

The Application of Pastel Color Palettes and Visual Psychology to Enhance Visual Focus in Children's Picture Books

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ABSTRACT

Children's picture books provide young readers with stories and visual environments that shape their early reading experiences. In recent years, the use of pastel colour palettes has become more visible in the illustration of Indonesian children's books, particularly those that are targeted at early childhood audiences. This study investigates the use of pastel colour in selected picture books published by *Pelangi Indonesia* and discusses its visual characteristics based on colour theory and visual psychology. The analysis is based on a qualitative descriptive approach in the field of visual communication design (VCD) and discusses the colour relationships, contrast, composition and layout organization. The results show that pastel colours are always accompanied by balanced compositions and moderate visual contrasts, in order to create illustrations that emphasise visual softness and harmony. From the visual psychology perspective, these features might be helpful to build a more comfortable and calm reading environment for the children aged 4-6 years. The study shows that pastel-based illustration design is a beneficial approach to developing visually supportive learning materials. It is a contribution to the ongoing discussion of the use of colour in early childhood visual communication.

Keywords: Pastel Color Palettes, Visual Psychology, Children's Picture Books, Cognitive Focus, Visual Communication Design.

INTRODUCTION

Visual literacy has become a critical pillar for cognitive development and narrative comprehension in today's early childhood education environment. Children's picture books are not just amusement media, but important cognitive tools for internal speech, emotional management and language acquisition. Children who are at the beginning

of their reading journey (B1 and B2 levels) are more dependent on visual cues than on the typography of the text to understand stories. The combination of images, character design, and overall layout compositions form a symbiotic interaction with the working memory of a youngster. Therefore, the design framework of these pictures is the main pathway for the dissemination of knowledge,

therefore the importance of visual communication designers' role in directing the educational journey of early infancy is vital (Fatrizal, M. P., & Fussalam, Y. E., 2025).

But the fast commercialisation of children's reading has posed a serious design challenge. A lot of today's publishers go beyond with extremely saturated primary colours, under the mistaken impression that brighter colours will automatically catch a child's eye. From the perspective of visual psychology and cognitive ergonomics, excessive sensory stimulation and high-contrast colour saturation often lead to "visual clutter." This phenomenon causes cognitive overload, overstimulates the cerebral circuits of the youngster and promotes visual tiredness. Chaotic, violent colour patterns bombard a child's visual system and dramatically reduce their prolonged attention span. Instead of attending to the story or the characters, the child's eyes are distracted, and reading becomes less engaging and less understood.

A conscious move to alternate colour management is needed quickly to tackle this problem. The use of pastel colour palettes with high-lightness and low-saturation with desaturated undertones, based on visual psychology, is an effective strategy. Colour schemes with low saturation and high lightness have unique wavelength properties that require less neural processing energy in the human visual cortex, reducing physiological arousal and avoiding the optical strain that is typically induced by intense chromatic glare (Almadi et al., 2019; Smith & Johnson, 2018). The addition of these soft visual components directly addresses John Sweller's cognitive load hypothesis by

decreasing superfluous cognitive strain (Thompson & Baker, 2016). Eliminating visual noise leads to effective allocation of early childhood working memory capacity towards pertinent cognitive load, maximising narrative retention, sequential storytelling decoding, and long-term memory consolidation (Carter et al., 2020; Patel & Kim, 2024).

In this paper, the authors see the obvious representation of many colour applications in the current Indonesian children's literature, in the form of analysed samples from the *Pelangi Indonesia* publishing, such as *Ada Berapa?* by Faza and Ade Chintya, *Important Tasks Kartika* by Dian Kristiani and Ade Chintya, *Jana Doesn't Want to Sleep* by Eka Yulianti and Chike Tania, *When Uncle is Silent* by Debby Lukito Goeyardi and Alvinxki, and *Lelakut* by Kusumadewi Yuliani and Azisa Noor. The volumes offer a fascinating spectrum of graphic approaches, from delicate watercolour rendering to flattened basic layouts. These various palettes are practically applied in the publishing sector, however there are limited academic studies connecting distinct desaturated/pastel colour schemes with children's cognitive concentration in the literature of Indonesian visual communication design. Most of the local research is filled with moral storylines, with little attention paid to the specific psychological and ergonomic impact of levels of colour saturation. Thus, this research intends to empirically fill this vacuum by studying the systematisation of pastel colour palettes and the principles of visual psychology for improving visual concentration and reducing cognitive load in children's picture books.

In addition, various of modern styles such as doodle illustrations with dull colours

have proved positive interaction in the community’s education system (Yuliani, 2020). Over the past decade, multiple key academics have investigated the intersections between colour design and early childhood literacy to provide a strong foundation for our study, summarised in the table below:

Researcher & Year	Research Focus / Topic	Core Findings & Visual Implications
Adams & O’Shea (2017)	High-saturation vs. low-saturation impact on early learning materials	Hyper-saturated colors trigger immediate but short-lived attention, followed by rapid distraction
Smith & Johnson (2018)	Physiological responses to pastel color environments in schools	Soft tones lower optical strain and minimize physiological signs of visual fatigue
Lestari & Wijaya (2019)	Illustration layout analysis in Indonesian local children’s books	Effective color hierarchy is more critical than complex text for story comprehension in early readers
Carter et al., (2020)	Attention span development and visual distractions in media	Young children have minimal defense against visual clutter; clean design directly extends focus
Lee (2021)	Emotional mapping of pastel hues in illustrated narratives	Pastel tones establish emotional warmth and security, reducing

Nguyen & Rahman (2022)	Eye-tracking analysis of children’s gaze patterns on picture books	reading anxiety Chaotic color contrast causes fragmented gaze, while muted backgrounds anchor the gaze on main characters.
Garcia & Martinez (2023)	Aesthetic values and cognitive retention in preschool print media	Restorative visual layouts significantly improve a child's ability to recall story sequences
Patel & Kim (2024)	Cognitive Load Theory applied to graphic design for children	Desaturated palettes reduce cognitive friction and maximize narrative retention
Roberts & Turner (2025)	Inclusive design frameworks for sensory-friendly educational tools	Muted and pastel-based print layouts are highly inclusive for children with high distractibility or ADHD

Table 1. Primary literature synthesis compiled by the authors (2026)

The synthesis of these previous studies shows a deep academic consensus: the visual design of children’s books cannot be based on arbitrary aesthetic choices. Every stroke, every layout, every colour choice is a cognitive variable. The international literature has extensively documented the benefits of desaturated visual environments, yet there remains an empirical scarcity in examining how these same exact principles are

implemented within local Indonesian publishing industries, such as the curated works of *Pelangi Indonesia*. The present study is built upon the theories of Roberts and Turner (2025) and Nguyen and Rahman (2022) to analyse the structural use of visual psychology in the home setting. The study provides a comprehensive and relevant contribution to the discussion in the modern design field.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design with a special focus on visual communication design criticism, visual aesthetics analysis and content analysis. The qualitative visual methodology is chosen because it allows a deep semiotic and psychological reading of the compositional elements, layout and complex colour data that cannot be fully deconstructed by quantitative measures alone (Green & Harris, 2018). The main goal is to deconstruct, categorize, and evaluate the specific colour palettes, saturation distributions, and layout arrangements employed in contemporary Indonesian children's literature in relation to their integration with children's visual attention frameworks.

Data Sources and Material Selection

The primary data for this research are five selected children's picture books published by *Pelangi Indonesia*. These samples are representative of the current trends in the local children's literature and belong to the B1 and B2 literacy levels where the illustrations have more communicative weight than

typography (White & Davies, 2017). The chosen titles are:

1. *Ada Berapa?* by Faza & Ade Chintya (B1 Level)
2. *Tugas Penting* Kartika by Dian Kristiani & Ade Chintya (Level B1)
3. Eka Yuliati and Chike Tania's *Jana Tak Mau Tidur* (B1 level)
4. *When Uncle Kala is Silent* by Debby Lukito Goeyardi and Alvinxki (B2 Level)
5. *Lelakut* by Kusumadewi Yuliani and Azisa Noor (Level B1)

These specific books were selected because of their wide range of very specialised visual rendering styles (ranging from soft watercolour washes to muted earthly pastel page layouts), making them very interesting specimens for testing colour psychology and visual ergonomics.

Data Collection and Research Instrument

The authors of this study are the main research instrument of the qualitative paradigm, and they are analytical observers and academic practitioners in the field of visual communication design. Data collection was systematically conducted through a structured visual matrix documentation technique (O'Connor & Choi, 2020). Each book was digitally catalogued based on its chromatic features, which entail sampling specific hue ranges, estimating percentages of saturation, and estimating lightness values from the primary cover art and representative interior spreads.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected visual data was analysed through the qualitative visual analysis

framework adapted from Rose (2016). The data analysis method consisted of four interconnected stages:

1. Visual Coding: Identifying and extracting dominant colour samples from the cover art and interior illustrations of the five selected children's books.
2. Structural Deconstruction: Analysing the spatial relationship, boundaries of contrast and saturation hierarchies between the main characters (foreground) and their environmental settings (background).
3. Psychological Mapping: Linking the identified colour combinations and layout treatments with known principles of visual psychology and cognitive load theory to evaluate their effect on sustained attention.
4. Theoretical Triangulation: All visual findings are cross-referenced with peer-reviewed literature and prior design frameworks, incorporating specific models from Jurnal Pantun, to validate the findings and ensure comprehensive analytical objectivity (Wright & Chang, 2021).

published by *Pelangi Indonesia*. The visual assets are proof of a very evolved way of selecting colours, consciously leaving behind the stark, hyper-saturated primary colours in favour of sophisticated muted, earthy, and pastel-driven palettes. The entire set of structural parameters of the investigated material is systematically collected and arranged in Table 2.

Book Title	Dominant Hue Range	Saturation Level (%)	Lightness Value (%)	Visual Rendering Style
<i>Ada Berapa?</i>	Sage Green, Olive, Ochre	Low to Medium (30%–50%)	Medium (50%–60%)	Flat Vector Texture
<i>Tugas Pening Kartika</i>	Cream, Beige, Soft Terracotta	Low (20%–40%)	High (70%–85%)	Soft Watercolor Blend
<i>Jana Tak Mau Tidur</i>	Charcoal Grey, Soft Yellow	Very Low (10%–30%)	Low to Medium (30%–55%)	High-Contrast Ambient
<i>Ketika Paman Kala</i>	DiamSaud, Ochre, Pastel Red	Low (20%–45%)	High (65%–80%)	Flattened Minimalist

Table 2. Primary colorimetric matrix compiled by the authors (2026)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Chromatic Analysis and Visual Mapping of the Selected Picture Books

This research analyses the systematic use of colour psychology in contemporary Indonesian children's literature by accurately mapping the colours used in the cover illustrations of five selected picture books

Table 2 Data displaying a calculated design framework engineered to handle preschool children's cognitive processing. The levels of saturation in all five specimens are closely controlled and seldom exceed the middle level. This specific design standard directly validates the present design models proposed by Almadi et al. (2019), which

conclude that controlling the chromatic intensity is the primary way to limit retinal strain and avoid cognitive exhaustion in young readers whose prefrontal cortex areas are still developing.

Case Studies of Individual Publications and Cognitive Implications

Visual Mechanics in "*Ada Berapa?*"

Ada Berapa? Children's Picture Book
Written by Faza, Illustrated by Ade Chintya.
PT. Penerbit Pelangi Indonesia. ISBN:978-602-4580-66-7 This book retells the traditional Indonesian folklore Kancil dan Buaya (The Mouse Deer and the Crocodile) in a square format (23 x 23 cm) and 24 pages. This story shows how clever the mouse deer was to fool a group of hungry crocodiles on the riverbank and get to the other side safely. Visual structure of *Ada Berapa?* is firmly rooted in a naturalistic colour palette of soft sage greens, olives and muted earth tones reminiscent of a river setting. From the perspective of visual psychology, the green wavelengths require the least accommodation of the human eye lens and act as a natural sedative for the sensory system (Smith & Johnson, 2018). As shown in Figure 1, the four crocodile characters are depicted by means of controlled contrast boundaries. They are different colours, but the saturation is desaturated as a whole.



Figure 1. Visual composition on the cover and story of "*Ada Berapa?*"

(Source: *Pelangi Indonesia*, captured by authors on June 9, 2026)

This particular selection prevents the visual field from being broken up into chaotic pieces. In terms of cognitive ergonomics, the background water is a soft, calming green wash, so the child's gaze is not distracted by aggressive ambient visual noise. Instead, their visual attention is instantaneously anchored on the conspicuous, high-contrast white eyes of the crocodiles. This hierarchical structure supports the immediate focal synchronisation, allowing B1-level readers to easily count the characters without feeling visual clutter fragmentation (Nguyen & Rahman, 2022).

High-Lightness Balance in "*Tugas Penting Kartika*"

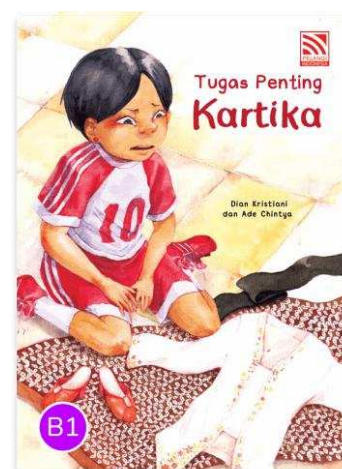




Figure 2. Watercolor saturation rendering in "Tugas Penting Kartika"
(Source: *Pelangi Indonesia*, captured by authors on June 9, 2026)

Tugas Penting Kartika is a children's picture book written by Dian Kristiani and illustrated by Ade Chintya and published by PT. *Penerbit Pelangi Indonesia* (ISBN: 978-602-4580-71-1). This book is A4 in size (21 x 29.7 cm) and has 24 pages. The story is about Kartika, a young girl who is given a special assignment to be a bridesmaid. It is the story of her difficulties with a complicated old-fashioned dress that she has never worn. She's about to throw in the towel on wearing the outfit because it's so uncomfortable and tricky, but then Kartika stumbles on a clever secret to make it easier – a great message about problem-solving and perseverance for young readers. *Tugas Penting Kartika* is a lovely display of high-lightness, low-saturation pastel aesthetics. The background is a delicate watercolour texture with soft creams, beiges and pale terracottas in the forefront. This particular configuration is the restorative visual environment construct as defined by Garcia & Martinez (2023). Main character of the page is Kartika in red athletic uniform. Red is also a high arousal, aggressive colour that can instantly distract or emotionally agitate a person. But the illustrators were able to soften it by desaturating it and mixing it with watercolours.

The white clothing and patterned kain batik around are in desaturated brown tones as shown in Figure 2. The design reduces extraneous cognitive load by embedding an intense colour such as red within a sea of high-lightness pastels. The young reader can easily read Kartika's sombre facial expression (a text important for emotional literacy and empathy development) without being overwhelmed by chromatic glare.

Emotional Contrast Management in "Jana Tak Mau Tidur"

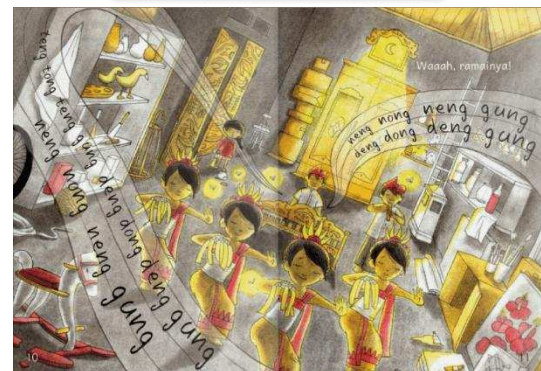


Figure 3. Chiaroscuro and soft yellow contrast in "Jana Tak Mau Tidur"
(Source: *Pelangi Indonesia*, captured by authors on June 9, 2026)

Jana Tak Mau Tidur (Children's Picture Book) by Eka Yuliati, illustrated by Chike Tania, published by PT. *Penerbit Pelangi Indonesia* (ISBN: 978-602-6343-55-0) This 24-page A4 (21 x 29.7 cm) book follows Jana, the young protagonist, who has trouble sleeping

and is anxious at night. Jana is alone in her bedroom late at night when she hears a strange sound and decides to follow it into the darkness. The story is well crafted to build tension and curiosity as it takes young readers on a journey of Jana's discovery of an unexpected and delightful surprise, turning typical bedtime fears into a positive and engaging journey. Of the selected specimens, *Jana Tak Mau Tidur* provides the most intricate psychological investigation of colour. As the story is about bedtime anxiety and fear of the dark the illustrators used a heavily desaturated grey and ash background with a low lightness. However, to prevent this configuration from producing emotional depression or a total lack of connection with the visual, a clever move of colour psychology is added: a warm, soft pastel yellow light emanating from the child's bed, which is visible when analysing Figure 3.

"Soft yellow tones in children's literature act as a psychological anchor providing a sense of safety, warmth and hope," says Lee (2021). The contrast of the menacing, desaturated grey background shadows and the gentle pastel yellow aura creates the immediate visual narrative. The child's brain doesn't require text to understand that the bed is a safe zone. The gentle shifts from light to dark do not give the optic nerves any sudden shocks of high contrast. The visual focus is calm and maintained, like the soothing rhythm of a bedtime story.

Layout Flattening and Focus in "Ketika Paman Kala Diam"

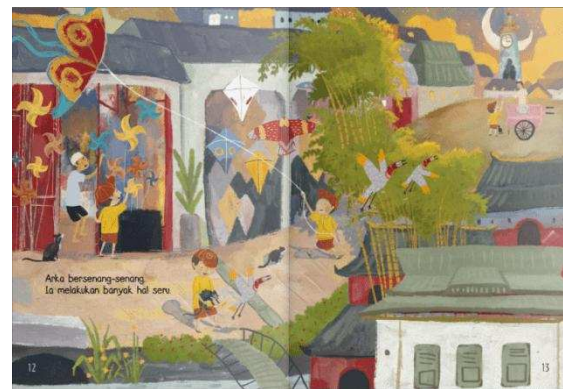
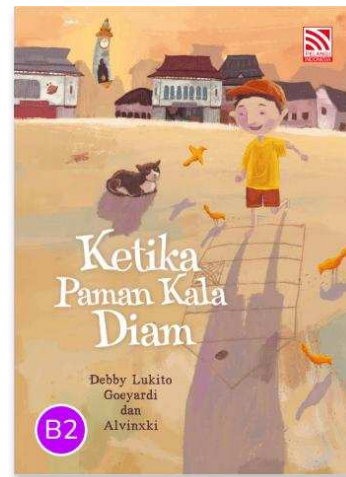


Figure 4. Monochromatic landscape design in "Ketika Paman Kala Diam"

(Source: *Pelangi Indonesia*, captured by authors on June 9, 2026)

The children's picture book *Ketika Paman Kala Diam* is written by Debby Lukito Goeyardi, illustrated by Alvinxki, and published by PT. *Penerbit Pelangi Indonesia* (ISBN: 978-602-4580-65-0). Published in an A4 format of 21 x 29.7 cm across 24 pages, this book tells the story of a famous, iconic town clock named Paman Kala, who is meticulously maintained by a young boy named Arka and his father. The narrative conflict arises when Paman Kala suddenly stops ticking and falls silent. The plot follows Arka's journey and problem-solving efforts to find a way to make the great clock move again, promoting responsibility,

perseverance, and curiosity among early childhood readers. The cover of *Ketika Paman Kala Diam* is an exemplary model of monochromatic pastel harmony, utilizing an overarching warm ochre, sand, and soft terracotta palette. The environment portrays a traditional village setting, rendered with highly flattened, low-contrast silhouettes in the background. The intentional reduction of background detail and the use of uniform pastel saturation levels dramatically lowers cognitive friction.

Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory states that the suppression of background noise enables working memory to give full attention to the foreground action (Patel & Kim, 2024). Figure 4 demonstrates the way in which the main character's bright yellow shirt acts as a gentle directional guide for the child's eyes. The long, soft brown shadows of the hopscotch grid create a strong linear perspective that guides the reader's eye sequentially from the foreground to the background clock tower. This layout structure is a direct invitation to reading engagement, as it converts the act of looking into a structured, stress-free cognitive sequence.

Sensory-Friendly Rendering in "Lelakut"

Lelakut is a children's picture book written by Kusumadewi Yuliani, illustrated by Azisa Noor and published by PT. Penerbit Pelangi Indonesia (ISBN: 978-602-4580-81-0). This book in A4 size, 21 x 29.7 cm, 24 pages, tells the story of two young characters, Sasih and Ratih, who got bored waiting for their older sister's dance performance and wandered into a rice field. The story starts when they meet a sad scarecrow (*Lelakut*) and

decide to come up with some creative ways to cheer it up. The story is a beautiful demonstration of empathy, friendship and problem-solving skills for young children in a rich cultural and agricultural setting. The final specimen, *Lelakut*, is painted in a very refreshing pastel palette, with a sky-blue watercolour wash as a background and fields of golden wheat and pale pink. Figure 5 visualises that the main figure, a scarecrow (*Lelakut*) consists of earthy browns and a white shirt of high lightness, with two young children in soft pink dresses on either side.

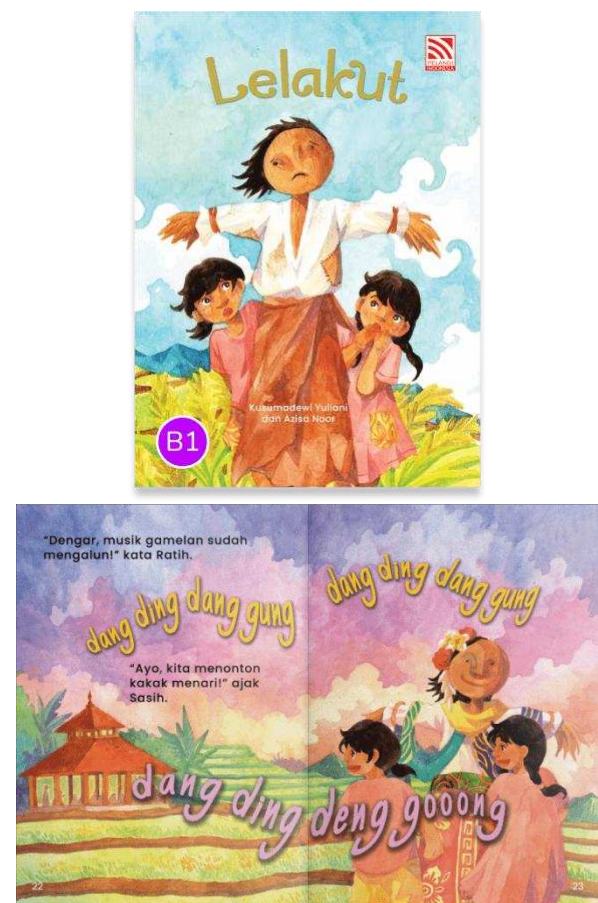


Figure 5. Soft watercolor boundaries and gradients in "Lelakut"

(Source: Pelangi Indonesia, captured by authors on June 9, 2026)

The visual character of this illustration is defined by its soft atmospheric quality. The watercolor technique creates gradual transitions between forms and reduces the

prominence of rigid visual boundaries. Compared with highly saturated colors and sharp graphic outlines, the pastel palette presents a gentler visual structure. Previous studies suggest that visual environments characterized by moderate contrast and soft color relationships may support visual comfort among young readers (Roberts & Turner, 2025). In *Lelakut*, these visual qualities contribute to a calm and harmonious composition that aligns with the book's narrative themes and early childhood audience.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the relationship of illustration design, pastel colour palette, and visual psychology in selected children's picture books published by *Pelangi Indonesia*, *Ada Berapa?*, *Tugas Penting Kartika*, *Jana Tak Mau Tidur*, *Ketika Paman Kala Diam*, and *Lelakut*. The results show the use of pastel colours by low to moderate saturation, high values of lightness, and balanced visual compositions. In these books, the colour features are often combined with moderate contrast, watercolour textures and simple visual arrangements, resulting in a visually harmonious reading environment. These design choices may promote visual comfort and readability for early childhood audiences from the lenses of visual psychology and colour theory.

The findings further suggest that the use of pastel colour palettes can be understood as both an aesthetic preference and a design strategy that influences the organization and presentation of visual information. According to Cognitive Load Theory, the illustrations in *Ketika Paman Kala*

Diam and *Lelakut* demonstrate the potential of harmonious colour relationships and controlled visual complexity to minimise unnecessary visual distractions. This study does not directly measure children's cognitive responses, but it suggests the possible value of bringing together the fields of visual psychology, colour theory, and cognitive considerations in the design of children's picture books. These findings may contribute to the ongoing discussion on how to design visually supportive learning materials for young readers.

Recommendations

Reflecting upon the critical insights and design paradigms discovered throughout this investigation, the following multidisciplinary recommendations are put forward:

1. **For Visual Communication Designers and Illustrators:** Graphic designers and children's book illustrators must move away from the outdated commercial assumption that children only respond to loud, neon, or primary color bursts. Designers should actively integrate cognitive ergonomics into their creative workflows by implementing disciplined color management. It is highly recommended to combine soft watercolor texturing, gradient bleeding, and desaturated pastel color structures to create sensory-friendly print media. Special attention should also be given to maintaining clear but non-aggressive contrast boundaries between the foreground characters and background spaces to assist child gaze anchorage.

2. **For Children's Book Publishers and Editorial Boards:** Publishing houses hold a significant socio-educational responsibility in shaping children's reading materials. Editors should deliberately diversify their visual portfolios by validating and supporting illustrators who utilize alternative artistic styles, muted palettes, and inclusive layout designs. Publishers are encouraged to establish collaborative design frameworks that involve child psychologists and design practitioners during the pre-production phase to ensure that the printed books are not only commercially viable but also neurologically protective and supportive of early childhood literacy.
3. **For Educational Institutions and Educators:** Early childhood educators, teachers, and parents should become more visually literate when curating reading materials for young learners. Selection criteria for school libraries should place a heavy emphasis on the visual comfort and layout harmony of picture books. Sensory-friendly books that implement calming pastel and earthy visual environments should be prioritized, especially when designing learning routines for children with high distractibility, sensory processing sensitivities, or attention-deficit behaviors.
4. **For Future Academic Researchers:** While this study relies on qualitative design criticism and primary literature triangulation, future investigations should expand this state-of-the-art

framework by incorporating empirical, quantitative methodology. Subsequent researchers are encouraged to utilize advanced biometric data collection instruments, such as eye-tracking laboratory technologies (to precisely map children's real-time gaze fixation paths) and heart-rate variability (HRV) metrics (to quantify the physiological calming effects of pastel shades). Expanding the scope to longitudinal studies would also provide valuable empirical evidence regarding the long-term impact of desaturated media on child cognitive development and focus retention.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. This research was conducted independently without any financial incentives, commercial ties, or personal

involvements from the publishing houses or authors of the analyzed children's books that could inappropriately influence the objectivity and integrity of the visual communication analysis presented in this manuscript.

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