

The Functions of Wattpad Towards Readers, Writers, and Publishers in Malaysia

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Abstract

Writing has become more accessible with the growth of technology, as many applications and websites that have been developed allow writing to happen at any time. This includes Wattpad, which is an online platform that enables users to read, write, and communicate with no geographical or time boundaries. Extensive literature has discussed the functions and benefits of Wattpad to readers, writers, and publishers across all countries; nevertheless, the literature on its functions in Malaysia remains scarce. This paper aims to address such a gap by exploring the functions of Wattpad toward readers, writers, and publishers in Malaysia. A total of eleven (11) members of the public participated in a qualitative analysis via interviews and the data were transcribed verbatim for further analysis. The findings showed that Wattpad's functions benefited three stakeholders, namely readers, writers, and publishers. The platform caters to the readers' interests by allowing them to choose reading materials across various genres, libraries, and the ability to communicate via comments. Meanwhile, it benefits the writers through the provision of ideas, free proofreading, and awareness of up-to-date trends that can be obtained through the comments. Finally, publishers can utilize Wattpad to ease their decision-making, converting from digital to printed writings, and having exposure to early chapters of creative writings.

Keywords: Wattpad, Functions, Readers, Writers, Publishers, Malaysia

Introduction

Wattpad is an internet-based application with many functions for writers. Aside from enabling both reading and writing to happen simultaneously (Rochester, 2012), Wattpad has been propounded as a platform that encourages writers to write and improve their writing (Justin, 2016; Adiningtyas, 2020). It also stands as a preferred digital reading platform among Generation Z along with Webnovel (Yoesoef, 2020).

Wattpad is a free writing site that also offers a free app for Android and iOS. It is one of the most popular narrative platforms that allows authors to share their content. However, it is not the only platform available. Wattpad allows you to share your writings for free, hoping

you will be noticed and published. The platform gives you a way out to test material with any plot line you want. You can have characters from different backgrounds, mix genres, or do anything you want. And the best part is you can see firsthand how people see your exploration. Maybe nobody likes your current version of the story, so the changes are in order. Or maybe it's a success, and people can't wait for more. Wattpad has a lot of negatives as well, but that does nothing to decrease all the benefits it also offers. It can help you give invaluable feedback and improve your writing style, create an audience, and gain recognition in the field of writing (Tolcheva, 2021).

The functions of Wattpad extend to numerous literature available across various parts of the world. According to Rowe (2018), Wattpad launched a new programme in 2018 to sell selected creative writing works. The programme, known as Wattpad Next, allows readers to buy 'coins' that can be used to readers to buy new chapters or selected stories available on the platform. Initially, Wattpad did not charge the writers for its services but instead generated its income from viewed ads that were placed between chapters. As digital reading gains greater interest (Pianzola et al., 2020), Wattpad becomes one of the preferred platforms among digital reading enthusiasts and possesses the potential of being a platform to gather creative writing (Kardiansyah, 2019; Poliokova, 2022).

Despite its worldwide renown, existing literature and empirical research on the prominence of Wattpad in Malaysia remain scarce. While the study by Mustafa and Abdullah (2018) reviewed the Malaysian publishing companies' opinions on technology, their findings may no longer include new technologies that have emerged to fit the current competitive market of the publishing industry. Investigating such issue is imperative particularly as many publishing companies have resorted to e-books or digital books to increase their sales and revenues.

Therefore, this study aims to

- Explore the functions of Wattpad among readers, writers and publishers in Malaysia

Literature Review : The Functions of Wattpad

Wattpad is a platform that gathers the readers and writers community for them to read, write, and communicate with one another (Rochester, 2012). Pianzola et al (2020) view Wattpad as a digital social source for reading that allows its users to communicate and comment on a vast collection of creative writing. The rise of a global reading culture among youths further contributes to the rising interest toward the application while their reading preferences for certain topics and genres dictate the patterns of reading engagement, aesthetic values, and social interaction on the platform.

According to Poliokova (2022), Wattpad carries the functions of a future library and publishers' submission platform; however, it does not disrupt traditional publishers because Wattpad incorporates values in its ecosystem that are similar to those published by traditional publishers. The notion is further supported by Kardiansyah (2019) who views Wattpad as having a prominent role in the field of literary production. Additionally, Wattpad has its own line of published books where the most popular creative writing works are selected and sold as chapters or books (Poliokova, 2022).

Mangen and Weel (2016) further contribute to the discussion on books and digital reading by looking at the expansion of reading methods through the utilisation of digital technology. Yusop (2017) suggested several characteristics of future books that will save the local publishing industry. The first characteristic is allowing readers to choose their preferred

plot for the ending of a story. Meanwhile, the second characteristic relates to digital readers who prefer to read on social media due to benefits like easy access.

Yoesoef (2020) said that Generation Z (or Gen Z) are likely to use Wattpad and Webnovel mainly as a vast majority of them are avid smartphone and computer users who are constantly aware of the changes happening within the digital world. The study also found that Indonesia is a major subscriber of Wattpad where most of the users are teenagers. Furthermore, the platform allows Indonesian writers to produce a wide array of unique creative writing works based on their creativity and many of these works have been published physically.

Wattpad also helps students to improve their writing skills and English language proficiency (Bal, 2018; Rokha, 2019). Adiningtyas (2020) investigated whether Wattpad has the capability of improving the writing skills of vocational students. The findings showed that more than half of the students are comfortable of using Wattpad to write their creative writing works. Moreover, Başoğul (2021) explored the perceptions of secondary school teachers and students toward youth literature in Wattpad. Their findings revealed that the teachers felt that Wattpad had negative effects in terms of language; however, the students were comfortable of using Wattpad and were prone to write on the application.

The discussion thus far has established the various functions of Wattpad, which include gathering numerous readers as a community and establishing communication between them, acting as a library, supporting the publishers, assisting the digitalisation of creative writing works, allowing gadget-based reading and writing activities, and improving the quality of the users' writing. These functions exist across various countries in the world, except Malaysia. Therefore, the results reported in this paper are solely focused on Malaysians perspective.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design through the use of interview as the data collection method. According to Creswell (2003), deciding on what method to use depends on the research problem, researchers' experience, the reporting audience, whether the researcher wants specific information or let it arises during the data collection process, and whether the data are to be collected in numbers or texts. Furthermore, Creswell (1998) stated that a small number of samples between four to ten people is commonly used when reporting in-depth cases. The requirement for informants will be halted when data saturation is achieved. A total of eleven (11) members of the public participated in the interview and the data were transcribed verbatim for further analysis. The informants comprised of stakeholders who used Wattpad as a platform to practice, promote, or learn about writing and to be acquainted with the writing world.

Findings : The Functions of Wattpad Toward Readers in Malaysia

All informants in this study agreed that Wattpad has the function of attracting readers, especially with its convenient and free reading features. Informant 1 emphasised that the 'Library' function on Wattpad helps readers to save any creative writing works that they are interested in the 'Current Read', 'Archive', and 'Reading Lists' sections. In the 'Library' section, Wattpad users can store their favourite stories and receive a notification when the writers 'update' the stories. This function helps writers to retain loyal readers as well as for readers to not miss any updates of their favourite stories.

Meanwhile, Informant 2 said Wattpad also attracts readers using interesting creative writing works. According to Informant 5, Informant 7, and Informant 8, the main function of Wattpad is to allow reading to take place online. They also stated that there are many types of creative

writing available on this platform, such as short stories, novels, and poems. The choice of genres is also extensive in addition to the availability of various languages. However, as English is deemed as a universal language, search result in the Malay language is often limited especially when the use of Wattpad among Malaysians is still at its early stage.

Informant 9 also mentioned that communication between readers and writers is another attraction for readers to use Wattpad as it enables them to express their opinions about the writers' works in each chapter and even suggests how to improve the works. Thus, this study found that Wattpad has many advantages in attracting readers, which clearly assists writers in gathering followers, readers, and even feedback and criticisms to their works. By accessing the fictional content available on Wattpad, readers can provide their suggestions about the storyline or characters. Reading via Wattpad is also not limited to merely readers in Malaysia but rather creative writing works written using the Malay language are also accessed in Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore. Works written in the English language are being read by users from various countries particularly those that use English as the first or second language.

Findings : The Functions of Wattpad Toward Writers in Malaysia

Wattpad plays an important role in cultivating writers' courage and confidence to submit their works for publication. This is admitted by the informants themselves whose self-confidence was improved through Wattpad, particularly from the feedback and criticisms received from other users. In addition, writers also gain their confidence from the number of followers or readers that they have on Wattpad.

The above notion subsequently leads to the next function of Wattpad namely as a medium of interaction and improvement of writing. Aside from being a medium that connects writers, readers, and publishers, communication that occurs via this platform can be done individually or in a group as well as by interacting in the 'Conversation' section within the writers' account where readers or visitors can leave comments in their 'Message'.

From the personal experience of Informant 1, uploading chapters of a story will gain comments from the readers. These comments act as fuel for her motivation that makes her continue writing and complete the manuscript. Following the statement by Informant 5, Informant 1 said that readers' comments would help writers to increase the quality of their works and assist in the editing and improving of these works before it is sent to the editors for publication purpose. It is because comments given by readers usually comprise reprimands of grammatical and spelling errors. This will reduce the editors' workload, thus allowing them to focus on editing other aspects of the respective works.

On the other hand, Informant 2 believes that the interactions occurred help writers to know the readers' preferences or trends that catch their current interest. Thus, any given comments can have an impact on the writers' storyline. However, Informant 3 and Informant 8 posit that such effects on the writers' creative writing works will eliminate their writing identity or style. Yet, they do agree that the comments can help to improve their work. Some writers use the comments to change their story according to the readers' preferences. However, Informant 8 said she is more comfortable with writings that have its own identity than those that are based on the trend or preference of the readers. She further added that writers should attract and influence readers to accept their writing style than merely succumb to the readers' preference.

According to Informant 4, writers-readers communication is highly important for writers. This is because readers are not merely reading but also serve as the first and free proofreaders of the writers' works. Informant 4 recounted his regret of disregarding the

comments left by the readers of his creative writing works 'Predator' and only noticed it when the work had already been published, thus missing the opportunity to improve the work. Since then, Informant 4 began to pay attention to readers' comments and interact with more readers and users on Wattpad.

Informant 6 also stated that communication between writers and readers is crucial especially to the writers themselves. This is because writers can generate more ideas and improve the quality of their writing based on the readers' comments. Such communication also allows both writers and readers to strengthen their relationship and that writers can learn from their readers as they are the person who gives a profound impression on themselves. The statement from Informant 6 hence illustrates the importance for writers to communicate and interact with the readers. This is because readers who read the writers' creative writing works will usually pay more attention to what is wrong with the background, place, and so on. From their comments, writers can be more sensitive to their writing, especially for new writers who occasionally write where such mistakes are common.

Adding to the discussion, Informant 7 and Informant 9 believe that the comments given by readers also enable writers to gain inspiration and further improve their creative writing works. Informant 9 said that storytelling usually comes from the writers themselves, but the plot can come from the readers. Before Informant 9 began to write seriously, she focused on the readers' comments because it can sometimes be used as an inspiration or plot for future stories. Apart from that, she also said that writers should be good at handling aggressive readers.

Informant 10 also advocates the same opinion that the readers are sometimes better than the original script produced. Hence, writers should sometimes consider using readers' ideas to change or improve the plot in their creative writing works. In response to this statement, Informant 11 said "If I follow too much of what people say, in the long run, it will have a big impact on the generation of my ideas, and I will often want to change the plot and method of processing as suggested by the readers in the comments section. However, now I realise that it is better for the writers-audience communication to be limited to the positive ones. Writers should be wise to filter by taking constructive comments and setting aside comments that want to dampen their writing motivation". The above exert came from the personal experience of Informant 11 who was initially impressed with the readers' comments. As a result, her storyline had changed tremendously based on the comments and it eliminated the originality of her storytelling style. She decided not to consider any negative comments from the readers. According to Informant 11, writers should ignore any negative comments but rather accept helpful and positive comments as these negative comments will eventually diminish the writers' motivation.

One similarity that was detected in the responses gathered from all informants is that readers' comments during their interaction with the writers are perceived as useful, especially for the writers to repair sections of their works such as the plot as well as grammar and spelling errors. The most important function of Wattpad in the Malaysian creative writing industry is the interaction that takes place and the opportunity for writers to improve their works toward betterment. Writers should be smart and use this free platform to gather experience, courage, and knowledge in writing.

Findings : The Functions of Wattpad Toward Publishers in Malaysia

Wattpad also has a prominent function for writers and publishers where it serves as a platform that connects both parties and facilitates the process of selecting creative writing works. This

is in line with Informant 4 who said, “Facilitating. Another story is in the process yet has gained interest from publishers. Nowadays, many publishers are taking stories from Wattpad not only because of high views but also because they know the storyline. That is the impact of Wattpad to us and to the publishing industry”. Such statement thus proves that several publication companies use Wattpad to find potential creative writing works to be published. Similar experience was also reported by Informant 1, Informant 2, Informant 9, and Informant 10, which further propounds that the function of Wattpad also includes opening more opportunities for writers.

This study also elicited the informants’ view of whether they will publish works available on Wattpad to physical books if they assume the role as a publisher. All informants responded that they would publish any works from Wattpad if it is good and with publishing potential. However, there is one problem that worries all informants, namely plagiarism.

Plagiarism is one of the major concerns for writers on Wattpad. As stated in the earlier section, Wattpad does not have any security measures against plagiarism. Furthermore, its nature as a platform with easy access and use further causes plagiarism to occur undetected. However, according to Informant 1, “... there is a report section. When Wattpad users do any abuse/misconduct, we can report it to Wattpad so that the misconduct is deleted from Wattpad”. This applies to plagiarised creative writing works as well. But as Informant 11 said, “Plagiarism is inevitable even in any era of writing. It is unpredictable when it will happen and to whom it will happen”. Still, some informants recommended uploading a quarter of the work or getting the International Standard Book Number (ISBN) before posting it on Wattpad.

When asked to assume the role of a publisher, Informant 4 said that he will use Wattpad to find creative writing works that fit his company’s image or genre. Meanwhile, Informant 5 said she would definitely give a chance to writers who produce good creative writing works because it will help their publication. Informant 6 also shared a similar opinion, believing that there is a lack of new writers and people who are talented in writing in Malaysia, or they are not confident to promote their own works. Informant 6 said as a publisher, she would allow new writers to publish their works.

Apart from being an online reading and writing platform in the form of e-books, Wattpad also serves as a platform that allows digital works to be printed or made as physical books. This is evidenced by five informants who have successfully published physical books via Wattpad and two informants who self-published their e-books via Wattpad. Furthermore, Wattpad acts as their training platform in writing, an introductory platform for them to the world of writing, a disciplinary platform in the production of works, as well as a useful platform for attracting readers and publication companies to their creative writing works.

Conclusion

This study explores several functions of Wattpad from Malaysians perspective and found that the platform helps readers, writers, and publishers in Malaysia by assisting the process of producing, writing, and accessing creative writing works. It also helps to establish communication between these stakeholders. All informants stated their agreement that Wattpad is a useful and beneficial platform for them. Even though plagiarism is an issue for Malaysian writers, the benefits and potential of Wattpad are far greater – this prompts local readers, writers, and publishers to continue using the application.

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