What are the leisure choice, reading and library habits of Vietnamese students in the age of Internet?

Zakir Hossain

Teacher Librarian and passionate Researcher, King Faisal School, Riyadh

Email: amity.du@gmail.com

Abstract: *Literature review exposed that an understanding of the Vietnamese students reading habits and their preferences would help related stakeholders to take necessary measures for reading promotion, book publication and design library services in Vietnam. This study aimed to investigate Vietnamese students' desired leisure activities which are related to their attitudes, purposes, preferences and tastes in reading and library habits. The research was conducted during 2013 to 2016 mostly from Hồ Chí Minh City area. Few (less than 5%) responses came from Mekong Delta area such Vĩnh Long and Long An.*

Quantitative methodology and questionnaire approach were followed for this study. A total of 631 usable responses received, comprising 244 university and 387 high school students. The study revealed that reading is still a considerable leisure choice among Vietnamese students besides browsing the Internet; listening to music; socializing with friends and watching tivi. Moreover, in depth data analysis show that less than 10 percent school and university students are keen on using their school, university and local public libraries as their reading venues.

The study also identified causalities for the slow improvement of reading habits of Vietnamese students. These are the availability of so many Internet-based leisure options; schools and universities are less operational to make reading a central element of learning, and the limited possibilities for libraries reaching out the broader community to nurture reading and library habits at an early age. It is suggested that more strategic and innovative library activities with proactive service staff are needed to increase library users and help them cultivate reading habits.

Keywords: Reading habits, Library habits, Leisure activities, Vietnam, Students.

Introduction

Reading plays an integral part in the education of individuals, especially children and young-adults. Reading draws the reader into a continual journey linking related interests and children who enjoy reading over three years ahead in the classroom (Clark and Teravaine, 2017). It is usually claimed that reading makes up 25 percent of a totally macro-skilled human with the 75 percent being writing, listening and speaking (Santiago, 2010). Concomitantly, libraries of all types provide access to reading materials through which school children and youths can gain and improve their reading skills. Libraries and librarians help to introduce the best use of reading for information, pleasure, passing examinations, and personal growth - attributes which characterize the lifelong learner. Clark (2010) showed a link between school library use and increased reading enjoyment, higher self-assessments of reading ability as well as more positive attitudes toward reading. A 2013 report by Pew Internet and American Life Project revealed that 84 percent American parents agreed that libraries are important because they facilitate children to have access to resources and help inculcate children's love of reading (Miller 2013).

Over the last two decades, Viet Nam's economy has improved, making it a lower-middle income country. The country made remarkable progress in health and education too. Universal primary education was achieved in 2000 and universal secondary education has also been achieved in some parts of the country (Hanemann, 2017). In terms of literacy levels, the number of people able to read and write has increased significantly. In 2013 the overall literacy rate was 98.06 percent for young people and 94.51 percent for adults (UIS, 2013). The government has made education one of the priorities since 2007, the education budget has accounted for around 20 percent (6.3% of country GDP) of total government expenditures (MOET, 2014).

These achievements have created a foothold for the government commit to Building a Lifelong Learning Society by 2020 (Hanemann, 2017). One of the targets set out was to promote a reading culture for all citizens, a target by all ASEAN nations by 2020. Reading culture and library involvement in the development of children and young-adults in their formative years are the most crucial factors which form the foundation for a child's education. Makotsi (2005) goes further and argues that reading is a very important issue which is not only about enjoyment but also about necessity. It is the basic tool of education. Developing a reading culture in children has been identified as providing the foundation and the building blocks for lifelong learning and a literate and learning society. To achieve this in Viet Nam, various initiatives have been launched through media, libraries, museums, community learning centers (CLCs) and cultural centers (Hossain, 2016).

In addition, to provide active intervention in 'reader development by increasing confidence and enjoyment of reading and opening up reading choices', Viet Nam has developed a public library system consists of 64 city and provincial libraries, 626 district libraries, 2016 commune/ precinct/

town libraries, 9,828 reading rooms in villages/hamlets (Hossain, 2016). The country's national standards require libraries for all primary schools and the government established 24,746 school libraries (Nguyễn, 2015) nationwide, in order to increase access to books and other reading materials and to encourage reading for pleasure at an early age.

However, a lot has been heard over recent years about declining reading habits among Viet Nam's students. While there are many reasons for this slow improvement in the reading habits of the population, by far the major reasons are too many entertaining activities available within the reach of children such as a high number of TV channels, the Internet, online games, social networking etc. Besides it is partly due to the limited possibilities for library staff to reach out to a broader population, due especially to the failure to take advantage of information and communication technology (Hossain, 2016) and the country's education system (VNN, 2016) that lead children away from reading.

In many Vietnamese families and societies, reading is yet to consider a relevant leisure activity and going to the library as an old-fashioned and unattractive when compared with the modern multimedia technology available at home (Hossain, 2013; Vũ Dương Thúy Ngà, 2012; VoV, 2010; VNS, 2008). According to a VietNamNet 2016 report, Vietnamese people like going to Internet cafes to chat, read news on websites. In urban areas, Vietnamese parents give mobile devices to their children to play, so that the kids don't disturb them consequently children aged two or three can use smartphones or iPads (VVN, 2016) and addicted to online games or YouTube videos. However, in a MoET Viet Nam report, it claimed that Vietnamese people are well aware of the importance of books for personal development and are discerning in their selection of books and magazines whereas about 20 percent Vietnamese families have their own bookcase and 25 percent Vietnamese citizens spend at least one hour a day reading books (adapted from Vũ Dương Thúy Ngà, 2012).

The Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism (MoCST) Viet Nam, reported that between 2011 and 2015, when there was a dramatic increase in the total number of books available in all libraries (an increase of more than 6 million), the number of people accessing libraries' services decreased by more than 1 million (Hanemann, 2017). Likewise, according to a recent report by the Center for Viet Nam and Southeast Asia Studies claimed that besides textbooks, Vietnamese only read on an average 1.2 books per year (VNN, 2016). A survey by Viet Nam National University (VNU) revealed that only 25% of students love reading books and 5% declared themselves mildly interested in them, but 70% said they had little interest in reading books (VNS 2013). Another study by Hossain (2014) found that 61% of Vietnamese secondary school teachers and 56% of university lecturers are concerned that most of their students' reading habits are poor.

Research also shows that many children in Viet Nam were reluctant to read, partly due to the failure to nurture reading and library habits at an early age, and partly due to crowded study schedules and evening

classes (Thu Hằng, 2010). Vũ Dương Thúy Ngà (2012) in her study blamed schools and universities in Viet Nam for failing to make reading a central element of learning, and libraries for not offering "how to use libraries effectively to get information". The situation is even worse in school libraries, only 13,000 (out of 24,686) of which meet national standards. Only about 43% of the 26,000 school library custodians in Viet Nam are professional librarians (Nguyễn, 2015 and Hossain, 2016); their knowledge and skills are therefore often out of date. Library staffs in wards/communes and in book corners at district cultural centers have almost no common qualifications. They are, therefore, incapable of advocating for support to organize events to expand the library's activities or to attract potential patrons. In her research, Vũ Dương Thúy Ngà (2012) found that in many provinces in Viet Nam, high-schools students go to their school library just once a week on average because of a shortage of librarians and the small size of libraries.

Considering the above-mentioned situation, it was unable to locate any study that addresses students' opinions in relation to their preferences for leisure, reading or library usage what distract them from those mentioned. Essentially, an understanding of students' choice and voice would help related stakeholders to take necessary measures for reading promotion, book publication and design library services in Viet Nam. This article covers that gap. Hence, to achieve this objective, along with exploring the broad nature of Vietnamese students reading habits, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ 1. What are the Favourite leisure activities of Vietnamese students?

RQ 2. How frequently Vietnamese students visit/use their school/university libraries?

RQ 3. What are the purposes students using/visiting libraries?

Methodology

The study employed quantitative methodology aiming to understand the border community opinions. The printed study questionnaires were distributed to the students of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Training Center (SEAMEO RETRAC) in Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC), Viet Nam with Vietnamese oral instructions and translation. The author selected SEAMEO RETRAC for this study for its diverse students' population. As SEAMEO RETRAC is renowned of its kind in HCMC and students from almost all universities and schools in HCMC come to SEAMEO RETRAC mainly to learn English and to prepare for International English Language testing such as IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC etc. during the afternoons and weekends.

Students were assured that their information will not be disclosed individually as they were concerned about their personal identity (a common phenomenon in Viet Nam). After having the responses, the collected data was analyzed using MS Excel software. Profile of the respondents (n=631) comprising 244 university students (38.67%) and 387 high school students (61.33%) from different schools and universities in Hồ Chí Minh City and vicinity. There were considerably more girls (68.19%) than boys (31.81%) among the respondents. Survey participants were aged in their 16s-22s.

Findings and discussions

Favourite Leisure Activities- RQ1

When participants asked the RQ 1 on their favourite leisure activities, the following responses were received depicts on Figure 1. Results from Figure 1 demonstrate that leisure time. University students, on the other hand, desire for meeting friends (65.16%), browsing the Internet (62.70%) and listening to music (54.09). Similarly, a study conducted by DI Marketing (2015b) found that 97 percent of Vietnamese spent

Figure 1: Favourite leisure activities of Vietnamese students (n=631)
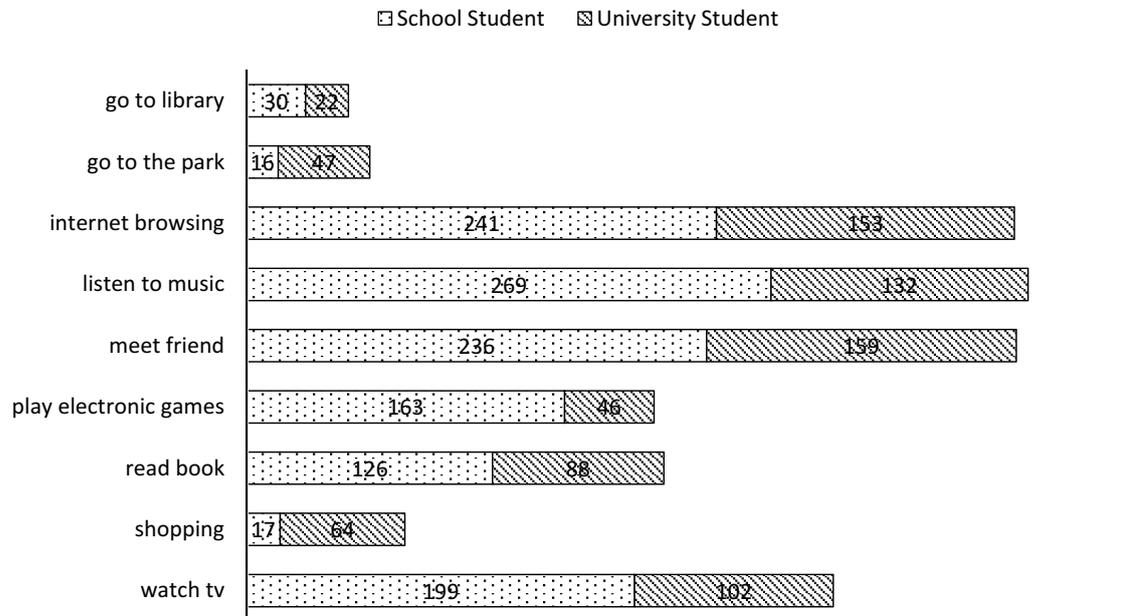
despite others, reading books is still a considerable leisure activity among Vietnamese school (32.56%) and university (36.07%) students. This finding is also similar to DI Marketing (2015) survey confirming that 47 percent Vietnamese love reading during their leisure. The percentages of reading are even higher according to a report by the MoCST which claims 59 percent pupils and 56.8 percent adults use their leisure time for reading books in Viet Nam (Vũ Dương Thúy Ngà, 2012).

Data also shows that a good number of Vietnamese school students play online games (42.12%), watch TV (51.42) and browse the Internet (62.27%) during their their free-time on Social Networking, followed by 69 percent listening to music, 71 percent watching television, 52 percent gathering with friends and 61 percent playing games.

Compared to the different research findings (DI Marketing, 2015 and MoCST, 2012) regarding Vietnamese pupils' reading habits, 59.3 percent of Chinese pupils said reading is their favourite pastime, ahead of sports and Internet activities (48.4%) (Reading Worldwide, 2010) and 79 percent of American students said they read books for pleasure (Miller, 2013) and three-quarters (78%) of UK primary school children enjoy reading (Clark and Teravaine, 2017). Another

statistics by the Publishing and Printing Department of Viet Nam found that the average Vietnamese reads 3.2 books per year, including textbooks in 2013 (VNS 2014) which is higher than for the average Malaysian who reads an average of two books (Inderjit, 2014), Chinese students, who read less than three books in the same year. However, it is far fewer than the 20 plus books read by Japanese students and the 10 books or more that Americans got through (Global Times, 2013).

Figure 1 also reveals that only 7.7 percent Vietnamese school pupils and 9.02 percent university students have interests in using/visiting their school, university and local public libraries during their leisure time. The feedback is attested by a figure by MoCST showing that the average Vietnamese reads only 0.8 books per year from the library (VNS 2014). There were many reasons that potential users do not come to the libraries but the two main reasons emphasized were, services that patrons needed are not available in most Vietnamese libraries and books and magazines are out of date and do not meet user needs.

Educators such as Huỳnh Công Minh (Hồ Chí Minh City's Department of Education and Training director) and Tran Huu Ta (former head of the Hồ Chí Minh City University of Pedagogy's Faculty of Literature) admitted that most libraries were "uninviting book warehouses", or not exciting and comfortable environments for study and entertainment mostly due to inappropriate investments (adapted from Thu Hằng, 2010). Trần Hữu Tá's claim is also attested by the findings of Nguyễn Thị Thu Phương (2015) that claimed in 2014-15 academic year the total budget for Vietnamese school library were VND 202 billion (US$ 9.78 million) with an average of VND 7.4 million ($335) for each library which affects potential users of libraries and their frequency of library visit/use as depicted in Figure 2 (RQ 2).

Frequency of Library visit/use - RQ 2
Participants were asked how frequently they visit their school, university or local public library and the results illustrate in Figure 2. Results in Figure 2 show that Vietnamese university students (19.67%) are more library-centric (everyday user) than the high school students (8.53%) as it is understood that university libraries are better equipped and have qualified library professionals than the school libraries. Figure 2 also gives us a serious concern that a good number of

Figure 2: Frequency of library visit/use (n=631)
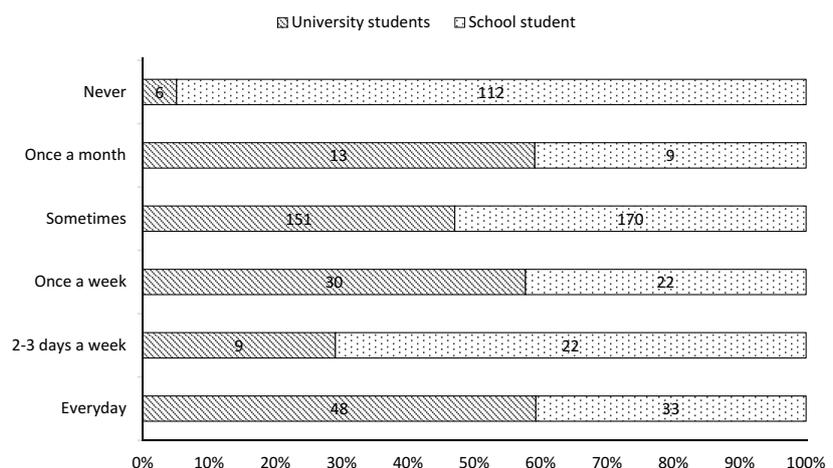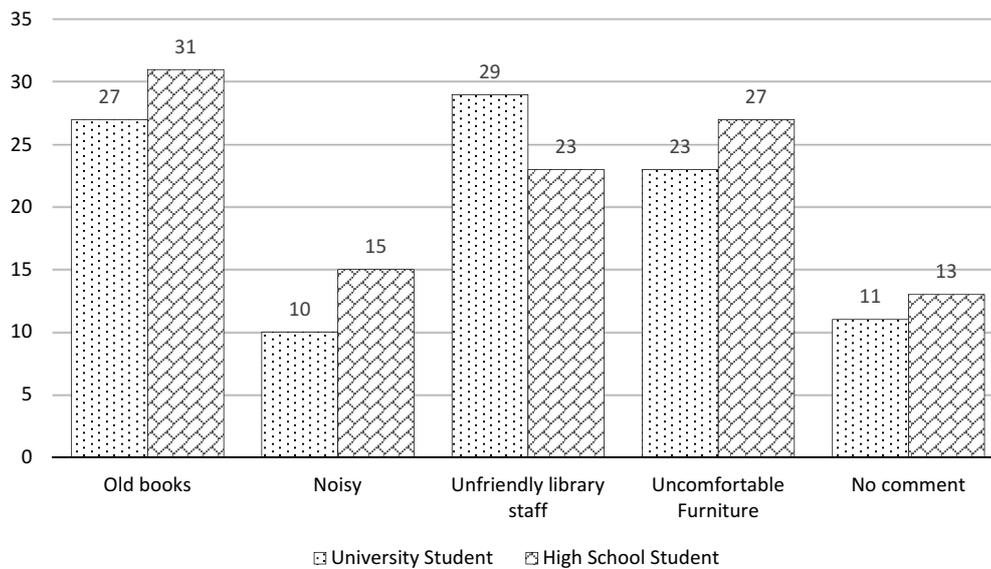
adapted from Hossain (2014)

school (39.02%) and university (61.89%) students identified themselves as 'Sometimes (occasional)' library users. The appalling condition, however, is one in four (4:1) school students (28.94%) never headed to their school and local public libraries which gives an alarming message to Vietnamese educators and policymakers to rethink and redesign the school and public library services and activities in Viet Nam. An earlier study by Hossain's (2014) found the causes that distract students going to their libraries are unfriendly library staff and uncomfortable library furniture, along with out-of-date materials.

*Purpose of using/visiting libraries - RQ 3*

As represented in Figure 3, the study also found that besides reading books and completing class assignments, Vietnamese students visit/use libraries for many other reasons such as Internet browsing and reading newspaper.

Data from Figure 3 also show that university students in Vietnam use libraries mainly for reading books (59.84%) and for assignments (40.98%) whereas school students for reading book which are fairly good indications. However, concerns arose from a study by the National Library of Vietnam and The Asia Foundation reported that a majority of school pupils mainly use the library Internet facilities to play games or chat with friends with limited ideas as to the range of Internet features (TAF & NLV, 2009). Interestingly and surprisingly, the opposite result was found from a 2015 survey by DI Marketing (2015a) which claimed nearly a half of Vietnamese read on the Internet and more than half think that it's better to read online rather buying books.

What type (genre) of books students read in the library during their visits is might be an indicator of serious reading habits or reading behaviour. A study conducted by NVU revealed that "60 percent of what Vietnamese students read were comic books, though some of them read short stories and novels (VNS, 23 October 2013).

Figure 3: Purpose of using/visiting libraries (n=631)

Purpose of using/visiting libraries
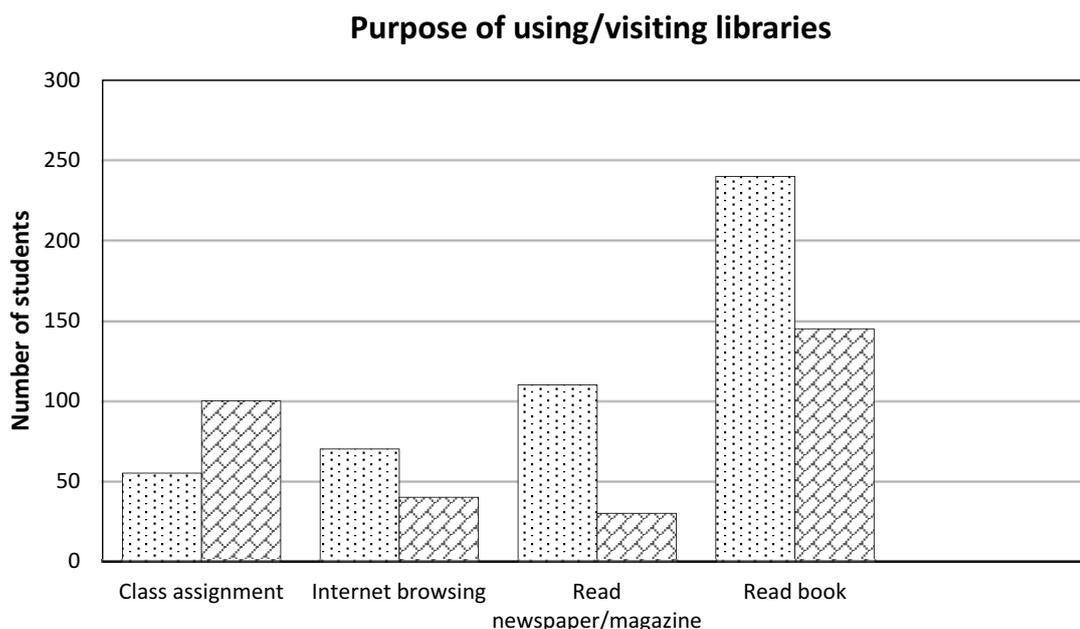
Similarly, Thu Hằng (2010) claimed that most students in elementary and junior high schools only liked to read cartoons or picture books. Conversely, a report from DI Marketing (2015) claims that 62 percent Vietnamese prefer reading novels followed by 52 percent for comic books.

Recommendations

Develop a reading culture in schools functioning school libraries

Findings from this study and from others research (Nguyễn Thị Thu Phương, 2015 and Vũ Dương Thúy Ngà, 2012) disclosed the fact that schools, colleges and universities in Vietnam had spent little money developing their library resources, ensuring comfortable and enjoyable spaces for students to study and to read for pleasure. There are very less professional development opportunities for library professionals particularly those are at school libraries.

It is observed from the developed world that a full-time certified school librarian/ Teacher-librarian or school media specialist is essential for building a strong school library program that helps children to increase their reading habits (Australian School Library Association, 2014). In order for the library to play a central role in the implementation of curriculum, librarians must take on a strong leadership role within their school. Qualified school library professionals are visible and active, the expert in information and digital literacy, reading promotion and instructional technologies who engage students and teachers in various activities and services. It is learned from Room to Read Vietnam website (www.roomtoread .org) that the MoET Vietnam welcomed its "Friendly Primary School Library Program" means, soon the MoET will be using Room to Read's librarian training model, library period curriculum, and library establishment practices to enhance school libraries in government primary

schools nationwide which are considered as a forward-looking enterprise.

Rethinking and redesigning library spaces, activities and services in Viet Nam

According to the findings of this study and previous studies (Hossain, 2014; Vũ Dương Thúy Ngà, 2012 and Thu Hằng, 2010), in Viet Nam libraries need to be more inviting and spacious. At a 2013 seminar on the library sector organized by the MoCST Viet Nam, educators also blamed the lack of innovation of the country's library system (VNS, 2013).

Special attention should be given to library furniture, layout and design so that each library is inviting and accessible to all children! Sourcing existing quality children's books for all libraries that are developmentally and culturally appropriate is equally important. Activities should focus on the designated reading period in all schools, raising awareness of the importance of reading and increased family and community awareness and involvement. Increase service time so that children can access books for reading before and after school and during school breaks.

Build digital library and promote e-book

It is understood from this study that the rapid growth of handheld devices and internet services in Viet Nam has changed reading habits, as many people now store dozens of books in their cell phones and tablets. Research shows that 61% Vietnamese find reading e-books is comfortable and 45% feel convenient buying books online (DI Marketing, 2015b). A study by Nguyễn Ngọc Giang (2015) revealed that 59.83% teachers think that it is very necessary to have e-books; more than half of the Vietnamese consider

reading online far better than buying printed books.

Hence with a market of more than 40 million regular internet users including 22 million smartphone users, Vietnam has ample opportunities to develop digital libraries and promote e-book nationwide (Hossain, 2016). Moreover, librarians can link free online e-book portals such as Storyline Online (www.storylineonline.net), Epic (www.getepic.com), Starfall (www. starfall.com), Book Adventure (www. bookadventure.com) and ICDL (http://en. childrenslibrary.org) to name a few on their social media pages or library websites for community access to enjoy online reading.

Collaboration among school, public libraries, and CLCs

Lack of up-to-date resource is a common issue exposed from this study and author's previous study (Hossain, 2014). There are gaps not only between urban and rural areas but also between different provinces in terms of library resources. In addition, people are largely unaware of library and their services (TAF & NLV, 2009).

To overcome these shortcomings of resources, school libraries should be the strategic partner of local public libraries or CLCs and local government should ensure a collaborative atmosphere among school teacher, librarian and CLCs instructor to foster a school curriculum inclusive of library literacy skills that should be basic to every 21st-century student (Hossain, 2016). Where there is an absence of libraries in some schools, students could be taken on excursions to public libraries, CLCs or libraries in other schools, topped up by tours to book exhibitions and fairs. During such visits, children would be introduced to the

library and its resources, and be educated on the importance of books and reading to their intellectual well-being and work opportunities.

Conclusions

The study confirms that despite lots of other preferred leisure options, Vietnamese students still consider reading as one of their favourite leisure activities. It also endorses that students in Vietnam desire to have more inviting library spaces and proactive library services which are essential for reading promotion but are largely absent in Vietnam. Vietnam government is trying to set-up a modern network of libraries with professional librarians and various kinds of books around the country by 2020 which is part of a proposed national strategy to nurture the reading habit (VNS, 2010) but it is far slower than expected. Proactive school librarians and functional school libraries are the key components of reading for pleasure activities. The MoCST and related professional organizations should ensure routine professional development opportunities for library professionals and a handsome budget for libraries for quality services. Ministries and departments could work together to promote cooperation and collaboration between school and public libraries along with CLCs which would be helpful for bridging the resource gaps and reaching out the broader community to nurture reading and library habits at an early age ❏

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