

A STUDY ON DIGITAL NATIVES' READING TRENDS AND PREFERENCES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT: *In the wake of a rapidly growing generation of digital natives, educators face greater challenges of identifying, understanding and acknowledging their learning habits, interests and preferences, let alone teaching them. The current study aims at investigating the reading trends and preferences of digital natives in higher education in Malaysia and more particularly Engineering and Management students. It has conducted a survey among Engineering and Management undergraduates of various ethnic, cultural, linguistic and geographical backgrounds at a Malaysian university while highlighting their preferences of a) types of reading materials, b) reading frequency, c) reading topics, d) reading habits, e) reading reasons and f) vocabulary learning strategies for reading. The findings have reported that digital natives are avid and frequent readers, with a constant consumption of all sorts of social media content, who prefer reading for more information and current affairs, fun and pleasure or even for personal development.*

KEYWORDS: digital natives, reading trends, reading preferences, reading habits, higher education, millennial learners

INTRODUCTION

Millennials are the generation born between the 1980s and 2000s. Millennials born after the widespread adoption of digital technology are popularly known as 'digital natives', a term first coined by Marc Prensky in 2001 (Oblinger, 2003). Studies have identified and discussed certain traits noticed in digital natives. Digital natives do not want to be bound by traditional methods of learning and prefer to use technology to study. In fact, their reading habits are considerably influenced by their use of digital media (Chaudhry & Low, 2009). They are technologically confident, more group-oriented and prefer to socialise and connect to the world through online media (Meyer, 2015). They are usually attracted to the learning opportunities that involve information processing, interaction and discussion. However, their preferred use of technology has placed a great deal of pressure on educators for identifying, understanding and acknowledging their learning habits, interests and preferences, let alone teaching them. The current study aims at investigating the reading trends and preferences of digital natives in higher education. It has conducted a survey among Engineering and Management undergraduates of various ethnic, cultural and geographical backgrounds at a Malaysian university while highlighting six reading parameters including: a) types of reading materials, b) reading frequency, c) reading topics, d) reading habits, e) reading reasons and f) vocabulary learning strategies while reading. The current study was undertaken with the following objectives:

- To explore the reading trends of digital natives in higher education
- To understand the reading preferences of digital natives and their reasons

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading is considered as a key component of the learning process which can enhance learner engagement as well as their creative and critical thinking skills (Brockbank & McGill, 2007).

Educators should develop curriculum to enable learners to enhance their reading skills so that they become independent readers and lifelong learners. In relation to the millennial learners and more particularly the digital natives, integrating technology into learning process can further motivate them to improve their learning efficiency. With technology as “a natural part of the environment”, digital natives are considered as “a generation of multitaskers in constant connectivity” (Oblinger, 2003: 38). As practiced users of digital technology, millennials have been investigated for their learning habits and preferences by several researchers (Garner, 2007; Sickler, 2009; Ratneswary et al., 2011; Bonner, 2015). Studies have reported varied findings on the reading interests of digital natives. While reading as a habit is on the decline in case of print materials, it has become a social activity for digital natives through social media and other digital technologies (Fuller & Sedo, 2014). Information distribution is faster and simultaneous in the digital era which enables accessing reading materials to a click-easy phenomenon. Further, it helps popularise and revive reading habits among millennial learners (Kurniasih, 2016).

Studies have pointed out the increase of digital reading of digital natives and their preference of e-books over print books creating schisms on reflective capacities and learning (Brockbank & McGill, 2007; Wolf, 2008; Meyer, 2015). Meyer (2015) investigated the reading habits of digital natives and found that they are readers – against the assumptions about digital natives as anti-reading. Being the constant users of digital technologies, reading seems to be a solitary activity for digital natives with their growing practice of private space. In terms of print readership, newspapers and news magazines are slowly in broad decline, mainly by the millennials but still in practice among the digital native ‘enthusiasts’ despite their digital inclination (Bonner, 2015). Not only that, readership for fun and pleasure is also constantly declining among millennial learners as well as teachers, thus declining proficiency in adult readers (Donaldson, 2013). When it comes to learning, millennial learners prefer more interactivity, feedback, peer review and team-based learning (Sickler, 2009). Although reading practices of digital natives are more online-oriented, readership trends among them are quite varied and interactive compared to other generations, thus indicating potentials for digital natives to inculcate a culture of reading to further enhance their lifelong learning experience (Ratneswary et al., 2011). The current study will look into the reading trends of digital natives in higher education while highlighting their reading habits and preferences.

Research design:

The current study has conducted a survey on the reading trends and preferences of digital natives at a Malaysian university. It has randomly selected 60 students from different Engineering and Management undergraduate programmes. The participants comprise varied groups of students with different ethnic, cultural and geographical backgrounds, both local and international students, specifically with the age range from 19 to 25 years (i.e., millennials born in the mid-1990s and above). The study used a structured questionnaire (see Appendix) to elicit information on the participants’ reading trends including their preferences for six reading parameters: a) types of reading materials, b) reading frequency, c) reading topics, d) reading habits, e) reading reasons and f) vocabulary learning strategies while reading. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) is used to analyse data and descriptive statistics to discuss findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In order to understand the reading trends and preferences of digital natives from Engineering and Management undergraduate programmes, the current study has conducted a survey along with the details and reports discussed below.

Participants' demographics

The current study included 60 participants from various Engineering and Management undergraduate programmes at a Malaysian university through random sampling. The students comprised of local and international cohorts, both male (40) and female (20), with an age range of 19 and 25 years, born between mid-1990s and 2000. The demographic profiles of the participants are shown in Table 1 below.

Percentage (%)		
School	Engineering	50
	Management	50
Gender	Male	66.7
	Female	33.3
Ethnicity	Malay	25
	Chinese Malaysian	16.7
	Indian Malaysian	16.7
	Others	42
Nationality	Malaysia	58.3
	Saudi Arabia	16.7
	Yemen	13.3
	Somalia	7
	Egypt	5

Table 1: Demographic Details of Participants

Reading trends and preferences

The study assessed the reading trends of digital natives in higher education in terms of their preferences for six reading parameters which are discussed below.

(a) Types of reading materials

The results, as shown in Table 2, demonstrate majority of students carrying their textbooks and/or reference books in their classroom. Female students (100%) always prefer to carry their textbooks to class. Management students (42%) are more regular with textbooks in class than their Engineering counterparts (30%).

Preferences in class	Frequency	Valid Percent
No textbook	17	28.3
Textbook/reference book	43	71.7
Total	60	100

Table 2: Reading Materials in Class

Textbooks are considered an integral part of student culture in a university. Popular assumptions advocate that, a) students who carry textbooks tend to read them in meaningful way whereas b) textbook producers see it as a profit-generating industry (Garner, 2007). The same study found that carrying textbooks or textbook reading habits are remarkably scarce among students in higher education. Although many students are committed to learning, a sizeable number of readers tend to read only the portion that will be 'on the test'. They want to read only a portion and not the entire

content of the textbook to mainly score the ‘passing mark’ of the course. Moreover, the concept of carrying notebooks in the class has been reinvented with the use of mobile technologies (Zhai et al., 2019). Students tend to make and share videos of lectures or take screenshots of lecture notes in class. For the information processing and interactive classroom of digital natives, this practice becomes a more relevant learning process at times.

In case of types of reading materials, digital natives usually prefer to read electronic materials rather than in print (see Table 3). However, the results reveal that a sizable amount of them prefer print materials as they find such materials easy to store and archive as well as easily accessible in the library, indicating that digital natives considerably contribute to the print readership and like to frequent the library for reading. More particularly, Engineering students show electronic reading preference while Management students choose both print and electronic reading sources. Moreover, students choose electronic reading materials because they can be easily carried and kept as well as can be read conveniently anywhere anytime.

Preferences of reading materials	Frequency	Valid Percent
Print	25	41.7
Electronic	35	58.3
Total	60	100

Table 3: Types of Reading Materials

Digital natives mostly read materials from online websites as they are well-versed with digital technology and online applications (Sickler, 2009; Ratneswary et al., 2011). They are accustomed to integrating technology in every aspect of life including classrooms (Garner, 2007). Among print materials, digital natives prefer to read academic and comic books the most with the first type due to its mandatory nature whereas the second one mainly for fun and pleasure (see Table 4). Further, preference of comic books is mainly due to their avid interest in online and animation gaming as informed by the participants. Reading magazines is another preference of the digital natives which relates to their way of staying updated with the personal and social aspects such as lifestyle, fashion trends, travelogues, and so on. Digital natives’ print preference of magazines includes reasons pertaining to readability, aesthetics and coverage (Zerba, 2011). Engineering students prefer reading comics, magazines, motivational books and fictional stories whereas Management students prefer books of general reference, self-help and academic books in print. Reduced number of reading newspapers is a concern which can be further investigated whether digital natives’ reading habits determine the future of newspapers (Bonner, 2015).

Print materials	Frequency	Valid Percent
Comics	40	66.7
General reference	27	45
Newspapers	7	11.7
Magazines	34	56.7
Motivational	22	36.7
Self-help	31	51.7
Academic	41	68.3
Fiction (stories)	19	31.7
Nonfiction	11	18.3

Table 4: Preferences in Print Materials

In case of electronic materials, the results report a fast-growing trend of consuming social media content among digital natives, as shown in Table 5 below. Digital natives, both Engineering and Management students, prefer to consume all sorts of social media content including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and so on. While readership of print newspapers is in constant decline, digital natives prefer reading online newsfeed contents to stay updated with current affairs. Engineering students prefer to explore and read electronic sources, including e-books, blogs and web articles, relatively more than their Management counterparts. Studies report that social media platforms have been successful in engaging audience digitally, who tend to consume all sorts of digital content, such as lifestyle, fashion, travel, sports, news, gossip and entertainment, provided in these platforms (Carter, 2013; Donaldson, 2013; Bonner, 2015).

Electronic materials	Frequency	Valid Percent
Social media forums	60	100
Newsfeed	51	85
Web articles	21	35
Blogs	26	43.3
E-books	39	65

Table 5: Preferences in Electronic Materials

(b) Reading frequency

Contrary to the popular belief that digital natives do not read much, the current study reports that reading frequency is somewhat a preferred choice among them, as shown in Table 6 below. Mainly due to the practice of digital connectivity and online consumption, digital natives are comparatively a better reading generation than its predecessors who like to read daily in general (61.7%). This is in line with the discussions of Kurniasih (2016) and Rutherford et al. (2017) who advocate the adjustment of the parameters of reading interest based on the dynamism of reading practices among digital natives. Reading frequency in class is reported 100% in the current survey. The mandatory nature of reading in course curriculum is the main reason behind it as shared by the participants in the survey. Digital natives are by and large readers who prefer to read both academic and non-academic materials daily (see Table 7). In both cases, Engineering students (around 45%) are more frequent readers than their Management counterparts (around 35%).

How often do you read?	Frequency	Valid Percent
Sometimes (in class)		
Sometimes (out of class)	23	38.3
Every day (in class)	60	100
Every day (out of class)	37	61.7

Table 6: Reading Frequencies (in and out of Class)

How often do you read?	Frequency	Valid Percent
Sometimes (academic)	12	20
Sometimes (non-academic)	12	20
Every day (academic)	48	80
Every day (non-academic)	48	80

Table 7: Reading Frequencies (Academic and Non-academic)

© **Reading topics**

In terms of topics, digital natives prefer to read print materials in various topics. Their academic textbooks top their preference of reading topics mainly due to the mandatory nature of textbooks for courses (see Table 8). Moreover, digital natives prefer reading travel-related books and magazines – mostly by Engineering students – along with a considerable number of them preferring romantic fiction to read. Female participants show a remarkable 100% readership of academic articles, textbooks, romantic fiction, self-help books and travel-related books and magazines. This distinct gender preference is supported by another study (Chaudhry & Low, 2009) which highlighted higher female readership in academic books and fictions which are traditionally available in print. The same study also found that new-age readers are unlikely to choose electronic reading materials which are already available in print format.

Topics	Frequency	Valid Percent
Travel	49	81.7
Photography	9	15
Healthcare	16	26.7
Self-help	37	61.7
Romance	39	65
Textbooks	60	100
Academic articles	33	55

Table 8: Reading Topics in Print Material

In case of electronic reading materials, digital natives prefer to consume mostly social media content of all sorts, as shown in Table 9 below. They in fact prefer to read all sorts of electronic content including blogs, websites and e-books on miscellaneous topics such as travel, lifestyle, photo blogs, and so on. Easy access of information is one of the most common factors for electronic reading preferences (Chaudhry & Low, 2009; Kumara & Kumar, 2018).

Topics	Frequency	Valid Percent
Lifestyle	42	70
Photo blogs and websites	49	81.7
Travelogues	48	80
General reference	35	58.3
Social media	60	100

Table 9: Reading Topics in Electronic Material

(d) Reading habits

The study has found that digital natives usually prefer to take the help of their peers to improve their understanding on the reading of various topics instead of asking their lecturers to explain in class (see Table 10). Peer interaction is crucial in language learning environments the absence of which can lead to develop passive and silent learners with low motivation to learn a new language (Huang & Hong, 2016). Such habits further inculcate learners with developing and practicing reading strategies of group studies and discussions, web-based learning and so on (Huang & Hong, 2016; Gilbert, 2017). However, an alarming concern about their reading habit to improve understanding is the practice of asking nothing which further indicates the attitude of indifference among digital natives to make any effort for improving their understanding on reading. This indicates significant room for further

research on metacognitive skill development, learning behaviour and attitude of digital natives which is beyond the scope of the current study.

How do you improve understanding?	Frequency	Valid Percent
Try to guess the meaning	10	16.7
Ask another student in class	46	76.7
Say nothing, just let it be	25	41.7
Request lecturer to explain it again	13	21.7

Table 10: Reading Habits for Improving Understanding

In terms of improving pronunciation and vocabulary, digital natives prefer to spend some time every day to revise what they learn in class (see Table 11). To learn and understand the meaning of new and difficult words, digital natives turn to online resources such as Google and Yahoo search engines; due to its widespread use they are often termed as the Google generation (Rennie & Patterson, 2008). Moreover, they prefer to use their smartphone to find meanings of new vocabulary. Sometimes, they visit the library to find reference books and magazines. In this context, adjustment of library accessing hours and availability of information sources are significant to further motivate learners to improve their reading practices (Kumara & Kumar, 2018). The increased use of digital libraries (Gilbert, 2017) is a healthy sign indicating the increased practice of digital reading among learners. However, digital natives are less likely to use a dictionary to learn new vocabulary or improve pronunciation. But the use of smartphone and various mobile applications can be a significant point of reference for digital natives to look online for new words (Bonner, 2015; Kumara & Kumar, 2018).

How do you improve pronunciation and vocabulary?	Frequency	Valid Percent
I ask myself questions as I read to make sure that I understand.	14	23.3
I use the rest of the sentence to guess the meaning of a word I don't know.	36	60
I read aloud the newly learned words 5 or more times as it helps me remember its pronunciation and spelling better.	12	20
I try to check the meaning of new words online.	49	81.7
I use dictionary to check the meaning of new words.	4	6.7
I visit the university e-library to look for research articles.	6	10
I visit the university library to look for reference books or read magazines.	38	63.3
I spend at least 30 minutes every day revising what I learn in class that day.	60	100

Table 11: Reading Habits for Improving Pronunciation and Vocabulary

(e) Reading reasons

When it comes to reasons and motivating factors of their reading habits, digital natives mostly prefer to read because it is mandatory for their studies (see Table 12). Access to information sources and awareness of current affairs and updated general knowledge are some of the common reasons motivating learners to turn digitally and technologically savvy (Ratneswary et al., 2011; Bonner, 2015; Huang & Hong, 2016; Gilbert, 2017). The current survey found that Engineering students prefer to read to get more information (45%) as well as read for fun and pleasure (43.3%). Whereas

Management students prefer to stay updated with current affairs (38.3%) as well as read for personal development (36.7%). In short, these factors conform that digital natives are avid and frequent readers.

Why do you read?	Frequency	Valid Percent
It is mandatory for my studies.	60	100
I want to update my knowledge of current affairs.	44	73.3
I like to read for personal development.	37	61.7
I read to get more information on the topic.	53	88.3
I like to read for fun and pleasure.	49	81.7

Table 12: Reading Reasons

(f) Vocabulary learning strategies

The study has found that digital natives prefer to learn new vocabulary by using online resources (see Table 13). This is in line with the previous studies (Ratneswary et al., 2011; Bonner, 2015; Huang & Hong, 2016; Gilbert, 2017) arguing that digital technology and applications play a serious role in practicing and improving reading habits and strategies. Besides, digital natives prefer to learn vocabulary by using the new words in their speaking and writing discourses frequently (26.7%) as well as to improve their understanding by sounding out the words while reading (21.7%). Moreover, the survey found that Management students are relatively more concerned about applying vocabulary learning strategies than their Engineering counterparts.

How do you improve pronunciation and vocabulary?	Frequency	Valid Percent
I always sound out the words in the books when I read.	13	21.7
I use the newly learned words a lot in speaking and writing.	16	26.7
I study the vocabulary notebook at least 3 times a week.	3	5
I write down all the new words in a vocabulary notebook.	3	5
I look at the examples online to learn how to use a word.	34	56.7
I look at the examples in the dictionary to learn how to use a word.	5	8.3

Table 13: Vocabulary Learning Strategies

CONCLUSION

The current study has conducted a survey of reading trends and preferences of digital natives in higher education by eliciting information from 60 participants of Engineering and Management schools at a Malaysian university through random sampling. It has limitations, for example, the sample size does not comprise equal gender distribution of participants, use of somewhat basic statistical tools for more meaningful information, and so on. The questionnaire provides substantial room for further improvement. Despite these impediments, the current study is useful in describing the reading trends and preferences of digital natives, particularly Engineering and Management undergraduates. The study specifically reports responses of digital natives on six reading parameters including types of reading materials, frequency, topics, habits, reasons and vocabulary learning strategies while reading.

The findings show that digital natives are avid and frequent readers which contradicts the popular notion that they do not read. Apart from reading academic materials as part of course requirement, digital natives prefer to read to get more information and stay updated with current affairs while other reasons of reading being for fun and pleasure as well as for personal development. The study has found that Management undergraduate students are more regular with textbooks and notebooks in class than their Engineering counterparts. Engineering students prefer to read mostly electronically whereas Management students choose both print and electronic sources. Engineering students are more frequent readers in academic and non-academic reading materials than their Management counterparts. Engineering students demonstrate better reading frequency in reading outside classroom and reading a book to completion than their Management counterparts. Female participants show a remarkable 100% readership of academic articles, textbooks, romantic fiction, self-help books and travel-related books and magazines. Engineering students prefer to read to get more information as well as read for fun and pleasure. Whereas Management students prefer to stay updated with current affairs as well as read for personal development. Management students are relatively more concerned about applying vocabulary learning strategies than their Engineering counterparts. The comparative analysis further leaves significant room for examining other aspects of reading trends, including a) attitude and reading behaviour, b) gender-based reading preferences, c) genre-based reading preferences and d) course-based reading preferences among digital natives, which is not feasible in the scope of the current study.

Digital natives show a general interest in reading both print and electronic materials though they prefer to read electronic materials over print mainly due to easy accessibility of information sources. There is a considerable amount of university library frequenters among digital natives who like to read on a wide variety of topics including academic (mainly because of its mandatory nature in course curriculum), comics, magazines, fiction, self-help, and so on. One of the noticeable reading trends is the sharp decline of newspaper readership in print among digital natives, which can be seen in increasing readership in online newsfeed contents as a preferred substitute. In terms of digital reading content, digital natives prefer to consume all sorts of social media content mainly due to its interactive nature, digital connectivity and easy accessibility. Besides, digital natives prefer to read miscellaneous online content including e-books, travel-related blogs and websites, general reference, and so on. In terms of improving reading comprehension and understanding, digital natives prefer to approach their peers more relatively than their lecturers. To learn and improve vocabulary, digital natives turn to online resources by using digital devices like smartphone. The study has also reported the reduced use of dictionaries among digital natives, which has now been replaced by online resources for this Google generation. Keeping these observations and results in focus, it is time for educators to analyse the reading trends and preferences of digital natives in order for them to realise the need of and implement innovative strategies so as to enhance their overall reading and learning skills.

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APPENDIX**Questionnaire on Reading Trends of Digital Natives****A. Types of reading materials:** Check what sorts of reading materials you prefer to read.

1. When you come to the class, what do you bring along?
 - a. nothing
 - b. textbooks
 - c. textbooks and notebooks
2. Which ones do you prefer to read and why?
 - a. print
 - b. electronic

because _____

Which of the following do you try to read regularly (i.e., at least 2 times a week)? (You can circle more than one answer.)

3. Print

- a. stories (fiction)
- b. other books (nonfiction)
- c. academic
- d. self-help
- e. motivational
- f. magazines
- g. newspapers
- h. general reference
- i. comics

4. Electronic

- a. e-books
- b. blogs
- c. web articles
- d. newsfeed
- e. social media forums (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.)

B. Reading frequency: Check how frequently you read.

1. How often do you read?
 - a. never
 - b. sometimes
 - c. everyday
2. How often do you read in your class?
 - a. never
 - b. sometimes
 - c. almost in every class
3. How often do you read something related to your studies?
 - a. never
 - b. sometimes
 - c. everyday
4. How often do you read something not related to your studies?
 - a. never
 - b. sometimes
 - c. everyday
5. How much time do you spend reading everyday outside your classroom?
 - a. less than half an hour
 - b. 1 hour
 - c. 2 hours
 - d. more than 2 hours

C. Reading topics: Check what kinds of topics you prefer to read on and about.

1. What kinds of topics do you prefer to read?
 - a. Print _____
 - b. Electronic _____

D. Reading habits: Check what sorts of reading habits you prefer to pronounce and understand the meaning of new words.

1. When you don't understand what your lecturer says in the class, what do you do? (You can circle more than one answer.)
 - a. Request the lecturer to explain it again
 - b. Say nothing, just let it be
 - c. Ask another student what it means
 - d. Try to guess the meaning

Consider the following statements for yourself, write **T** if they are **TRUE**.

2. Every day, I spend at least 30 minutes revising the things I learned in my class

that day.

3. I enjoy visiting my university library to look for reference books or read magazines. _____
4. I sometimes visit the university e-library to look for research articles. _____
5. I make use of the dictionary to check the meaning of new words. _____
6. I try to look for the meaning of new words online (e.g., through Google, Yahoo search, Bing, etc.). _____
7. I read aloud the newly learned words 5 or more times because it helps me to remember the pronunciation and spelling better. _____
8. I sometimes use the rest of the sentence to guess the meaning of a word I don't know. _____
9. I ask myself questions as I read to make sure that I understand. _____

E. **Reading reasons:** Check the reasons behind your reading.

Consider the following statements for yourself, choose Yes or No. Strike off the other option.

1. I like to read for fun and pleasure. **Yes/No**
2. I read to get more information. **Yes/No**
3. I like to read for personal development. **Yes/No**
4. I read because I want to stay updated with current affairs. **Yes/No**
5. I read because it's mandatory for my studies. **Yes/No**

F. **Vocabulary learning strategies:** Check what strategies you use to learn and improve vocabulary.

Consider the following statements for yourself, write **T** if they are **TRUE**.

1. I look at the examples in the dictionary to learn how to use a word. _____
2. I look at the examples online (Google, Yahoo, Bing, etc.) to learn how to use a word. _____
3. I write down all the new words in a vocabulary notebook. _____
4. I study the vocabulary notebook at least 3 times a week. _____
5. I use the newly learned words a lot in speaking and writing. _____
6. I always sound out the words in the books when I read. _____