17
Bahasa Melayu	166	83
N= 200		

Table 4. Preference of language for online reading materials

Language	Frequency	%
English	158	79
Bahasa Melayu	42	21
N= 200		

4.6 Male and Female Students' Reading Habits

Both males and females do not spend much time on informative online reading materials. Data from Table 4.5 shows that online magazines are rarely read where 41.9% of males and 37.7% of females rarely read online magazines. Besides, 40.7% of males and 34.2% of females rarely read any online news. E-mails are most often read by female students (11.4%). On the second rank, female students prefer to read stories, novels, movie reviews, comic strips and jokes. Male students read comics strips and jokes (8.1%), news (5.8%) and e-mails (4.7%) as their most preferred online reading materials.

English language teachers in Malaysia could use the data on the findings as a guide to prepare lessons that are to the students' interests. For example, entertainment sites carrying news on movies can be used to teach description of events and characters.

Table 5. Gender and reading habits

Online Reading	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
	%	%	%	%	%
News					
Male	31.4	40.7	14	8.1	5.8
Female	31.6	34.2	26.3	6.1	1.8
E-magazines					
Male	33.7	41.9	15.1	7	2.3
Female	22.8	37.7	27.2	8.8	3.5
E-Books	41.9	31.4	22.1	3.5	1.2
Male	31.6	37.7	21.9	6.1	2.6
Female					
Stories/novels					
Male	31.4	32.6	24.4	9.3	2.3
Female	21.9	21.1	28.9	19.3	8.8
E-mails					
Male	20.9	29.1	24.4	20.9	4.7
Female	18.4	24.6	27.2	18.4	11.4
Movie reviews					
Male	17.4	20.9	38.4	19.8	3.5
Female	21.9	25.4	31.6	12.3	8.8
Horoscope					
Male	45.3	30.2	16.3	5.8	2.3
Female	36	25.4	24.6	11.4	2.6
Comic strips and jokes					
Male	32.6	17.4	29.1	12.8	8.1
Female	20.2	34.2	26.3	10.5	8.8
N= 200					

4.7 Time Spent on Reading

The analysis shows the highest percentage of students spend 1-3 hours online daily. Read. Table 6 reveals that 119 respondents spend 1-3 hours on the internet every day. The findings also show that students give emphasis to using the internet; although only 37.5% of the respondents have computers at home with internet access, most of them spend 1-3 hours online daily. Only 37.5% of them have computers at home with access to the internet.

Table 6. Hours daily spent on online reading

Category		Frequency	%
	Less than an hour	63	31.5
	1-3 hours	119	59.5
	4-6 hours	16	8
	More than 6 hours	2	1
N= 200			

Furthermore, it was discovered that students least use computers at school. Why is this scenario occurring, when schools are supposed to provide ICT facilities to students? Computer facilities should be improved in quality and quantity so that students are able to go online for research purposes. If students use computer facilities at home or at schools, online materials accessed by students could be screened by teachers or parents. At cyber cafes, students are free to access any type of online materials. It is worrying that online violence, foul languages, etc. are accessed by students without the supervision of adults.

Therefore, it is obvious to address the inequalities in internet access in schools. As students spend an average of six to seven hours in school, schools play a major role in providing internet facilities to students. Schools can increase internet facilities and teachers could supervise students in computer laboratories during free periods. Observation in the three school libraries of the five sample schools also reflected that school libraries fail to provide students with internet services. A few students interviewed also voiced out that if internet facilities are provided in the school library, it would give them great opportunity to seek for information and encourage them to browse for information.

4.8 Time Spent on Online Reading According to Gender

A comparison on the gender and hours spent on online reading indicates that males read more hours than females (Table 4.7). A total of 10.5% of males read 4-6 hours daily compared to females who only show 6.1%. On the contrary, a higher percentage of females (62.3%) spend 1-3 hours of reading compared to males (55.8%). Only one male and one female spend more than six hours daily on online reading. Overall, there is not sharp gender difference in online reading.

Table 7. Hours daily spent online according to gender

		Less than an hour	%	1-3 hours	%	4-6 hours	%	More than 6 hours	%
Gender	Male	28	32.6	48	55.8	9	10.5	1	1.2
	Female	35	30.7	71	62.3	7	6.1	1	0.9
N= 200									

In brief, findings for the research questions revealed that students in rural areas do not show interest in informative reading materials. Students prefer the entertaining mode of reading

materials such as e-mails, movie reviews, comic strips and jokes. There is also not much difference of gender and online reading habits. Students also read to gain general information. Although the English language may appear to be a barrier to rural students, they still chose reading English online reading materials as their choice. This evidence clearly indicates that students are vulnerable to change and are able to adapt and suit themselves to various languages of reading materials.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study confirm the belief by Tan et al. (2009) that as many adolescents today are fairly techno-savvy, teachers or educators should go beyond teaching technical skills to integrating ICT in the language classroom where students can truly explore and experience the internet as a resource.

Online reading for information purposes is not widely used in Malaysian schools, especially in rural areas. Some students have low English language proficiency and the language barriers discourage them from reading English language reading materials. English teachers play a vital role to promote on reading English online newspapers so that students are well read and equipped with updated information. In this regard, E-newspapers, e-magazines and e-books could be utilized maximally as teaching aids.

This research is a quantitative research which only focused on the frequency of reading, number of hours, types of online reading materials and activities. Hence, a qualitative research is recommended to see the real effectiveness of online reading. A quasi experiment on online reading would help researchers a better understanding of the study. The findings from such research would further help the teachers to select appropriate online reading materials for the English lesson.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Please fill in the blanks or place a tick (✓) in the appropriate box.

Personal Information

1. Gender: Male Female

2. Do you have a computer at home with access to the internet

Yes No

Computer Usage

3. Where do you mostly use the computer? Please tick (✓) only once on your choice.

- i. At home
- ii. At a friend's house
- iii. At school
- iv. At a cyber café

4. What is your common activity when using a computer?

Please list according to your usage (1 to 7).

i. Games	
ii. Surfing the internet	
iii. Research for school	
iv. Word Processing	
v. E-mail	
vi. Chatting	
vii. Downloading music	

5. Hours spent online daily. Please tick (✓) only once on your choice.

Less than an hour		1-3 hours		4-6 hours		more than 6 hours	
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6. Reading Habits: Text Books

Hours spent on reading the text books daily. Please tick (✓) only once on your choice.

Less than an hour		1-3 hours		4-6 hours		more than 6 hours	
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7. Reading Habits: Books

Hours spent on reading books and magazines daily. Please tick (✓) only once on your choice.

Less than an hour		1-3 hours		4-6 hours		more than 6 hours	
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8. Reading Habits: Magazines

Hours spent on reading books and magazines daily. Please tick (✓) only once on your choice.

Less than an hour		1-3 hours		4-6 hours		more than 6 hours	
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9. Reading Habits: Newspapers

Hours spent on reading newspaper daily. Please tick (✓) only once on your choice.

Less than an hour		1-3 hours		4-6 hours		more than 6 hours	
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10. Reading Habits: E-Books

Hours spent on reading e-books and e-magazines daily. Please tick (✓) only once on your choice.

Less than an hour		1-3 hours		4-6 hours		more than 6 hours	
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11. Reading Habits: E-Magazines

Hours spent on reading e-books and e-magazines daily. Please tick (✓) only once on your choice.

Less than an hour		1-3 hours		4-6 hours		more than 6 hours	
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12. Reading Habits: E-Newspapers

Hours spent on reading e-newspaper daily. Please tick (✓) only once on your choice.

Less than an hour		1-3 hours		4-6 hours		more than 6 hours	
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13. Reading Preference: E-Newspapers (Online Newspapers)

Please circle your answer on the 5-point Likert scale.

	1.Never	2. Rarely	3. Sometimes	4. Often	5. Very Often
i. The Star Online	1	2	3	4	5
ii. New Straits Times Online	1	2	3	4	5
iii. Utusan Malaysia Online	1	2	3	4	5
iv. Berita Harian Online	1	2	3	4	5
v. Metro Online	1	2	3	4	5
vi. Kosmo! Online	1	2	3	4	5
vii. Harakah Daily	1	2	3	4	5
viii. Others (please specify)	1	2	3	4	5

14. Topics of Interest in the Newspapers and E-Newspapers

Please circle your answer on the 5-point Likert scale.

	1. Never	2. Rarely	3. Sometimes	4. Often	5. Very Often
i. Local news	1	2	3	4	5
ii. Foreign news	1	2	3	4	5
iii. Business/Stock market	1	2	3	4	5
iv. Leisure columns	1	2	3	4	5
v. Sports	1	2	3	4	5
vi. Editorial	1	2	3	4	5
vii. Book reviews	1	2	3	4	5
viii. Others (please specify)	1	2	3	4	5

15. Reading Preference: E-Magazines (Online Magazines): Fields of Interest

Please circle your answer on the 5-point Likert scale.

	1. Never	2. Rarely	3. Sometimes	4. Often	5. Very Often
i. Sports	1	2	3	4	5
ii. Music	1	2	3	4	5
iii. Education	1	2	3	4	5
iv. Vehicles	1	2	3	4	5
v. Entertainment	1	2	3	4	5
vi. Movies	1	2	3	4	5
vii. Fashion	1	2	3	4	5
viii. Pornography (sex sites)	1	2	3	4	5
ix. Others (please specify)	1	2	3	4	5

16. Reading Preference: E-Books (Online Books): Fields of Interest

Please circle your answer on the 5-point Likert scale.

	1. Never	2. Rarely	3. Sometimes	4. Often	5. Very Often
i. Sports	1	2	3	4	5
ii. Music	1	2	3	4	5
iii. Education	1	2	3	4	5
iv. Vehicles	1	2	3	4	5
v. Entertainment	1	2	3	4	5

vi. Movies	1	2	3	4	5
vii. Fashion	1	2	3	4	5
viii. Pornography	1	2	3	4	5
ix. Others (please specify)	1	2	3	4	5

17. Reading Preference: Online Information

Please circle your answer on the 5-point Likert scale.

	1. Never	2. Rarely	3. Sometimes	4. Often	5. Very Often
i. Sports	1	2	3	4	5
ii. Movies	1	2	3	4	5
iii. Gossips	1	2	3	4	5
iv. Examinations	1	2	3	4	5
v. Others (please specify)	1	2	3	4	5

18. Reading Preference: Preference between Online Reading and Printed Reading Materials.

Please list according to your preference (1 to 6).

i. Newspapers		ii. E-Newspapers
iii. Magazines		iv. E-magazines
v. Books		vi. E-books

19. Preference of Language: Printed Reading Materials

Which language do you most prefer while reading printed materials?

Please tick (✓) only once on your choice.

i. English		ii. Bahasa Melayu		iii. Chinese		iv. Tamil		v. Others (please specify)
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20. Preference of Language: Online Reading

Which language do you most prefer while online reading?

Please tick (✓) only once on your choice.

i. English		ii. Bahasa Melayu		iii. Chinese		iv. Tamil		v. Others (please specify)
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21. Preference of Online Reading Materials

What do you usually read on the Internet?

Please circle your answer on the 5-point Likert scale.

	1. Never	2. Rarely	3. Sometimes	4. Often	5. Very Often
i. I read online news	1	2	3	4	5
ii. I read online magazines	1	2	3	4	5
iii. I read e-books	1	2	3	4	5
iv. I read stories/ novels	1	2	3	4	5
v. I read emails	1	2	3	4	5
vi. I read movie reviews	1	2	3	4	5
vii. I read horoscope	1	2	3	4	5
viii. I read comic strips or jokes	1	2	3	4	5

22. How often do you read while listening to songs or music in the internet?

Please circle your answer on the 5-point Likert scale.

	1. Never	2. Rarely	3. Sometimes	4. Often	5. Very Often
i. Reading and listening to songs or music in the internet	1	2	3	4	5

23. Preference of Online Activities

What do you do when you surf on the Internet?

Please circle your answer on the 5-point Likert scale.

	1. Never	2. Rarely	3. Sometimes	4. Often	5. VeryOften
i. I play games	1	2	3	4	5
ii. I look at photo albums. (Facebook)	1	2	3	4	5
iii. I listen to music	1	2	3	4	5
iv. I read all kinds of information	1	2	3	4	5
v. I use MSN Messenger	1	2	3	4	5
vi. I use Yahoo	1	2	3	4	5

Messenger					
vii. I use Skype	1	2	3	4	5
viii. I use MySpace	1	2	3	4	5
ix. I check e-mails	1	2	3	4	5
x. I use the YouTube	1	2	3	4	5
xi. I use Facebook	1	2	3	4	5
xii. I watch/read pornography materials	1	2	3	4	5

24. Hours Spent Weekly On Internet Activities

How many hours do you spend weekly on each activity when you surf on the Internet?

Please tick (✓) on your choice.

	0 Hours	Less than an hour	1-3 hours	4-6 hours	More than 6 hours
i. I play games					
ii. I look at photo albums.(Facebook)					
iii. I listen to music					
iv. I read all kinds of information.					
v. I use MSN Messenger					
vi. I use Yahoo Messenger					
vii. I use Skype					
viii. I use MySpace					
ix. I check e-mails					
x. I use the YouTube					
xi. I use Facebook					
xii. I watch/read pornography materials					

25. Purpose of Online Reading

What is the purpose of reading online materials?

Please list according to your preference (1 to 4).

i. General Information		ii. Pleasure		iii. Examination purpose		iv. Others (please specify)
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