

Measuring materialism in children's books

April 18 2013, by Jon Reidel



Senior Rachel Franz reads from the children's book 'No, David!' -- one of the 30 books she's analyzed for their consumer and environmental messages. Credit: Sally McCay

(Phys.org) —Rachel Franz has read more than her share of books to young children growing up next to a daycare center, babysitting neighborhood children and working as a nanny. It didn't take long for the environmental studies major to notice a disturbing trend: continual reinforcement of materialistic behavior and consumerism.

Born out of concern for the children under her care and the picture

books she was reading them, Franz decided to write her senior thesis on the subject with one primary question in mind: "How do children's picture books potentially deter or reinforce materialistic values and consumer culture?" She revealed her findings – among the first to focus on the role of children's literature in shaping material and consumer values – in her 196-page Honors College senior thesis, "Cultivating Little Consumers: How Picture Books Influence [Materialism](#) in Children."

"I read three or four books a night as a babysitter and started noticing how much greed there was in children's books and became deeply concerned," says Franz, who is double-minoring in studio arts and green building and community design. "I realized how damaging consumerism is to the environment and tied that to my love of children. This study was an attempt to reconcile the two."

Franz, who based her results on a [content analysis](#) of 30 picture books written between 1998 and 2012 from a list of Caldecott Medal Winners, *New York Times* bestsellers and librarian recommended books, found that picture books reflect, reinforce, and deter consumerism simultaneously with environmental messages serving as the most frequent way to counter consumerism. In the study, a number of picture books featured excessive amounts of toys, sending pro-consumer messages to children ages zero to six while others contained more outdoor-related themes that Franz says serve as a tool for countering consumerism.

Franz will be among more than 300 students presenting their research at the [2013 Student Research Conference](#) on Tuesday, April 23 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. in the Davis Center.

"The results of this study reveal that picture books have a significant potential to act as both an avenue for becoming consumers and a tool for countering consumerism" says Franz, who has a professional certificate

in sustainable business practices from UVM. "In order to help children to become positive, connected, responsible individuals, we must improve the quality and consciousness of the media and their ability to respond to it. Picture books, whose tradition is to inspire imagination and offer refuge, are a fantastic place to start. I know I'll never read a book the same way again."

Coding consumerism

Franz, who cited a study showing a decrease in the number of interactions with the outdoors is resulting in "nature deficit disorder," created a comprehensive and unique coding system that identified 50 indicators across 10 categories representing different ways in which picture books can promote and discourage the consumer socialization of readers. Text and illustrations were coded to measure the occurrence of indicators of consumerism or counter-consumerism across five themes: individual material orientation, interpersonal material orientation, social norms, commercialization and environmental messages.

Some of the 37 pro-consumer indicators included "desire for more stuff," "material goods as a vehicle for approval/gaining friends" and "focus on objects instead of peers in social setting." Among the 13 counter-consumer indicators were "self-acceptance," "sharing," and "positive orientation to the outdoors/inspiration." Overall, the average book contained 5.34 indicators of pro and counter-consumerism. The most frequent number of instances among counter-consumer indicators were "outdoor engagement" and "creative/imaginative engagement," while "standard of living: above average" and "engagement with toys/games" topped the pro-consumer indicators.

The *Pete the Cat* books, for example, included pro-consumer indicators by showing Pete with a nice car, an expensive guitar, surfboards, and a significant number of toys located in an above-average home.

Conversely, "nature immersion" ranked high due to the fact that "outdoor engagement" was found in 76.7 percent of the sample (23 of 30 books), with characters playing on playgrounds, skateboarding, biking or playing in the sand at the beach. Many characters go on walks, while others describe a "more emotional engagement in their natural surroundings" like feeling the wind, smelling the air or imagining riding a bird across the landscape in *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*.

"Rachel took on an ambitious capstone research project that required great persistence in the design phase," says Stephanie Kaza, Franz's adviser and director of the Environmental Program. "Her thoughtful and meticulous analysis reveals important findings on the specific nature of consumer messages in children's literature. Perhaps her greatest triumph was sticking it out through the many challenging phases of such a major piece of independent work."

Putting research into practice

Franz is hoping scholars, parents, caregivers and educators use the information to offset other consumer drivers like television, video games and social media. She also hopes her research, which identifies leverage points for shaping consumerism through more careful selection of children's [picture books](#), is expanded to include classic books to examine how these values have changed over time.

"Most books, like our lives, have a combination of both messages," says Franz, who has worked as an executive assistant at a design firm during college. "Parents are the number one source for countering consumerism. I'm hoping this study encourages people to develop critical thinking skills around consumerism and to select books more carefully."

Provided by University of Vermont

Citation: Measuring materialism in children's books (2013, April 18) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-materialism-children.html>

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