

## What Motivations Drive Malaysian Readers to Choose Printed Newspapers in the Digital Era

Aliza Shah Muhammad Shah<sup>1</sup>, Zulkifli Abd Latiff<sup>2</sup> & Nur Atiqah Sia Abdullah<sup>3</sup>  
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,  
Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam  
zulatif@yahoo.com<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

*Printed newspapers are losing their popularity as people prefer free, easy-to-use digital channels. The situation hurt newspaper circulation, forcing many out of business. In Malaysia, Malay Mail and Tamil Nesar are among those forced to shut their printed version. Past studies have demonstrated how the demise of printed newspapers has brought along many negative impacts, such as the loss of local news [1] and unreported stories [2], and the threat of misinformation and disinformation [3,4,5]. Given the current trend, Malaysia may soon face the same repercussions if printed newspapers are left to die. This study thus examines reader motivations for selecting printed newspapers. This information is crucial to help media organisations enhance their appeal, attract and retain readers and buyers, ensure newspaper relevance, and avert the mentioned negative consequences of losing printed newspapers. The study employs qualitative research by first conducting content analysis on selected mainstream newspapers. Data gleaned from this analysis serves as the foundation for conducting in-depth interviews with six industry experts and seven readers, which were chosen using purposive sampling. The researcher identified 18 motivations for print newspaper reading, encompassing surveillance, information needs, affective needs, personal integration, and tension relief. The study also reveals that while reader motivations for print newspapers mostly remain unchanged, there are also new motivations that print providers need to consider to attract readers.*

**Keywords:** motivations, printed newspapers, digital era, sustainability, Malaysia

### 1.0 Background of the study

Since the 1800s, printed newspapers have been crucial, but technological innovation, especially the arrival of free information from social media and other internet platforms, has challenged the traditional medium. Reuters Digital News Report revealed that newspaper readership dropped from 40 percent in 2017 to 17 percent in 2022. About 89 percent of the respondents also admit to using social media as their major news source [6].

In Malaysia, the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) reports indicate that printed newspaper circulation began to fall in 2013. The report notes that in 2015, 5,813,812 newspapers were sold, down from 7,450,738 in 2012 [7,8,9]. ABC halted its report publication, citing publisher support issues, thereby

restricting data accessibility. The researcher anticipated a sustained decline in print newspaper circulations from 2017 onwards.

Global and local media employees have been laid off as a result of the organisation's attempt to reduce losses by reducing its workforce. The scenario is troubling given that past studies have demonstrated that the demise of printed newspapers resulted in the loss of local news [1] and unreported stories [2], and raised the threat of misinformation and disinformation [3,4,5].

Several media institutions, including Utusan Malaysian and Media Prima Berhad, had to go through multiple downsizing processes. In order to maintain its operations, the media group Media Prima Berhad, which owns the New Straits Times, Harian Metro, and Berita Harian, had to lay off more than 500 employees [10]. As a result, bureaus were shut down, and each state now has fewer reporters assigned to it [10]. Due to the focus on larger issues, the limited resources would also result in limited local news coverage [1]. This resulted in many unwritten stories [2], particularly about subjects or locations that required in-depth study.

This study will thus examine the best ways for printed newspapers to survive in the digital age by ascertaining the underlying motivations that prompt individuals to pick up and read printed newspapers in the digital era. This data holds significant relevance for media entities as it enables them to tailor their products and services efficiently, thereby enhancing their appeal to potential consumers.

### **1.1 Aim and Objectives**

The objective of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the state of printed newspapers in Malaysia and to determine the underlying motivations that drive individuals to purchase and read printed newspapers in the present digital era. The significance of this data lies in its ability to assist media entities in effectively customising their products and services, thereby augmenting their appeal to potential consumers. The ultimate goal is to avert the demise of printed newspapers and the various adverse consequences that have been documented in previous research [1,2,3,4,5].

### **2.0 Literature Review**

According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2022, which draws on data from 46 countries across six continents, including Malaysia, the readership of newspapers has declined significantly from 40 percent in 2017 to 17 percent in 2022 [6]. The findings corroborated the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) data, which indicated a noteworthy reduction in the circulation of printed newspapers in Malaysia since 2013. ABC in their reports notes that only 5,813,812 copies of newspapers were sold in 2015 compared to 7,450,738 copies sold in 2012 [7,8,9].

The financial challenges faced by certain media organisations have resulted in the cessation of print operations. Malay Mail and Tamil Nesan are among the news publications that have transitioned their operations to the digital realm.

A number of media outlets in Malaysia also implemented cost-cutting measures, such as workforce reductions due to decreased sales and advertising revenue. Media Prima Berhad, a media conglomerate, conducted multiple downsizing initiatives that resulted in the departure of more than 500 of its employees [10]. The process of downsizing has a significant impact on all three publications that fall under the purview of Media Prima Berhad, namely the New Straits Times, Berita Harian, and Harian Metro. According to Alyaa Alhadjri (2019), the implementation of exercises resulted in a decrease in the workforce, particularly in the states, leading to the closure of certain bureaus. This had an impact on the

quantity of regional news coverage and could potentially lead to numerous untapped and uncovered issues [10].

## **2.1 Uses and Gratification Theory**

The researcher's exploration into the motivations behind reading printed newspapers is grounded in the framework of the Uses and Gratification theory. The theory explains why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs. Understanding what would influence readers to select printed newspapers will aid in the development of a sustainable strategy for printed newspapers' survivability in the digital era.

The researcher has synthesised and examined the works of Katz et al. (1974) [11], McCombs (1977) [12], Elliott & Rosenberg (1987)[13], Vincent and Basil (1997) [14] and Flavián & Guerra (2006) [15]. Their studies were chosen as they provide a list of motivations used in mass media (which include printed newspapers) and printed newspapers.

**TABLE 1**  
A Compilation Of Studies On Uses And Gratification Theory

Scholars	Katz, Gurevitch & Haas (1973)	McCombs (1977)	Elliott & Rosenberg (1987)	Vincent and Basil (1997)	Flavián & Guerra (2006)	TOTAL
Medium	Mass Media	Newspaper	Newspaper	Mass Media	Newspaper	
Motivations						
- Surveillance - Keep updated		✓	✓	✓		3
-Cognitive needs - Need for information	✓	✓				2
Affective needs	✓					1
Personal integrative needs	✓					1
-Social integrative needs	✓					2
-Tension release -Escapism -Escape	✓	✓	✓	✓		4
-Entertainment -Excitement -Need for fun			✓	✓	✓	3
Killing time			✓			1
Advertising			✓			1
Habit					✓	1
Relaxation					✓	1

These past studies highlighted that people choose to read print newspapers for a variety of reasons, including the desire to keep updated, the need for information, affective needs, personal integrative needs, tension release, entertainment, killing time, advertising, habit, and relaxation motivations. This study will attempt to establish whether the same motivations apply in the current situation.

### 3.0 Methodology

The researcher adopted a qualitative research design for this study and conducted a content analysis of nine mainstream newspapers, which included Berita Harian, BH Ahad, Harian Metro, Metro Ahad, New Straits Times, Sunday Times, Sinar Harian, The Star, and Sunday Star. The data collected from this analysis was then used to develop questionnaires for both experts and readers.

A purposive sampling method was employed to select six industry experts, all with over 20 years of experience. They were chosen for their insights and knowledge of the current realities. Similarly, seven printed newspaper readers from diverse backgrounds were chosen using the same method. They were all occasional readers. The decision to select them was based on the belief that they would offer valuable insights into their specific motivations for choosing this medium on particular days, revealing essential information about their content preferences and needs.

The data obtained from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher used the Nvivo software to assist in the analysis of the interview data.

### 4.0 Finding

The researcher collected 11 readers' motivations by synthesizing insights from Katz et al. (1974), McCombs (1977), Elliott & Rosenberg (1987), Vincent and Basil (1997), and Flavián & Guerra (2006) studies on the Uses and Gratification Theory. These studies were chosen because they specifically investigated motivations for reading printed newspapers.

Subsequently, these motivations were presented to our respondents, who assigned scores based on their preferences, with 1 indicating low importance and 5 indicating high importance. Table 2 shows the findings following interviews with industry experts and readers.

**TABLE 2**  
Readers' Motivations for Reading Printed Newspapers

<b>Newspaper buying motivations</b>	<b>Score</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Surveillance	5,5,4,4,4,4,4,4,3,3,3,3,2	45	4
Need for information	5,5,5,5,5,5,5,4,4,4,4,4,3	58	1
Affective needs	5,4,4,4,4,4,4,3,3,3,3,3,3	47	3
Personal integrative needs	5,5,5,4,4,4,3,3,3,2,2,2,1	43	6
<b>Social integrative needs</b>	<b>5,4,3,3,3,2,2,2,2,2,1,1,1</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>11</b>
Tension release	4,4,4,3,3,3,3,3,2,2,2,2,1	36	8
<b>Entertainment</b>	<b>4,4,3,3,3,3,2,2,2,2,2,2,1</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>10</b>
Killing time	5,5,4,3,3,3,3,2,2,2,2,2,2	38	7

Advertising	4,4,3,3,3,3,3,3,2,1,1,1	34	9
Habit	5,5,5,5,5,4,4,4,3,3,2,1	51	2
Relaxation	5,4,4,4,4,4,3,3,3,2,1	44	5

The need for information has been scored as the most important motivation to buy and read printed newspapers. Almost all respondents rated the need for information as "most important" and "important". One of our respondents shared how printed newspapers are able to provide readers with news developments in a variety of fields such as sciences and technology and other subject matters. One of our industry experts said :

*"Personally I believe that our trend has changed, people are no longer buying newspapers for the entertainment factor, entertainment factor is a bonus, they buy newspapers to be informed," informant I said.*

Echoing the sentiment was one of our readers. The reader said:

*"I would buy printed newspapers to read on other news, those that are not hotly debated or the latest issues, because these sorts of stories can be read online. I would only look for other stories such as recipes, tech news, music or movie reviews, artist gossip, and business news," informant G said.*

The finding is consistent with earlier research by McCombs (1977) and Flavian and Guerra (2006), who found that readers opted for printed newspapers to meet their informational demands and conduct targeted information searches.

The study also identified habit as the second most significant motivation for people to purchase printed newspapers while affective needs are the third most important motivation. The survival of the print newspaper industry, according to our respondent, depends on instilling reading habits in young readers. One of our industry experts said :

*"Why didn't we make use of our Didik pull-out to find new readers, and get them hooked on our product (printed newspaper). Include contents that would attract them to read, and follow the in-trend such as giving them BTS or Black Pink posters for example. It must be relevant and useful for them. Habit is something that is not easy to kill," Informant I said.*

Habit was proven to be a potent motivator, as some of our readers have expressed their affection for printed newspapers due to the tactile experience and the nostalgia it evokes. Their past interactions with this medium have left them with positive emotions and sentimental value, reinforcing their continued preference for it.

*"You achieve more satisfaction when you hold the newspapers," said Informant A.*

Informant G shared the same sentiment, saying he loves reading printed newspapers because *"there is an unexplained satisfaction of holding newspapers"*, which they can't find when reading news

on the currently available digital gadget. This suggests that these readers have become accustomed to the medium, and reading something in a physical form has become a habitual practice for them.

As for informant E, her upbringing in the 70s with printed newspapers still fills her with excitement whenever she encounters them. She described how the sight of printed newspapers elicits a sense of comfort, signifying the beginning of her day with knowledge.

*"I still get excited when I see printed newspapers on sale. In waiting rooms, I prefer reading printed newspapers over magazines. They make me feel content," expressed the reader.*

Surveillance, which was also noted in McCombs (1977) and Flavian and Guerra (2006) studies sits in fourth place. This shows that readers opt for printed newspapers to help them keep updated on the current situation in the country. One of our respondents shared an interesting observation that whenever there is a noteworthy event or incident, the circulation of most printed publications would noticeably increase. This suggests that the public's hunger for up-to-date news would have motivated them to pick up printed newspapers.

This was shared by a few of our industry experts. One of them said :

*"During the election, even though Harian Metro is not a political newspaper, at that time every Malaysian was eager to hunt for news, even though they knew Barisan Nasional had won or lost, but it is still not enough. So the next day, even though the results (shown in printed newspapers) are incomplete, every newspaper will see its circulation increase," Informant 4 said.*

One of our readers said :

*"It is like how we have special stamps on special events, I believe printed newspapers could also invest in something like this because people would definitely buy the newspaper if they had very interesting and nice-looking infographics that they could keep and use, like a new calendar, for example," informant A said.*

Relaxation is ranked fifth followed by Personal integrative needs, killing time, tension release and advertising.

Two motivations identified from previous studies, namely social integration and entertainment, received notably low scores. This suggests that these motivations may no longer be significant drivers for people to purchase and read printed newspapers.

Informant A pointed out that social integrative needs are no longer the primary driving force behind the purchase and reading of printed newspapers, as the public can access information more quickly online. This motivation has become impractical.

*"In the past, newspapers held a vital role as a primary source of information, and people would buy them to read about various topics and share information with friends and family.*

*"However, in today's digital age, social media has assumed this role. Individuals can now access information independently and engage in open discussions through online platforms. Consequently, people no longer rely on printed newspapers as their primary source for conversations with friends and family," said the newspaper reader.*

Informant A also believed that entertainment is no longer the primary incentive for purchasing and reading printed newspapers, as readers can access more visually engaging content and compelling audio online.

The manner in which printed newspapers present entertainment stories is often considered outdated and uninspiring, contributing to the perception that printed newspapers have lost their appeal. In contrast, digital platforms offer a more vibrant and contemporary writing style, making them a preferred choice for those seeking engaging and fresh content.

Another respondent, Informant G, suggested that printed newspapers should leave gossip and entertainment news to online platforms and shift their focus to providing movie or music reviews.

*"Gossip news tends to gain significant traction online, and reading this type of news in printed newspapers feels outdated. I believe printed newspapers should concentrate on delivering movie and music reviews," he recommended.*

#### 4.1 Additional Motivations For Printed Newspaper Buying In The Digital Era

The researcher has identified 13 extra motives for the purchase and reading of printed newspapers from both key experts and readers. The key experts proposed a total of eight motivations, while an additional five motivations were suggested by the readers. Table 3 shows the additional motivations.

**TABLE 3:**

Additional Motivations For Reading Printed Newspapers As Suggested By Industry Experts And Readers

Newspaper buying motivations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Score/ Rank	Rank
<b>To help make a decision</b>	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3,3,3,3,3,2,2	19/7
<b>Personal gratifications</b> Has news about yourself, your family, your favourite artist	5	5	2	2	5	4	2	5,5,5,4,2,2,2	25/4
<b>Additional information</b>	5	3	2	4	3	4	3	5,4,4,3,3,3,2	24/5
<b>Tangible benefits</b> Coupons, free gifts	5	3	1	4	3	3	4	5,4,4,3,3,3,1	23/6
<b>To be enlightened</b>	5	5	4	4	3	4	4	5,5,4,4,4,4,3	29/2
<b>For educational purposes</b> Didik, Score-A1 for example.	4	2	1	4	1	3	2	4,4,3,2,2,1,1,	17/8
<b>Read on heavy topics</b>	5	5	5	3	4	4	4	5,5,5,4,4,4,3	30/1



<b>Readers trust the medium</b>	5	4	4	1	4	4	4	5,4,4,4,4,4,1	26/3
<b>Can be touched</b>									
<b>Exclusive content</b>									
<b>The way news is being presented</b>									
<b>Less information overload</b>									
<b>Sentimental value</b>									

The industry experts suggested eight motivations, they are - To help make a decision, personal gratifications, additional information, tangible benefits, to be enlightened, for educational purposes, read on heavy topics and readers trust on the medium.

Our readers strongly agree with some of the suggested motivations. They are - read on heavy topics, to be enlightened, and readers trust the medium and personal gratifications.

One of the key experts emphasized that despite relying on online platforms, he has a distinct preference for reading printed newspapers, especially when it comes to in-depth analysis. He finds that reading printed newspapers aids in developing thoughtful insights and delving into weighty topics.

*“I myself would read news on my gadget just so that I get information, but online reading is not to help me develop my thoughts or read on heavy topics,” informant 5 said.*

Informant B, a printed newspaper reader, shares a similar sentiment and believes that printed newspapers are ideal for delving into weighty topics. She explained that her choice of printed newspapers is influenced by the way they present news, effectively preventing information overload, and enabling her to engage in slower, more deliberate reading to fully grasp the content.

Most readers also agree that one of the motivations for them to read printed newspapers is to get enlightened on issues surrounding them. Informant C for example said she read printed newspapers so that she could get news on crime, reading columns, opinion pieces and letters to editors.

*“I hardly read much political news in printed newspapers as my social media accounts are already plastered with important world and political news. So I don’t see the importance of reading them again in printed newspapers,” she added.*

The study also found that the readers’ trust in the brand and medium is also one of the most important motivations for them to buy and read printed newspapers. A key expert, informant 6 emphasised that trust extends far beyond financial considerations and marketing strategies.

Informant 2 pointed out that in the digital age, individuals can take on the role of "citizen journalists," producing news content online and inundating social media with unverified and inaccurate

information. This opens up opportunities for printed newspapers to act as reliable sources for fact-checking and verification.

*“A classic example is when there were rumours that the former Agong had married, the New Straits Times carried the news, and people straight away said that the news was true. So we become like a source for them to verify,” informant 2 shared.*

Our readers stressed that the way news is presented in printed newspapers instils confidence and trust. Respondents mentioned the structured filtering process in print media, which makes it seem more reliable than online news, which they often approach with scepticism.

*“Sometimes, even though I have read the news, I will read it again in printed newspapers just because I trust it more,” informant A said.*

Informant G further noted that he considers the ownership of the newspaper when choosing what to read. He specifically prefers Sinar Harian for its perceived neutrality in reporting, given its lack of affiliation with any political party.

Less than half of the readers consider tangible benefits a strong motivation, with a few expressing neutralities in their responses. Only one reader explicitly stated that it is not a motivating factor for purchasing and reading printed newspapers. Similar results were recorded on additional information and personal gratifications. The majority of our respondents expressed neutrality when asked if they would purchase printed newspapers to aid their decision-making.

The readers rejected the notion that people buy printed newspapers for “educational purposes”. Over 50 percent of the respondents expressed disagreement with the suggestion. However, the result contradicts the information provided by our experts, who stated that Berita Harian, which publishes Didik, their education pull-out every Wednesday, will see a larger circulation on that day. The fact was also verified by other industry experts.

The researcher attributed the contradictory results to the demographics of the majority of our reader respondents, who are young and unmarried. It is likely that parents who buy newspapers for their children would find this motivation more relevant and beneficial.

Five additional motivations as suggested by the readers are - printed newspapers can be touched, access to exclusive content, the presentation of news, a reduction in information overload and sentimental value attached to printed newspapers.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

The study found that the most important motivation for readers to buy and read printed newspapers is the need to satisfy their thirst for information. Our respondents indicated they turn to printed newspapers for information not readily available online, particularly for in-depth coverage of substantial topics. The readers choose printed newspapers in order to gain enlightenment, and their trust in the medium also serves as a compelling motivation for purchasing and reading printed newspapers.

The second motivation is habit. Habit is a resilient quality, as evidenced by some of our readers who express that the tactile experience and satisfaction of touching a printed newspaper contribute to their continued preference. Fostering this attachment among the younger generation holds the key to ensuring the medium's enduring relevance in the years ahead.

The third motivation is affective needs. Affective needs mean choosing a medium that stirs emotions. For instance, people watch horror movies for an adrenaline rush. Similarly, people chose to read printed newspapers to evoke specific feelings.

Among the 24 motivations gathered through interviews with experts, readers, and previous studies, three motivations were rejected by our respondents: social integration, entertainment, and educational purposes.

The Educational motivation, proposed by our expert, was not supported by the reader respondents. This outcome appears to conflict with the fact that Berita Harian, the publisher of Didik, their educational pull-out, experienced increased circulation on the day Didik was released. The rejection thus could be linked to the demographics of our respondents, who are primarily young and single. Parents who buy newspapers for their children are more likely to be motivated by educational content.

All in all, there are 21 motivations gathered through literature reviews and the researcher interviews with experts and readers. Some of these motivations were consolidated due to their overlapping explanations, such as the need for information and additional information, habit and sentimental value, and news presentation with less information overload. As a result, the total motivations identified in this study have been reduced to 18. Table 4 provides the finalised newspaper reading motivations.

**TABLE 4**  
Finalised Newspaper Reading Motivations

Newspaper buying motivations	
1. Surveillance	10. To help make decisions
2. Need for information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional information</li> </ul>	11. Personal gratifications
3. Affective needs	12. Tangible benefits
4. Personal integrative needs	13. To be enlightened
5. Tension release	14. Read on heavy topics
6. Killing time	15. Readers trusted the medium
7. Advertising	16. Can be touched
8. Habit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sentimental value</li> </ul>	17. Exclusive content
9. Relaxation	18. The way news is being presented <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less information overload</li> </ul>

The study reveals that readers' motivations for purchasing and reading printed newspapers have remained relatively consistent over the years. Nevertheless, the research has identified additional motivations that printed newspaper establishments should consider to effectively attract their readers.

They include helping to decide, personal gratification, additional information, tangible benefits, enlightened, educational purposes, reading on heavy topics, readers trusting the medium, being touched, exclusive content, the way news is being presented, less information overload, and sentimental value.

The knowledge gained from this research is crucial for preventing the death of printed newspapers. Knowing what motivates people to read printed newspapers would enable media organisations to tailor their offerings accordingly. This would hopefully encourage newspaper reading among Malaysians, aid in the survival of printed newspapers, and mitigate the negative effects of the demise of local printed newspapers, which have been noted in various studies.

The study also makes a theoretical addition by contributing new knowledge on readers' motivations for reading printed newspapers in the digital age.

## **6.0 Recommendation**

Future studies should aim to verify the findings of this study through the administration of a survey encompassing a significantly larger sample size, with varied backgrounds. This would help prevent biased findings and help establish, for example, whether education purposes are indeed a good motivation for readers to buy printed newspapers.

In this study, the researcher found that the readers rejected our expert's suggestion that education is one of the motivations for reading printed newspapers. The disapproval, however, contradicts the fact that *Berita Harian* - which publishes *Didik* - an educational pull-out, can score a higher circulation on the day *Didik* is released. The majority of our responses were young and single, which may have contributed to the rejection, but parents who buy newspapers for their children are more likely to be motivated by this.

In addition to the reader's motivations, content is also another crucial element in engaging readers. Thus, a potential avenue for future research would involve conducting research into the preferences of readers with regard to the specific types of content they seek out in printed newspapers. This data is of utmost importance for local media organisations to gain a deeper understanding of their readers' preferences and enhance their ability to cater to their needs.

Future scholars might also examine the effects of Malaysian readers abandoning printed publications. This is crucial because it underlines the seriousness of the situation in which printed newspapers completely disappear, thereby alerting authorities to the need for action to ensure the future of the sector. Additionally, it assisted them in developing the finest plan for the longevity of printed newspapers.

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