

Modeling Multi-Subject Interaction in “Early Love” within the Framework of Labeling Theory

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Abstract:

Early love is a unique Chinese term. What hides behind it is China's unique view of education and marriage, as well as China's unique model of family and campus interaction. This paper adopts a qualitative research method to explore the origins of the word “early love” and construct a model of multi-subject interaction in early love within the frameworks of symbolic interactionism and labeling theory. Firstly, the term “early love”, as a discursive practice that resists adolescent romance, arises from specific temporal and spatial factor during 1960s in China. Secondly, “early love” is characterized as a “joint action” accomplished through the interactions of various parties involved—parents and children, teachers and students, and students and peers—each operating under their respective situational definitions. This paper provides a new perspective on the study of early love and offers theoretical support for scientific interventions aimed at promoting adolescent love and safeguarding adolescent mental health.

Keywords: Early love; multi-subject interaction model; symbolic interactionism; labeling theory.

1. Introduction

At the 2024 National People's Congress, numerous delegates and members raised concerns regarding youth mental health, presenting their opinions and suggestions. Xu Ling, a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), stated, “Schools generally emphasize test-taking and success education..... Teachers often struggle to recognize students' psychological crises, and their crisis intervention skills are insufficient, making it challenging for them to detect and address students' psychological problems

promptly..... Many parents are overly focused on their children's academic performance, employing simplistic and ineffective educational methods with quick and easy goals. This parental anxiety leads to conflicts between parents and children, escalating tensions, and even resulting in frequent suicidal incidents.”.

“Early love” has become a significant social issue in recent years due to its prevalence and profound impact on the mental development of adolescents. As teenage students enter the stage of sexual maturity, they experience physiological and psychological

urges that draw them toward the opposite sex. Moreover, in the information age, multi-channel mass media exposes modern teenagers to a vast amount of sexual information and stimulation, making curiosity and exploration of sex and love unavoidable [1]. According to the *2015 Chinese Marriage and Love Survey Report*, over half of the respondents (51.09%) reported having their first love affair before or at the age of 18 [2].

Heterosexual interactions have significant psychosocial implications for adolescent development, particularly concerning self-expression, moral values, legitimate choices regarding sameness, career readiness, and various social roles, including gender roles [3]. Appropriate interventions in adolescent relationships can help individuals establish a clear sense of self through interactions with the opposite sex, fostering self-worth and identity, and accumulating experiences that contribute to the development of mature love in the future [4-6]. Conversely, unreasonable interventions may lead to escalating conflicts [7-8].

By modeling multi-subject interactions in early love through the lens of symbolic interactionism and analyzing conflict escalation through labeling theory, this study aims to provide a new perspective on early love and theoretical support for scientific interventions in adolescent love relationships.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Sources of symbolic interactionism

The German sociologist Max Weber believed that sociology should study the subjective meanings that social actors assign to their actions. Social behavior is interactive, with various behaviors shaped by role status, behavioral norms, and the cultural values and meanings present in specific social situations [9].

The situational paradigm proposed by the Chicago School emphasizes understanding social behavior and phenomena within particular social contexts. This paradigm asserts that human behavior is influenced not only by intrinsic personal factors but also significantly by the social environment and context in which it occurs. William Thomas introduced the concept of “definition of the situation” to explain the mechanisms underlying social interactions, suggesting that individuals’ consideration and subjective interpretation of the situations they encounter prior to their actions will determine their behavioral responses. Furthermore, both parties in an interaction respond only after understanding the meaning behind the other party’s behavior. Different interpretations can lead to varying re-

actions, which may diverge significantly from the original motivations of the actor. The responder can only understand the motives of others basing on their own feelings [10].

The Chicago School developed the theory of symbolic interaction, which posits that people interact through symbols (e.g. language, gestures, facial expressions) and, in the process, develop their understanding of themselves and others. Brummer introduced the concept of “joint action” referring to actions taken collaboratively by two or more individuals. In joint action, people in different positions interact with each other through their own interpretations and definitions, combining to form an ongoing process [11].

2.1.2 Labeling theory

Labeling theory, a branch of symbolic interactionism, aims to explain “transgressive behavior.” This theory posits that a social phenomenon becomes a problem when society labels it as such under specific temporal and spatial conditions. As defined, “Deviant behavior is the behavior that people so label. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied. “[12]. Only when a social situation and behavior are labeled as “normal,” “justified,” or “normative” can their antagonism be automatically mitigated.

Labeling theory considers “transgressive behavior” as a particular form of interactive process—a “joint action” in which the transgressor and the labeler dynamically interact with each other based on their “definitions of the situation.”[12]. Lemert categorizes this interactive process into two stages: “primary deviance” and “secondary deviance.” Primary deviance is occasional infractions that can occur to almost anyone. They are often temporary, tentative, minor, and easily concealed. Although they violate universal norms of behavior, these transgressions are typically forgiven by the public. However, if such behavior is discovered and made public, the unfortunate primary transgressor who is caught will face public censure and punishment under the convention and become labeled as a transgressor. Consequently, those around him or her will begin to react according to this label, leading to discrimination, contempt, and similar responses. As the individual comes to accept this label, they may develop a sense of entitlement to it, form a new self-concept, and begin to act in accordance with it. They enter secondary deviance-engaging in behavior that violates social norms, being labeled as transgressive by others and by themselves. The secondary transgressor may make this transgressive behavior a habit, termed “habitual transgression,” thereby entering a career of transgression. Simultaneously, the new transgressive group or subculture to which

the individual belongs provides socialization support for this behavior, making it hard for them to revert to their pre-transgressive patterns [13].

2.2 Status of Existing Research on Early Loving

2.2.1 Definition of “early love”

The definition of the term “early love” firstly hinges on the definition of “early.” In practice, the age and educational stage of the individuals involved are generally used as criteria to determine whether a relationship qualifies as an early love affair. In this paper, “early love” is defined as teenage love occurring before the completion of high school, typically before the age of 18 or 19. Secondly, we must consider the definition of “love.” While different scholars may have various definitions of adolescent romantic relationships, they generally share common characteristics. First, a romantic relationship is defined as a mutually recognized, ongoing interactive relationship between two individuals. Second, both parties in a romantic relationship are attracted to each other, expressing strong emotions alongside sexual attraction [14]. In summary, this paper defines “early love” as a relationship in which both parties acknowledge each other’s status as a couple,

are attracted to one another, and express their affection through various means before completing high school.

2.2.2 Origins of the discursive practice of “early love”

“Early love” is a local concept in China. By horizontally comparing the differences in attitudes toward teenage love between China and the West, and vertically analyzing the changes in attitudes toward teenage love before and after the 1960s, we can identify the specific temporal and spatial conditions that gave rise to the transgressive concept of “early love.”

In Western countries, the concept of “early love” does not exist. Participation in romantic activities is viewed as a normative and often defining experience of adolescence. Establishing close friendships and romantic relationships is considered an important developmental task for adolescents. As children transition into adulthood, the time spent with peers of the opposite sex increases [15,16]. By middle to late adolescence, this increased interaction often takes the form of pursuing romantic interests and developing romantic relationships [17]. Adolescents who engage in more romantic socialization tend to demonstrate higher psychosocial maturity, greater social competence, and broader social networks within schools [18].

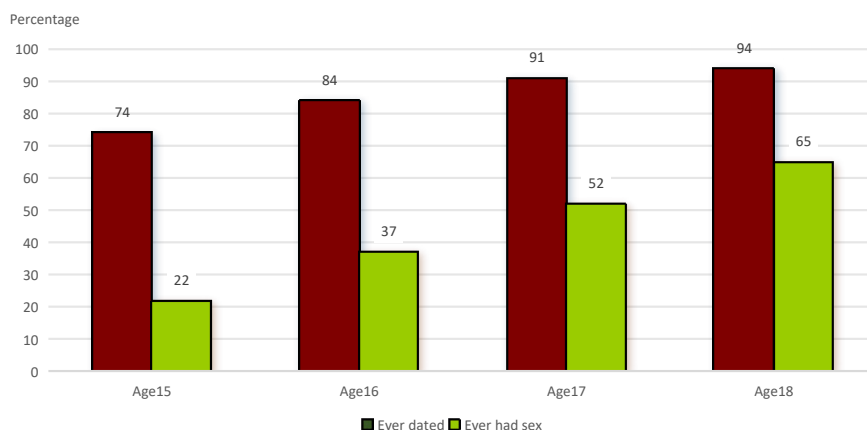


Fig. 1 Teen dating and sexual activity, by age [19]

According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, a U.S. survey on early relationship experiences among 15 to 18-year-olds, nearly all teens date at some point. Among those in the NLSY97 sample, 74 percent of 15-year-olds reported having dated, and 22 percent reported having had sex. By the age of 18, almost all (94%)

had dated, and 65% had reported having had sex (Figure 1) [19]. Data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NCHS), conducted from 2002 to 2017, shows that the percentage of unmarried adolescents aged 15-19 engaging in sexual behavior has remained around 42% over time (Figure 2) [20].

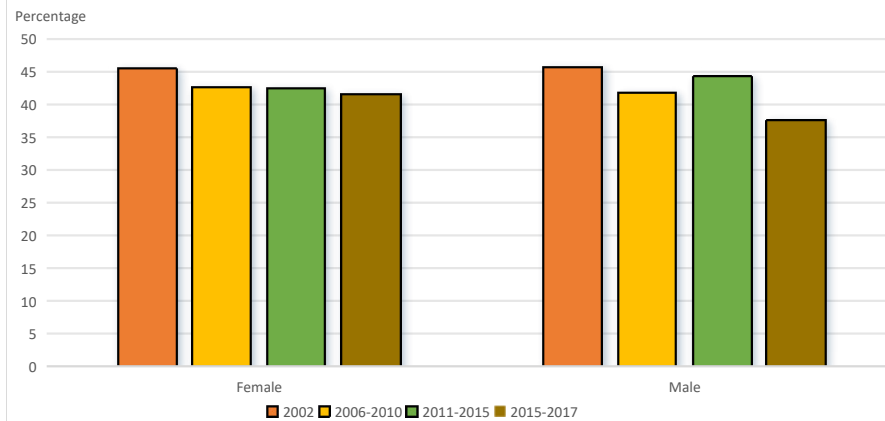


Fig. 2 Never-married females and males aged 15–19 who have ever had sexual intercourse: United States, 2002–2017 [20]

In contrast, within the dominant national discourse in China, teenage love is often viewed negatively. The term “early love” itself serves as a discursive practice resisting teenage romance. For instance, Wang Yinggang asserts that when adolescents become lost in the confusing world of youthful emotions, parents should intervene promptly to curb the situation before it spirals out of control [21]. Through vertical comparison, we find that attitudes toward underage love in China began to shift from normalization to criticism and restriction roughly around the 1960s and 1970s. The term “early love” emerged as a label denouncing underage romance.

Historically, early marriage and childbearing were the norm in China, spanning from the slavery era to feudal society and up until the Republic of China. In 1950, China enacted the *Marriage Law*, which stipulated that “a man shall not marry until he is 20 years old and a woman until she is 18 years old.” This law was accompanied by strong endorsements of free love and democratic marriage. Under these regulations, underage love was still considered acceptable, with people praising the pure love depicted in the Liang Zhu story and glorifying revolutionary campus romances. However, the 1970s saw a shift towards advocating “late marriage and late childbearing.” The 1980 amendment to the *Marriage Law* mandated that “men shall not marry earlier than 22, and women shall not marry earlier than 20.” During this transformative period, opposition to underage love grew, and the term “early love” became widely adopted as a means to criticize teenage romance.

This paper argues, drawing on labeling theory, that specific temporal and spatial conditions have contributed to the labeling of teenage love as “transgressive behavior.”

First of all, educational reforms and the popularization of compulsory education have emphasized the importance of education as a primary means of social mobility, especial-

ly following the resumption of the college entrance examination, which has become a crucial pathway for many to change their destinies. As competition intensifies, parents and schools are increasingly eager for children to concentrate solely on their studies, often suppressing any distractions to seek a better future. The societal and educational evaluation systems heavily favor meritocracy, making good grades a significant determinant of success. Secondly, the market-oriented reforms of the 1980s modernized the economy and enhanced social mobility, allowing what Bourdieu refers to as institutionalized cultural capital—such as academic qualifications and skill certifications—to be effectively converted into economic income and social status. Simultaneously, the responsibility for individual and familial development has shifted from the state back to individuals and families, exacerbating the instability brought on by rapid societal changes. With the advent of family planning policies, the nuclear family has gradually become the dominant family model in China. In this context, parents in nuclear families, motivated by economic rationality, increase their investments in their children’s education, aiming for cultural capital accumulation to continue the family’s advancement. Consequently, any factors affecting academic performance, including love, are often suppressed. Finally, from a national perspective, early love contradicts the “late marriage and late childbearing” policies promoted by China since the 1970s. The 1980 amendment to the *Marriage Law* encouraged late marriage and late childbearing, and the introduction of family planning in 1982 established these principles as fundamental state policies. It is the state’s will to vigorously promote education and control population growth, which necessitates that schools and media, as social structures, align with this policy, naturally leading to opposition against early marriage and relationships.

2.2.3 Current status of domestic research on “early

love”

In the past, the dominant domestic discourse surrounding early love has been negative, characterizing it as “trivial, transient, unstable, or simply a product of social dysfunction.” Labels with punitive consequences were preconceived and imposed on adolescents [22, 23]. Given their limited mental capacity, adolescents are seen as incapable of handling emotional issues appropriately. While natural and sincere friendships can develop between members of the opposite sex, adult-style romantic relationships are discouraged [24, 25].

However, existing research largely relies on empirical summarization and theoretical conceptualization, lacking scientific and empirical evidence. Much of it focuses on the sexual psychology and sexual morality associated with adolescent relationships, often neglecting the social psychological significance of adolescents’ heterosexual interactions. This oversight has artificially narrowed the scope and value of research on these interactions [26].

Today, more researchers are employing scientific methods and drawing from relevant Western theories to analyze early love, gradually recognizing the multi-level nature of the influencing factors and the multidimensional impacts of early love on adolescents. Some studies have begun to explore the individual emotional needs and subjective ex-

periences of adolescents, highlighting their rational thinking during the process of falling in love [22, 27].

In summary, domestic scholars are becoming more rational and dialectical in their perspectives on adolescent love. While existing research acknowledges the mutual influences between adolescent romantic relationships and parent-child, teacher-student, and peer relationships, it tends to overlook the subjective experiences of other important figures in early love, such as parents, teachers, and classmates. This lack of focus on the interactions among these subjects and the individuals involved in early love results in a deficiency in the systematic understanding of the dynamics present in adolescent romantic relationships.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Method

This paper primarily employs the in-depth interview method to explore the meaning world of different subjects involved in early love (including the early lovers, teachers, and parents). The study involved interviews with 19 students who have experienced early love (Table 1), 8 parents with experiences related to early love (Table 2), and 8 teachers who have dealt with students’ early romantic relationships (Table 3).

Table 1. Information on the interviewed early lovers(anonymized)

Number	Name	Gender	Number of early love experiences(segments)	Early love stage
1	Wei Chunlai	Male	7	Elementary, junior, senior high school
2	Zhao Hejing	Male	3	Junior, senior high school
3	Chiu Chen	Male	2	Senior high school
4	Wu Liqing	Female	3	Senior high school
5	Tong Xi	Male	1	Junior high school
6	Yin Jianguo	Male	1	Junior high school
7	Zhang Jin	Male	2	Junior, senior high school
8	Chiu Xinyao	Female	3	Junior, senior high school
9	He Xin	Male	1	Senior high school
10	Tang Haitao	Male	3	Junior, senior high school
11	Ma Kexin	Female	2	Senior high school
12	Wu Fangguo	Male	5	Junior, senior high school
13	Yang Qi	Female	2	Junior, senior high school
14	Li Qin	Female	1	Senior high school
15	Yin Jiahao	Male	3	Senior high school
16	Meng Piyang	Male	2	Senior high school
17	Zhang Qipin	Male	4	Junior, senior high school

18	Zhou Yili	Female	3	Senior high school
19	Pan Xinyan	Female	1	Senior high school

Table 2. Information on teachers interviewed

Number	Name	Stage of teaching
1	Ms.Zhang	Junior high school
2	Ms.Li	Junior high school
3	Ms.Jia	Junior high school
4	Ms.Yang	Junior high school
5	Mr.Zhou	Senior high school
6	Ms.Pan	Senior high school
7	Mr.Meng	Senior high school
8	Mr.Zhao	Senior high school

Table 3. Information on parents interviewed

Number	Name	Stage of child's early love affair
1	Ms.Wu	Junior high school
2	Ms. Dai	Junior, high school
3	Mr. Tsang	Senior high school
4	Mr. Shao	Senior high school
5	Ms. Li	Junior high school
6	Mr. He	Junior high school
7	Ms. Ma	Junior, high school
8	Ms. Liu	Senior high school

The interviews focused on three main themes: “symbolic interaction,” which examines the labels that subjects assign to early love; “joint action,” which explores how multiple labels interact within a relational framework; and “definition of the situation,” which looks at how early lovers and other subjects interpret and respond to each other’s signals. With the consent of the respondents, the researcher used recording devices during the interviews and conducted online interviews when respondents were unable to meet in person. Additionally, the researcher conducted non-participatory observations on the online platform “Xiaohongshu,” reviewing comments from individuals who have experienced or are currently involved in early love, as well as remarks from parents addressing their children’s early love experiences and teachers discussing students’ early romantic relationships, along with their interactions with netizens.

3.2 Research Results and Theoretical Analysis

3.2.1 Symbolic interaction

Different subjects understand and label early love differently. All the interviewed early lovers believed that early love is normal, that they desire to be together when in love, and that falling in love is an important source of emotional value. Parents generally label early love as “the culprit affecting children’s learning,” “a factor impacting children’s mental health,” and “a manifestation of children’s lack of love.” Some parents may recognize the positive influences of love. Parents with daughters in early relationships additionally focus on issues of safety in sexual health. Teachers commonly label early love as “impacting students’ learning,” “related to students’ personality development and physical and mental well-being,” and “affecting class morale and development.”

3.2.2 Joint action

The multilayered labeling context of early love forms the

basis for constructing heterogeneous patterns of interaction. The greater the alignment between the early love interest and the parents or teachers regarding their symbolic understanding of early love, the less likely conflict is to arise. The interaction patterns corresponding to the degree of consensus between the early love interest and the parents are, in descending order: co-operation, hiding, and conflict.

In the cooperation mode, parents do not oppose their children's early love affairs and may even offer some support. Children, in turn, take the initiative to share their romantic experiences with their parents and collaborate to address challenges in both their love lives and school. In this mode, children explore relationships independently with parental guidance, grow more quickly, and avoid risks, resulting in a closer parent-child relationship. Here, children do not internalize the external label of "transgressor" and are rarely inclined to engage in secondary transgressions. In the hiding mode, both parents and children consciously steer clear of discussions related to early love, resulting in minimal parental intervention. Parents in this mode can be classified into two types: anxious and democratic. Anxious parents oppose early love and feel anxious but are unsure how to intervene, leading them to choose avoidance; this type often has a significant generational gap with their children. Democratic parents, on the other hand, adopt a more tolerant and open approach toward early love, taking a wait-and-see stance without unnecessary intervention. In this mode, children generally develop their own judgment, navigate their romantic relationships, and are less likely to engage in secondary transgressions under the subtle constraints of their parents.

In the conflict mode, parents and children find themselves almost entirely unable to reach a consensus about love, resulting in intense conflict. There are three types of end results: the child compromises, but it is very easy to leave a psychological shadow, by the family conflict and love frustration brought about by the double damage, it is likely to appear secondary deviance; parents compromise, the child's sense of independence and responsibility in relationships may increase, but may suffer from too much emotional involvement; both parties manage to compromise, the child may experience some psychological distress but is less prone to secondary deviance under parental restraint.

The interaction patterns corresponding to the degree of consensus between the early love interest and the teacher can be categorized into three modes: complinace, hiding, and conflict.

In the complinace mode, the student agrees with the teacher's viewpoint and consciously alters their opinions, restraining their feelings and behavior. This alignment leads to reduced conflict, often resulting in the romance ending sooner.

In the hiding mode, students disagree with the teacher's perspective but do not engage in direct conflict. Instead, they adopt subtle strategies to navigate their relationship with the teacher. In this mode, students exhibit more independent judgment and thought, and the constraints imposed by the teacher make them less likely to engage in secondary transgressions. For instance, one student recounted, "The day after our parents and teachers found out, my boyfriend came up to me and asked me to pretend—like sending some texts or making a phone call—act like we had broken up and were just friends. The idea was to show his parents and teachers so they'd feel reassured. But in reality, we were still secretly dating."

In the conflict mode, the student strongly disagrees with the teacher, leading to direct confrontations over the early love affair. Teachers often resort to contacting parents or involving the school for additional support in ending these relationships. The label of "bad student" and the growing trend of blame can intensify students' rebelliousness, causing them to identify with this label and engage in further transgressive behavior.

Teachers and parents typically share a common understanding of the symbols associated with early love, which facilitates the formation of a cooperative relationship. However, conflicts and disagreements can also create an adversarial dynamic.

Peers play a significant role in influencing early lovers. On one hand, the normalization of romance among peers can stimulate curiosity and prompt students to engage in early love. On the other hand, some early lovers express feelings of shame due to gossip or fear of being exposed to the teachers, leading them to refrain from openly acknowledging their relationships.

The interaction models described can be visualized in Figure 6.

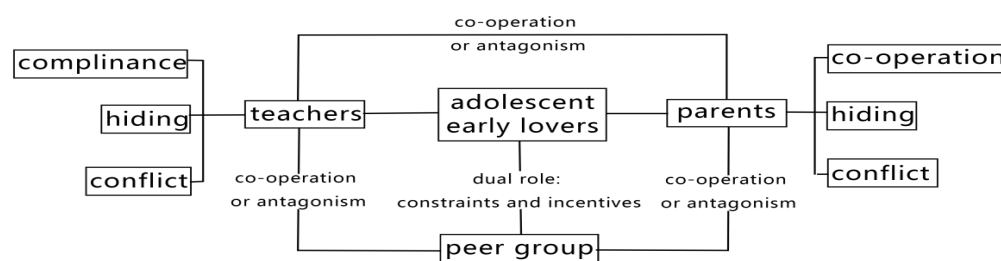


Fig. 3 Multi-subject interaction model in “Early Love”(Photo credit: Original)

3.2.3 Definition of situation

Individuals often interpret the situation through their own feelings, limiting their understanding of others’ motivations. For example, in the conflict modes of parent-child and teacher-student interactions, the child often perceives the parent’s motivation as stemming from a generation gap and an unwillingness to understand, interpreting parental efforts to curb their love as simple and harsh. In response, the child may assert, “I will protect my love and dignity against all odds.” Meanwhile, parents and teachers tend to interpret the child’s motivation as “the child doesn’t understand anything; it’s just puberty rebellion,” prompting parents to adopt measures to prevent early love without considering the child’s perspective.

In the cooperative model of parent-child interaction, the child’s motivation is perceived as stemming from “love, understanding, respect, and support,” while the parent’s motivation is understood as “feeling pure love.” This mutual understanding fosters cooperative responses. One parent expressed, “I can’t imagine parents still scold and hit their kids over dating nowadays? I’m here helping her figure out which boy chasing her is more outstanding and who can support her academic growth. I tell her to know what’s worth pursuing and what’s not, and that the right person will wait for her in the best part of her future. I give her plenty of love, understanding, and support, while also helping her build the right worldview, understand boundaries, and provide guidance.”

In the hiding parent-child interaction mode, the child interprets the parent’s motivation as “worried about my learning and personal safety,” responding by striving to keep up with studies, avoiding behaviors that are too out of line, and generally trying to stay out of the parent’s way. Anxious parents interpret their child’s motivation as “adolescent restlessness” but fear triggering rebellious behavior, leading them to seek appropriate intervention methods. Democratic parents understand their children’s motives as “adolescent restlessness and a normal growth phenomenon, feeling pure love,” and adopt a wait-and-see approach, interfering only when necessary.

In the compliance teacher-student interaction model, the early romantic partner perceives the teacher’s motivation

as “worrying about my studies for my own good” and “teaching me to see the long term from the perspective of someone who has been there before,” leading to a submissive response. In the circuitous model, early romantics also acknowledge the teacher’s concern for their academics but, due to personal priorities favoring their relationship, they opt for covert means of maintaining it. Additionally, students’ perceptions of their peers’ attitudes towards early love impact their own responses; they are more likely to engage in early love if they interpret their peers’ attitudes as envy and curiosity, and less likely if they perceive ridicule.

3.2.4 Conflict escalation and resolution

The conflict interaction pattern between early romantic partners and their parents and teachers is the most damaging for the young individuals involved. With the help of intimacy, parents’ simple and harsh interventions can cause significant harm to the child. The alliance formed between parents and teachers against the early lovers often leaves these young individuals feeling helpless and confused. Moreover, the forced end of their relationships, due to the intense opposition from parents and teachers, may lead to self-doubt regarding future romantic relationships.

“When I was in middle school, my family found out I was in a relationship too early. They scolded and beat me, and that became a psychological scar that has stayed with me my whole life. Even now, though I’m married with kids, I still have bad dreams where my family expresses disappointment in me.”

“When I was in middle school, someone wrote me a love letter. My mom found out and came at me with a knife, saying she’d slash my face. I don’t know if it’s because of that, but since then, I’ve always felt inadequate when it comes to dating. I lack confidence and am afraid of being with someone who has better prospects.”

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the process of early romantic relationships unfolds within the context of multiple labels assigned by various actors, including parents, teachers, and the early romantic partners themselves. These labels are contemporary and positional, shaped by the actors’ social and cultural backgrounds.

In an effort to promote actions that align with their own perspectives, these actors often compete to dominate the interpretation of early romance. Due to their status and authority, parents and teachers typically take the lead in this process.

Early love is often viewed as a form of primary transgression—it is common, temporary, tentative, mild, and easy to conceal. However, when early romantic partners are “caught” and subjected to public condemnation, reprimands, punishment, and labeled as “bad students” or “problematic teenagers,” the situation tends to deteriorate. Under the weight of accusations from parents and teachers, as well as discussions and ostracism from peers, early romantics may begin to internalize these negative labels. This internalization can lead them to move from primary transgression to secondary transgression, where they may begin to associate with other so-called “problematic teenagers.”

In the secondary transgression phase, adolescents often adopt behavioral patterns consistent with their new identity as “problem youths,” including smoking, drinking, fighting, and excessive internet use. As they enter this phase, they may also receive acceptance and support from others within the “problem youth” group, further reinforcing their sense of belonging to this community. Over time, this can lead to habitual transgression. “Usually, girls like to find a boyfriend and then go around showing off, saying ‘this is my husband.’ Once they’re in a relationship, they start forming cliques. When you try to talk to them, some act very prideful, and some are super rebellious and won’t listen to you. They’re drawn to boys with dyed yellow hair. They smoke, fight, watch explicit shows, constantly talk about genitals, skip class, and bully others at school.” The antagonism between a child perceived as a transgressor and the teacher or parent who labels the child as such deepens as conflicts escalate. Guo Yi likens this dynamic to a “tug-of-war,” where the parent tries to pull the child back by ten steps, while the child resists by moving twelve steps away. However, this tug-of-war often results in a lose-lose situation [28]. “The teacher frequently pulls me aside for private talks. Even if my grades fluctuate just a little, he makes a big deal out of it and keeps me in a constant state of anxiety. I’m already a pretty rebellious person, so this kind of approach only made me more determined to continue the relationship.”

In a cooperative parent-child relationship, antagonism over romantic behavior is automatically reduced when it is initially labeled as “normal,” “appropriate,” and “acceptable.” Parents who shift from being aggressors to supporters of their child’s early love can significantly reduce the likelihood of the child being harmed and entering a secondary stage of transgression.

Teachers, due to their different statuses and role in managing classroom behavior, often take an opposing stance toward early romantic relationships. However, some teachers also label early love as “normal” in an effort to reduce the antagonism between students and themselves. “I actually think the more mysterious and taboo this topic is made, the more curious students become—they’ll want to dig deeper and find out for themselves. Sometimes, it’s better to address the issue directly. For example, when I teach Chinese literature, I occasionally bring it up, like when we study love poems such as ‘*Guan Jiu*’. Our teacher would openly discuss the topic of love. For instance, the line ‘Cicada leaves, plucked from both sides’ subtly implies that when we choose a partner, we should be selective and thoughtful. As we pursue love, we should also work on improving ourselves and communicating in a pleasant way. These are all skills, and part of the process of developing a healthy personality.”

4. Conclusion

This paper introduces perspectives from symbolic interactionism and labeling theory to explore early love, expanding upon existing research in two key ways. First, by embedding early romantic relationships within a historical context, this paper uses horizontal and vertical comparisons to explain the origins of discourse surrounding early love and reveals the unique spatial and temporal contexts behind early love as a localized concept. Second, by paying attention to the motives of teachers, parents, and peers, this paper brings into the discussion of early love other important subjects’ worlds of meaning that have been hardly addressed in previous research. This approach constructs a model of multi-subject interaction in early love. Future research can apply this interaction model to other educational issues beyond early love, helping to propose more scientific measures that protect the physical and mental health of adolescents.

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