



The Visual Representation of Love: How College Students Express Romantic Views Through Graphics

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Abstract. Semiotic theory has confirmed that graphics can significantly reflect an individual's inner activities and their concepts and opinions, indicating a close correspondence between graphics and individual thought. This study, through a series of campus activities and offline interviews, utilizing a relaxed and free doodle method, collected 455 pieces of graphic materials themed on love from 517 college students. The objective is to explore the love concepts reflected through these visual expressions by college students and to delve into their genuine thoughts about love. The findings reveal: (1) The diversity of graphics underscores the enhanced individual consciousness among college students; (2) The graphics expressing the theme of love by college students exhibit pronounced social media characteristics, reflecting a high degree of correlation between college students' love psychology and behaviors and social media; (3) College students' graphical expression of love tends towards the description of immediate emotions, with less expression of long-term emotional trajectories or expectations, reflecting the current students' view of love as a relaxed attitude requiring no long-term goals. This research provides useful clues and perspectives for a deeper understanding of college students' love concepts, offering valuable references and guidance for future related research and practice.

Keywords: Problems of college students in love, semiology, graphic analysis, love concepts,

1 Introduction

In China, the love affairs of college students are a hot topic of social concern. Compared to the past, modern college students have exhibited significant changes in their views on marriage and love[1][2]. However, due to the protection of personal privacy and the complexity of the inner world, it is not easy to deeply understand the real love concepts of college students. Traditional surveys and face-to-face interviews, although providing some data support, often struggle to access the true thoughts deep within respondents[3]. Against this backdrop, exploring a research method that can both stimulate college students to express their true feelings and protect their privacy holds important theoretical and practical significance for understanding and analyzing the contemporary love concepts of college students.

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The semiotic theory proposed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, which posits that signs are composed of the signified and the signifier[4], provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how college students express their love concepts through graphics. Concurrently, the triadic model introduced by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, further enriches our comprehension of the classification and modes of expression of graphics into symbols, indexes, and icons[5][6]. Meaning is generated when graphics are conveyed to an interpreter[7]. These graphics each carry distinct emotions and directions, showcasing the diversity and complexity of college students' love concepts. Additionally, the psychological theory of self-concept and the sociological theory of social learning offer further perspectives on the formation and expression of college students' love concepts, emphasizing the impact of individual cognition and social environment on the formation of these concepts[8][9]. Through these theoretical frameworks, we can gain a deeper understanding of how college students express their love concepts through graphics, and how these concepts reflect their personal and sociological learning experiences.

Building on the aforementioned theoretical foundation and research needs, we devised a series of campus activities. These activities were designed as an open platform, allowing college students to express their views on love and their emotional experiences in graphic form. By collecting and analyzing this visual graphic data, we aim to identify potential issues or unique ideas within the love concepts of college students. These issues or ideas pertain to challenges in love, expectations, and the gap between ideals and reality, among others. Through in-depth analysis, we can offer college students more practical emotional support and guidance, while also providing a richer resource and inspiration for future related research.

2 Methodology

The data for this study were sourced from 517 students enrolled at Ningbo Tech University(NTU)in Zhejiang, China, including 218 males and 299 females, with respective proportions of 42% and 58%. The information collected includes age, gender, major, grade level, whether they are an only child, and the love-themed graphics they created. Data collection spanned from April to November 2023, employing methods such as offline love-themed drawing activities, offline focus group interviews, and online submissions of love-themed graphics. During this period, a total of 5 offline love-themed drawing activities, 3 focus group interview sessions were held, and an online submission channel was opened. By November 2023, a total of 455 effective graphics were collected.

At the outset of the research, we organized a graphic collection team consisting of 6 researchers, who solicited love-themed graphics by hosting offline thematic drawing activities in campus cafeterias and public halls of teaching buildings. Through three such activities, we collected 53 effective graphics. During this phase of the study, we primarily employed observation and interview methods to invite participants to share their feelings and expectations about love, and guided them to depict these feelings and thoughts through graphics. From the perspective of research efficacy, this method

proved challenging in terms of collection. College students found it difficult to exhibit patience and enthusiasm when facing strangers, making it hard to cooperate with the research.

In the second phase, we organized 3 focus group discussions, each involving 6 to 10 college students who were acquainted with each other. Researchers initiated conversations around the topic of "love," encouraging participants to freely share their concepts of love. As the discussions unfolded, participants simultaneously created graphics, resulting in the collection of 72 effective love-themed graphics. This method of collecting graphics within relatively familiar small groups proved to be more relaxed and enjoyable. However, the number of participants was limited, leading to a potential "peer influence" where collected graphics might exhibit similarities. Consequently, we iterated on our collection methodology.

In the third phase of the research, we redesigned two types of offline activities. The first was the Love Mailbox activity, where we set up mailboxes in two different colors, red and blue, to represent males and females, respectively. Participants were required to fill in personal information and answer questions about their views on love, as well as to draw their own "love graphics." Through this activity, we collected 112 effective graphics. The second activity was the Hand-drawn Tattoo event, where free hand-drawn tattoo services were provided in an activity classroom. Participants were asked to provide their own love graphics and answer questions about their love views, resulting in the collection of 147 effective graphics.

Concurrently with the offline activities, we also utilized a website called "Survey Home" for data collection, where participants could enter via a QR code to submit their information, supplementing our research. This channel provided a convenient remote participation method for students involved in the activities. From April to November 2023, through this online channel, we received 118 valid submissions, from which we collected 71 effective graphics.

3 Results and Analysis

3.1 In terms of graphic presentation

Within the love-themed graphics created by college students, three primary forms of expression can be observed as illustrated in Figure 1: purely graphic, purely textual, and a mix of text and graphics. Their proportions are respectively 79.57%, 12.08%, and 8.35%. Pure graphics primarily convey the emotions and relationships associated with love through visual elements intuitively. Pure text expressions manifest as shouting out across space, sharing inner thoughts, expressing wishes, etc. Meanwhile, the mixed form of text and graphics tends more towards the style of online chatting, characterized by hand-drawn emoticons accompanied by text. These different forms of love-themed graphics reflect the diversity and individuality of college students' concepts of love.

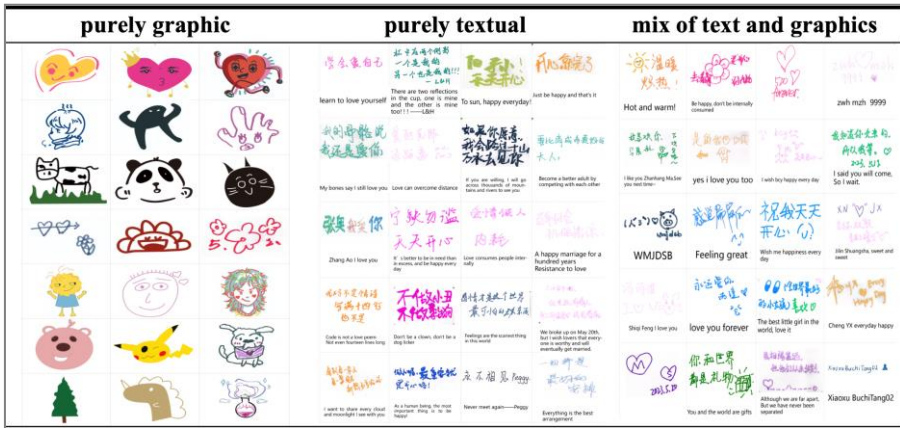


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the three forms of the love graph

3.2 In terms of the content of the graphic representation

In terms of the content expressed, the 455 love-themed graphics collected from college students can be categorized into three major classes as indicated in Figure 2: graphics expressing emotions, graphics symbolizing love, and graphics of abstract cultural significance. Emotional expression graphics primarily include those related to emotions associated with love, such as happiness, sadness, and anger, totaling 205 pieces, which account for 45.10% of the effective graphics collected in this study. Graphics symbolizing love mainly refer to those representing the object of love or characteristics of love, totaling 106 pieces, accounting for 23.29% of the effective graphics collected, and include hearts, animals, plants, etc. Abstract cultural graphics mainly signify personal identity, value expressions, and preferences, including one's own cartoon image, character settings from animations, personal hobbies, etc., totaling 144 pieces, which represent 31.64% of the effective graphics collected in this study.

A comprehensive analysis of the three categories of expressive content reveals that graphics expressing emotions constitute the largest proportion. Within this category, those conveying positive, happy content exceed 53%, while those depicting sadness and anger account for approximately 9%, and other types make up 38%. This indicates that the majority of college students hold an optimistic or positive attitude towards love, with a considerable number also adopting a neutral or open stance, and comparatively fewer exhibiting a negative attitude. Among the 106 graphics symbolizing love, college students predominantly use animals, plants, hearts, and flowers to express the cuteness, romance, and tenderness of love. This reflects college students' earnestness and bashfulness in emotional relationships, as well as their aspiration for romantic affection. In the 144 graphics of abstract cultural significance, those related to anime and cartoons total 73 pieces, accounting for 50.69%. These include self-portrayal in anime form, anime depictions of love interests, and favorite anime characters, illustrating the close connection between anime media and college life. Another notable characteristic is within the abstract cultural graphics, where students' names related graphics appeared

55 times, textual graphics expressing their own love preferences appeared 34 times, and 12 individuals explicitly expressed the sentiment "to love others, one must first love oneself." These graphics reflect the clear self-identification and the desire to realize self-worth among college students.



































































graphics expressing emotions			graphics symbolizing love			graphics of abstract cultural significance		
								
								
								
								
								
								
								
								
						learn to love yourself	Lovers remember to love themselves first	Love consumes people internally

Fig. 2. Schematic representation of the three types of expressive content of love graphs

4 Conclusion

A salient characteristic of the 455 effective graphics collected in this study is that most of the graphics possess features common to social media symbols frequently used by college students, such as the emoticons from QQ, WeChat, and BILIBILI. These symbolic graphics are concise, direct, and easy to disseminate or communicate, suggesting that on one hand, college students' communication and interaction rely heavily on social media, and on the other hand, social media has shaped the perceptions of college students. In the process of using social media, college students are unconsciously establishing or maintaining interpersonal relationships, including romantic ones, in ways that are structured by these platforms. This finding prompts us to consider whether dependence on social media is directly related to the phenomenon of the "fast-food" approach to love relationships that is currently observed among college students.

Another characteristic of these graphics is the preference for depicting immediate emotional states rather than expressing long-term emotional directions or aspirations. In the past, college romance was often seen as more likely to lead to marriage, with those involved harboring expectations of progressing towards marriage and family, and typically dreaming of future life aspects such as housing, vehicles, children, and so on. However, in this collection of graphics, we see hardly any that symbolize such long-term objectives. The current trend among college students is to enjoy the present's immediate emotions or feelings, with little concern for or an avoidance of future emotional directions.

Overall, the graphics collected in this study exhibit distinct characteristics of the era and a diversity that is two-fold. On one hand, we can observe the deep connection between Chinese college students and the internet and new media; anime, films, and social media have exerted a profound impact on the contemporary college students' concepts of love. On the other hand, it also reveals the varied expressions and autonomous awareness of college students regarding their notions of love. This diversity not only reflects the differences and uniqueness among individuals but also showcases the richness and plurality of the college student demographic in terms of their love concepts.

This study has certain limitations, particularly in the methods and processes of graphic data acquisition. We have noted that the environment of the graphic collection activities, the characteristics of the participants, and the communicative abilities of the data collectors can lead to variability in the quantity and quality of the graphic data collected. Consequently, subsequent research will target improvements concerning these influencing factors.

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