Color Me Calm: Adult Coloring in the University Library

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In early summer 2015, a local newspaper reported on adults in the Omaha-metro area joining in on adult coloring. While a student coloring club formed at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the fall, no such organization existed at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). Capitalizing on the growing adult coloring trend and local interest, Criss Library held several events entitled “Color Me Calm” during the 2015-2016 academic year, both independently and during a campus-wide event known as “De-Stress Fest.” This event is held in partnership with multiple departments and groups across the UNO campus, including the Academic and Career Development Center, Civic and Social Responsibility, Maverick Productions, Student Involvement, Student Government, UNO Bookstore, and Wellness Subdivision. Collaborating with these organizations put “Color Me Calm” on the official list of activities and strengthened our partnerships with these departments.

The Adult Coloring Phenomenon

An activity usually reserved for children, coloring books for adults rose from hipster trend to global phenomenon beginning in 2013. Adults flock to the activity for a variety of reasons, including stress relief, socialization, as a way to unplug from technology or even a way to hedge social status by appearing trendy. Participants report enjoying the tactile, interactive nature of the books as a respite from constant screen time.

Coloring books shot to the top of the Best Sellers list on Amazon and were prominently displayed in book and craft stores. For example, between 2013 and 2015, the mega-hit Secret Garden sold more than 5 million copies in 22 languages, marking the 96-page collection of black-and-white ink drawings into a global best seller.

Social media fueled the trend when fans began posting their elaborate creations on Facebook and Pinterest. As their popularity grew, celebrities joined the craze and even Martha’s Vineyard offered coloring opportunities for its elite vacationers. Popular culture coloring books soon appeared featuring Star Wars, Game of Thrones, Doctor Who, Harry Potter, Sherlock, Mad Men, Grumpy Cat and several editions with swear words in fanciful designs. Even mega-store IKEA launched 5 free pages online for budding interior designers. Eventually, themed coloring events started appearing, such as “Star Wars,” “Color between the Wines” and The Hopping Gnome Taproom’s “Coloring and Beer.”

Many therapists are quick to point out adult coloring was not in the traditional arsenal of techniques for art therapy and should not be labeled as such (Schwedel, 2015; Malchiodi, 2015). To date, there have been no empirical studies offering evidence of health benefits from using coloring books, despite the media quoting several art therapy studies (Curry & Kasser, 2005; Drake & Winner, 2012; Dovy, 2015).

Conclusion and Future Outreach

We went from 63 participants and no partnerships to 110 participants and collaborations with 10 other campus programs within the academic year. Our future coloring events include participating in De-Stress Fest at scheduled times as well as leaving the supplies out for people to use at the make-n-take stations during other library events. We will also have coloring events during the summer to provide opportunities for staff on campus who can’t get away during the year as well as students attending summer courses.

Selected References


Grab a marker and color yourself calm anywhere on the poster!