SUGAR-FREE LOVE IN THE CONTEXT OF MEDIATED EXISTENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA FACTORS BEHIND THE FORMATION OF CRUSH-BASED ROMANTIC IDEALS

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Abstract: In the context of China's declining population growth, the accelerating trends of lower birth rates and delayed marriages, the transformation of information dissemination and social interaction modes brought about by mediated existence has reshaped the public's concept of love. On social media platforms, crush-style love has garnered significant attention and intense discussion among young people. This instant emotional experience has become an electronic substitute for real romantic relationships, fulfilling individuals' romantic fantasies without requiring significant effort or exposing them to risk. The characteristics of crush-based love are frequency, one-sidedness, ephemerality, and illusion, typically based on specific contexts and idealized personas. Its emergence and popularity are fundamentally due to the acceleration of time and the erosion of patience, the flow of emotions and absence of genuine presence, and the alienation of values and the raising of emotional thresholds brought about by mediated existence.
Keywords: Sugar-free love; Time-space compression; Emotional flow

1 PHENOMENON: EMOTIONAL ILLUSIONS IN CYBERSPACE AND THE DECLINE OF REAL-WORLD SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

For Generation Z, love is no longer tied to labels such as "forever" or "eternity." The term *crush*, which has been widely circulated on various social media platforms, embodies a new understanding and longing for love among young people. As of now, the Douban group "I met a crush today" has nearly 180,000 members, and an increasing number of young people are spontaneously sharing their past or present *crush* experiences on media platforms. People have playfully referred to *crush* as "sugar-free love," likening it to sugar substitutes in high-sugar, low-calorie foods. It fulfills the individual's romantic fantasies and emotional needs while avoiding the expenditure of effort or the risk of harm. These emotional experiences are often expressed through a combination of text, images, and music, blending romance, ambiguity, and intense emotions. This combination effectively stirs the viewer's emotions, encouraging the viral spread of the content. The spontaneous creation and dissemination of such content by various individuals have resulted in the formation of a serene and warm emotional illusion in cyberspace.

As mediated existence becomes the norm, the modes and possibilities of human connection grow exponentially. Interpersonal attraction and social interactions have become effortless, with distance, race, and class no longer obstacles to human connections. Mediated existence and mediated communication have removed the difficulties of connection, making communication smoother than ever. However, this ease has also opened Pandora's box. The convenience of interpersonal communication has led to a devaluation of its quality, while the pursuit of communication efficiency has caused people to lose the ability to engage in deeper conversations. In this experience economy, people's expectations of love have been reduced to fleeting experiences and pleasure, rather than lasting commitment and mutual companionship. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs' "2021 Statistical Bulletin on the Development of Civil Affairs" official data, 7.643 million marriages were registered in 2021, a decrease of 6.1% compared to the previous year. The marriage rate was 5.4%, marking a 0.4 percentage-point drop, the lowest in 36 years. Moreover, in 2022, China's natural population growth rate was -0.60%, a decrease of 0.94 percentage points from the previous year. The phenomena of late marriage, delayed childbirth, and the refusal of marriage and childbearing are closely tied to a significant distortion in the romantic views of the younger generation, shaped by changes in information dissemination and social interaction patterns. Therefore, it is of great practical significance to study the impact of media on the romantic views of contemporary youth.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

2.1 Types of Love

As the highest form of interpersonal attraction, love is an ancient and timeless topic. In *The Symposium*, Plato recorded a myth about the origins of love: it is said that in ancient times, human beings were very different in terms of gender and appearance. Fearing their power, Zeus split humans in half with a mighty axe, and ever since, people have spent their lives searching for their "other half."[1]This romantic description expresses the idea that love is the impulse to return to a state of wholeness. Scholars throughout history have provided various interpretations of love, and in terms of

its typology, the following perspectives are most common:

The Theory of the Three Primary Colors of Love.[2]Canadian sociologist John Alan Lee, using the card sorting method to analyze Western literature and the emotional experiences of his interviewees, proposed the theory of the three primary colors of love. His core idea is that love has three main styles, akin to primary colors: *Eros* (passionate love), characterized by intense emotional experiences; *Ludus* (playful love), casual and game-like in nature; and *Storge* (friendship-based love), where affection grows over time through mutual understanding. The combinations of these three primary love types form secondary forms of love: Passion and playfulness create *possessive love*; Passion and friendship create *altruistic love*; Playfulness and friendship form *realistic love*. The style of love is not fixed, but rather represents a relationship that can transform. Different relationships evoke different forms of love, and even for a specific individual, love may change as circumstances or time evolve.

The Cluster Theory of Love. [3]Psychologist Davis argues that love incorporates eight key elements of friendship (joy, mutual support, respect, freedom, acceptance, trust, understanding, and deep emotional connection) along with two specific clusters: *passion* and *care*. The passion cluster includes "infatuation with the other," "sexual desire," and "exclusivity," while the care cluster contains "support for the other" and "maximal sacrifice." Therefore, Davis believes that love is a special form of friendship, but with a deeper emotional intensity in its shared elements compared to friendship.

The Triangular Theory of Love. [4]Sternberg metaphorically depicts the three components of human love—*passion*, *intimacy*, and *commitment*—as the three corners of a triangle. Passion refers to the awakening source of intense emotional experiences, typically sexual desire or other strong emotional needs. Intimacy encompasses elements such as acceptance, understanding, support, and sharing. Commitment represents the investment to maintain love. The combination of these three components forms eight different types of love: *Non-love* (absence of all three), *Liking* (intimacy only), *Infatuated love* (passion only), *Empty love* (commitment only), *Romantic love* (intimacy and passion), *Companionate love* (intimacy and commitment), *Fatuous love* (passion and commitment), and *Consummate love* (intimacy, passion, and commitment).

The above studies approach the classification of love from different angles, yet they all convey a similar view: love should simultaneously encompass intense emotional experiences (passion) and relatively mild, enduring care and understanding—both are indispensable.

2.2 Mediated Existence and Crush

Mediated existence refers to a way of living centered around media. As early as the 1980s, scholar Kent Asp introduced the concept of "political mediation." [5]With the increasing importance of media in human social life, research on mediation expanded into broader social fields. Some scholars argue that mediation is the extension of media effects to macro social consequences, with its essence lying in understanding the complex social outcomes caused by media through this concept. [6]Mediated existence not only refers to the intrusion of media into daily life, but also describes, from a more macro perspective, the mutual influence of social processes and media technology. Media extends human bodies and reorganizes social relationships and practices, presenting a "super-subjective" nature that transcends the traditional instrumental role of media. The advent of mediated existence has disrupted traditional concepts of social time and space, altering the ways in which information is disseminated in interpersonal communication. The media timeline becomes fragmented, the boundaries between real and virtual spaces blur and interpenetrate, and user behavior is digitized. [7]As described in materialist philosophy: matter is primary, consciousness is secondary; matter determines consciousness, and consciousness is a product of the development of the material world. Changes in the material world drive changes in public social cognition and self-awareness, and the meaning of love also bears the marks of the times.

Crush is a term that has recently been widely discussed and circulated on social media platforms. Its Chinese definition has two interpretations: as a verb, it can mean "to crush" or "to squeeze"; as a noun, it refers to "a brief, intense infatuation." In the context of social media, people often use expressions like "I had a crush on him," meaning they briefly, intensely, and shyly liked him. This expression emphasizes the emotional experience of love while neglecting or downplaying the outcome of the relationship. Compared to true love, crush lacks the emotional element of "sustained care," and is often viewed as a transient emotional experience, characterized by the following traits:

First, frequent emotional stimulation, usually based on a specific scene. With the help of filters and digital beautification technologies, media platforms have become a "symbolic reality" full of beautiful illusions, where body image becomes a symbol of pleasure and desire. Audiences constantly switch between different scenes, which are often constructed with specific elements and tags that can quickly evoke emotional experiences in viewers, triggering admiration and infatuation. A popular internet saying aligns with this characteristic: "This is an era where love comes quickly; on short video platforms, you can fall in love with hundreds of people in a minute."

Second, the one-sided and ephemeral nature of the emotion. A crush does not emphasize emotional interaction between the subject and the object of their affection, focusing instead on the subject's own emotional experience, which is why it is one-sided. When a person experiences admiration or attraction to someone in a specific time or scene, they can be described as having a crush. Furthermore, the one-sided nature and scene-based characteristics of a crush make it difficult to maintain over time. It usually fades quickly once the emotional triggers (such as the scene, atmosphere, or persona) disappear.

Third, the illusory nature of the emotional experience. Media technology has made performance a regular part of daily life, allowing people to easily take on different roles in different contexts. A crush usually corresponds to an idealized

virtual persona that has been carefully curated, rather than a real, three-dimensional individual. Therefore, it is essentially a projection of the subject's own aesthetic values onto a specific object, and carries a strong element of emotional virtuality. Although this emotional illusion can satisfy an individual's romantic fantasies, it may influence the subject's normal emotional needs.

3 THE IMPACT OF MEDIATED EXISTENCE ON THE LOVE CONCEPTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Intelligent terminals' popularization not only means the extension of electronic components to the human body, but also means the co-opting of social relationships by mediated network systems. As more survival information is incorporated into the mediated network, the inherent communication structure collapses, and the socio-spatial conditions on which humans rely for survival are reconstructed. David Harvey, in his work The Condition of Postmodernity, accurately defines the characteristics of modern society. That is, the time-space we live in is experiencing a collapse. "The history of capitalism is characterized by an acceleration of the pace of life while overcoming various spatial obstacles, such that the world sometimes seems inherently to collapse towards us." [8]In the mediated world, time is in constant flux, space flows freely, and diverse values and traditional ideologies coexist in tension. For the contemporary young generation, information transmission, social interactions, and relationship construction are all in a state of subversion, and their concepts of love will inevitably change in the blending of the real and the virtual.

3.1 Accelerated Time: The Shrinkage of Social Interactions and the Deprivation of Patience

Communication technology has helped humanity overcome the barriers of time and space, propelling society into a rhythm of accelerated flow. Heidegger once described this in a lecture: "The budding and growth of plants, which were once completely hidden within the cycle of seasons, can now be shown in a minute through film. Film reveals the distant ruins of the most ancient cultures, as though they are right in today's streets. In the shortest time, humanity travels the longest distances. By casting the greatest distances behind, humanity brings everything before itself with the smallest possible distance." [9]Here, we can vaguely glimpse two characteristics of mediated time: compression and the ability to weave time freely, while the construction of one's concept of love is often inseparable from temporality.

The mediated time in modern society has been compressed and accelerated, becoming a high-value and scarce resource. The competition for time extends across all areas of society, creating a massive butterfly effect. On one hand, we see how mediated existence has brought about a transformation in social production practices, making fragmented browsing, real-time connection and feedback, and multitasking the norm. [10]News reading, leisure, and education are no longer practices conducted within specific time slots but are instead fragmented into the gaps of time. Humans are able to process more information in a shorter period of time, creating more value. On the other hand, while media fill fragmented time, they also fragment all our complete moments. The convenience of synchronous communication makes idle time become empty talk, as people must constantly manage the work that might arise. Multitasking improves productivity, but as the value created in each unit of time increases, the time available for the individual self decreases. [11]The acceleration of mediated time acts like a conveyor belt, affecting all aspects of social life. According to the "time substitution theory," as more time is consumed by the internet, real-world interactions decrease. The time saved by media is reinvested into new information production and consumption, becoming digital labor for capital, while real-world social interaction shrinks due to lack of nourishment. A healthy romantic relationship requires both "passion" and "care," which inevitably need time, setting, energy, and interaction to sustain, all of which are elements that young people in an accelerated society often cannot afford. The rise and popularity of "crush"-style love can be seen as a collective release of the anxiety and tension caused by modern society's competitive pressures and survival stress.

The other characteristic of modern mediated time is its ability to be freely woven. In the world created by "mediated existence," time is uncertain and fluctuating. People live in the present, constantly shifting between past and future in the realm of screens and mediated time. Each person is required to rebuild their sense of time amidst the interplay of reality and the virtual world. However, media technologies and human behavior often flow in opposite directions, influencing one another. Platforms like social media and short videos give individuals the freedom to consume time, but they also deprive them of patience. At the same time, asynchronous communication makes it easier to manipulate one's image in mediated interactions, while frequent strong visual stimuli keep the subject's emotions in a state of constant stimulation. As the famous poet Mu Xin wrote, "In the past, daylight moved slowly, cars, horses, and mail were slow, and a lifetime was enough to love only one person." The relaxed romanticism of the past can no longer adapt to this fast-paced era.

3.2 The Flowing Space: Emotional Fluidity and Absence of Presence

Time and space are crucial dimensions in media studies. In his work *The Bias of Communication*, Canadian scholar Harold Innis makes a clear distinction between the temporal and spatial biases of media communication and discusses their impact on social structures. [12]With the widespread use of smart devices, the "global village" that Marshall McLuhan once described has become a reality in modern society. The space in which we live has evolved from being fixed to fluid, from shared to private, and from real to virtual, exhibiting characteristics of liquidity and a fusion of the real and the virtual. As a result, social interactions and interpersonal emotions are quietly undergoing transformation.

Digital technology has broken down the spatial barriers to information dissemination, turning space from a fixed geographical concept into a fluid "river." The internet, likened to a vessel, enables individuals to navigate between

multiple heterogeneous spaces, communities, and scenes over time. Each space contains its own set of unique elements, and people must perform specific roles within these spaces. These roles are always partial representations of the self—never the complete, authentic individual—merely a snapshot of the self at a given moment. In media platforms, due to the one-way nature of emotional engagement and the asynchronous nature of space and time, the establishment and dissolution of relationships have become easier. The rapid flow of information reduces emotions to a form of consumption, where people no longer need to focus on someone for an extended period but instead treat them as a fantasy emotional partner or a consumable companion. [13]In this one-sided emotional experience, the elements of "intimacy" and "commitment" in the triangle of love retreat into the background, leaving only "passion" to satisfy the individual's emotional needs.

On the other hand, as social media has become an indispensable part of daily life and social interactions, it is increasingly replacing offline social activities. More and more people choose to stay indoors, spending time with their smartphones or computers, making "the absence of presence" a growing phenomenon. Traditional romantic relationships, which typically require prolonged social interactions, are increasingly shifting from offline to online spaces due to the advent of media-centric living. While communication still occurs in virtual spaces, it lacks the immediacy, interactivity, and physical presence inherent in offline interactions, rendering it a distorted form of communication. "Presence" refers to the physical embodiment of the individual in the space where events occur. In the process of information exchange between subjects, language only carries part of the message, while the remaining communication is conveyed through body language and eye contact. Thus, as people increasingly rely on online interactions, real-life interpersonal communication gradually diminishes. Furthermore, in the pursuit of presenting a more perfect performance in the media space, individuals invest more effort into selecting and utilizing "props." Real-world spaces become the props for media performances and sharing, with individuals focusing on media content while ignoring the real world around them. [14]People seem to fall into a paradox: while information interactions become more frequent, media platform content increases, and virtual spaces become more lively, they increasingly feel isolated.

3.3 Alienated Value: Egoism and the Rising Threshold

Compared to the interactions in the real world, some social cues in mediated interactions are in a state of retreat, and the participants are unable to grasp the information exchange in an intuitive, three-dimensional manner. As a result, the importance of visual imagery naturally rises to an exceptional level. As Guy Debord describes, life itself is presented as a vast accumulation of spectacles, becoming a subordinate part of the visual symbol display.[15]The visual landscapes ubiquitous in the media cater to the aesthetic preferences of the public, while simultaneously numbing and controlling them. If, in a commodity society, things or reality are divided into use value and exchange value, then in a society of spectacles, they are divided into reality and image.[16]In this society where "images dominate everything," the worship of appearance and egoism are distorting and alienating the emotional values of the public.

McLuhan believed that media are extensions of human beings, and extension also means reduction. The mediated existence facilitates communication without obstacles, but it also causes its significance to quickly diminish. Due to the lack of social cues, interpersonal interactions on media platforms lack sufficient social presence.[17] This leads to behavior on media platforms often not being constrained by social norms. In other words, interpersonal communication in mediated spaces does not exhibit the characteristics of strong connections. In specific contexts, users remain "atomized" individuals. Atomization refers to the process in which social bonds change during periods of institutional transformation. It is primarily characterized by the weakening of connections between individuals, the alienation of individuals from the public sphere, and the resulting deterioration of fundamental social connections such as the distance between the individual and the state, as well as the breakdown of moral norms. The specific manifestations of social atomization include: (1) the alienation of interpersonal relationships, the loosening of social bonds, and the decline of primary social groups; (2) the alienation of individuals from the public world; (3) the failure of norms, and a decline in social moral standards. [18]Although the existence of media has, to some extent, enhanced the informational connections between individuals, it has never truly fulfilled its expected role as a bridge for emotional connection. In the relatively relaxed moral environment of cyberspace, young people, heavily influenced by utilitarian education, often scorn traditional moral values regarding love. Furthermore, diverse cultural values collide, compete, and merge in the information space. Many are influenced by the Western notions of romantic relationships, pursuing casual, free-spirited love, blindly chasing romantic ideals, while ignoring or unwilling to take on the essential responsibilities and obligations in intimate relationships. An increasing number of individuals have become refined egoists and individualists, harboring distrust towards others and unwilling to make sacrifices for others. The traditional "other-centered" sacrificial view of love has been discarded, shifting more toward a "self-centered" hedonistic view of relationships.

In addition, the consumption of specific information content has raised the psychological threshold for love among young people. The cultivation theory proposed by American communication scholar George Gerbner suggests that the "symbolic reality" presented by mass media plays a significant role in shaping individuals' perceptions and understanding of the real world. On one hand, in the media platforms overwhelmed by information, the type of content that often wins the competition for the audience's limited attention is eye-catching negative information. As a timeless topic, stories about marriage and relationships have become the key to attracting traffic for the media. The media sets the agenda for the public, sparking widespread discussion. Under the deliberate guidance of certain negative self-media,

the platform often presents content like breakups, divorces, infidelity, and violence. These negative messages can quickly stir up a whirlpool of public opinion, promoting secondary dissemination. Over time, the constant exposure to negative information erodes people's confidence in healthy, intimate relationships, leading them to project their emotional needs onto the idealized and ephemeral notion of "crush" relationships.

On the other hand, the visual transformation of media dissemination means that much of the information now carries aesthetic content. Whether it's photos and short videos posted by influencers or the portrayal of handsome men and beautiful women in films and TV shows, all of this engages in aesthetic disciplining of the audience. People get lost in the pseudo-environment constructed by the media and begin to disregard real physical appearances in the world around them.

4 CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

This paper introduces the concept of "mediatization" into the practice of interpersonal attraction, aiming to explore the characteristics and formation reasons of the love concepts among young people from a media perspective. Media platforms provide a fluid, multi-value coexistence scenario. The combination of fragmented information consumption habits, asynchronous communication forms, fading social cues, and more relaxed social norms has fostered the emergence of "crush" as a love concept centered around emotional experience. Rather than saying that "crush" is a spontaneous love concept formed by contemporary young people that fits their traits, it is more accurate to view it as a product of changes in information dissemination and social interaction patterns. As a form of "sugar substitute," a crush may offer a brief, idealized love experience, but this experience is ultimately a projection of individual imagination onto a particular object. Although it can evoke intense emotional desires, it lacks the other foundational elements of love, thus cannot be sustained in the long term.

Therefore, when mediated interactions become a widespread social phenomenon, it is worth reflecting on how we can avoid the erosion of emotional meaning caused by fluidity. In his work The Interaction Ritual Chain, American sociologist Randall Collins argues that procedural activities expressing different meanings—what he refers to as interaction rituals—are the source of social dynamics. The image individuals present in society is formed through their interaction practices with others. Society, according to Collins, becomes a chain made up of different interaction rituals, and people rely on this chain to transition from one situation to another.From the perspective of interaction rituals, romantic relationships can be viewed as interactive behaviors between two parties. Similar to other interaction rituals, participants in a romantic relationship form a shared focal point of attention, experiencing each other's subtle bodily rhythms and emotions. Interaction rituals have the ability to evoke emotions in participants, and in turn, emotional responses can enhance the participants' sense of the ritual itself. From this, we can infer the process of romantic interaction rituals. When both participants in a romantic relationship focus on the same point of attention, emotional resonance drives the production and expression of interactive symbols.

The key to maintaining love lies in resonance and symbolic interaction. First, as described in the "intimacy" element of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love or the "friendship" element in the Theory of the Three Colors of Love, emotional maintenance requires frequent, regular interactions between the two participants. This not only represents a relative fixation of communication spaces or contexts, but also necessitates equivalent symbols capable of evoking resonance. Secondly, an essential aspect of interaction rituals is that the participants must establish boundaries with outsiders. From both an ethical and emotional perspective, love inherently possesses strong exclusivity. The frequent emotional stimuli on media platforms not only hinder the cultivation of romantic relationships, but also undermine their seriousness. Finally, the physical presence of bodies is another indispensable element in the ritual chain of interaction. While media extend our possibilities for communication, the mediated interactions still lack certain social cues, and thus fail to convey sufficient emotional energy, making it impossible for interpersonal communication to achieve true intimacy.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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