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## Finding Comfort: A Study of Reading Habits among Malaysian University Students During Covid-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

This paper is prepared to examine the leisure reading habits of university students in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we know, due to the pandemic, the Malaysian government has imposed a series of mandatory lockdown. In higher institutions, classes are carried out using online platforms instead of the traditional learning in the classroom since April 2020. Online courses have changed the learning pattern not only in Malaysia but around the world. University students are now required to adapt to the new normal of learning. This has affected how they spend time between following their online classes and doing their assignments in the confinement of their homes or university residences. According to Association of American Publishers, book sales are up again. Due to this new normal of limiting physical human interaction and spending their time at home or university residency, students turn to reading again to find comfort to handle the accumulated stress during this pandemic. The method of turning to books in times of burden and difficulty is called bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy is still not widely known in Malaysia. This paper explains how leisure reading habits can help students to calm down from the anxiety of limiting physical human connection and the stress of spending almost most of their time following the new normal of learning. The writing method for this paper is in the form of quantitative analysis based on the survey conducted on 100 university students throughout Malaysia. This paper highlights literature reviews relating to the reading habits, reading preferences amongst university students in Malaysia and how this is related to bibliotherapy. Therefore, this study concludes that most respondents spend time reading for leisure purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Malaysia and it has helped them cope with the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Literature, Bibliotherapy, Reading Habit, Leisure Reading, Covid-19 Pandemic

### Introduction

In normal circumstances, being university students are not easy. Apart from going to classes, juggling a minimum of 18 credit hours per semester, they have to be active in joining clubs and doing societal responsibilities to fulfil their extra-curricular credits. Nevertheless, the exhaustion from juggling their academic lives is often being compensated by having friends around. University students usually will go out with their friends. In Malaysia, the popular

activities for university students to unwind or “de-stressed” themselves include; going to the cinema, hanging out at the *Mamak*, playing sports and of course, going on a hunt for the best food in town. University life is easy with friends who care to share parts of the burdens. The strong bond that they create during university time will always be cherished forever. It is truly one of the best parts of being a young adult.

With the unexpected coming of the COVID-19 pandemic, all aspects of lives have to be put on hold. The Government of Malaysia has seen it necessary for all non-essential businesses and premises to be temporarily closed down in order to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Higher education institutions have taken the steps to close their campuses and letting students go back to the safety of their homes. Those who are unable to go back are mandatorily confined in their rooms on campus.

Classes are now being conducted entirely online, and students spend time in front of laptops or tablets to follow the lessons. Just like that, a new normal in higher learning education has developed. Now, instead of going out with friends after a stressful class session, students can no longer participate in this leisure activity due to the regulations by the Government of Malaysia that explicitly forbids any gathering.

This has not only abruptly cut off social interaction, but it brings about the lack of human connection, which in turns makes the students try to find another way to relax after having followed the online classes. Students like to indulge in several forms of entertainment in this new normal; playing video games and lurking around social media are popular activities these young adults want to do. There is also reading; which has seen an increased number of activities since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Essentially, this paper provides exploratory insights into the reading habits of 100 university students all over Malaysia. By identifying the students’ reading habits and preferences, the paper also tries to establish the relationship between reading habits and preferences with bibliotherapy and make suggestions on how this particular therapy will be perfect for students to deal with accumulated stress and anxiety COVID-19 pandemic. With that in mind, the paper is also cognisant that bibliotherapy might not help students deal with grief or stress since not everyone loves to read and knows which books can help in dealing with whatever crises they are experiencing. Hence, the following research questions are aligned to the objectives of the paper:

1. What are the popular book genres among the 100 university students?
2. How many hours do the students spend reading in a week?
3. How can bibliotherapy help the students in dealing with stress?

### **Reading and Reading Habits**

Reading is not a new activity. It is considered an outdated activity. According to Pivec (1998), teenagers’ interest in reading books has declined due to their interest in TV and the internet. This statement was supported by Korzenny & Korzenny (2007), saying that teenagers spend close to 20 hours a week on television and another 20 hours per week surfing the internet. Majid & Tan (2007) found that 57.6% of young adults prefer playing on the computer or surfing the internet, whereas only 44.1% prefer reading as their leisure time activity. Still, research from Kamalipour et al (1998) revealed that students spend 45.05% of their waking hours per week attending to electronic and print media for study and leisure reading activities.

Predictably, the reading trend has spiked up again since the start of COVID-19 pandemic. Students are forced to stay inside the confinement of their house or campus residency

without any means to go out and meet other people due to the imposed lockdown by the Government of Malaysia.

Staying at home for a significant period alters a lot of practices and activities for many. The substantial reduction in outdoor activities and social activities may lead to idleness and monotony. This drives the university students to find a new way not only to entertain themselves but also it has become a coping mechanism. The COVID-19 pandemic brings only devastation and grief that will lead to many mental health problems experienced by the students.

### **Reading Preferences**

In 2010, a survey done by the Malaysian Reading Profile reported that Malaysians at the age of 10 and above only read approximately eight to twelve books a year (National Library of Malaysia, 2010). Literacy statistics in 2016 reported that out of 85% of Malaysians who read regularly, 77% of them preferred newspapers, 3% read magazines, 3% read books, and 1.6% read comics (Borneo Post Online, 2017). It showed that Malaysian had a variety of reading preferences.

Furthermore, previous research proved that students had several reading preferences. In a study by Erdem (2015) on the types of reading material read by university students, it was determined that the respondents read novels, newspapers and magazines in their leisure time. However, they could not spend much time carrying out reading activities due to their busy schedules between attending classes and spending time with loved ones.

The enormous production and consumption of information and knowledge via digital media had rapidly changed how reading is experienced. People no longer read solely from print-based materials (Chong, 2016).

In addition, a study by Noor (2011) indicated that postgraduate students prefer internet reading materials. Lone (2011) pointed out that university students mostly read for education, as 43.49% of his respondents said, followed by 40.23% who read to gain information while only 11.39% read for leisure. The negative attitude towards reading for leisure is because their parents and teachers pressure them to perform better academically, thus leaving them no time to enjoy reading to help them relax.

However, Carr (2013) summarises that using digital media leads to a set of inevitable effects. The effects are an overload of information, attention instability, and frequent shifts of focus. This makes printed materials the preferred material for students if they want to focus on the literature and connect to it, which is what bibliotherapy is all about.

### **Bibliotherapy**

Bibliotherapy uses literature, film or other media to promote understanding or promote awareness and facilitate problem-solving related to one's therapeutic goals (Marrs, 1995). Bibliotherapy is used to prevent and treat mental health problems such as anxiety (Cobham, 2012), depression (Gregory et al., 2004) and aggression (Shechtman, 2009)

The term bibliotherapy was coined in 1916, however, the use of written material to treat emotional distress dated back centuries. "The Healing Place for the Soul" was an inscription above a library entrance in Thebes in ancient Greece (Heath et al., 2005) that provided historical context to the therapeutic use of the written word. McCuliss (2012) detailed the history of bibliotherapy by highlighting the use of libraries in the 1800s, where librarians chose reading materials to assist patients in the 1920s.

Kierfeld et al (2013) investigated the utilization of bibliotherapy in treating children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Finding those self-help manuals could serve as practical resources for assisting parents in managing their children's externalising behaviour. Studies have also explored the efficacy of bibliotherapy as a preventative approach and treatment option for anxiety and depression, as mentioned by James et al (2015).

Furthermore, research had found cognitive bibliotherapy to reduce depressive symptoms for adolescents experiencing mild to moderate depressive symptomatology (Ackerson et al, 1998).

Although widespread mental health literacy programs had existed in Australia and Sweden (Alan & Robyn, 2012; Svensson & Hansson, 2014), Malaysia had not yet incorporated mental health literacy into the national educational curriculum. However, students, significantly higher learning institution students, are taking their initiative by seeking out literary preferences that they were comfortable reading and connecting for them not only to unwind from the accumulated stress but also to cope with the still on-going pandemic that seems never-ending.

### **Methods**

This study focused on the leisure reading habits of Malaysian university students during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown as part of bibliotherapy. Due to the spread of the university students, a descriptive survey design was adopted, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, a survey was done via a web-based questionnaire, which was Google Forms. This allowed for a codification of responses into numerical data to permit the description of the reactions. The link to the survey was then spread to Twitter. As mentioned before, the participants in this study were university students in Malaysia. They were not selected based on their state of origin, religion, and ethnicity; however, the survey was randomly prearranged to those who love to read. One hundred respondents answered the survey, and the data received were sufficient for this research to be conducted. The survey had 12 questionnaires for participants to answer.

A simple random sampling technique was adopted for this study. This allowed every prospective respondent to have an equal chance of participating in the study. The link to the survey was generated in June and was shared on social media which was Twitter. A total of 100 responses were collected from the respondents. This data represents the study's unit of analysis, which was analysed using descriptive statistics, frequency count and simple percentages. This method of analysis allowed for a straightforward interpretation of data to make it easy to be understood.

### **Results and Discussions**

The total number of responses is 100 students, which represent the unit of this analysis. Collected data was automatically analysed into descriptive statistics of frequency counts and simple percentages on the Google Forms backend page of the researchers.



### Education Level of Respondents

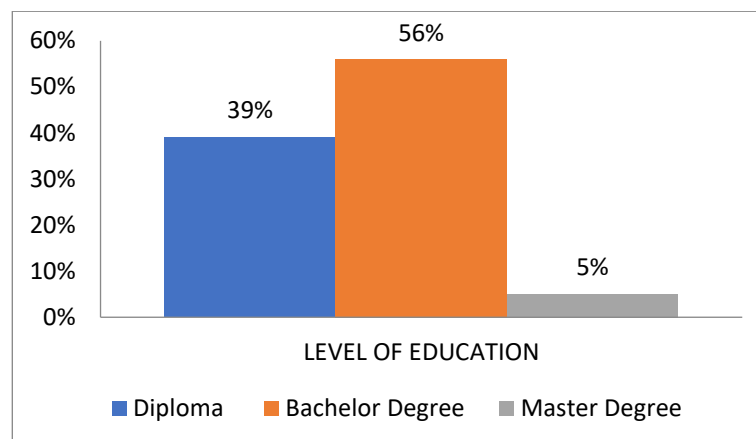


Figure 1: Education level of respondents

Since the survey was targeted at university students in Malaysia, Figure 1 shows that there were more Bachelor Degree student respondents (56%) than Diploma student respondents (39%) and Master Degree student respondents (5%). Out of 100 respondents, 56 respondents were currently doing their Bachelor's Degree compared to 39 respondents who were currently doing their Diploma studies and five respondents who were pursuing their Master's Degrees. This shows that among the 100 respondents, more Bachelor's Degree students are interested in using reading as a medium for them to relax, unlike Diploma and Master's Degree students.

### Gender of Respondents

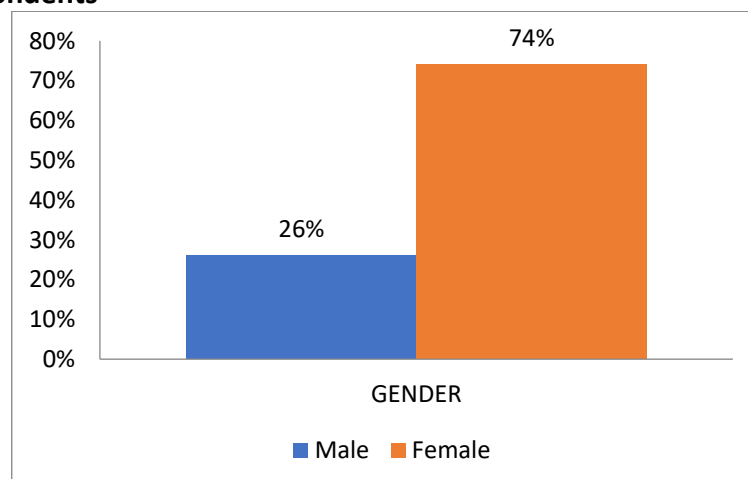


Figure 2: Gender of respondents

Figure 2 shows that out of the 100 respondents, 74% were female, and 26% were male. The data shows that more female respondents were interested in spending their free time reading than male respondents. Perhaps, male students were much more interested in doing other leisure activities such as gaming and sports.

From these figures, it can be concluded that more female students were likely to devote their free time to reading activity as reported by Meece et al. (2006) that female students show more favourable motivation patterns in language arts and reading. Logan and Johnston (2009) also see female students have a more positive attitude toward reading than boys.

Furthermore, Saidi (2012) said that females tend to be more sensitive; they were able to comprehend texts full of sadness and happiness more than males.

### Reading as a Leisure Activity

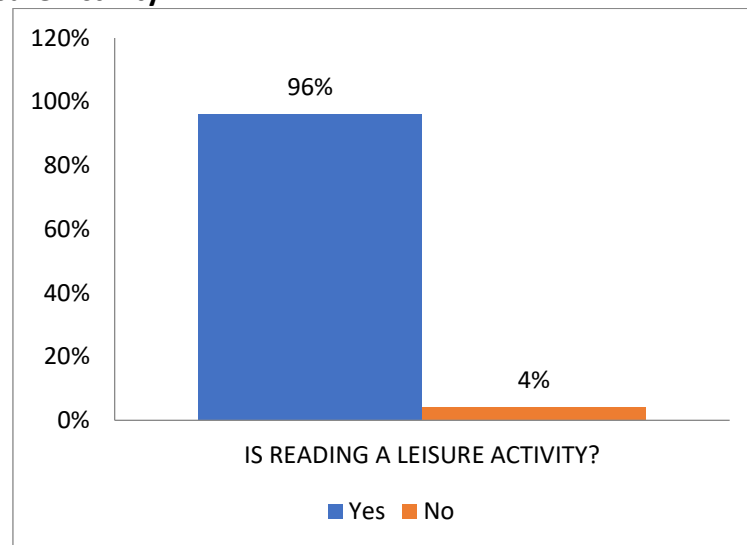


Figure 3: Is reading a leisure activity?

In Figure 3, most of the respondents (96%) agreed that they consider reading a leisure activity, while the other 4% disagreed with this statement.

### Preferred Medium

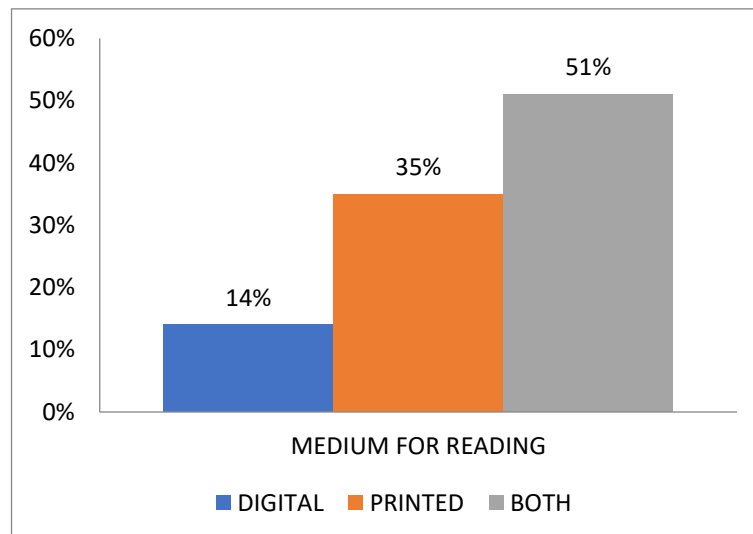


Figure 4: Which medium do you prefer when reading?

In addition to the survey, the respondents were asked which medium they prefer to use when reading and Figure 4 displays that 14% of the respondents chose to use digital or online platforms only. This reflects the study by Noor (2011) that found the majority of university students chose internet materials as their primary reading materials. Similarly, Mohamed et al (2012) also revealed that students spent time reading on digital media more than printed materials.

Abidin et al (2011) reported that the growth of electronic media as one of the sources of information and entertainment has been extraordinary. Liu (2005) mentioned that the

reading habit of people in this digital era, especially young adults, had changed because they were spending more time reading digital materials than printed materials. But that does not mean printed material had been abandoned altogether, as seen in Figure 4.

In contrast, another 35% of the respondents preferred to use the traditional printed medium. However, 51% of the respondents chose to use digital and printed media to read leisurely. Students comprehend better when they read printed material (Mangen, Walgermo, & Bronnick, 2013). Printed materials gave readers the time to engage with the text, which will provide them with a better understanding and establish a deeper connection with the literature (Wallis, 2010). Thus it was to no surprise that despite numerous technology advancements regarding reading activity, the participants still chose printed materials.

#### Hours Spend Reading Per Week

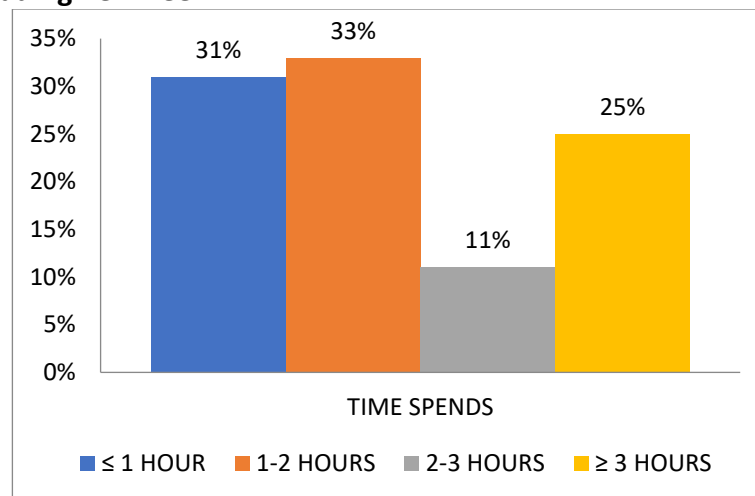


Figure 5: Hours spend reading leisurely per week

Figure 5 exhibited the hours' respondents spend reading leisurely in a week. About 31% of the respondents spent less than an hour per week reading, while another 33% spent about one to two hours reading leisurely per week. This was followed by 11% of the respondents who consumed two to three hours reading leisurely per week. Approximately 25% of the respondents spent more than three hours per week reading leisurely. From the graph shown, it can be concluded that most of the respondents were able to set aside some time for them to take a break by reading leisurely.



### Preferred Genre

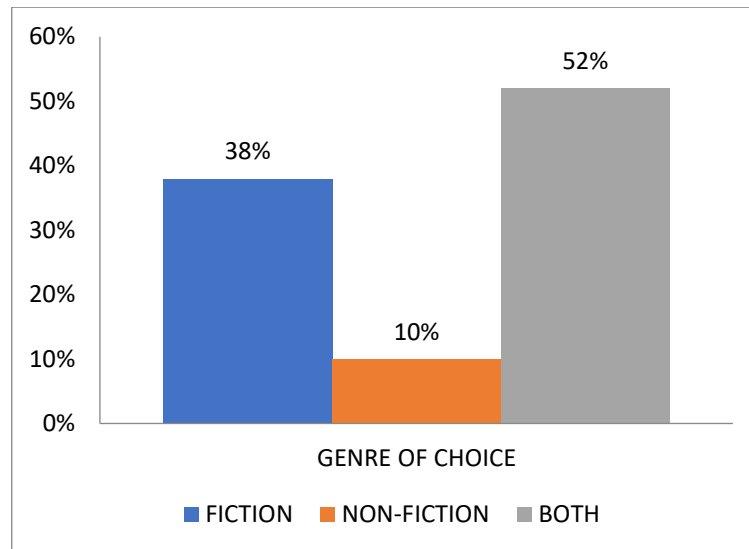


Figure 6: The genre of choice.

Figure 6 indicates the genre of choice. 38% of the respondents chose fiction, while 10% of them chose non-fiction. A total of 52% of the respondents chose both fiction and non-fiction as their genres of choice.

### Fiction Genre Preferences

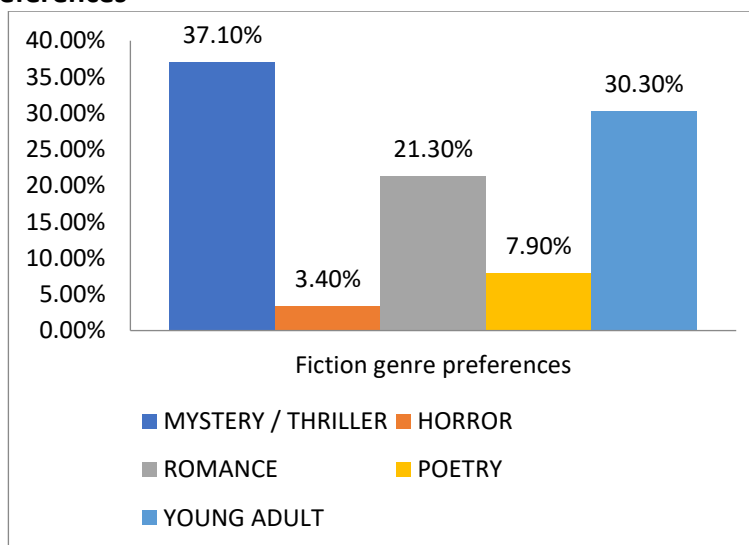


Figure 7: Fiction genre preferences.

Figure 7 is related to Figure 6, in which respondents chose their fiction genres of preferences. Out of 100 respondents, only 89 gave their responses. 37.3% of the 89 respondents chose mystery or thriller as their preferred fiction genre, while another 3.4% chose horror. Among the 89 answers, 21.3% of them preferred the romance genre, while the other 7.9% chose poetry. Around 30.3% of the respondents chose the young adult genre, which is not surprising since they are university students; thus, they are still young adults.

### Non-fiction Genre Preferences

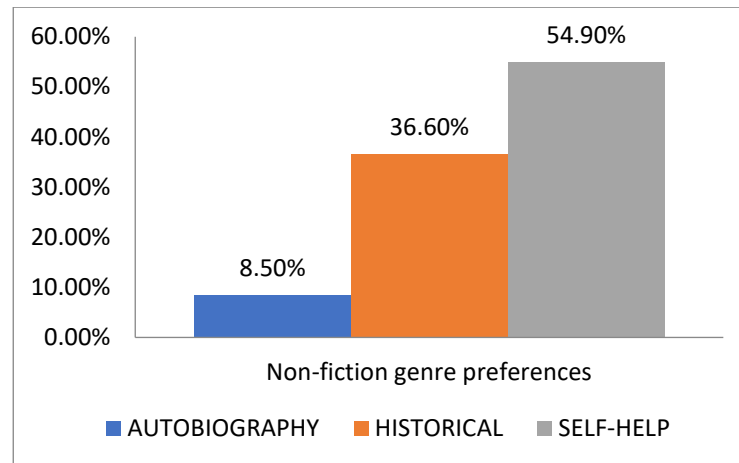


Figure 8: Non-fiction genre preferences

Figure 8 displayed the non-fiction preferences, and for this survey, only 71 responses were given out of 100 responses. For an autobiography, only 8.5% of the respondents liked this genre, while the other 36.6% preferred to read historical books.

Surprisingly, around 54.9% of the respondents chose to read self-help books. The effect of depression, particularly when untreated, typically extends across the life span and deters an individual's ability to lead a self-sustaining, productive, and satisfying life (Kieling et al., 2011). As the number indicates, out of 71 respondents, almost half of them were trying to make sense of what they are feeling by reading self-help books, especially now that they were living in a pandemic.

### The Ability to Emotionally Connect with the Characters

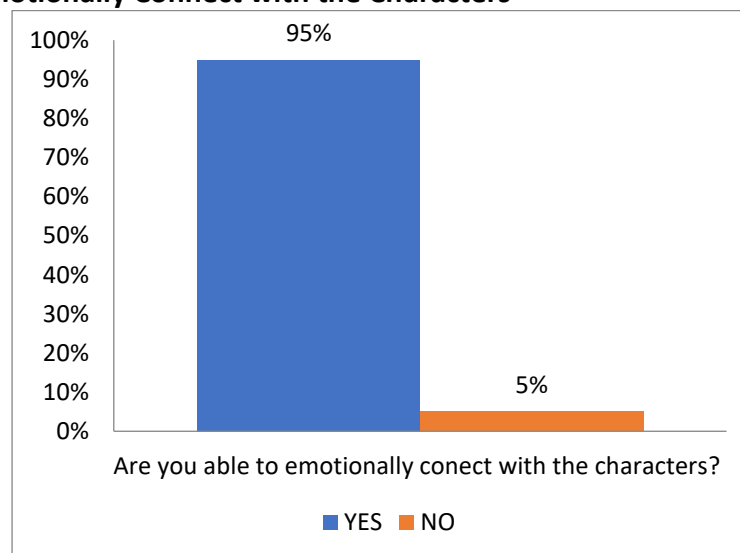


Figure 9: Are you able to emotionally connect with the characters?

Figure 9 answered whether respondents could emotionally connect with the characters of their preferred book or not, and 95% of the respondents answered yes. McCulliss and Chamberlain (2013) suggested that bibliotherapy referred to unique readers' guidance to help them learn about and cope with social or emotional struggles.

Bibliotherapy is based on classical principles of identification, inspiration, and insight, leading to motivation for positive change. This can help readers understand by connecting with characters and values in poems, short stories, and novels (Beres, 2019).

In addition, Campbell and Smith (2003) suggested that the bibliotherapy technique is used to prevent and solve the problems individuals confront in their daily lives during their development period.

In contrast, only 5% of the respondents answered no. Thus, it took a lot of concentration and understanding from the readers to emotionally connect with the literature they had selected.

#### Mental and emotional capacities to understand chosen literature

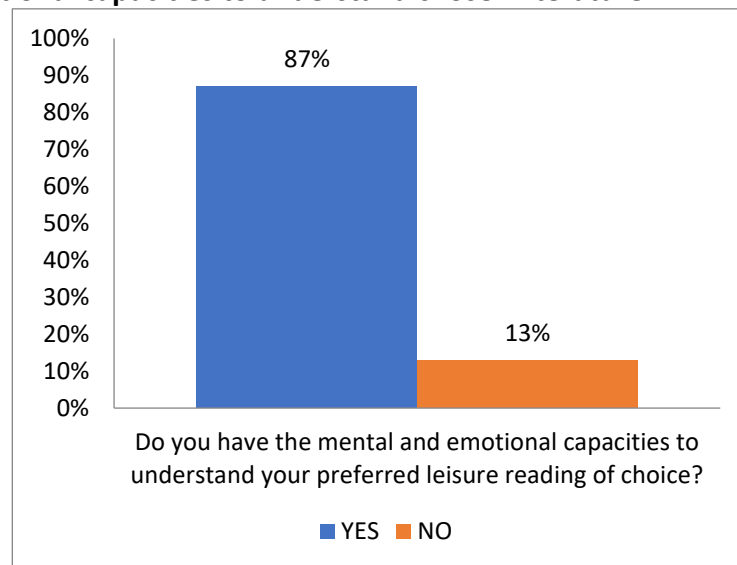


Figure 10: Do you have the mental and emotional capacities to understand your preferred leisure reading of choice?

Figure 10 answered whether respondents have the mental and emotional capacity to understand their preferred reading, and 87% of them answered yes, while 13% answered no. According to Riordan and Wilson (1989), bibliotherapy can be defined as the guided reading of written materials to understand or solve problems relevant to their selected therapeutic needs.

Although 13% may look like a small number, it was still a worrying trend since they were already stressed out. Leisure reading aims to relieve tension, which they cannot do since they do not have the mental and emotional capacities to enjoy their literature.

### Satisfaction after Books have been Read

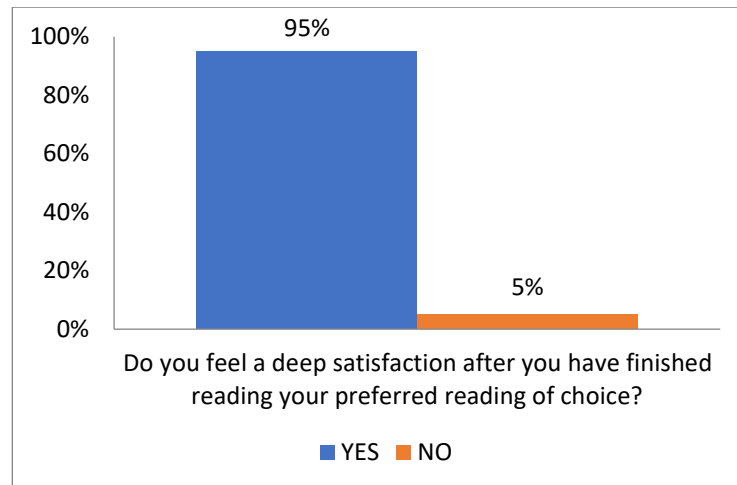


Figure 11: Do you feel a deep satisfaction after you have finished reading your preferred reading of choice?

Figure 11 asked whether respondents feel a deep satisfaction after reading their preferred book, and 95% answered yes.

Harvey (2010) suggested that bibliotherapy aimed to elicit change in the attitudes and behaviour of the readers; that they were not alone because the others have the same concerns or problems. Yalom (1995) added the primary goal of the therapeutic process was a positive life change and personal development.

In contrast, 5% of them answered no. Perhaps, the readers in the 5% bracket have chosen literature that does not resonate with whatever issue or problem they are experiencing; thus, it is difficult for them to feel satisfied after reading.

### Fulfilment of Social and Emotional Needs

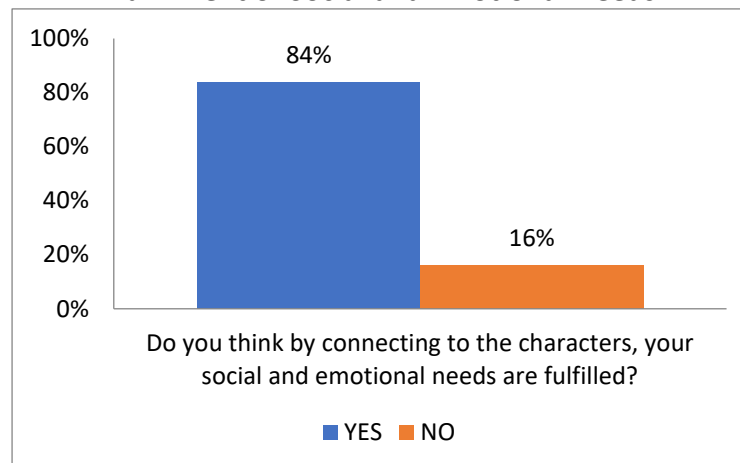


Figure 12: Do you think by connecting to the characters, your social and emotional needs are fulfilled?

Figure 12 answered whether respondents think that their social and emotional needs are fulfilled? Out of 100 respondents, 84% answered yes, while another 16% answered no.

The aim of bibliotherapy, as mentioned above, was to form an emotional connection with not only the story in the literature but also with the characters. One way to help young adults to manage their emotions is by using emotional literacy (Latifah, 2019). A person can

understand, express, and respond to the emotional expression of others and is responsible for the action taken (Steiner, 1991).

According to Smith Family (2009); McNicol (2018), to improve emotional literacy, the readers must learn a valuable lesson from the books they had selected. Leininger (2010) discusses bibliotherapy as helping students gain insight into themselves while promoting problem-solving skills. Thus, it is true that the emotional needs of the respondents are fulfilled.

Still, in terms of social conditions, the respondents realise that bibliotherapy cannot resolve that requirement because it had to be met by socialising with a natural person instead of fictional characters.

### Conclusion

The findings highlight that most respondents spend time reading for leisure purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Malaysia. The majority of respondents which believe that reading is a leisure activity are females. Apart from that, it can also be agreed that respondents prefer both printed and digital materials. Although the respondents are not familiar with the concept of bibliotherapy, they understand that choosing the right genre of literature will make it easier for them to connect with the characters and the storyline. In addition, the selected literature is not only essential for an emotional connection between the readers and the characters, but it also plays a significant role in teaching readers about valuable lessons from the literature. However, in terms of social need, it is agreed that bibliotherapy cannot offer to achieve this demand.

Although this paper has talked about bibliotherapy and how it could help the 100 university students cope with stress and difficulty they are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic, the data is too small to make a broad generalisation. Plus, the questions regarding the understanding of bibliotherapy should be included in the survey.

Nevertheless, the paper offers several recommendations based on the findings. Firstly, in tandem with the current COVID-19 pandemic, more research on which kinds of literature are suitable to provide to students who might have experienced the grief of losing their loved ones to the virus should be conducted. Secondly, bibliotherapy is exclusively a part of psychological and clinical therapy, making it harder for those who come from low-income and middle-income families to have access to top therapy sessions. Libraries in Malaysia should curate one section for bibliotherapy literature so that people can quickly gain access to them. Finally, the Ministry of Education should consider incorporating bibliotherapy in the national education curriculum. This will help students to open up about their traumas by using selected literature in the classroom with the guidance of teachers. A discussion about how the students feel and connect with the literature should help them discover that there are always silver linings in every hardship.

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