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READING MALAY ROMANCE NOVELS IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

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Abstract:

This study investigates why Malay romance novels, particularly those written by the popular author Anjell, remain compelling to Malaysian undergraduates, and how reading medium shapes the experience of romance reading. Grounded in Reader-Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), Media Ecology (McLuhan, 1964), and Affective Reading scholarship (Miall & Kuiken, 2002), the study adopts a descriptive exploratory mixed-methods design. Data were collected from undergraduates at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) through an online questionnaire (n = 20) and semi-structured interviews (n = 3). Descriptive statistics summarised survey patterns, while thematic analysis examined meaning-making, immersion, and emotional resonance across print and digital environments. Findings indicate that romance reading is sustained by affective mechanisms such as emotional conflict, relational tension, and character-based identification, with Anjell's appeal emerging from how readers actively co-construct emotional meaning. Print reading is associated with stronger focus and deeper narrative absorption, whereas e-books are valued for accessibility, affordability, and portability, reflecting hybrid reading strategies rather than a simple print-digital divide. The study contributes to

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Malay popular-literature scholarship by centring real readers' responses and offers implications for publishers and educators seeking to support reading culture in digitally saturated contexts.

Keywords:

Malay Romance Novels, Anjell, Printed Books, E-Books, Reading Preferences, Malaysian Undergraduates

Introduction

Malay romance fiction has become one of the most widely consumed forms of popular reading among Malaysian youth, especially within university settings where leisure reading frequently intersects with identity formation, emotional self-understanding, and social imagination. Although romance novels are sometimes treated as “light” or purely commercial, their cultural significance is difficult to dismiss; they circulate relationship ideals, model emotional conduct, and provide narrative spaces in which readers rehearse hope, conflict, sacrifice, and reconciliation. Empirical and text-based studies of Malay romance narratives have already shown that emotional conflict and relational struggle function as structural engines of reader interest, rather than mere decorative plot features (Che Shaffine et al., 2020). Yet, despite their popularity and cultural reach, Malay romance novels remain underrepresented in sustained scholarly inquiry, especially research that foregrounds how real readers experience these texts.

At the centre of this study is the romance fiction of Anjell, whose novels have developed a strong following among young readers for their emotionally charged conflicts, gradual relational development, and endings that many readers experience as impactful. However, the appeal of Anjell's novels cannot be adequately explained by textual features alone. Reader-Response Theory emphasises that literary meaning is not a fixed property located entirely in the text; instead, meaning is produced through the transaction between reader and text, shaped by readers' histories, values, emotions, and expectations (Rosenblatt, 1978). This reader-centred perspective is particularly relevant for popular genres such as romance, where affective response is a primary driver of reader engagement. This approach makes the reader central, not secondary, and therefore provides a strong foundation for examining Anjell's popularity as a phenomenon of interpretive participation and emotional co-construction.

At the same time, contemporary reading does not occur in a single stable environment. Malaysian students increasingly read across a mixed media ecology of printed books, PDFs, reading applications, and commercial platforms. Media Ecology reminds us that the medium is not a neutral “container” for content; it is an environment that reshapes attention, sensory engagement, and interpretive habits (McLuhan, 1964). In digitally saturated contexts, reading is often embedded within networks of distraction, mobility, and time compression. This is especially relevant in the era of networked screens where reading competes with notifications, multitasking, and visual fatigue. Scholarship on digital technogenesis and reading practices further suggests that screen-based environments can encourage different modes of attention and textual engagement than print-based reading cultures (Hayles, 2012).

Because romance fiction relies heavily on affective momentum and emotional immersion, the question of medium becomes even more analytically significant. Affective Reading research shows that readers' feelings; empathy, tension, anticipation, and self-reflective emotional shifts are not incidental reactions but core mechanisms through which narrative meaning and value emerge (Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Psychological accounts of fiction similarly argue that narrative reading can function as emotional simulation, enabling readers to explore social experience and emotional complexity through story worlds (Oatley, 1999). Despite this, relatively few studies have examined how affective immersion in genre-specific reading is shaped by reading medium, particularly within non-Western literary contexts.

This study therefore investigates the appeal of Anjell's Malay romance novels among IIUM undergraduates while comparing how printed books and e-books mediate focus, immersion, accessibility, and emotional engagement. By integrating reader-centred literary theory, media ecology, and affective reading scholarship, the study aims to advance a more holistic account of romance reading as an interaction between text, reader, and reading environment, grounded in empirical evidence from Malaysian university readers.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Malay romance novels traces the genre's development from early reformist narratives that incorporated romantic elements within broader moral and social concerns to contemporary popular fiction that foregrounds emotional intimacy and personal struggle (Omar, 2024). Early Malay novels often employed romance to explore tensions between tradition and modernity, while later works increasingly positioned love and emotional conflict as central narrative drivers. In recent decades, commercial publishing houses and digital platforms have expanded the reach of romance fiction, making it one of the most widely consumed literary genres among Malaysian youth (Grup Buku Karangkraf, 2025).

Studies of popular Malay romance novels have highlighted recurring themes such as love, sacrifice, emotional conflict, and moral growth (Che Shaffine et al., 2020). However, much of this scholarship remains text-centred, offering limited insight into how readers experience these narratives. Reader-Response Theory provides a valuable corrective by emphasising the reader's role in constructing meaning and emotional resonance through lived engagement with the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). This theoretical shift allows romance fiction to be analysed not merely as a narrative structure, but as an experiential process shaped by readers' affective participation.

Parallel research on reading media has produced extensive comparisons between printed books and e-books, often focusing on comprehension, recall, and usability. These studies consistently suggest that printed books support deeper focus and sustained attention, while e-books offer advantages in accessibility and convenience (Kosch et al., 2021; Saiju et al., 2025). Nevertheless, such research frequently overlooks genre-specific and affective dimensions of reading. Media Ecology Theory addresses this limitation by conceptualising reading formats as environments that shape cognition and engagement rather than as neutral delivery systems (McLuhan, 1964).

Affective Reading Theory further enriches this discussion by centring emotion as a fundamental component of literary experience. Empirical research has shown that emotional responses such as empathy, tension, and absorption play a crucial role in readers' appreciation

of fiction (Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Romance fiction, with its emphasis on emotional development and narrative resolution, provides an ideal context for examining affective engagement. Despite this suitability, affect remains underexplored in comparative studies of print and digital reading, particularly in Southeast Asian literary settings.

By synthesising insights from Malay literary studies, reader-response criticism, media ecology, and affect theory, this study positions itself at an interdisciplinary intersection. It responds to gaps in existing scholarship by offering an empirically grounded and theoretically informed analysis of how Malay romance novels are read and experienced across media formats by contemporary university students.

Research Objectives

Guided by Reader-Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), Media Ecology (McLuhan, 1964), and Affective Reading Theory (Miall & Kuiken, 2002), this study aims to deepen understanding of how Malay romance novels are read, experienced, and valued by contemporary university students. One of its primary objectives is to examine how undergraduate readers interpret and emotionally engage with Anjell's romance novels, and how these interpretations contribute to the novels' sustained appeal among young readers. By foregrounding readers' voices, the study seeks to move beyond text-centred literary analysis and highlight reading as an active, participatory process.

A further objective is to explore how different reading environments shape literary experience. Drawing on Media Ecology Theory, the research investigates how printed books and e-books influence readers' focus, immersion, and emotional connection to romance narratives. Rather than framing printed and digital formats as competing or mutually exclusive, the study aims to understand how readers negotiate between them according to context, accessibility, and affective needs (Toor et al., 2021).

In addition, the study seeks to identify the narrative and affective elements that make Anjell's novels particularly appealing, including emotional conflict, character development, and narrative resolution. Through the integration of these objectives, the research offers a holistic account of romance reading that connects literary form, emotional response, and media environment within the Malaysian university context.

Research Significance

This study is significant on theoretical, disciplinary, and practical levels. Theoretically, it contributes to Malay literary studies by applying Reader-Response Theory to popular romance fiction, a genre often marginalised in academic discourse. By demonstrating that readers' emotional engagement and interpretive practices are central to understanding literary value, the study challenges rigid distinctions between canonical and popular literature and supports calls for more inclusive literary scholarship (Miall & Kuiken, 2002).

From the perspective of media and reading studies, the research advances discussions on print and digital reading by incorporating Media Ecology Theory. It shows that reading formats are not neutral vessels but environments that actively shape how texts are perceived and emotionally processed (McLuhan, 1964; Hayles, 2012). This insight is particularly relevant in the digital age, where reading increasingly occurs within technologically saturated contexts.

The study also contributes to affect theory by foregrounding emotion as a legitimate and analytically productive category in literary research. Romance novels offer a valuable site for examining how affect operates in reading, how emotional responses are cultivated, and how they vary across media environments. Practically, the findings provide insights for publishers, writers, and educators by clarifying how young readers engage with romance fiction and how format choices influence reading satisfaction and motivation (Sarwendah Puspita Dewi, 2022).

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both general patterns and in-depth reader experiences. Such a design aligns with Reader-Response Theory, which positions readers' interpretations and emotional reactions as central sources of literary meaning (Rosenblatt, 1978). The study was conducted among undergraduate students at the International Islamic University Malaysia, a population representative of contemporary youth reading practices due to their academic engagement and digital literacy.

Data were collected using two primary methods. First, an online questionnaire was distributed to undergraduate students to gather data on reading habits, familiarity with romance novels, preferences for printed books and e-books, and perceptions of Anjell's works. Questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, consistent with prior studies on reading media preferences (Amirtharaj et al., 2023; Toor et al., 2021).

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to obtain richer accounts of reading experience. The interview format enabled participants to articulate their emotional responses, sense of immersion, and reflections on how reading medium influenced engagement with the novels. In line with Affective Reading Theory, emotional responses were treated as core analytical data rather than incidental impressions (Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Interview data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to emotional immersion, focus, accessibility, and narrative satisfaction. The integration of survey and interview data allows for methodological triangulation, strengthening the credibility and interpretive depth of the findings.

It should be noted that this study is subject to several limitations. The sample size is relatively small and limited to undergraduate students from a single institution, which may affect generalisability. In addition, findings rely on self-reported reading experiences that may be shaped by recall bias or social desirability. Finally, the study focuses specifically on Malay romance novels within a Malaysian context, and findings may not be directly transferable to other genres or cultural settings.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that Malay romance novels continue to hold strong appeal among undergraduate students, both as a form of leisure reading and as a medium of emotional engagement. Consistent with Reader-Response Theory, participants' interpretations and evaluations of romance novels were shaped by their personal experiences, emotional expectations, and reading contexts rather than by textual features alone (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Emotional Engagement and Narrative Appeal.

Participants' conceptualisations of romance novels emphasised emotional development, relational conflict, and psychological depth rather than formulaic happy endings. This suggests a shift away from simplistic genre stereotypes and aligns with studies showing that contemporary readers increasingly value emotional realism and character growth in popular fiction (Che Shaffine et al., 2020). From an affective reading perspective, respondents' emphasis on conflict and emotional tension indicates that affective intensity plays a central role in sustaining narrative interest and reader immersion (Miall & Kuiken, 2002).

Affective Responses to Anjell's Novels.

A key finding of the study concerns the perceived emotional impact of Anjell's novels. Respondents consistently identified emotional conflict, restrained expressions of love, and gradual relational development as defining features of her writing. These elements encouraged empathy and emotional investment, allowing readers to project their own experiences onto the characters. Such responses support previous research suggesting that emotional identification and affective resonance are crucial mechanisms through which readers derive meaning and pleasure from fiction (Oatley, 1999; Miall & Kuiken, 2002).

Medium Preference and Reading Environment.

The findings also highlight nuanced preferences regarding reading media. While half of the respondents expressed a preference for printed books and the other half reported using both printed and digital formats, no participant relied exclusively on e-books. Printed books were frequently associated with deeper focus, reduced distraction, and stronger emotional immersion. These perceptions align with existing research indicating that print reading supports sustained attention and narrative absorption, particularly for longer and emotionally complex texts (Kosch et al., 2021; Delgado et al., 2018).

In contrast, e-books were valued primarily for their accessibility, affordability, and portability. Participants noted that digital formats allowed them to continue reading despite time constraints or physical limitations. However, several respondents also acknowledged that screen-based reading could reduce emotional immersion due to notifications, visual fatigue, and fragmented attention. From a Media Ecology perspective, these findings reinforce the view that digital reading environments introduce competing stimuli that shape how narratives are processed and emotionally experienced (McLuhan, 1964; Hayles, 2012).

Cultural and Personal Impact of Romance Reading.

Finally, the findings indicate that students perceive romance novels as having a broader cultural and personal impact. Most respondents believed that romance fiction influences reading motivation and shapes attitudes toward relationships and emotional expression. This perception aligns with literary psychology research suggesting that fiction contributes to emotional awareness, empathy, and social understanding (Oatley, 1999).

Discussion

This study demonstrates that the appeal of Malay romance novels emerges from the dynamic interaction between narrative content, reader affect and reading environment. From a Reader-Response perspective, readers do not merely consume Anjell's novels but actively participate in meaning-making by drawing upon personal emotions, expectations, and social experiences

(Rosenblatt, 1978). Emotional conflict and gradual relational development function as interpretive triggers that invite affective investment rather than passive consumption.

Affective Reading Theory further clarifies that emotional responses such as empathy, anticipation, and tension are central to literary valuation, particularly in romance fiction (Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Participants' emphasis on emotional realism supports the view of fiction as emotional simulation, allowing readers to rehearse relational experience and self-understanding (Oatley, 1999).

Media Ecology Theory explains how these affective processes are shaped by reading environments. Print reading facilitates sustained attention and emotional continuity, while digital formats prioritise access and flexibility but may fragment immersion (McLuhan, 1964; Hayles, 2012). Importantly, readers adopt hybrid strategies rather than privileging a single medium, reflecting contemporary reading practices among university students (Toor et al., 2021).

These findings contribute to Malay literary scholarship by positioning popular romance fiction as a legitimate site of emotional and cultural meaning-making, and by demonstrating that reading medium mediates, but does not determine affective engagement.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Malay romance novels continue to resonate strongly among Malaysian undergraduates, not merely because romance offers entertainment, but because it provides an affective and interpretive space in which readers actively negotiate emotional meanings. Interpreted through Reader-Response Theory, the findings reinforce that Anjell's appeal emerges through readers' participation in the text, through identification, projection, emotional evaluation, and the personal "work" of making the story meaningful (Rosenblatt, 1978). The students in this study did not treat romance as a simplistic formula; rather, they foregrounded emotional conflict, relational tension, and character development as the elements that sustain attention and shape satisfaction, aligning with affective reading research that positions emotion as central to literary experience (Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Oatley, 1999).

The study also clarifies that reading medium meaningfully conditions the quality and texture of engagement without fully determining it. Print reading was consistently linked to deeper focus and stronger emotional immersion, echoing broader empirical evidence that print can support sustained attention and comprehension advantages in many reading contexts (Delgado et al., 2018). In contrast, e-books were primarily valued for accessibility, portability, and affordability factors that help sustain reading frequency in time-constrained student lives. Crucially, however, students' practices were not "either/or." Their responses indicate hybrid strategies: print tends to be chosen for immersive affective reading, while digital formats are adopted for convenience and continuity.

As a contribution, this study strengthens Malay popular-literature scholarship by treating romance as a legitimate site of cultural meaning and by centring readers' emotional experiences as analytical data. It also extends print-digital reading debates by demonstrating that the medium question is not only cognitive (comprehension, recall) but also affective (immersion, emotional continuity), especially for emotionally demanding genres. Future research could expand the sample across institutions, examine platform-specific reading (e.g., apps versus

PDFs), and explore longitudinal changes in emotional reading habits as students' media ecologies evolve.

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