

Under the Black Hue: Assessing Bilingual Islamic Short Fiction for Youth Moral Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Young Muslims living in today's digital culture are subject to complex sociocultural pressures that negatively affect their moral decency (*haya*) and ethical values (*akhlak*). As young readers often reject traditional religious teaching (*da'wah*), such as lectures. Thus, creating innovative, creative, and indirect educational strategies is necessary. This study evaluates readers' acceptance of *Under the Black Hue*, an 81-page bilingual (English-Malay) e-book collection consisting of four short stories designed as an Islamic edutainment resource. The stories focus on relatable themes such as gratitude, interpersonal relationships, and self-reflection (*muhasabah*). A quantitative survey with 48 young readers to evaluate readers' reception towards the e-book. The findings demonstrated positive reader reception, perceived clarity, engagement, and potential usefulness. Results showed that 95.8% of respondents successfully extracted key spiritual concepts, and 100% of respondents reported having a thorough understanding of the characters and story structures. Additionally, 95.8% of respondents preferred multi-lingual presentation, with 87.5% praising its capacity to communicate unique emotional nuances across languages. Visual design and layout ergonomics strongly influence the respondents to read the entire e-book (93.7%), give peer recommendations (97.9%) and maintain reading engagement (97.9%). In conclusion, digital bilingual short stories could provide clear communication that helps young readers to engage with modern Islamic teachings and reflect deeply on Islamic values.

Keywords: Bilingual short stories, Islamic Edutainment, Youth Reader Reception, Digital Da'wah, E-book

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The fast growth of the internet, apps, and social media has completely changed how young people live, connect, and experience their culture today. The changes present complex challenges for the young Muslims in terms of the preservation of religious identity, moral boundaries (*akhlak*), and the concept of modesty (*haya*). Even though the digital world provides a completely new level of connection for people worldwide, it exposes youth to norms that usually diverge from traditional Islamic ethics. To face these challenging shifts, modern Islamic pedagogy increasingly highlights edutainment (combining lessons with entertainment) as an essential way to teach religion through emotional connection. One of the most empathetic mediums that connects abstract ethical principles with youth life experience is storytelling, or creative short fiction. Moreover, in multicultural societies like Malaysia, bilingual reading materials help students become fluent while showing how moral values are interpreted across various cultures in Malaysia.

Problem Statement

In modern society, young Muslims are easily and increasingly influenced by negative lifestyles or trends that weaken their spiritual values and Islamic moral conduct. Although Malaysian Muslim youths are generally taught religious knowledge at both primary and secondary schools, there is a noticeable gap when applying the principles to daily life. Official statistics confirm several growing concerns, which include the normalization of premarital dating, improper covering of *aurah*, and frequent exposure to inappropriate online content among

teenagers and young adults. Abdullah et al. (2014) observed that most adolescent pregnancy cases among Malaysian youths aged 15 to 17 resulted from relationships with known partners. Such negative phenomenon has escalated over the past decade; Mokhtar (2025) notes that digital immorality, including the monetization of explicit online content by minors continue to rise. This not only reflects behavioural deviation but also a deeper crisis of ethical and emotional states.

Many religious teachers at school mostly rely on direct preaching in imparting the religious knowledge, which causes students to psychologically reject the lessons. Youths may feel this type of teaching is too simple, dry and therefore, fail to reflect the struggles and pressures that they experience today. Dania (2020) states that youngsters today prefer shorter and easy-to-read stories over long and difficult texts when reading media. Empirical research by Nila et al., (2020) also shows that bilingual texts are highly effective for learning vocabulary and understanding context. Additionally, Ervina et al., (2021) state that storytelling builds emotional connections and helps young people adopt religious values, but how bilingual creative short stories specifically help readers to self-reflect on their spiritual growth is still unknown. It is hoped that this e-book project, which presented a bilingual Islamic short story for youths, would add to the knowledge on moral values especially to the young readers. In addition, the short story collection: *Under the Black Hue* - could be a beneficial online reading material as the book uses simple language suitable for youths and presents short stories that could help teenagers deal with real-life moral issues.

Research Objectives

The study outlines the following research objectives:

- a) To evaluate readers perceived acceptance of integrating Islamic values using bilingual short stories (English - Malay)
- b) To analyse readers' reception regarding their reading experience with the *Under the Black Hue* e-book prototype.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Storytelling (*Qasas*) as a Medium of Teaching Faith

Storytelling has always been a fundamental tool for spiritual and moral education within the Islamic tradition. The Holy Qur'an places structural emphasis on the narrative method (*al-qasas*). As stated in the Quran "*We relate to you the best of stories in what We have revealed to you of this Qur'an*" (Surah Yusuf, 12:3). This emphasises that using indirect narratives to guide believers is one of the most effective methods for religious education. It fosters emotional connection and cognitive reflection regarding moral lessons, and this process guides believers to easily reflect on the spiritual messages (*tadabbur*) within the narratives.

A famous Islamic scholar, *Imam Al-Ghazali*, in his book *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, wrote that the human heart learns best through feelings (abstract concept) and visual examples. He further explained that some good values such as modesty (*haya'*), self-awareness (*muraqabah*) and gratitude (*syukur*) are difficult to understand just by reading dry rules. However, such concepts can better be internalized if they are indirectly illustrated in narratives or real-life examples. Another famous scholar, *Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyah* concurred with this and

emphasised the power of words. They can act like an arrow that directly touches the listeners' heart when messages are conveyed with wisdom.

According to the commandment for Muslims in Surah An-Nahl (16:125) we are instructed to guide individuals toward divine truth with wisdom (*hikmah*) and appropriate instruction. This may imply using creative and digital format is necessary as modern youth live in digital world. Making tools like short story collections and e-books easily accessible on digital platform helps replace the daunting learning process of listening to religious talks or strict preaching in traditional classroom. Since younger generation nowadays are inseparable with digital connectivity, utilizing digital spaces is more effective to reach them and this approach allows educators to share the truths without changing core Islamic beliefs (*aqidah*).

Reconceptualization of Islamic Edutainment for Modern Youth

The reliance of traditional *da'wah* on one-way, top-down, or teacher-oriented strategy may trigger negative psychological resistance among young adults as they perceive these modes of learning as detached or disconnected from the realities that they live in. Therefore, synthesizing Islamic educational content with engaging delivery mechanism is crucial as a key strategy in modern Islamic pedagogy that suits youth psychology and needs. Recent literature features crucial pillars in modern Islamic youth engagement.

Ervina et al. (2021) state that young readers can vividly feel other's experiences as their own through narrative-media. This encourages self-reflection (*muhasabah*) without feeling they are directly being judged. Theoretically, identifying with realistic characters who face modern challenges like peer pressure, boundaries of *aurah* or promiscuity, contemporary youth absorb spiritual wisdom naturally.

Scholars in *da'wah* also argue that contemporary readers need creative ideological approaches to achieve strategic communication (Ab. Aziz & Mohamad, 2018; Samsukamal et al., 2023). To communicate complex spiritual teachings effectively to modern audiences requires a creative bridge such as visual media and accessible digital publications (Abdul Ghani & Abdullah, 2020; Ali & Husni, 2022). These new platforms not only transform traditional reading experience from passive activity into an engaging one but also serve as tool for self-reflection. Salwa (2024) claims that for younger readers, their digital literacy and electronic formats help making reading activity easier.

Youth Reading Behaviours in the Digital Era and Micro Narratives

The advancement in digital technology has significantly changed the cognitive and reading habits of teenagers and young adults by providing creative platforms for reading texts. Current research on youth literacy has demonstrated a clear shift toward shorter and highly accessible text formats such as short fiction, flash fiction, or micro-narratives (Dania, 2020).

Long and dense books or reading texts discourage young readers, as readers have limited attention spans, which burdens them cognitively. On the other hand, short stories match their shorter attention span without sacrificing the narrative structures, making it a great way to help young people build a reading habit.

Kidd and Castano (2013) proved that even brief exposure to literary fiction like short stories immediately enhances the theory of mind, which is the ability to infer others' mental states, moral perspectives, and internal emotions. Additionally, Bal, P. M., & Veltkamp, M. (2013) proved that short, single-sitting fictional texts increase short-term and long-term empathy and emotional reflection when the reader is transported by the narrative.

Bilingualism and Its Impact in Religious Education

As noted by Nila et al. (2020), stories written in two different languages serve as a bridge for readers to understand the story step by step through guessing the plot or meaning of words based on context. This enables them to switch to their dominant language to keep the momentum going and prevent boredom without needing

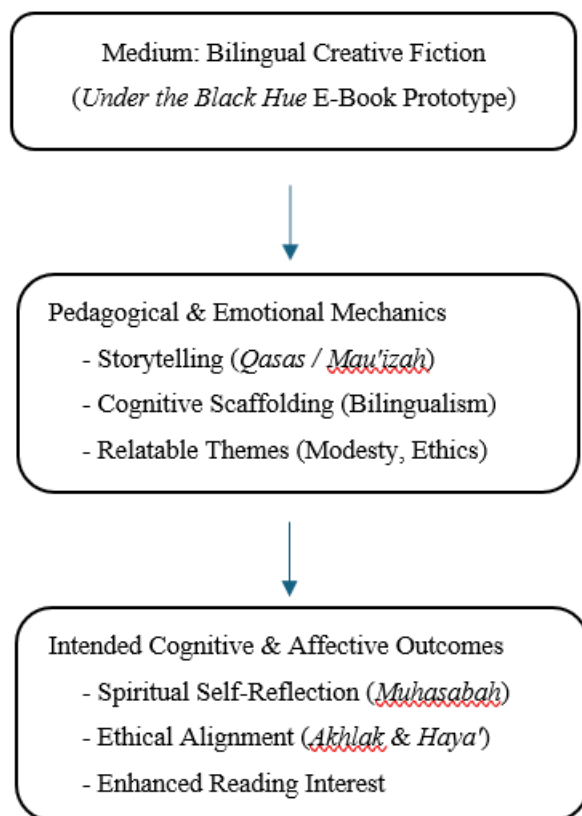
to check the dictionary. Traditionally, religious teaching contains difficult or archaic terms that may confuse readers. Thus, having difficult terminologies explained in plain English words alongside terms like trustworthiness, (*amanah*) helps readers to internalize the moral lessons and truly practice them in real life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examines how Islamic Pedagogical Theory and Narrative Transformativity Theory are connected.

Input: Youth Digital Environment)

Diagram 1: Theoretical Framework



The framework suggests that sharing ethical principles through bilingual and creative short stories (*Under the Black Hue*) helps to overcome psychological issues young readers face. It allows them to accept Islamic values naturally by connecting with their emotions and encouraging deep thinking.

METHODOLOGY

Research Methodology

For this digital book project, to develop the product, the main researcher wrote four main short stories in English. Then, translated them into Malay side-by-side, designed the layout and cover, and put them all together into the final e-book prototype entitled *Under the Black Hue*. *Under the Black Hue*, was developed through a structured four-stage creative and pedagogical process. The main researcher started with brainstorming and writing the content. The four short stories focused on three main religious themes; modesty

(*haya'*), self-reflection (*muhasabah*) and ethical boundaries (*akhlak*). The stories were then translated into English through a cross-adapting process between English and Malay to ensure both the English and Malay part of the stories follow proper grammar, spelling, linguistic accuracy, and sentence structures. Then, visual elements, typography and cover art were designed to enhance reader engagement before the stories were converted into a digital e-book format.

Finally, the researchers carried out a quantitative survey online using multiple-choice items and 5-point Likert scale questions. To reach readers who interacted with the *Under the Black Hue* e-book, purposive and convenience sampling techniques were utilized. The survey questions were categorized into four primary items, mainly: 1) content clarity and comprehension, 2) bilingual presentation, 3) visual design and layout, 4) overall reading experience. Finally, data was analysed using descriptive statistics and simple percentages to present the main findings. Diagram 2 summarizes the processes.

Diagram 2

Phase 1: Product Development

1. Content Writing: Drafting core themes
2. Translation: English-Malay parallel narrative adaptation
3. Visual & Graphic Design: Formatting, illustration and cover
4. Prototype Finalization: *Under the Black Hue*

Phase 2: Quantitative Evaluation

1. Survey Distribution: Target demographic approach digitally
2. Data Collection: Close-ended Likert/Multiple-choice items
3. Statistical Analysis: Descriptive statistics and percentages
4. Perception Assessment: Clarity, bilingualism, design and experience

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Demographic Profile

A total of 48 respondents (N=48) participated in the survey to evaluate the e-book prototype- *Under the Black Hue*, representing the target demographic consisting of Malaysian youths and young readers. Results show that approximately 56.3% (n=27) came from the 18 to 20 age group, 29.2% (n=14) were aged 21 and above, and 14.6% (n=7) represented the 15 to 17 age group. Next, the female participants represented 81.3% (n=39) of the sample, while males accounted for 18.8% (n=9). The majority of the respondents were university students (70.8%, n=34), followed by high school students (20.8%, n=10) and working adults (8.3%, n=4). Over 58% (n=28) of them reported high engagement with short stories (scoring 4 or 5 on a 5-point frequency scale). This confirms Dania's (2020) finding that fiction matches the media preferences of modern youths.

Readers' Reception on Narrative Clarity and Value Delivery

Analysis of the survey revealed strong positive reader reception regarding narrative clarity and value delivery.

Table 1: Readers' Reception on Narrative Clarity and Value Delivery

Evaluation Criteria	Percentage of Agreement	Number of Respondents
Storyline Clarity	100%	n = 48
Character Comprehension	100%	n =48
Message Transmission	95.8%	n = 47
Engagement with Morals	97.9%	n = 46
Perceived Value of Themes	97.9%	n = 46

Based on the above table, all respondents (100%) agreed that the storyline is clear and that the plot structures remained accessible despite the condensed short-story format. All of them also claimed that the main characters were easily understood, which helps foster reader empathy. A strong majority of 95.7% (n=46) said they successfully grasped the core Islamic ethical lessons embedded in the snippets. 97.9% (n=47) agreed that the moral messages were interesting; similar responses agreed that the religious themes conveyed beneficial guidance (97.7%).

According to Erikson (1968), young adults between 15 and 21 years old struggle to find their identity, what they believe in, and where they fit in society. During this period, Malaysian youths experience internal conflicts, actively debating with themselves on differentiating between what is religiously right and wrong (Idrus et al., 2021). For instance, such conflicts were portrayed in the fictional characters in the short story who faced relatable struggles. It is hoped that these short stories could guide young readers to deal with their own emotional and social issues, such as modesty, interpersonal boundaries, and gratitude (Boehm & Bean, 2024).

Perception Towards Efficacy of Bilingual Presentation

The findings showed that the dual-language approach showed that the use of a bilingual language could benefit learners as the approach could help readers to understand the content and messages in the stories. In terms of readability and preferences, 95.8% (n=46) enjoyed the bilingual format, and 100% (n=48) of youth appreciated the freedom to choose their preferred languages. Regarding emotional impact, 87.5% (n=42) reported various emotional intensity when reading the text in different languages. This aligns with the Malaysian cultural context, where English texts are perceived to be modern and emotionally distant by bilingual readers. However, in conveying certain emotions, moral values, or religious concepts, Malay texts may carry heavier cultural and moral seriousness.

The findings support Abdullah et al. (2021), which emphasizes that dual-language communication is important for modern *da'wah* to reach different demographic audiences. The principle illustrates that the bilingualism strategy in creative writing overcomes linguistic barriers while preserving the emotional and spiritual messages.

Perception Towards Visual Aesthetics and Prototype Receptivity

The visual design and overall project acceptance yielded high satisfaction scores. In terms of the ergonomic and layout, 97.9% (n=47) agreed that font selection and page layout were clear and easy to read, while for visual appeal, 87.5% (n=42) indicated that the cover design and illustrations increased their motivation to continue reading. As for the prototype reception and recommendation, 93.7% (n=45) expressed a strong desire to read the full e-book upon publication (60.4% highest scale rating), while 97.9% (n=47) would recommend *Under the Black Hue* to their peers.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that creative bilingual short stories could benefit young readers as a reading platform to portray stories and *da'wah* to highlight Islamic ethics (*akhlak*) to modern youth, especially in this digital age.

First, the e-book project successfully combined Islamic education with entertainment. This reader-friendly edutainment format helped young readers reflect on key values like modesty (*haya'*) and self-reflection (*muhasabah*). Second, respondents clearly understood the storylines, characters, and core spiritual lessons (*mau'izah*), suggesting that embedding moral guidance within creative short stories allows young readers to grasp ethical messages easily. Finally, the dual English-Malay presentation made the text smooth and enjoyable to read in either language, resulting in positive engagement, high interest in reading, and a good willingness among respondents to recommend it to their peers. In summary, the e-book project entitled '*Under the Black Hue*' supports that bilingual creative writing could become a valuable and modern approach to contemporary *da'wah* for young readers in Malaysia today.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should expand the sample size beyond university demographics to include a broader population of male youth and high school students across varied urban and rural regions. Researchers could conduct a longitudinal study to investigate whether long-term engagement with Islamic short narratives helps readers to sustain ethical values and how readers maintain digital modesty in the digital age.

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