

## VOICES OF ARDENT READERS: ONE IN CONCERT

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### ABSTRACT

What does it take to be an ardent reader? Research on literacy and reading motivation has shown that one's upbringing and background, specifically the relationship between attitude and beliefs are crucial factors in shaping one's reading habits. With that as its basis, this paper captures significant findings from interview data of university students of differing backgrounds who are proficient in English and more importantly, who share the love of reading. The researchers aim to better understand the reading experience of these Malaysian readers by listening to their accounts of early and current reading experiences. The researchers choose to analyze and understand the data from a qualitative approach because it accords these voices more depth. While each voice is regarded uniquely in its own historical context and construct, their voices when in concert, point to the construction of new insights in the researchers' stance on what it takes to be an ardent reader. To learn from these voices is to reiterate not how infrequently young Malaysians read, but how possible it is to shape young Malaysians into ardent readers.

### Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century poses new challenges and competitors to what appears to be the almost sterile, passive act of reading. Amongst others, literacy researchers (Halls & Coles, 1999; Van de Voort, 2001) have aptly investigated and even attributed a decline in reading engagement to the advent of electronic multi media. The fact that the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) survey (Kelly, 2001) carries in it two items pertaining to reading and television watching is indicative of the current challenges literacy education faces. Indeed, if there should be a distinction of what would be crucial to the reading process, an individual's possession of the necessary, positive attitude would rank highly.

In reading-specific terms, Alexander and Filler (1976) define "attitude" as "a system of feelings related to reading which causes the learner to approach or avoid a reading situation." (quoted by McKenna, 2001:136). Attitude theorists argue that our attitude is heavily dependent on our belief structure (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). This refers to the relationship between feelings and thought, with act and practice.

McKenna (2001:135) argues that understanding attitude and beliefs is “a concept vital to any effort to systematically foster engaged readers.” Linking together the belief structure, attitude and reading, McKenna (2001) put together a framework (Reading Attitude Acquisition Model) that captures the dynamics of a “reading attitude”. Specifically, McKenna highlights that an individual’s cognitive (and metacognitive) abilities alone are insufficient in propelling that individual to read. This framework encapsulates the factors of one’s social structure and environment in forming the belief system, and by extension, the attitude. Fundamental to the framework, McKenna’s posits, is the individual’s beliefs and attitude toward reading that is contingent on, among others, the “importance ascribed to a specific reading activity being considered” (2001:140). So, how crucial would one’s ability to ascribe importance to a reading activity be to the make-up of an ardent reader? This question is important because it is critical “to understand how beliefs originate and how they can be targeted as a means of changing children’s attitudes” (McKenna, 2001:138)

This current study is a follow-up to a previous investigation carried out by Chong and Lai (2007) that looked into a group of university students’ perception of importance of reading and the corresponding practice of reading, thus providing a snapshot of these young adults’ individual belief systems and their association with the act of reading. Their study indicates that a positive perception of the importance of reading does not necessarily engender positive reading habits, where an individual may clearly acknowledge the importance of reading, without demonstrating the corresponding strength in reading. Because Chong and Lai’s (2007) analysis was quantitative in nature and its interpretations derived from quantitative measures, it provided breadth in its findings. However, it could not capture detailed accounts of the participants’ reading-related experiences. Thus, in this present study, the researchers believe that qualitative data obtained from interviews would contribute to an in-depth and detailed look into the nature of readers and the notion of importance ascribed to the reading habit. As such, this study set out to understand the meaning and meaningfulness of the reading experiences to these ardent readers.

## **Methodology**

Within the scope of this paper, an “ardent reader” is defined and understood to be have the following characteristics. Firstly, because the ardent readers came forward on a voluntary basis, it necessitates their personal self-declaration and acknowledgement as being one who belongs to this ardent readers’ category (Clark & Rumbold, 2006). Secondly, the ardent readers demonstrate the ability to

remember vividly their early or even earliest reading experiences. They are able to identify the pivotal experience or turning point when the act of reading left an impact on them. (See Becker, 1997, on her study of avid women readers and the detailed descriptions of their earliest turning points.) Our notion of literacy is set within the context of “high-level literacy”, a plane where readers read for pleasure (Becker, 1997; Clark & Rumbold, 2006).

For this research, we choose to employ the qualitative method because the “phenomenological approach is a focus on understanding the meaning events have for persons being studied” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:3). Thus, this phenomenological study allows us to understand the reading experiences from the “point of view” or “perspective of the subject” (Kvale, 1996). When these voices are lent credence, the intricacies of their individual reading experiences begin to surface, thus revealing depth.

Taking into account the above research rationale and perimeters, a call to those who deem themselves ardent readers was directly and indirectly put out by the researchers. This was done through word-of-mouth and through the help of two students who put up messages on the student website and individual blogsites. As a result, nine students volunteered to take part in this study. Although gradual, the process to meet and make arrangements with all nine was smoothly done. All nine agreed to be interviewed about their early and current reading experiences. Our interviews were based on an interview guide that was adapted from Fairbairn & Fairbairn (2001). We believed that only through interviews, would we be able to capture the participants’ reading experiences from their own perspectives and in their own words. Although the interview sessions ranged from 10 to 35 minutes, we were more interested in the spontaneous, rich and relevant responses from the students.

### ***Sample***

The participants of this study are students from a private Malaysian university, which uses English as its medium of instruction. Of the nine interviewees, four are females. They are Siti who is Malay, Emily who is Chinese, Devi an Indian and Kiran, who is of mixed Chinese and Punjabi parentage. The five male students are Howard, John and Felix who are all Chinese, and Damo an Indian and Farid, a Malay. They hail from national type day schools and boarding schools. For all nine, their medium of instruction in school was Bahasa Melayu (Malay language). Also characteristic of these nine was their proficiency in English language. All nine scored “A” for the SPM examination; with seven of them scoring A’s in the university English courses while the other two scored a B and a B+. When it came

to reading, all nine unanimously read mostly (if not exclusively) in the English language. They ranged from being 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> year students (see Table 1 for details pertaining to their courses.)

**Table 1:** Breakdown of sample

<b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Year of study</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Howard	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Engineering	Chinese
John	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Information Systems	Chinese
Farid	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Engineering	Malay
Emily	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Engineering	Chinese
Damo	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Engineering	Indian
Siti	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Engineering	Malay
Devi	4 <sup>th</sup>	Technology	Indian
Kiran	4 <sup>th</sup>	Engineering	Punjabi
Felix	4 <sup>th</sup>	Engineering	Chinese

## **Voices**

In this section we will put forth four categories that highlight the individual voices of our ardent readers. First, we discuss their background and upbringing with reference to their reading experience. Secondly, we show the significance of their reading experience. Thirdly, we trace the development of their reading genre and finally, we look at their current reading experience as an undergraduate. These categories were formed based on the recurring themes drawn from the interviews. The themes are also in line with our initial objective to understand the make-up of ardent readers, via their early and current reading experiences. Their individual voices stand for the spirit of subjectivism and constructivism in that each voice and each story is recognized for its own intrinsic value.

### ***Background and upbringing***

In looking at these readers' past reading experiences, we are essentially uncovering what McKenna called the readers' "social structure and environment" in relation to their reading attitude. This will help to show how important their social structure and environment were in building the foundation of their positive reading attitude. It was very clear that the early memories of these ardent readers' reading experience

were still very vivid in their minds. All nine participants were able to identify a specific person/people who introduced them to the reading dimension. From this sample, we identified that four participants were mainly influenced by their mothers. For example:

*“When I was young, as a kid, before I could read and write, my mum used to read a lot of stories to us, so she used to tell us a lot of stories, and we used to ask her to repeat the stories again and again, and we never used to get bored..”* (Kiran)

*“Previously I was encouraged to read by mum. Started with comics, at the end, I try to read other challenging materials, novels, Malay novels...”* (Farid)

*“When I was young my mum used to bring me to her library. They had the Lady Bird collection. So I picked up the habit from there. I would read all the books while waiting for her to finish her class. I started enjoying reading from then on...I was about 4, 5....”* (Devi)

On the other hand, three participants attributed the influence to both their parents. Howard and Emily attribute their interest in reading to both their parents, although Emily mentioned that the “NILAM project” in school also encouraged her reading habit. John too shared the role his parents played in his early reading experiences:

*“It started with my parents. They would get me simple books with pictures and all. Initially it was for the pictures that I read, but later on it was for the words and the story. At first I was apprehensive of the language that I would sometimes encounter, but my parents slowly brought me along the path for reading...”* (John)

There is a recognizable pattern in seven out of the nine participants in that the introduction as well as their initial attachment to their reading experience began when they were in pre- or primary school. Effectively, this meant that their interest in reading began as early as the age of 4 or 5. Correspondingly, for all seven early readers, their influencers were either one or both parents.

However, Felix’ and Siti’s experiences proved to be different. Their attachment to reading began much later in their lives.

*“Never really started reading until Form 4 [16 years old], was never exposed to reading habits, unlike sister who reads in the house, but I never read her books like Ladybird, Penguins, so I never did read those. Started reading because of brother-in-law who bugged me to read and it was the Odyssey and Homer (laughed). It took me a long time to read because every single word was “What’s this?” “What’s this?” But I caught on from there.”* (Felix)

*“When I first started reading I was 14. It was recommended by my friend, she told me the author’s good....So at first it was the storyline, but later it was... habit maybe, I have to read.”* (Siti)

It is also important to note that for both Felix and Siti, their influencers were not any of their parent(s) but a brother-in-law and a friend, respectively. Regardless of when they started reading or who influenced them, it was clear to the researchers that these ardent readers readily acknowledged the roles played by the specific individuals in their lives at the advent of their reading experience. This clearly shows that in the beginning of the reading experience, there appears to be a “hand-holding” phase where an external individual is pivotal in motivating the readers to begin and continue reading. This hand-holding phase will stay relevant until the point when the independent reading journey takes off.

### ***Significance of reading experiences***

The build-up of these readers’ social structure and environment in relation to their reading experience would eventually contribute to the formation and re-formation of their belief systems. All nine of them believe that the rewards and benefits of reading have returned tenfold. The descriptions of the significance of reading ranged from very practical benefits to those that were more abstract and intangible in nature.

To the question of how reading has helped her, Devi highlighted the practical benefits:

*“It helps me with my presentation. I would say with my words, I have been able to capture, impress the lecturer. It shows that you have a high standard”* (Devi)

To the question of whether reading has given her the edge, Siti shared:

*“Eighty percent of my language, my English language has improved because of reading....it helped me a lot for my English especially speaking in English.”*  
*[Do you think people look up to you because of that?] “Some people have mentioned that...”* (Siti)

In the same vein, Damo shares that reading helped him as a university debater, giving him “an edge” and helping him cultivate creativity.

On the other hand, Kiran found her reading experiences significant in the way it adds to her world view:

*“What I like about reading is that it actually transports you into the world of the book itself.... Most of the time I try to relate, to see if I’ve actually gone through that similar experience before or not. Even if it’s something from a totally different*

*culture I look at it as ... I'm learning something new.... it's like you travel around the world, but you're actually just right there in your own spot..."* (Kiran)

Howard describes the significance of his reading experiences, both in terms of abstract and practical benefits:

*"...there are a lot of things that can be learned from reading....I've the hunger to procure the knowledge, to satisfy my need, to broaden my perspectives, to see things in the way that people normally wouldn't see. And also challenge myself to greater limits. At the same time to also go back to some fundamental needs perhaps to widen my vocabulary, to correct my own grammatical errors 'cause although I've been an avid reader, I still make grammatical mistakes, occasionally."*

(Howard)

Cutting across all nine, it is clear that they have benefited in terms of English language proficiency. This translates into a sense of confidence and even self-esteem. Here, the readers' conviction of the importance and significance of their reading experiences is a testament to their belief system.

### **Genre**

For those who began reading ardently at a young age, their exposure to children's literature is recognizable.

*"That Mr. Man collection, like Mr. Habit, so those were one of my favorite books because we used to have the collection ... Primary was a girl's school, so all of us will share the Sweet Valley collection."*

(Devi)

*"I started with the simplified versions of Aesop's fable. As I grew up, my father was insistent that I be an avid reader, so he bought books mostly classics. But because classics were quite difficult for me and I was very young, so I put them aside a borrowed from the library books such as Enid Blyton, mysteries and any other storybooks even Hardy Boys, some easier materials for me to digest."*

(Howard)

As they grew, all of them continued to show interest in the fiction genre, albeit at a more mature level. For example:

*"...after SPM, I started to read fiction, some science fiction novels as well, some thrillers, the most recent thriller was the "Da Vinci Code". But it's only one of the very few thrillers that I've read. I've read mostly classics like Hans Christian's Fairy Tales, Shakespeare's "Tales of Two Cities", "Oliver Twist", Aesop's Fables the classic version, Rudyard Kipling, Roald Dahl and many others."*

(Howard)

*“As I grew older, I started with magazines and followed by young teen’s fiction and moving on to full fledged fiction. Far too many (titles). If I recall, Sidney Sheldon and John Grisham were my favorites at that time.”* (John)

Even for the two readers whose journey took flight later in their lives, the initial reading genre was fiction.

*“The first novel that made me really fell in love with reading was Sidney Sheldon’s “The Sky is Falling”. Then I started reading Sidney Sheldon, all the time it was Sidney Sheldon.”* (Siti)

In Felix’ circumstance:

*Started reading because of brother-in-law who bugged me to read and it was the Odyssey and Homer ... “Read fiction mostly, some basic literature like “Sophie’s World”, “The Little Prince”, I just finished that, “5 People You Meet In Heaven”, “Harry Potter” ... and a lot more, can’t remember, “To Kill a Mocking Bird”. Currently, I haven’t opened “Tuesdays with Morrie” yet ... it’s for my next reading list”.* (Felix)

Although these readers continue to read fiction even in the university, there is a distinction in that now, their choice of reading also includes materials that are immediately applicable and useful for them.

*“[How do you identify the books to read?] First it has to be a topic I am interested in, and relevant to what I’m going through in life. Back during school, I read for the fun of it because I didn’t have much issues to deal with. So I was hooked on fiction a lot. Now, in university, the focus is on developing a good career; I focus of things like self-development, stress management an all. It interests me in whether it will help me or not at this point of time.”* (John)

*“Maybe more on real life novels ... like “The Diary of Anne Frank”. These materials portray their lives. For me not only are they thought provoking, there are certain issues that concern me as a student, as a teenager. I also get to put myself in the writer’s shoes. Perhaps certain experiences that they have gone through and they like to share, so I get to think from their point of view how they deal with certain issues or problems.”* (Howard)

When tracing the progression of the genre that these readers’ prefer, we see that it began with reading for fun or pleasure and gradually evolved into reading for pleasure and for specific purposes.



### ***Reading as an undergraduate***

Bearing in mind that these nine are ardent readers, we asked about their current reading experiences and habits as university students. We identified two important characteristics. The first relates to time, while the second relates to their social circle.

#### *Time*

Although all nine are undergraduates in the same university and as such, are fundamentally subjected to similar academic demands and challenges, each person's time management is different. Damo shared that during the semester, he spends about 4 hours a day on reading, out of which 3 hours are academic reading while 1 hour is for leisure reading. However, during the semester break, he can easily spend up to 8 hours a day on reading fiction and motivational books.

Emily put it very simply:

*"Now I don't read so much 'cause...busy with work."* (Emily)

Kiran's comment rang quite loudly:

*"We may not read as much as we'd like to, like I'll usually just read right before I go to bed, if I can finish a chapter, considered fantastic....Our biggest complaint is that we wish we had more time to read."* (Kiran)

John shared:

*"Now in the university, my reading habits died a little bit. I don't read books as much as I used to....I'll give anything to get a good novel and curl up in bed and read the whole day. In essence, I have not been paying much attention to reading. I used to devote a lot of time for reading before, now I only read maybe about 1 or 2 hours each day. Some days, I don't even have the time to read at all...I still enjoy reading. The only problem is finding time for reading."* (John)

But in spite of the time constraint, some of these readers continue to make the most of their circumstance.

*"I'm reading most right now, in the university... Right now, with lectures, I'm reading two books a month..."* (Damo)

*"In a month, non-academic books, it depends on how many I can get. If I get a lot of them, then I will finish them before the month is up. I would say even 20 is not a problem."* (John)

Therefore, it appears that their strong attachment to the reading habit proved difficult to break. They demonstrated their individual reading styles and preferences in terms of the reading pace and genre.

### *Social circle*

There was a mixed response when it came to the kind of social circle and environment these ardent readers find themselves in.

*"Yes I do share with friends. I recommend the books that's nice to read. I just pass it to them. [Are the friends around you also readers?] Yes they are readers."*

(Felix)

*"... ya... most of my good friends even now in university, are readers... Ya, we do read, like my group of friends are also avid readers, I would say. If we find that a book is really interesting so once someone is done, then yes, there'll be a queue to borrow a book."*

(Kiran)

Incidentally, Kiran and Felix belong to the same social circle. According to the both of them, they only discovered that their friends were readers after getting to know each other better. However, most of the others found that the opposite is true in their social circle.

*"...after coming to university...I've yet to meet people who are as engaged as I am in reading...I haven't met people that I can connect at that level."*

(John)

*"...my circle of friends here are more into reading their textbooks, for the sake of examinations. Extremely few of my friends would read to pass time or as a hobby."*

(Howard)

Farid pointed out that people in his social circle seldom read and reasons out that:

*"Our students prefer to watch movies...Problem of peer pressure, for example, you want to read, but your friends ask you to go out..."*

(Farid)

However, when asked about his reaction to this peer pressure, he shares:

*"I don't bother at all what other people think about me when it comes to my reading habit."*

(Farid)

Damo echoed the same sentiment when he said that he "doesn't get affected by whatever people say". Similarly, to the question of whether she is discouraged by her less reader-friendly social circle, Siti's reply was, "Not really. I just continue reading."

In the same vein, John shared:

*“...regardless of people allowing me to read or not, it doesn't inhibit me in anyway.”*  
(John)

Irrespective of the encouraging or discouraging circumstance of their social circle, it appears that the underlying nature of these ardent readers is one of deep confidence and conviction for reading. From the “hand-holding” phase, these readers have moved into another phase which sees their journeys as readers taking flight. They have developed into independent readers.

### **Voices in concert**

When we first set out to understand these students' experiences, it was to capture their voices of past and present reading experiences. However, as we listened to them, we found that their voices began to ring in unison as they indicated the relation of their reading passion and their notion of the importance of reading. It became clear that their conviction of how much they love reading and in that respect, their intention to keep reading, rang far louder than their conscious acknowledgement of importance ascribed to reading activities.

*“Is it important? I started because it's important. But now it's not. Now it's because I want to.”*  
(Damo)

*“It's shaped me into who I have become. It should not be viewed as reading is important.”*  
(Kiran)

*“I don't read because it's important to read, but now, I do see the importance in reading.”*  
(Emily)

That initial acceptance of knowing that reading is important has been replaced by an even deeper acceptance of how much more valuable and life-changing reading is and has become to them. We can see that now, they are readers because of their love and passion for reading. The extrinsic element that encouraged reading in these readers has been replaced by an intrinsic passion for reading.

### **Discussion**

With reading being inextricably linked with language instruction, language practitioners often find themselves hard put to inculcate the reading habit in their charges, let alone produce avid readers. To see their charges through, such that they arrive at becoming ardent readers seems like a lofty ambition. Yet, as demonstrated by these nine ardent readers, it is not impossible.

### ***Parents' and teachers' roles***

It is clear that parents and teachers should be encouraged to continuously provide the necessary scaffold to their charges. This is because this study shows the importance of an external motivator during the “hand-holding” phase of the reading journey. Parents and teachers need to be sensitive to the unique and individual nature and personality of their charges so as to help them along their journey.

This study also shows that fiction seems to be a favorite genre that sustains the reading interest in these participants. This implies that if beginning readers are introduced to suitable fiction, there is a possibility that they can embark on their journey towards reading. However, educators need to take into consideration the challenges of time management and social circle management that the ardent readers may face. In terms of the former, this refers to the situation where over and above their desire to read, these readers contend with many other demands and tasks that also compete and vie for their time. Secondly, educators should be aware that these readers' social circle may prove to be both challenging and discouraging when it comes to the sustenance of their reading habit. Perhaps then, when educators are in the “hand-holding” phase of guiding these students, these issues could be identified and addressed individually.

This could be done in terms of providing easy access to libraries, creating suitable reading environments in homes and schools or even leading and reading by example. As teachers contend with the real challenges of teaching and managing a class, they could still weave into it, both overtly and covertly, necessary guidance so that their charges may begin or continue to uncover the passageway to high-level literacy. This also applies to educators in higher learning institutions in that they should continue to encourage those who may only be starting on their reading journey.

Most significantly, when these readers' voices are put together, in the Gestaltist sense, the whole is greater than the sum of all its parts. This is because in coming back to the question of how crucial would one's ability to ascribe importance to a reading activity be to the make-up of an ardent reader, findings from this study show that there should be a shift in that question's focal point. Although crucial, it is not in how *much* the importance is acknowledged at the *onset* of any reading activity, but rather, in how *far* and how *deeply* a reader identifies with the ripple effect of that reading activity. The key lies in the breadth and depth of that while-and post-reading experience. If this is true, parents and teachers must realize that the formation of an ardent reader is a lengthy process which involves the dynamic reader-reading inter-relationship.

## Conclusion

If we intend to shape our students into ardent readers, we must at first understand how they come to be ardent readers. This study set out to understand the make-up of our ardent readers and to document their journeys. By implication, the reading journey may be seen as being comprised of two phases: the “hand-holding” phase (see also Bus, 2001; De Temple & Snow, 2001; Leseman & de Jong, 2001) and the “independent reader” phase. Here, it is clear that an individual’s background and upbringing continue to be crucial factors in forming and shaping his/her reading habits.

To battle nascent challenges of teaching beginning readers, only to find that many do not maintain their reading habits afterwards is like planting seedlings with the hope of them growing, only to realize that the nurturing process was neglected. This study reiterates that the role of educators (both parents and teachers) remains crucial to the formation and flight of this journey. Indeed, it is heartening and inspiring to know that there are young Malaysians who still derive such deep pleasure from the simple act of reading. If there is one thing to be learnt from these voices, it is in the knowledge that these nine self-proclaimed ardent readers have found the elusive key to the doorway into the dimension of high-level literacy. That key is in the breadth and depth of their reading journey. And because their journeys took flight, they now soar in the plane of ardent reading.

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