

# Investigating Rural Library Usage among Rural Youth in Malaysia: Its Corresponding Determinants and Impacts

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## Abstract

The demands for information are increasing nowadays, providing adequate sources of information for the community is a crucial agenda as it is an essential part of community development particularly the youth; the future leader of our community. As information and communication technology (ICT) play significant roles as sources of information, similarly, the rural library in Malaysia can play the same roles in offering updated and needed information of the community. The main objective of this paper is to know the potential factors, benefits and problems in using the services provided in the rural library. Discussion of this paper is based on applied documents and literature analysis. Based on the analyses done, a number of potential benefits offered by the rural community have been identified and certainly information offered is the main benefit available. Potential problems faced by the rural community in using the rural library services need to be overcome to ensure the rural community will profit from the benefits offered. Besides, a number of related factors and theories have been further discussed.

**Keywords:** Youth, Rural library, ICT, Rural community, Information management, Rural development

## 1. Introduction

The advancement of information communication technology (ICT) has provided a scenario where people dealt with information and thus created a knowledge society. Nowadays, knowledge is power. To create a

knowledgeable community, there must be enough sources or channel to that knowledge. In fact, urban community are always been regarded as having an updated knowledge and information, compared to their counterparts in the rural areas due to facilities provided, enable them to easily access to information (Bhalchandra *et al.*, 2010). Realizing this, the Malaysia government has established a number of projects to provide all sorts of information and knowledge needed by the rural community, and among the projects are Rural Internet Center and Rural Info Center. The government efforts to create knowledgeable rural community have never ended. The National Library Malaysia (NLM) was established in 1971, with the aim to promote a nationwide system of free public libraries and library services in Malaysia (Wijasuriya, 1985). Various programs were embarked under NLM such as establishing rural library, multimedia mobile library and knowledge cyber centre. Those initiatives are to create a knowledgeable and information society and also to bring ICT facilities development to the rural people (NLM, 2011).

To further encourage knowledge and information seeking among the rural people, the government has taken a wise step by introducing library services to the rural people known as Rural Library or locally known as “Perpustakaan Desa”. Rural library is a mini library located at the rural areas and its’ function is to provide library services to the people of that areas. The setting up of the Rural Library since the year of 2000, (Zainab *et al.*, 2004) in the rural areas is aimed to: 1) encourage reading habits among the rural people 2) provide useful reading sources to the rural community 3) assist rural students in getting useful reading sources for their studies and 4) provide related recreational activities for the rural community. Among services provided under the rural library are borrowing books, internet services, reading books, magazines, articles and other sources of readings. Apart from reading related activities, Shariful Islam (2009), further mentioned that the rural library also offer the rural community social activities such as social awareness, celebrating important occasions, vocational training and literacy training. Apart from that, activities related to children and adults are also provided while in Cyber Rural Library, internet services are also provided. A number of groups have been the target to be the main users of the rural library and youth is one of them.

Youth is an important group in Malaysia. They are the backup generation and the future leaders of the community. Doubtlessly, youth are under the radar of information dissemination process. Indeed, they are among the main target groups of the information development programs such as Rural Internet Center, Rural Info Center and Rural Library. According to Malaysia Youth Council, those whose age range from 15 to 40 years old can be considered as youth while United Nation and Commonwealth Secretariat have their own view when they categorize those whose age range from 15-24 years old as youth. In a research done by Institute of Youth Research and Development (IPPBM) (2011), in 2010, youth constituted 42.5% of the overall population and this big number reflects the importance of this group for the country development. Interestingly, further analysis employed by IPPBM have concluded that information and knowledge are included in top five demands by the youth thus depicted the relevancy of the information sources such as rural library to them. Youth are the heavy users of ICT, IPPBM (2011) have revealed that a total of 79.7% of youth use computer and a total of 74.3% of youth use the internet. We do know that ICT offers a lot of benefits and profits to the youth, nevertheless, only a little has been discovered on the benefits and profits offered by other information sources such as rural library. To date, a total of 1089 rural libraries have been established across Malaysia (Table 1). Sarawak, Sabah and Johor are the three states with the highest number of rural libraries in Malaysia. Looking at the huge number of rural libraries in Malaysia, it may trigger questions as to what extent does these rural libraries have been fully utilised? What are the benefits offered to them from the usage? If they are not using it, what are the reasons of not using the rural library services? Hence, this paper intends to discuss potential benefits and problems faced by the youth in Malaysia in using the rural library services.

## 2. Literature Review

Norshila *et al.* (2011) have conducted a study on rural youth perception of information sources and rural library services. Based on the objectives of investigating the needs and usage of information sources and perceptions of rural youth on rural library services, a number of revealing findings have been discovered. This study has proven that majority of the rural library users in Malaysia were students. Further, it was found that majority of the users in the rural library were seeking for 1) information on continuing education, 2) information germane to computer, and internet and 3) information related to career. Information on education is mainly sought by the users and they mainly seek information education germane to scholarship, study opportunities in college and universities as well as information on vocational training. In another part of the study, the researchers were interested in identifying the purpose of using the rural library services among youth and they concluded that youth use the rural library services mainly for assisting them in making important decision and gaining new knowledge. Albeit the rural library importance, it seems that it is not the main source preferred by rural youth; internet was the main preference for

searching information needed and rural library was ranked fourth. Norshila *et al.* (2011) furthermore have identified two main problems that obstructed rural youth to use rural library services namely 1) lack of time and 2) have other option of information access. Based on the study, it is recommended that rural libraries should provide rural youth with access to information in print and electronic formats. Certainly, the information must be germane to education opportunities and ICT. Problems faced in searching the information highlighted in this study recommend that rural library should offer services at no cost, increase promotional activities and computer facilities with internet connection.

Early research by Wijasuriya (1985) examined the development of Malaysian library services and its problem faced in delivering services to the public. Problems faced including low level of usage of the public library, where public were not making use of the public library facilities, limited number of public library services outlets, poor reading habits and lack of books. To make things worse, 30 percent of the book titles are outdated and no longer suitable especially referring to the primary and secondary level school textbooks. However, Wijasuriya (1985) further forecasted that with the increasing number of literacy rate in the country, which may lead to increase of reading habits, this scenario may contribute to the demand and needs to the use of the public library in the future.

Another study carried out by Anwar and Supaat (1998) looked at information needs of rural community in Malaysia. Their study integrated data of 33 studies on rural information needs gained from LISA-PLUS database and results of a study that looked at the information needs of the rural community living in three Malaysian villages with no rural library. Analysis done have concluded that among the desired information by the rural community are (1) Religious information; (2) Family bonding; (3) Current affairs; (4) Health information; and (5) Education. Furthermore, according to Anwar and Supaat (1998), these five desired information are driven by these reasons (1) Fulfilment of the need to know; (2) Solving problems; (3) Self-development; (4) Establishing a better family; and (5) Work purposes. Moreover, besides having all sorts of advanced technologies, rural communities seem to prefer "traditional sources" of information such as (1) TV/Radio; (2) Friends/neighbours; (3) Printed materials; (4) Relatives from the city; and (5) the School answered (library) to have their desired information. Majority of the rural community that the questionnaire (93.4%) have informed that they are highly interested in using the rural library services. This study has recommended that the establishment of the rural library must be in tandem with the needs of the rural community.

Another study was done by Corradini (2006) that focused on the youth experiences, expectations, and perspectives on the library use and services in Northern Italy. Through this study, it can be concluded that youth use the services provided by the library mainly to gain recent information and to conduct a group discussion with their colleagues. Nonetheless, albeit the benefits offered by the library, youth in his study has obviously stated that libraries as uninteresting and cold, solemn and rigid, boring and old-fashioned, 'old' collections and lacking of sources that are germane to their needs and interests. To further enhance and develop the services offered by library, it must be connected to youth; their needs must be fulfilled. Then, the sources provided must be the current one. Apart from this, library services and activities must be 'heard' and 'seen' by the youth; it must be intensively promoted. Finally, it should construct a concrete relationship with schools, teachers, parents, administrators and other external stakeholders.

Smith (2003) has managed to complete a study that aimed to provide the answer for this question; why rural public libraries should (and how they can) attract youth to use its' services? The main point highlighted in this study is to comprehend the needs and interests of youth and an implementation and maintenance process for youth. Smith (2003) has suggested a number of recommendation to further intensify rural library services. Firstly, is to identify the needs and interests of youth; they should know the push and pull factors that impinge usage of the the rural library services among youth. Second, there is a need for the rural library to conduct a consistent monitoring on their available resources and services and to have this is crucial as it will provide youth with up to date sources and services. Smith (2003) also has stressed on the importance of providing relevant trainings to the rural library staffs as it will strengthen their staff competency, knowledge and skills. Apart from this, this study also has suggested the importance of getting the youth involvement in the planning process in which it can aid in recognizing the most crucial needs and hindering the trial and error that typically exist with collection development and programming for this age group. One of the approaches in getting their involvement is by creating Youth Advisory Board which will cooperate with the rural library in developing appropriate rural library services for youth.

### **3. Factors Related to the Usage of Rural Library Services among Youth**

Previous researches have shown that there are various factors that influence the community to use the library services among youth. Research by Herselman (2003) demonstrated that there are four factors that can influence the usage of services provided which are technically connected, physical access to the services, local needs and

sustained capacity building. The geographical barriers must be overcome and factors such as better road and mobility must be considered to ensure the target groups will use the services provided. The relevance of the materials provided to the local needs are highly emphasized as the irrelevant materials will cause the sustainability problems on the usage of rural library services. Herselman (2003) further argued that these factors are the essence if the government want to see their investment on the rural library come out with a positive impact. Additionally, Vavrek (1995) and Smith (2003) have stressed on the importance of rural librarian to conduct a survey on knowing the information needs of the local people so that the services provided will be accordance to “what they want”. Typically, youth needs information that are related to education development, career opportunities and improving their computer and internet skills and knowledge.

Sattar (2007) in his study has emphasized on the importance of sustainability if the services offered by the government is to be persistently used by the target groups. Attitude in many cases will play an important role in creating a better usage towards something and similarly it can also be found in the case of rural library services. Interestingly, rural community are always related to positive attitude towards projects and programs brought by the government (Shiro, 2008). People with better attitude towards rural library services are predicted to have a higher level of usage on services provided (Goodman, 2008 and Cheunwattana, 1999).

Perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of the library services can be related to the usage of rural library services as it has been proved by Yusliza *et al.* (2009) and Ramayah *et al.* (2003). Yusliza *et al.* (2009) for example, have stressed that as the community feels that the services offered is something useful to them, their usage level will be higher. Additionally, Meso *et al.* (2005) have emphasized factors such as perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, higher trust on services offered and broader access to services offered are the keys factors for better confidence thus form a better usage of the services offered. Subjective norm will have an impact on rural library services, other people and family members usage of rural library services might influence youth to use the rural library services and encouragement from the government agencies and rural leaders for example can play an important role (Hildreth, 2007 and Spencer, 2000). Apart from this, Gilligan (2005) has demonstrated the impact of subjective norm on usage by concluding that rural people that live in areas where less people use the services offered (such as rural library) will have a low level usage.

Wijasuriya and Evans (1992) for example has stressed on the importance of the government support (eg: financial and infrastructure) to ensure the sustainability and continuity of rural library services. Doubtlessly, demographic factors can also be included as the one of the factors that can influence rural library services as Vavrek (1995) and John (1995) have proved that gender and type of job something to do with the usage of rural library services. Wigg (1995) on the other hand has identified that youth are more likely to use rural library services compared to the older people due to the materials offered at the rural library are more related to young peoples’ needs.

#### **4. Benefits Offered by Rural Library Services**

For the users of the library services, there are a lot of benefit that is offered to them and this is not surprising as it is in tandem with a number of previous studies. Vavrek (1995) for example concluded that rural library are the sources of knowledge and entertainment for the rural community. Moreover, rural library can be a place where the rural community can access to the internet to get an updated information and knowledge. Through the internet service provided, it will expose the users to the world of information where unlimited sources of knowledge, entertainment, leisure activities, communication, networking and others are offered. Off course, all of these are free for them.

Shariful Islam (2009) has concluded that library users are more active in social and cultural activities than the non users. Services provided in the rural library will intensify youth involvement in local activities. Apart from this, rural library can act as the main point for community facilities and be a good example of the additional services and value that local community groups may offer to their constituents. Shariful Islam (2009) further added that there are numerous benefits that rural library services can offer to the rural community which creates “learning society”, improve reading and learning skills, create social awareness in the issue of health, education, women development, rural development and other and also to provide formal and non-formal education. Moreover, services provided will promote literacy among the rural community and cultivate reading habits among them.

Interestingly, youth can use services provided in the rural library to reduce stress and tense and this has been proven by Vavrek (1995). John (1995) further emphasized that the rural library services can be a solution to reduce the knowledge gap that occur between rural and urban communities due to the rural community are given a ready access to the information necessary to stimulate their development process. Interestingly, Josephine (2003) in her research managed to reveal that rural library services can be one of the mechanism in achieving sustainable rural development by providing information supports to development projects and to eradicate illiteracy. Furthermore, Josephine (2003) has emphasized that rural library services can establish and improve rural information system.

There are three types of proximity that can be covered by community environment which are geographical proximity (physical distance), technological proximity (IT society) and cultural proximity (local/regional community spirit). Rural library can be a catalyst to strengthen the technological proximity by providing and intensifying ICT services provided. In terms of cultural proximity, it can be intensified through rural library by integrating the services offered with the community culture and needs. However, to achieve this, active and effective cooperation with a multiplicity of community agencies are needed (Hildreth, 2007).

### **5. Potential Problems of Using the Rural Library Services**

Despite the facilities and services provided by the Malaysian government, yet, there are still rural community especially youth who are reluctant to use services provided by rural library due to a number of reasons. The existence of internet nowadays has been one of the reasons (Piiro, 1993). Eventhough there are internet services provided in some of the rural libraries, yet not all of the rural libraries are provided with computer and internet services. Apart from this, albeit some of the rural libraries do provide computer and internet services, the problem of adequacy of such services still exist. Furthermore, it is easier for the youth to just click the computer mouse at their home and get the information they want, compared to the effort and time used to get to the rural library.

Vavrek (1995) claimed that people still do not want to use library services simply because they do not know what is available in the library. Rural library must be connected to the community as their services and activities must be intensively promoted. To do this is crucial as the services and activities of the rural library will be heard, seen and involved by the community. Moreover, the community must be encouraged and motivated to use the rural library services and apart from this, reading must be cultivated as a culture and habit among rural youth.

As updated knowledge and information are highly demanded by the communities nowadays, Vavrek (1995) said that the problems of keeping the current/updated services (reading sources) can be a cause of why rural community do not want to go to the library. Obviously, lacking of consistent monitoring systems has been found as the root of such problem (Smith, 2003). Some causes were identified why such monitoring systems are not conducted namely indifference of library personnel, inadequate number staff and limited budget and staff reluctance to conduct such assessments.

Moreover, the problem of inappropriate content and activities of rural library can drive the rural community not to use the services provided; for example the agriculture information in the West or Africa might not be suitable to be read by the local farmers and this happens due to lack of research and survey conducted on what type of information rural community needs (Nyana, 2009). To ensure that the sources and activities provided is germane to the local needs is so crucial as it has a significant impacts on the rural library statistics. It is important to admit that as long as librarians remain book oriented, instead of information- and people-oriented, people will continue to ignore the library. Community will consider the sources in the rural library as not essential to their survival needs and not able to fulfill their entertainment needs. Additionally, it is a good plan to have more sources such as novel and updated education related articles in the rural library to invite more youth to come and use the rural library services.

It is not surprising that lack of time and knowledge can be the main constraints for the rural community to use the rural library services and this problems are highlighted as the main problem faced by the professionals (Zabed Ahmed, 2010). Meanwhile, Holt (1995) has other view when he stressed on the problems of lack of physical access, cultural and linguistic diversity, unequal social and educational levels, and mobility are among reasons why local people do not use rural library services.

### **6. Conclusion**

Information is everything nowadays. To have adequate information is crucial for youth development and to have this, channels for the information must be established. A number of information channels have been established by the government and one of it is the rural library. Past studies have concluded a number of factors can be related to rural library services such as geographical factors, relevancy, sustainability, positive attitude, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, government support, subjective norm and demographic factors. These factors will determine whether the users will have the benefits from the usage or facing problems in using it. In term of potential benefits offered by rural library services are sources of knowledge and entertainment, improved internet access to updated information, social and cultural activities, channel of relaxation and strengthen technology and social and cultural proximity.

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Table 1. Number of Rural Libraries in Malaysia

| State                      | No of Rural Libraries |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Johor                      | 92                    |
| Kedah                      | 92                    |
| Kelantan                   | 37                    |
| Melaka                     | 57                    |
| Negeri Sembilan            | 73                    |
| Pahang                     | 64                    |
| Perak                      | 78                    |
| Perlis                     | 38                    |
| Pulau Pinang               | 82                    |
| Selangor                   | 70                    |
| Terengganu                 | 88                    |
| Sabah                      | 198                   |
| Sarawak                    | 207                   |
| Wilayah Persekutuan Labuan | 3                     |