

# Marketing Professor Studying Adolescents' Sources of Happiness

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Lan Nguyen Chaplin

(PhysOrg.com) -- Lan Nguyen Chaplin, an assistant professor in the Eller College of Management, says children and teenagers, in finding happiness, do not always place material things before personal relationships.

Mindflex and Zhu Zhu pets are among the most popular toys and games this holiday season, but will they bring [happiness](#) to the kids who receive them?

A tremendous amount of empirical and anecdotal information indicates that [children](#) derive the most pleasure from objects - such as toys, video games, [electronic devices](#) and the like - as opposed to people and

experiences.

But is this true?

Lan Nguyen Chaplin, a University of Arizona assistant professor, has spent years studying what sources children and teens rely on to fuel their happiness.

Chaplin, who teaches marketing in the UA's Eller College of Management, said little youth-centered research has been conducted to provide reliable information about their sources of happiness. In fact, research about children's' happiness only emerged during the 1990s, she noted.

But her new article, "Please May I Have a Bike? Better Yet, May I Have a Hug? An Examination of Children's and Adolescents' Happiness," published this month in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, provides some insight.

Currently, marketing and advertisements directed toward adolescents is a multibillion dollar industry. In fact, the Education and the Public Interest Center indicated in a report released this year that companies continue to "aggressively" market to children and youth, and that it is becoming commonplace to find product advertisements in "classrooms, cafeterias, hallways and gyms."

Additionally, Toys "R" Us remains among the top stores for toys for children, from birth to the teenage years.

Yet despite the long-held belief that children draw happiness from playthings at a time when toys and other gadgets are increasingly becoming commonplace in the lives of some children, Chaplin noted that childhood depression has become a concern across the nation.

"Although opinion leaders have clearly voiced their concern about the increase in childhood [depression](#), the answer to the question of what contributes to children's happiness is debatable," Chaplin's paper noted. Her research has considered issues related to adolescent self-esteem and self-worth.

"With children being constantly bombarded with images suggesting that slim figures, trendy fashions, expensive toys, or other material goods are solutions to finding happiness, it is exceedingly difficult to determine what truly makes children happy."

Of particular note is that Chaplin found that youth do not always rely on material things - that, in some cases, relationships were far more substantial.

For her investigation, Chaplin in 2002 surveyed 150 children and adolescents, age 8 through 18, asking them to define what makes them happy. Five themes emerged: people and pets, achievements, material things, hobbies and sports.

In addition to understanding sources of happiness for adolescents, Chaplin sought to determine ways that age is a factor in sources. Respondents were interviewed and also completed tasks - answering open-ended questions and also completing a collage - meant to determine their individual sources of happiness.

"Parents and teachers need to understand the important role that they play in adolescents' lives in contributing to their overall happiness," said Chaplin, who specializes in materialism and consumer behavior among children.

Chaplin's research follows up on a seminal article released in 2006 by Nansook Park and Christopher Peterson, who surveyed parents about

their children. Her findings have implications for parents, teachers, researchers and the general public.

She found that what children rely on for happiness may change as they age. Particularly midway through childhood, hobbies and people - family, friends, coaches and teachers - were listed as key sources of happiness.

By the time adolescence hit, a shift appeared to occur, Chaplin said, noting that this is when sources became more material. Yet, people and pets remained central. Later in the adolescent years, sources shifted yet again - this time from material things and more on achievements, she noted.

Overall, girls tended more often to list people and pets as sources of happiness where as boys were more likely to list sports as a key source of happiness.

Subtle differences were recorded depending on the age range. For instance, seventh- and eighth-grade girls were more likely to rely on material things than boys and 11th- and 12th-grade girls relied more on people than did the boys.

And while material things were "very important" sources of happiness for children in the entire sample, the findings suggested that people were more important, Chaplin noted.

"These days, we tend to assume that children and adolescents are only interested in expensive material things. But what really makes them happy is spending time with family and friends," Chaplin said. "They resort to finding happiness in material goods when their interpersonal support systems fail."

Chaplin said additional research is required, particularly in understanding the gender differences that arose in the study.

Future research should focus more keenly on children as opposed to parental interviews, Chaplin said. She also noted that future research must use more "novel and engaging measures" and also investigate the happiness of children and adolescents within a broader age range.

Chaplin also noted that studies have been designed mostly to evaluate levels of happiness as opposed to what leads to personal happiness.

In her article, Chaplin also emphasized that "not only do current happiness studies fall short of providing meaningful answers to questions related to what makes today's children happy, but they also lack effective measures that are suitable for examining age differences across a wide age range."

Provided by University of Arizona

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