

# A SURVEY OF STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS OCCULT AND PARANORMAL PULP MAGAZINES AT A TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY COLLEGE IN MALAYSIA: A QUESTION OF VALUE

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## ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, pulp magazines and tabloids that deal with the occult and the paranormal are ubiquitous. They are very popular with the masses but not much research has been done on them. This paper, therefore, hopes to bridge that gap and study, though in a somewhat preliminary and limited scope, the extent to which students at a technical university college in Malaysia identify with these magazines from a value perspective. This paper hopes to act as a platform for a more comprehensive and definitive study in the near future.

## Introduction

I remember vividly when I came back to Malaysia for the summer holidays way back in 1983 when I was a student in the United States of America, and coming across copies of magazines written in the Malay vernacular, which were adorned with pictures of beautiful women on the cover page and on it you'd find the content titles screaming at you for attention. Most of the stories dealt with the supernatural and the occult, with titles like "Black cats make good food for the Djinnns," "White crocodile appeared in so and so's dream before his tragic drowning death," "Flying coffin over the sky of Sabah," and so on and so forth. After completing my studies in 1987 I came back to Malaysia and discovered that not only have those magazines survived the stormy weather of readers' whims and fancy, but also their number had mushroomed to almost double what they used to be. We can safely extrapolate that these magazines' readership must be quite substantial for them to have existed for so long. These magazines, with fantastic and mostly darkly tales of horror, death, magic, and peppered occasionally with steamy stories of sex and scandals, are a force to be reckoned with. Again, we can extrapolate that these magazines must be of some value to those who buy them every month. There must be some intrinsic value which these magazines encase within their covers to have so enthralled their readers and make them come back for more. However, to some, these publications might just be looked upon as mere pulps meant for those whose academic standings are somewhat inchoate in nature and that they are devoid of any real academic or educational value due to the nature of their contents, a claim which should be interesting enough to be looked into. This paper, therefore, seeks to determine, though in a somewhat preliminary and limited scope, the extent to which students at a Malaysian technical university college identify with these magazines and the value that they assigned to them. It is hoped that this research will act as a platform for a more comprehensive and definitive survey in the near future. This paper accrued from the need to associate the influence of the media, in this case a special form of pulp magazine which deals with the occult and the paranormal and which is quite popular in Malaysia, with those who read them, in this case students from a technical university college in the northern state of Perlis in Malaysia, and which collectively are viewed as belonging to a certain kind of community, and an investigation into its *raison d'être*.

## **Brief History of Pulp Magazines**

Etienne Barillier (2004) in her article on pulp fiction gives an excellent overview of the history of pulp magazines. According to her, pulp magazines have their beginning way back in the nineteenth century. In their heydays, between the two World Wars, pulp magazines crowded America's newsstands and drugstores with hundreds of titles and could claim a steady readership in terms of millions each month.

The pulps prospered because people wanted to read, people who would not afford the cost of a book, but who could buy a cheap magazine. In less than thirty years literacy rate doubled in the United States.

After a couple of decades there were just two dozen pulp titles left. New titles were getting more and more ephemeral and only the major remained - those who were able to print the best stories, but not always pay their authors correctly, by the early fifties some were still paid for each word printed.

The pulps disappeared by the fifties. As they supplanted the former weeklies, new media got the audience's favour: the comic books. Another element which caused the decay of the pulps was cheap paperbacks.

According to Barillier, pulp magazine publishing was said to be the business of purveying predigested day-dreams to people who cannot dream for themselves. Such a harsh criticism is quite typical: the reader is, in a way, as guilty as the publisher about the poor quality of the texts published. This kind of analysis ignores that pulp magazines were a genuine form of popular literature. The amount of letter columns reveals how aware the editors were of their audience's taste and its naiveté.

In Malaysia, the history of the beginning of the pulp magazines is not well documented but some magazines like Mastika which started out as an academic or knowledge-based matter-of-fact publication and had begun operation in the early sixties or seventies, had to make a volte face in its choice of stories to run. It had to make the necessary sacrifice in the name of ringgits and sens and, in the eighties, began publishing stories along the line of the strange and the fantastic. One of the first pulp magazines in Malaysia to have hit the newsstands way back in the eighties was Variasari. After that it was followed by a host of other publications like Sarina, Wawancara, Bicara and Variasi. Apart from these, there are also the weekly tabloids, filled with stories that revolve around the strange, the uncanny, the mysterious, the paranormal and other ancillaries. The readers are always reminded by the writers or editors that everything that happens as per stories told in the magazines, does so by the grace of the Almighty, in line with the Islamic tenet of the Omnipotence of God . Rumours were abuzz not too long ago that the government might disallow the publishing of such magazines but all that came to naught, maybe again because of the Ringgit-and-sen factor. These magazines are drawing in the crowd and it would be inane for the government to ban them in the name of progress and scientific advancement and lose out in term of publishing tax.

## **A Question of Value**

For these magazines to have survived the stormy weather of readership followings and their whims, there must be a *raison d'être* for such a phenomenon. Perhaps this revolves around the issue of value. Those who read these magazines on a regular basis must have assigned to them

some measure of value. Hutcheon (1972) in his attempt to formulate a conceptual definition of value theory cites eight sources of confusion in dealing with the concept of value:

- (a) *Values as norms.* Kolb (1957) claims that (until the 1960s at least) the most significant accomplishment of value study was the firm anchoring of the concept in the realm of objective group norms.
- (b) *Values as cultural ideals.* Milton Rokeach (1968) in a recent attempt at clarification, suggests that values differ from attitudes in that they transcend specific situations and have to do with generalized modes of conduct (instrumental values) and end states of existence (terminal values). This conceptualization seems to be building on Merton's familiar means-end model. Further examination of Rokeach's research, however, reveals that what he is actually measuring is the relative commitment claimed by the respondent to whatever ideal or principle is symbolized for him by each of the terms which he is asked to rank. These terms (equality, freedom, independence, love, etc.) could perhaps better be considered as symbolizing cultural ideals.
- (c) *Values as assessments of action.* Landes, in a 1967 study, measures what he considers to be values by having respondents rank fifty behavioural items on a ten-point scale from "least to most worst". He is either defining values simply as moral judgments or employing moral judgments as indicators of values, without clarifying his procedures. Similarly, E. H. Epstein (1968) in discussing changing values in Puerto Rico, appears to be defining values solely in terms of the occupational reward structure.
- (d) *Values as beliefs.* Milton Albrecht (1956), in his article entitled "Does Literature Reflect Common Values?" constructs (for the purpose of content analysis) a list of supposed American family-life values. However, as this list appears to be a mixture of statements describing behavioural prescriptions (norms?), descriptions of the desirable (beliefs about the "good"?), and descriptions of the actual (beliefs about the "real"?), it is difficult to infer the exact meaning which Albrecht attributes to the concept of value. However, Richard Morris (1956) in developing a typology of norms, is very clear about what he means by the term. He defines values as either individual or commonly held conceptions of the desirable.
- (e) *Values as objects.* Ralph Turner (1961) on the other hand, initially defines values as objects which are regarded favourably or unfavourably; and then, while explaining value conflict, seems to imply that these values impinge upon the individual in the form of norms removed to a higher level of generality and inclusiveness. In defining values as objects Turner is in the company of such respected theorists as R. B. Perry (1954), Stephen Pepper (1958), and Florian Znaniecki (1952), who saw values as objects to the degree that they are shared and in the public domain. Perry's claim that a theory of value must refer to the emergence of interests focusing on objects (1954) is fairly representative of this point of view.
- (f) *Values as value orientations.* This term, as used by Clyde Kluckhohn in 1951 and by Florence Kluckhohn in 1961, seems to symbolize a deeply rooted set of culturally patterned and regulatory responses to the major environmental challenges facing humans in every time and place, capable of being identified at the level of the cultural system. Rainer C. Baum (1968) explains recent attempts to measure this concept both by direct respondent-ranking procedures and by content analysis of the literature of various historical periods. On the whole, however, the term "value orientation" seems to have

gained more rapidly in popularity than has the concept, and is now often confusingly interchanged with "attitude".

- (g) *Values as behaviour probabilities.* Franz Adler (1960) claims that in order for values to qualify as concepts of social science they must be defined in terms of behaviour. He sees them as learned components of personalities identifiable only as probabilities that a particular behaviour will occur in a variety of circumstances. He suggests that in addition to personalities, other value systems of varying degrees of complexity are groups, society and culture. Milton Yinger (1963) in a somewhat similar vein, cites what he calls the "inner-tendency" system as the source of predisposing factors for behaviour, with the "socio-cultural" system providing the precipitating factors. Like Adler, he claims that only from individual behaviour can we infer either the inner structure of the person or the patterns of the socio-cultural system.
- (h) *Values as generalized attitudes.* Considering the progress in attitude measurement during the last four decades, it is rather surprising that the relationship between values and attitudes has not claimed more attention in the behavioural sciences. Rokeach (1968) moves in this direction, claiming that although values (like attitudes) are predispositions to act, they differ from attitudes in their transcendence of specific objects and situations. In a similar vein, a major study edited by Baier and Rescher (1968) conclude that "choices manifest preferences which in turn mirror values". If these "preferences" could be conceptualized as attitudes, this simple description might be combined with Adler's definition to suggest a model capable of relating and interpreting -- by means of individual behavioural choices -- the phenomena of attitudes and values, as well as those represented by concepts such as cultural ideals, norms, moral judgments, reward structures, espoused beliefs and value orientations.

As we can see from the above, the concept of value is very much open to debates and polemics, and as far as this study is concerned, I am inclined to go with items (e) values as favourable or unfavourable objects and (h) in the above discussion which view values as generalized attitudes as aptly stated by Baier and Rescher (1968), "choices manifest preferences which in turn mirror values."

## **Methodology**

One-hundred first-semester students who are currently enrolled at the Northern Malaysia University College of Engineering were given a questionnaire to fill and their responses were recorded. All respondents are Malays due to the fact that these magazines are written in the Malay vernacular. The questionnaire comprises four sections:

- A. Demographic data;
- B. Respondents' attitude towards occult and paranormal pulp magazines (Strongly agree-Agree-Not sure-Disagree-Strongly disagree). If they indicate SA or A as their choice, then they need to go to Section C; if they indicate SD or D, then they need to go to Section D; if they are NS, then they need go no further in the questionnaire.
- C. Reasons given by those who indicate that they like to read these kinds of magazines. Reasons respondents can choose from are:
  1. to kill time;
  2. to relax the mind;

3. to know more about the strange and the mysterious;
4. to remind them of the omnipotence of God;
5. to believe in the fact that strange things happen by the grace of God;
6. others in their family like to read these magazines;
7. other reasons.

D. Reasons given by those who do not like to read or buy such magazines. Reasons respondents can choose from are:

1. the stories are too weird to make sense;
2. it is unbecoming of them as a university student to believe in such stories;
3. such stories are meant for those who are less educated;
4. such stories are not suitable in this age of science and technology;
5. they are quite interested in such magazines but don't feel like spending money on them;
6. reading those magazines is just a waste of time;
7. other reasons.

Responses were recorded and the results were analyzed descriptively.

### Results and Discussion

Of the one-hundred respondents, 58 are male and 42 are female. Forty-four indicated that they are from urban areas, 25 from small towns and 31 from rural areas.

Abode/Sex	Male	Female	Total
Urban	27	17	44
Small town	15	10	25
Rural area	16	15	31
Total	58	42	100

Sixty-two respondents indicated that they either strongly agree or agree to having an interest in reading these types of magazines; 21 respondents indicated that they either strongly disagree or disagree towards the idea of reading or buying these types of magazines; and 17 respondents indicated that they were not sure.

From those 62 respondents who indicated that they have a predilection for reading these magazines, 41 are male and 21 are female.

Abode/Sex	Male	Female	Total
Urban	22	9	31
Small town	9	6	15
Rural area	10	6	16
Total	41	21	62

The breakdown in frequency of reasons given by those who have an affinity for these types of magazines according to sex and abode are given below:

Male				
Item	Urban	Small town	Rural	Total
C1	19	8	8	35
C2	9	3	3	15
C3	15	8	7	30
C4	16	8	10	34
C5	16	8	9	33
C6	5	4	4	13
C7	0	0	0	0
Total	80	39	41	160

For the male respondents, a total of 160 counts out of the number of reasons that they can choose from was recorded. Most of the respondents say that they read just to kill time (C1), followed closely by those who say that they read because they believe in the power of God (C4 and C5) and to enhance their knowledge of the unknown (C3). The pattern in the types of responses given by those from urban, small town and rural areas are about the same.

Female				
Item	Urban	Small town	Rural	Total
C1	9	5	5	19
C2	1	0	1	2
C3	7	3	4	14
C4	7	5	4	16
C5	6	5	3	14
C6	3	3	0	6
C7	0	0	0	0
Total	33	21	17	61

A total count of 61 cumulative responses was given by female respondents who like to read these types of magazines, saying that they do so most of the time just to kill time (C1), followed closely by reasons C4, C3 and C5. This pattern is somewhat similar to that given by the male respondents.

A grand total of 221 responses were recorded for both male and female respondents who reacted positively towards these magazines and this shows that these magazines are viewed quite favourably by them.

Below is an analysis of those who indicated that they do not like to read or buy these magazines.

Male				
Item	Urban	Small town	Rural	Total
D1	3	2	3	8
D2	1	1	1	3
D3	2	0	0	2
D4	0	0	0	0
D5	1	2	1	4
D6	1	2	1	4
D7	0	0	0	0

Total	8	7	6	21
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A total count of 21 cumulative responses was recorded, and of these D1 (the stories just don't make sense) was cited by respondents as the main reason for not reading, followed by D5 (don't want to spend money on them) and D6 (waste of time). The pattern does not differ markedly for types of dwellings.

Female				
Item	Urban	Small town	Rural	Total
D1	4	0	2	6
D2	0	0	2	2
D3	0	1	0	1
D4	2	1	2	5
D5	0	0	0	0
D6	1	2	1	4
D7	0	0	0	0
Total	7	4	7	18

For the female respondents, a total of 18 cumulative responses was recorded, with reason D1 (the stories just don't make sense) cited as the main reason for not reading them, followed by items D4 and D6. The pattern differs only slightly from that of the male. Since only 39 responses were recorded for both male and female respondents, we can deduce that they do not view these magazines favourably compared to those who like these types of magazines.

In the final analysis, the results show that most of the respondents like to read these types of magazines and they don't feel that the act of reading them is somewhat beneath their station as university students. Most read these types of magazines to kill time rather than for what the stories stand for. But for some, they read these magazines to help them become close to God or to know God and his workings better through uncanny happenings that could occur as depicted in the stories. So, what does this tell us? Firstly, we can surmise that these magazines are of value to the respondents in that they are a form of entertainment to them, an activity that they engage in to help them fill up their free time. Secondly, if the reason they read these magazines is so as to know God better, then this shouldn't be looked upon in a negative manner, but should be commended in that, as technical students, they are very much aware, as Muslims, of the power of God and that science does not provide all the answers to the mystery of life. Within the perspective of values as generalized attitudes, this certainly augurs well for the future of science and technology in the country since it is in line with the tawhidic concept of knowledge which states that God is the source of all knowledge, be it noumenon or phenomenon. Thirdly, the notion that values can be viewed as objects which are favourable or unfavourable to a community of beholders is somewhat justified going by the number of responses recorded in the survey.

## Conclusion

Hopefully, a more comprehensive and definitive research can be done in the near future using more respondents and utilizing a more powerful statistical package such as the SPSS. As I mentioned earlier, this research is meant to broach on the subject rather than to be a one-off study.

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