



Emotion expression and the locution “I love you”: A cross-cultural study

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Abstract

This exploratory study is aimed to advance the understanding of emotion expression across cultures by focusing on the declaration of love and studying its expression across cultures. In particular, the use of the locution “I love you” was investigated. Results indicate that the use of the locution “I love you” fluctuates greatly across cultures: It is used exclusively for romantic declarations of love in some cultures, but has a much wider distribution in others. Interestingly, nonnative speakers seem to use the locution “I love you” more in English than their native language. Differences are also noticeable within cultures, particularly across genders and age groups. Thus, females tend to use the expression more often than males. In addition, there seems to be more widespread use of the locution now than just a few decades ago.

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1. Introduction

This research treats emotions as cultural artifacts whose meanings are symbolically constructed, historically transmitted, and expressed by individuals in

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instances of situated communication (Carbaugh, 1996; Fitch, 1998; Philipsen, 1992). A study of emotion expression is also a study of the moral, cultural, and political life of a people and can yield anthropological knowledge about the social structure and cultural values that are reproduced and negotiated in the communication of emotions (Lutz, 1988). Consider the following segment drawn from a televised episode of the American program *60 Minutes* titled “Tango Finlandia” (Tiffin, 1993). Aired in February 1993, Morley Safer, the lead narrator and journalist, introduces his audience to Finland and Finns who “in their natural state,” are “brooding” and “private, grimly in touch with no one but themselves, the shyest people on earth, depressed and proud of it.” In this one segment of the program the locution “I love you” and its expression in Finnish culture is discussed by Ms. Schultz (a female American journalist living in Finland), Jan Knutas (a Finnish male literary critic), and Arja Koriseva (a celebrated Finnish female tango singer):

SAFER: Do people tell each other that they love each other?

SCHULTZ: No, oh my God, no, no. Not...even lovers.

KNUTAS: Well, I'd say you could say it once in a lifetime.... Say, you have been married for 20 years; perhaps your spouse is on her death-bed, you could comfort her with saying “I love you,”...

SAFER: (laughs)

KNUTAS: It's not funny.

KORISEVA: It's easier to me to say, like, to my boyfriend that “I love you”[in English]. ...We have heard it on TV, in movies; it's easier to me to say “I love you” than “mina rakastan sinua,” it doesn't [sound] very nice if I say “I love you” in Finnish.

SAFER: You look slightly embarrassed when you say it in Finnish.

KORISEVA: Yeah—we don't use “I love you” so much as you do. You love almost everybody (laughs). When a Finnish guy or man says “I love you,” he really means it.

The above segments of the *60 Minutes* documentary program are chosen here because claims involving nostalgia, exoticism, and the search for authenticity are made with regard to declarations of love. While the commentaries are artfully edited for playful and humorous effect for American consumption, what gets lost in the translation are the particularized and highly cultural inferential structures involving social scenarios and moral attributions that participants use to construct their commentaries about declarations of love. Clearly the communication of *love* is an important aspect of interpersonal relationships across cultures. But saying “I love you” can be a very delicate walk, with much gray area, regarding what can and should be communicated about love, when, by whom, and to whom. Love is sometimes felt but not expressed; other times, love is expressed only nonverbally; and still other times, it is communicated verbally, with or without nonverbal manifestations. In the verbal realm, a healthy daily dose of verbal “I love you's,” for some, communicates affection, care, and devotion. For others, expressing love verbally too often cheapens the deeply felt emotion and undermines its significance for others. There can also be dispute about how much love should be revealed given

the current development of a relationship. Just what is the right thing to say, when, and by whom?

2. Literature review

When searching for literature on love expression, one first notices a relative abundance of research on the expression of emotions in general. Unfortunately, most studies do not differentiate between brief and long-lasting emotions (such as anger or surprise versus love). Relatively fleeting emotions, however, share little with and should therefore be distinguished from long-lasting effects (Metts & Bowers, 1994). When studies do differentiate, they often favor the investigation of relatively brief emotional states (e.g., Bryant & Cantor, 2003; Fussell, 2002). Research on love and love expressions as features of the cultural construction of emotion is relatively rare. The available body of literature falls into three broad categories: definitions of love, intracultural studies, and cross-cultural comparisons.

Webster's lists nine different definitions for the term love. These range from affection to sexual embrace to adoration for God. The first meaning focuses on the emotion of love in human relationship contexts and is closest to the meaning targeted by this and other emotion communication studies; it defines love as "strong affection for others arising out of kinship or personal ties" (Merriam-Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary*, 1998). Researchers also commonly differentiate between love styles, as established by Greek philosophy. These styles include *agape* (unconditional, selfless love), *storge* (instinctual, familial love), *philia* (tender affection between friends), and *eros* (romantic, passionate love) (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986).

With respect to intracultural studies, research often focuses on the frequency and values associated with love expression. Clements (1996) found that marital commitment is positively related to marriage quality and expressions of love. In a study on cancer patients, Swensen and Fuller (1992) determined that love expression increases during severe health crises of one partner. Lum (1997), in a study on immigrants to the United States, reports that love expressions increased among immigrant couples the longer they resided in the United States. In contrast, within the rural Chinese, emotions are present in individuals and may bear a relationship to social experience, but "emotions are concomitant phenomena in social life, not fundamental ones" (Potter, 1988, p. 186). Using Hall's (1976) notion of contextuality, an expression of love for the high-context rural Chinese even when love is apparently most congruent with the social structure, as in the case of love between a father and a son, is understood as "being inherently in opposition to valued structural continuity" (Potter, 1988, p. 199). According to Potter (1988), emotions for the rural Chinese have no *formal* consequences. In these cases anthropologists think of expressions of love as concern-based construals, "inasmuch as both concerns and construals seem to be highly variable and culture-dependent" (Roberts, 2003, p. 183).

In addition to the issue of frequency, love expression in relation to distinctive male and female behavior differences can be interpreted using Hofstede's (2001)

masculinity–femininity dimension. For instance, males seem to express their love in developing relationships more than females, presumably fulfilling male role expectations in bidding for the relationship (Owen, 1987). In established relationships, however, females seem to surpass males in intimacy expression (Ting-Toomey, 1991). Studies have also compared preferred love styles with respect to gender. Women have been found to gravitate toward *philia* (tender affection), whereas men often prefer *ludus* (game-playing love) and *eros* (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1995; Woll, 1989). The overall importance of love for the establishment and maintenance of marriage and general attitudes and experiences of love, however, seem to be largely the same for women and men (Levine, Sato, Hashimoto, & Verma, 1995; Sprecher et al., 1994; Woll, 1989).

General attitudes and the emotional *experience* of love also seem to be similar across ethnic groups within the United States (Doherty, Hatfield, Thompson, & Choo, 1994; Lum, 1997) as well as global cultures (Scherer & Wallbott, 1994; Sprecher et al., 1994). Cultural differences, however, do explain variance in the expression of love, and do so more than gender (Kimura, 1998; Sprecher & Toro-Morn, 2002). Markus and Kitayama (1991) make the distinction between independent and interdependent self-construal where the former uses inner feeling as a motivational force in achieving personal goals, the latter values conformity and cooperation prioritizing the feelings of others. As Potter (1988) points out, the West has used the capacity of love as the symbolic basis for social relationships and as a low-context communication style maybe linked to an independent self-construal. In contrast the rural Chinese use the capacity to work to construct social relationships and the subsequent patterns of preexistent structure involved in such work. Given the form and strength of relationships that exist within preexistent structures, expressions of love are considered as threats to the established sociocultural order. Understood within a framework of an assumed interdependent self-construal, an expression of love between a father and a son for the rural Chinese, flouts the patterns of respect and obedience necessary for the optimal maintenance of a formalized relationship (Potter, 1988).

Using Hofstede's (2001) dimension of individualism versus collectivism, expressions of love are found to be more frequent in individualistic than collectivistic cultures (e.g., United States versus Japan) since members of the latter tend to be more restrained in voicing opinions as well as feelings (Kimura, 1998; Mesquite, 2001; Schwartz, 1990; Ting-Toomey, 1991). The importance of love and love expression for the establishment and maintenance of marriage also seems to be greater in Western, industrialized nations than in Eastern, underdeveloped countries (Levine, Sato, Hashimoto, & Verma, 1995).

3. Research questions

A popularized view of emotion is that it is a physiological process associated with the nervous system. Located at the core of the nervous system is a universal and

essential set of emotional states. One of these could be said to be love (Goldie, 2000; Roberts, 2003). Everybody experiences the state of being in love at least once in a lifetime (some will say if they are lucky enough). Definitions of *passionate love* (Kim & Hatfield, 2004) for example, do involve physiological effects that transcend issues of culture. While the universality of some emotional states may not be in dispute, how persons interpret and manifest those emotional experiences will differ across cultures (Ochs, 1986). A psychocultural view allows for the study of the social construction of emotion as it is shaped and informed in a social and cultural environment. Hence, this paper aims to advance an understanding of emotion expression as a de-essentialized domain and to view it as “a cultural and interpersonal process of naming, justifying, and persuading by people in relationship to each other” (Lutz, 1988, p. 5).

The thematic clusters emerging from the literature review included the issues of verbal versus nonverbal emotion expression, gender difference, nonnative versus native use of verbal love locutions, and culture change. Based on these themes, we formulated the following questions.

1. What are the demographic and contextual parameters for verbal and nonverbal declarations of love in different cultures?
2. What are the effects of cultural and linguistic backgrounds on the use of the English locution “I love you”?
3. Can a culture change be observed concerning the frequency and usage of love expression in different cultures?

We took the locution “I love you” as a point of access into cultural communication systems and the varying accomplishments of sociality its use implies. At the cross-cultural level our analytical task then was: (a) describing the locution “I love you” with reference to its occurrence and non-occurrence, where it occurs, with whom, in what language(s) and dialect(s), in which verbal forms, about which topics, as part of what interactional sequences, and with what observable consequences; and (b) interpreting the participant understandings of the locution “I love you” given the patterned contingencies under (a) above. It is through holding the phenomena of emotion expression as a constant that we will search the cultural variability in order to understand the general forces and particular features of emotion expression. Our focus here will be on the performance of communication patterns within intimate/personal relationships.

Our interest then falls on the expression of love within intimate/personal relationships. Our expectation is that the expression of love will be one of those communicative activities that give force and meaning to intimate/personal relationships. In intercultural relationships it is our hypothesis that patterned moments of love declarations also function to situate and give voice to cultural identity. Put simply, to say or not to say “I love you” can also be communicating much about communal understandings of sociality, of persons, and their strategic activities.

4. Methodology

Due to the relative scarcity of literature on intimacy expression, we developed a study design that is exploratory in nature. Using the themes that had emerged from the literature review as a basis, we designed a mixed-method study, consisting of an online survey (for quantitative analysis) and a qualitative follow-up questionnaire that invited respondents to elaborate. We began with a focus on the locution “I love you” and then expanded the range of questions to include love expression in general.

We posted the quantitative survey online, and students were recruited from undergraduate communication courses ($N = 77$). Males represented a smaller proportion of the sample ($n = 16$) than women ($n = 61$). The respondents’ ages ranged from 16–50, with 56 percent ($n = 45$) of the age 21–25. The majority of the respondents were from the domestic United States of America (66.2 percent; $n = 51$). The majority of the domestic US students were White-Americans (23.4 percent), followed by Hispanic-Americans (18.2 percent), Black-Americans (16.9 percent), and Asian or Pacific Islander Americans (7.8 percent). There were 26 international students (33.8 percent). For the most part these students were single (83 percent; $n = 64$). English was the native language of 43 respondents (55.8 percent); the rest (44 percent; $n = 34$) spoke Spanish ($n = 10$), Chinese ($n = 4$), Korean ($n = 2$), Hindi ($n = 2$) and 14 other different languages.

Our interest in administering the survey was to ask respondents to first consider various possible relationships. These we listed as *spouses*, *romantic lovers*, *parents* and *children*, *children* and *parents*, *siblings*, *grandparents* and *grandchildren*, *grandchildren* and *grandparents*, *cousins*, *friends*, *neighbors*, and *work* or *professional colleagues*. We also gave the option for respondents to list other possible relationships that we had not thought of. Two respondents listed themselves and their *pets* and themselves and their *flowers* as further possible relationships we might explore. When considering these relationships we asked respondents to indicate: (a) How often is the declaration “I love you” made in these relationships? (b) Through which mode (face-to-face; on the phone; in writing; text messaging; instant messaging) is the declaration “I love you” most commonly made? (c) On what occasions (short-term leave taking; long-term leave taking; no special occasion; festive occasions; serious occasions) is the expression “I love you” most common in these relationships? In addition to these questions, we asked respondents to indicate whether gender was a key factor as to who produced these declarations, whether declarations of love most commonly occurred verbally or nonverbally, whether nonnative speakers of English used the English declaration “I love you” more or less often than the equivalent in their native languages, and whether any culture change had been observed in the frequency and spread of the declaration over time.

We evaluated the data derived from the survey by first constructing frequency distributions to display the counts for each response and the relative percentage of responses for each value. We used cross-tabulations to examine relationships between two or more variables and explored if an independent variable such as gender, age, ethnicity, nationality (US or non-US), or marital status had any effect on dependent variables.

Built into the survey was the option to volunteer for a follow-up qualitative questionnaire in which personal experiences and questions raised in the survey process were to be investigated in greater detail. Of the 77 original survey respondents, 36 (47 percent) indicated interest and were contacted with the follow-up questions. The purpose of the follow-up questions was to explore more closely reports on emotion expression—its meanings and its derivatives. We explored the larger discursive domain of which emotion expression is a part, as well as respondent attitudes towards emotion expression and their understandings and perceptions of the situational and cultural contexts in which it is intelligible and deeply felt.

We used three general types of strategies for the collection of the follow-up qualitative data: (a) the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) where we asked for people's most memorable positive or negative experience within a romantic/personal relationship; (b) use of episode analysis (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000) where we asked respondents to reconstruct a scene, complete with lines of dialogue, that represents the recurring pattern of emotion expression in a relationship; and (c) account analysis (Harré & Secord, 1973) where, if respondents happen to document a critical incident or an important episode in regards to emotion expression, we can ask them to account for what *they* observed or how they perceived the event. The follow-up questionnaire lent itself nicely for a cultural-themes analysis (Spradley, 1980) where we could systematically search for general semantic relationships among domains. This included the cultural constructions of femininity/masculinity, relationship, romantic scenes, intimate relations, and roles such as boyfriend/girlfriend, mother/father, and parent. In this manner, we went about identifying a communication profile for the use or non-use of the declarative "I love you" and explored the larger messages about sociality (distance, power, intimacy, etc.) which would allow for or prohibit the use of "love" speech.

5. Results

5.1. Quantitative survey

As mentioned above, the first part of our study consisted of an online survey. The survey responses and cross-tabulations based on these responses furnished the following quantitative results.

5.1.1. Relationships: Frequency, mode, occasion, and gender

The respondents were asked how frequently the locution "I love you" occurred in their cultures in a variety of romantic and nonromantic relationships. Considering the given relationships, the respondents indicated that the verbal declaration "I love you" was used as follows (Table 1).

Among the choices of *frequently*, *occasionally*, *rarely*, and *never* with respect to the use of the locution "I love you," respondents chose *frequently* most often for the category of lovers (62.3 percent), followed by parents (40.3 percent) and grandparents (37.7 percent), and their respective children or grandchildren.

Table 1
How often is the declaration “I love you” made in these relationships?

Relationship	N	Mode	Frequently (%)	Occasionally (%)	Rarely (%)	Never (%)
Spouses	77	Occasionally	33.8	45.5	18.2	2.6
Romantic lovers	77	Frequently	62.3	35.1	2.6	0
Parents and their children	77	Frequently	40.3	35.1	15.6	9.1
Children and their parents	77	Occasionally/rarely	20.8	35.1	35.1	9.1
Siblings	77	Rarely	3.9	16.9	53.2	26
Grandparents and their grandchildren	77	Frequently	37.7	27.3	23.4	11.7
Grandchildren and their grandparents	77	Rarely	27.3	28.6	31.2	13
Cousins	77	Rarely	5.2	11.7	45.5	37.7
Friends	77	Occasionally	14.3	44.2	26	15.6
Neighbors	77	Never	2.6	1.3	15.6	80.5
Work/professional colleagues	77	Never	1.3	2.6	15.6	80.5

Respondents selected *occasionally* as the most common for spouses (45.5 percent), friends (44.2 percent), and children and their parents (35.1 percent). *Rarely* was the most common choice for siblings (53.2 percent), cousins (45.5 percent), and grandchildren and their grandparents (31.2 percent); and *never* the most common choice for neighbors (80.5 percent) and work/professional colleagues (80.5 percent).

When the declaration “I love you” is used, it is made most commonly when in face-to-face communications across all relationship types. Except for work/professional relationships and relationships with neighbors, the declaration “I love you” required for the most part no special occasion for those that used it. The fifteen respondents who said that they use the declaration “I love you” in work/professional relationships and relationships with neighbors used it predominantly in occasions of short-term leave taking. Respondents also indicated overwhelmingly that females are more likely to say “I love you” across all relationship types.

5.1.2. Gender, internationality, and ethnicity

Chi-square tests were used to determine relationship across gender, internationality, and ethnicity with frequency of love declarations in relationships. A few findings were significant ($p < .05$) or close to significant ($p = .05$ and $.06$) and are explored further below (Table 2).

When considering spousal relationships, 45 percent of the sample ($N = 77$) indicated that they use the declaration “I love you” occasionally and 34 percent indicated they used it frequently. Table 3 displays responses to how often the declaration “I love you” is made across spousal relationships by gender. Chi-square analyses revealed a significant difference among males and females ($\chi^2(3, N = 77) = 11.152, p < .05$). Males were less likely to indicate that they would use the declaration “I love you” frequently (18.8 percent) and more likely to indicate its use as occasional (37.5 percent) and rare (31.3 percent). Females are more likely to

Table 2
Comparison of two sample chi-square tests

Relationship type	Gender	Domestic versus international student	Ethnicity
Spouses	.01	.20	.65
Lovers	.58	.06	.45
Parents to children	.92	.05	.43
Children to parents	.55	.18	.67
Siblings	.44	.20	.08
Grandparents to grandchildren	.99	.21	.36
Grandchildren to grandparents	.76	.72	.80
Cousins	.27	.83	.90
Friends	.26	.67	.26
Neighbors	.22	.76	.09
Work colleagues	.11	.18	.33

Table 3
How often the declaration “I love you” is made across spousal relationships by gender?

Gender	Frequently (%) (n = 26)	Occasionally (%) (n = 35)	Rarely (%) (n = 14)	Never (%) (n = 2)	Total (%)
Male (n = 16)					
Row	18.8	37.5	31.3	12.5	100
Column	11.5	17.1	35.7	100	
Female (n = 61)					
Row	37.7	47.5	14.8	.0	100
Column	88.5	82.9	64.3	.0	
Total	100	100	100	100	

Note: $\chi^2(3, N = 77) = 11.152, p < .05$.

indicate a more frequent use (37.7 percent) and occasional use (47.5 percent) of the declaration. In sum, unequal proportions of males and females indicated the use of the declaration “I love you” in spousal relationships, with females using the declaration more often than males.

When considering parents and their children, 40 percent of the sample (N = 77) indicated that they use the declaration “I love you” frequently and 35 percent indicated they used it occasionally. Table 4 displays responses to how often the declaration “I love you” is made across parents and their children by domestic and international students. Although not significant, chi-square analyses revealed some interesting differences across domestic and international students ($\chi^2(3, N = 77) = 7.783, p = .051$). Domestic students are more likely to indicate a frequent (49 percent) use of declarations of love from parents to children. International students

Table 4
How often the declaration “I love you” is made across parents and their children by domestic and international students?

Status	Frequently (%) (n = 31)	Occasionally (%) (n = 27)	Rarely (%) (n = 12)	Never (%) (n = 7)	Total (%)
Domestic US student (n = 51)					
Row	49.0	33.3	13.7	3.9	100
Column	80.6	63.0	58.3	28.6	
International student (n = 26)					
Row	23.1	38.5	19.2	19.2	100
Column	19.4	37.0	41.7	71.4	
Total	100	100	100	100	

Note: $\chi^2(3, N = 77) = 7.783, p = .051$.

Table 5
How often the declaration “I love you” is made between lovers by domestic and international students

Status	Frequently (%) (n = 48)	Occasionally (%) (n = 27)	Rarely (%) (n = 2)	Total (%)
Domestic US student (n = 51)				
Row	68.6	31.4	.0	100
Column	72.9	59.3	.0	
International student (n = 26)				
Row	50.0	42.3	7.7	100
Column	27.1	40.7	100	
Total	100	100	100	

Note: $\chi^2(2, N = 77) = 5.469, p = .065$.

are more likely to indicate an occasional (38.5 percent) use of the declaration of love from parents to children. While the relationship was not significant, it was close enough that we wanted to explore this further in the qualitative analyses.

Table 5 reveals a similar relationship across respondents’ domestic or international status and how often the declaration “I love you” is made between lovers. Domestic students are more likely to indicate a frequent use (68.6 percent) of the declaration, while international students are more likely to indicate an occasional (42.3 percent) use.

5.1.3. Verbal versus nonverbal love expression

Except across spousal relationships, respondents said that verbal declarations of love were more common. The percentage ranged from 77 percent for lovers to 56 percent for siblings. Only 42 percent of the sample, however, state verbal

declarations of love were more common across spousal relationships; 58 percent indicated that in spousal relationships love was demonstrated nonverbally.

5.1.4. *Native versus nonnative language use*

Of those who spoke more than one language and whose native language was not English ($n = 31$), 21 (67.7 percent) said that they use the English declaration “I love you” more often, 5 (16.1 percent) said equally, and 5 (16.1 percent) said less often. Of those whose native language is English but who also spoke a second language fluently (10 respondents), all said that they use the English declaration “I love you” more often than a second language equivalent. Chi-square analyses revealed a significant difference between nonnative speakers of English and bilingual speakers ($\chi^2(2, N = 41) = 4.266, p < .05$). While most respondents to the qualitative follow-up questionnaire indicated that both they and their partners spoke English and the same second language, and that they made a conscious choice to use English, an inquiry concerning this issue was not part of the survey. One has to keep in mind that only about half of the survey respondents participated in the follow-up questionnaire; the survey results are therefore not completely conclusive. It may be that some respondents did not have a choice but *had to* use English if they did not have a second language in common with their partners (Table 6).

5.1.5. *Culture change*

There were only six persons over the age of 36. Three responded that declarations of love occurred less often than in the past, 2 more often, and 1 equally.

5.2. *Qualitative follow-up questionnaire*

Of the 77 original informants, 36 volunteered to elaborate on their survey responses by filling out a qualitative questionnaire. What follows are the themes that

Table 6
Use of English phrase “I love you” by nonnative and bilingual speakers of English

Language of speaker	Use of English phrase “I love you” instead of native-language equivalent			
	More often (%)	Equally (%)	Less often (%)	Total (%)
Nonnative speakers of English ($n = 10$)				
Row	100	.0	.0	100
Column	32.3	.0	.0	
Bilingual speakers ($n = 31$)				
Row	67.7	16.1	16.1	100
Column	67.7	100	100	
Total	100	100	100	

Note: $\chi^2(2, N = 41) = 4.266, p < .05$.

emerged, each illustrated by quotes from the informants. (Please note that to protect the privacy of the informants, all names have been changed. Also note that occasional grammar errors by nonnative speakers have not been corrected.)

5.2.1. Relationships

5.2.1.1. *Domestic versus international use of love expression.* Respondents were asked to comment on who can make the declaration “I love you” to whom. Responses fell into two categories: a broad use of the phrase (by friends, family, lovers, and others) and a narrow use of the phrase in romantic relationships only. As Verona (African-American female) puts it, “[in] some cultures it’s taboo to say I love you; in others, they say it all of the time.” The demarcation often happened along domestic and international lines, with domestic informants expressing that the declaration is used in many relationships, and international/ethnic informants (i.e., those not born in the United States as well as those with strong ethnic identities, such as first-generation immigrants) asserting that in their respective cultures, it is used less often. Many international/ethnic informants point out that the phrase is confined to romantic relationships, as does Maria (Polish female):

I know that if I would tell my parents straightforward that I love them they would not feel comfortable, same thing with my sister. We [Polish people] know we love each other but we don’t say it straight to somebody’s face if it is not our husband or wife.

The declaration “I love you” is often used so exclusively that the connotation is marriage. Philip (Greek male from Cyprus) asserts that “the declaration has to be made to the woman you will live with.” Pete (Syrian-American male) agrees:

“I love you” is a more serious and committing term in other cultures. Middle eastern girls I know who hear that from a guy automatically think marriage. Therefore, men of American culture should be very careful with their “I love you’s.”

Many international informants elaborated on the fact that their parents and family members, for example, do not declare their love verbally. Christy (Chinese-American female) had this to say:

Every time when I go back home, my father always go to kitchen and asks me what I want to eat. He doesn’t say anything but make food for me quietly. It is very touching every time when I see my father does it. Love doesn’t have to be express verbally. I completely agree with it. Love my Dad!

Sam (Guyanese, ethnic Indian male) has a similar experience:

In a family it is usually understood that your parents love you, children don’t expect to hear it all the time. Children, like babies, will be told that you love them frequently but as they become adults, it is not done often. I don’t remember the last time my parents have told me that they love me, neither do I remember when

my brother or sister has done it, but it doesn't bother me. This is because I know that my family loves me by the actions that they do, not by saying three words.

Even in established romantic relationships, the phrase is used more sparingly in many cultures, leading to tension among intercultural couples where one partner is domestic. Sally (Jamaican-American female) remembers:

I dated someone American who thought I was cold because I didn't say the word. I just can't use the word so freely. Love is a very strong word, and I want to make sure that I mean it and not say because it is expected of me.

Respondents volunteer a number of reasons for the infrequent use of the phrase. One is that the phrase is difficult to express verbally in the native language. Jung (Korean female) explains: "I don't know why, but in my culture, to tell a person 'I love you,' so hard to come out from a mouth. We feel in heart but to say it is a very hard thing to do." This may be because the phrase "I love you" carries great weight and will lose meaning and depth if overused. Michael (Slovak, ethnic Carpatho-Ruthenian male) states:

In average Eastern European settings (family, friendship, and romance) "I love you" is rather scarce, arguably due to "considerable weight" of the expression. ...Our people believe that gravity of expressing love is way too great to be diminished by spontaneous moments of urge to say "I love you."

Sam (Guyanese, ethnic Indian male) reports a similar sentiment: "In my culture, it is normal to wait a long time before telling someone that you love them, and it is not also done frequently because it will lose its meaning." A conservative attitude and traditions were also mentioned as grounds for sparse use of the declaration. Thus, Christy (Chinese-American female) explains: "I don't think that my people will say 'I love you' easily to their lovers because Chinese people are considered to be conservative. Therefore, they don't say this often to the other ones." Margi (Jamaican-American female) theorizes that childhood experiences with verbal love expression are carried over into adulthood:

At a women conference I learned that many women from a West Indian background have not often heard or never heard the words "I love you" from their parents, husband, wives, children, or significant others, and find it hard to express their feelings of love to others in adulthood.

Some respondent did point out that young and therefore "passionate" people constitute somewhat of an exception with respect to verbal declarations of love. Thus, Jung (Korean female) explains: "My culture believes verbal declaration of love is not important. Older people says verbal declaration occur when people were young and passionate in their hearts." Taking the idea of youthful passion a step further, Sue (Romanian, ethnic Hungarian female) even attached a lack of control or weakness to the verbal use of the phrase: "It shows the weakness of the person who couldn't control herself/himself and had to burst out."

Not all international and ethnic respondents claimed infrequent use of the verbal declaration “I love you.” A few informants of Latino background maintained that, since Latinos are passionate, the phrase is freely used in their culture. According to Adis (Cuban-American female), “in the Cuban culture, people tend to speak very loud and are not afraid to express their feelings. My family members tell you up front that they love you. They are not emotionally restrained at all.” Carlos (Colombian-American male) agrees: “It’s something that Latin people don’t really hold back on verbally. The word is sometimes thrown around like a love struck teenager.”

5.2.1.2. Gender. Gender also plays an important role concerning a number of love expression issues. One question is who declares love first in romantic relationships. The traditional dictum of men taking the initiative seems to hold still true in some respondents’ lives, as Claire (Caribbean-American female) states: “In romance, I think both male and female can say ‘I love you,’ in my culture, [but] it’s usual for the female to wait until the male declares his love first.” Anita (Ukrainian female) further illustrates the phenomenon:

Just few months ago, at first time in my life I declared my love to the person I love. It happened in the train station where I walked my boyfriend to. He told me first “I love you” and started leaving for the stairs. That was amazing experience and I was waiting for that moment a long time. However, I was waiting to hear it first from him, afraid that I won’t hear it back if I’d tell him first. He felt the same, but he got the strength to make that declaration.

Apart from this first occurrence, however, men seem to express their love verbally less often than women. Jamie (Jamaican-American female) states that “people in my culture find it hard to say those words they would rather show you, especially the men.” One reason for the discrepancy suggested by the respondents is a male desire to maintain dominance. Christy (Chinese-American female) explains:

In China, men are always the heads of the families. The women were taught to obey their father, husband and son. Therefore, men are very dominating. In order to show men’s power, they don’t say “I love you” easily because it is considered emotional when they say it.

Philip (Greek male from Cyprus) adds a male propensity for seriousness and gravity: “The guy ... when he does say it, that means he means it. You don’t just say ‘I love you’ to anyone.” Self-admitted laziness is the rationale given by Maurice (Jewish, Russian-American male):

Men don’t really say “I love you” in my culture. We use nonverbal declarations. The men in my family and possibly culture are notoriously lazy and thoughtless; so when we actually do something not lazy and thoughtful it’s our way of saying “I love you.”

One of the most adamant proponents of verbal restraint in our sample, Sue (Romanian, ethnic Hungarian female) even expresses a sense of aversion to men who

use verbal declarations of love: “It’s quite embarrassing for me to see a man all emotionally exposed, I shut them down.”

Unlike Sue, most women, however, seem to say *and* want to hear love declarations more often than men. Thus, Christy (Chinese-American female) asserts: “I think women will say ‘I love you’ more often than men because of the human nature. Women are more emotional than men.” Likewise, SukJa (Korean female) states:

Between lovers, women want to hear the actual word from her partner as often as possible. However, men believe love should be treated preciously, so they don’t say it often. If men don’t say it, then women may think that their lover doesn’t love them anymore.

This desire for women to hear the verbal declaration and the contrasting preference of men for nonverbal love expression can create tension or at least require some adjustment in relationships. For example, Dina (Puerto Rican-American female) muses: “My husband does not like to say ‘I love you,’ so nonverbals are important for me to watch out for.”

Indicating that change is possible, with men becoming more open with their emotions and the verbal expression of their love. Pat (African-American female) explains:

My husband is Caribbean and I am American. We have been married for thirteen years, but together for 21 years. In that time I have seen him grow from holding back his emotions to now being more verbal about sharing his love for me, with me by verbally telling me, instead of keeping it to himself. I, on the other hand, have always shown my love and tell him so every chance I get.

5.2.1.3. Mode. The initial survey responses indicated that face-to-face communication of love was by far the most common mode. While not many respondents elaborated on this issue in the questionnaire, those that did actually preferred writing or phone conversations. Sally (Jamaican-American female) declared that “I usually can write it but not say to people,” and Pam (Colombian female) stated that “On the phone, when I speak to my dad, I tell him that I love him and miss him. For me it’s mostly on the phone and sometimes but rarely in the person’s face.”

5.2.1.4. Occasion. The occasions deemed suitable for the declaration “I love you” ranged from “anytime” to only on special days and in romantic situations. Exemplifying the “anytime” end of the scale, Dina (Puerto Rican-American female) recounts: “I was watching TV with my son and he just turned to me and said, ‘Mom, you’re the best, I love you.’ Then he cuddled up with me on the sofa.” A little less *laissez-faire*, Sally (Jamaican-American female) states that “‘I love you’ is said when you won’t see the person for sometime or they are traveling, or it’s a special day.” Finally, Michael (Slovak, ethnic Carpatho-Ruthenian male) illustrates the most exclusive end of the spectrum:

It’s usually an event to be remembered by both. Later, especially married couples are expected to remember when and where was the love declared. Typically, a

couple in romance prepares for ‘I love you’ in carefully choosing a setting (restaurant, park, etc.) Before and after there’s a prolonged moment of silence, as if the whole happening were contemplated.

5.2.2. *Verbal versus nonverbal love expression*

Respondents were asked whether verbal or nonverbal love expression was more common in their culture. In line with the differences between domestic and international/ethnic respondents mentioned earlier, domestic and Latino informants tended towards verbal love declaration while other internationals asserted that nonverbal love expression was more common. For example, Jay (Filipino-American male) states that “growing up in the Philippines, I rarely experienced the declaration of love between people, they were mostly nonverbal.”

One of the reasons for the greater nonverbal occurrence was the belief that actions can communicate love most adequately or truly, as Lily (Jamaican female) expresses:

Love transcends the physical. It is about the inner being of the person. When you love from within, it shows. Bad habits become tolerable and good habits are appreciated. We do not believe in saying “I love you” every waking hour of the day. We feel that when a person says “I love you” too often, they do not really mean it or it is a cheating heart that needs reassurance. Showing love by action speaks volume in my culture. My mother always says, “Don’t say it, show it.”

Illustrating what actions express love in romantic settings, respondents gave examples ranging from concern over the partner’s grooming to significant sacrifices of time and putting someone else’s needs ahead of one’s own. Pete (Syrian-American male) gives this example:

Making sacrifices or doing anything extra to make sure the person you love is happy; for example, missing a very important baseball game to go to your girlfriend’s grandfather’s birthday party (this just happened to me). Putting someone else’s needs before yours, means a lot to people you love.

Responses also reflected the survey finding that partners in long-term romantic relationships (e.g., spouses) use the verbal declaration less often. “[With respect to] old couples: The love need not to be expressed, just hand by hand, people will feel the love between them,” as Christy (Chinese-American female) puts it, quite poetically. Beyond romantic settings, love is expressed nonverbally within the family setting. Christy (Chinese-American female) had this encounter with her mother: “I listened to my mom obediently one day when she taught me a lesson how to wash dishes. It is a simple thing. However, it is my way to show my love.”

The question of whether to express love verbally or nonverbally is not always clear cut, however. Several respondents recalled tensions caused by differing expectations. Dina (Puerto Rican-American female) recounts:

My husband feels that love should be shown, not constantly said. It caused a lot of problems between us. I felt that he should want to tell me all the time. I could

not see his side or even understand it. I actually broke up with him our first year together because I did not feel that I was getting the emotional support that I need from him or that he was in the same emotional state that I was because he could not say that he loved me. It took three years for me to stop fighting about it, once I realized that he felt that showing meant more than saying. Our first Christmas he gave me a chain on a heart, our second a car, our third a coat. They equal: his heart, making my life easier, making sure I was kept warm. Once that was settled we were engaged one month later.

Abigail (Caucasian-American female) reports a flip side of the issue—a partner saying “I love you” but not showing his love:

Yes, [there was tension] when a boyfriend would say he loved me but then never showed me. His time was spent with his friends or plans were made without me, I felt as though the love declaration was made but only to appease me for the moment.

5.2.3. *Native versus nonnative language use*

Nonnative speakers of English and bilingual speakers of English commented on the phenomenon that it is somehow easier to say the words “I love you” in English than in their native or other language(s). Maria (Polish female) ruminates about her problems with the phrase.

I tell my son every day that I love him and he tells me the same thing. He was born here and I think it is easier for him and for me to use English “I love you” than if I would have to tell him in Polish. I don’t know how to explain this. I do mean real love when I tell him this, but it sounds different if I think about it in Polish. Maybe the way I was brought up has an influence.

There seem to be languages where the verbal expression “I love you” is almost nonexistent, as the following quote from Sue (Romanian, ethnic Hungarian female) illustrates:

My partner is American who feels the urge of declaring his love to me verbally and nonverbally way too often. And he is hurt by my reaction or lack of response. It took me four years, but I learned that it is important to him, so I let him say it, and I say it back, surprisingly easily. English is not my first, second or third language, saying “I love you” means nothing to me. I wouldn’t dare say it in Hungarian to anyone.

5.2.4. *Culture change*

Comments like the last one indicate that there is resistance to the inflation of the verbal expression “I love you” within some individuals or cultures. Despite this resistance, at least some cultures seem to be undergoing an apparent culture change connected with the use of the expression. Several respondents explain that members of the younger generation in their families (notably also among informants with international and ethnic background) are using the phrase more often than the older

generation. Thus, Abigail (Caucasian-American female) observes: “As my generation of family members start their own families, I notice that the declaration of love to their children happens more often. That happens with aunts and uncles to nieces and nephews as well.” Valerie (Puerto Rican-American female) attempts this explanation:

The reasons that these declarations might occur in my culture is because each generation notices that the generations before them never really expressed their sentiments at all—not verbal or nonverbal. The showing of emotion was not a common thing in that particular time, and that is something that I have noticed the newer generation of my culture has tried to change.

A similar sentiment is expressed by Christy (Chinese-American female): “I am considering myself as the second generation in United States. Therefore, I have learned how to say ‘I love you’ and not to hide my feeling inside.” Even parents are, at times, trying to use the declaration more often—although it may not quite sound “right,” as the following quote by Anita (Ukrainian female) illustrates.

My parents love each other. However, in my culture, spouses don’t say to each other “I love you” especially when somebody hears it. I’m in relationship with my boyfriend [a Romanian-American] only for a year, but we love each other, and my parents who hear sometimes [him] telling me “I love you,” are trying to imitate it, and for them who are very Ukrainian-minded people, it’s funny, and hearing my dad saying “I love you” it seems for my mom funny and not serious.

Besides a general move toward more emotional openness and the impact of US American language, the influence of TV and customs connected with the use of new technology are given as reasons for the more frequent use of verbal love declaration. Even Sue (Romanian, ethnic Hungarian female), the respondent so opposed to verbal expressions of love, has noticed the change creep into her own family. She describes it as follows:

First of all I must say things are changing lately. For 30 years I only heard on TV anybody saying “I love you.” ...Since I’ve been studying in the US, my father started to write me text messages on my cell phone ending in “I love you.” My Mom expresses the same in the end of her e-mails. It’s a huge step in my family and for my culture. They still don’t say it to my sister, who lives in the same city [abroad].

The culture change elicits different reactions. Some informants, like Gwen (African-American female) welcome the increased use of the phrase:

As a parent, I express love to my children anytime I get the chance. My mother was not as affectionate because she didn’t know the effects on my development. My mother was reared to believe that providing my with food and shelter was declaration enough.

Others, like Maurice (Jewish, Russian-American male) deplore the change as inflationary and meaning depriving.

Movies are guilty of portraying the wrong kind of love. Two actors meet each other, within ten minutes they are professing their love. It's completely inappropriate and undermines the meaning of the phrase. ...An ex-girlfriend of mine once said it after we were dating for only two weeks. Later that night I brought it up because it created a lot of tension ...she barely knew me. It made me feel a lot of different things but mostly disappointment because I put a high power on those words and they way she used them really cheapened the feeling.

6. Discussion

Respondents indicated that frequent use of verbal declarations of love was common in relationships of lovers and across parents and grandparents to their children and grandchildren, while declarations of love overall were rarely if ever used across work/professional, neighbors, siblings, cousins, and grandchildren to their grandparents. The tradition seems to be that males express love verbally first in new romantic relationships, but that, in established relationships, females are more verbal. Married couples seem to express love verbally less than new couples.

Our data suggest that there is a difference between expressions of love in relationships that are brief, intense, or in the initial stage of relationship development and expressions of love in relationships that are long-lasting and enduring (e.g., committed relationships, such as spousal relationships). Other research has found that love expressions decrease with the length of marriage (Swensen, Eskey, & Kohlhepp, 1984). Potter (1988) makes the claim that the West has used the expression of love as the symbolic basis for social relationships. However, this feature of the West may only be the case in newly emerging relationships. Further analysis of more sustained and long-lasting relationships may point to an underlying preexistent structure that some communities, even in the West, might amplify. Verbal expression of love within these relationships may be muted so that a preexistent structure can be heard.

For many international respondents and those with strong ethnic identities (e.g., first-generation immigrants), verbal love expressions do not seem to be widely used in settings of family and friends. To some extent, they seem to be restricted to romantic situations only, and even then seem to be rare in some cultures—with nonverbal expression being the preferred way to communicate love. The only exception in our study were some Latino cultures, where the verbal expression of love seems to be more widespread than in the other contrast cultures.

With relatively small research populations of 77 (for the survey) and 36 (for the follow-up questionnaire), one should be careful to make cultural attributions, especially since the nondomestic group was quite heterogeneous. Additional research will be necessary to investigate specific cultural variables and to refine the groupings, if possible.

For the time being, the marked difference between domestic and most international/ethnic groups concerning the frequency and usage of verbal love declarations leaves one to speculate whether the split between domestic and most international/ethnic responses is hiding further culture-specific differentiations. These differences may constitute a phenomenon similar to Lewin's (1997) observation of a comparatively broad public domain in the United States that allows communication patterns considered private in other cultures to be used more liberally and in a larger range of contexts. Lewin's model is based on the premise that people have a number of personality layers, ranging centripetally from public layers on the outside to an innermost private center. Lewin compared the United States with Germany and determined that, in the United States, all but the central innermost layer are public domain, but in Germany, only the outermost layer is considered such. Despite its age (Lewin's paper dates back to 1936), Lewin's findings continue to reverberate and serve as an explanation for a host of relatively unique US American features, including US use of first names in professional settings, high informality, high self-disclosure, and congeniality and ease with strangers. More recent studies found similar differences in that US culture exhibited higher self-disclosure (Chen, 1995; Cunningham, 1981; Jourard, 1961; Melikian, 1962; Ting-Toomey, 1991) and lower privacy concerns (Bellman, Johnson, Kobrin, & Lohse, 2004; Maynard & Taylor, 1996) than a diverse number of other cultures. With a correlation between low privacy concern and individualism likely (Bellman et al., 2004), the unique position of the United States might be explained by its high ranking in individualism compared to other countries (Hofstede, 2001). Whatever the ultimate reason, American patterns seem to communicate amicability and are often misunderstood by outsiders as a sign of having gained access to the private realm. When it becomes clear that this is not yet so, judgments of Americans as shallow and superficial are not uncommon (Gareis, 1995). In a similar vein, the term *friend* has a broader category width in US English than in a variety of other cultures. Thus, in the US English, it includes relationships ranging from casual, some people may say they have 30 to 50 friends, to long-standing and deeply committed (Matthews, 1986), but in other languages often has the narrower definition of *close friend* (e.g., German *Freund*, Swedish *vän*, French *ami*, Spanish *amigo*, Japanese *shinyuu*). With the term being susceptible to incorrect translations, linguistic generalizations and even the interpretation of the American friendships as inflated and devoid of intimacy are not uncommon (Gareis, 1995). While further research is necessary to substantiate a connection between these factors (comparatively broad width of the public realm, privacy and self-disclosure patterns, and the category of *friend* in the United States) on one hand and the broad and frequent use of verbal love declarations on the other, some interesting parallels seem to be indicated and may be worth investigating.

Another intriguing difference in our data suggests that many nonnative-speaking or bilingual respondents find it easier to say the words "I love you" in English than the translation in their native languages—although none was sure exactly why. The absence of ways to express one's love verbally in some cultures in nonromantic settings and the rarity, in some cases, of verbal love declaration even in romantic

situations seems to represent a void in the minds of some nonnative speakers who then welcome the opportunity to avail themselves of US customs and the English locution. Nonetheless, even international/ethnic respondents freely using the English locution seemed to treasure the fact that its translation in their native languages was available for them in all its “uninflated” glory for those special moments when only an exclusive verbal declaration would do.

A possible explanation for the ease of emotion expression in a second language may be found in the phenomenon of code-switching (the shifting into another language by bilinguals and other second-language speakers) (Scotton & Ury, 1977). Code-switching occurs especially in situations when topics in the first language are emotionally charged and become more approachable in a second language. The phenomenon can be most commonly observed in individuals who learned their second language after puberty when personal and emotional involvement is usually less intense than in the first language—the language of childhood (Novakovich & Shapard, 2000; Pavlenko, 2002). Speakers can thus express topics that would be sensitive or even taboo in the first language from an emotional distance and without embarrassment in the second language (Bond & Lai, 2001). The question arises whether emotions, including love, occupy separate emotional spaces or constructs in the minds of second-language speakers and thus become culturally untranslatable (Derné, 1994). If they are untranslatable, then bilinguals may use code-switching when certain expressions are more appropriate in one language versus the other (Panayiotou, 2004). This phenomenon is linked to linguistic relativity—the claim that culture, through language, affects the way in which we think and classify our experiences in the world (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996). It has also been found that with socialization into a language, the attrition of first-language emotion expression in favor of second-language concepts and scripts may take place (Pavlenko, 2002). The factors of code-switching and socialization seem to shed light on our findings; more research is necessary, however, to test their applicability.

An interesting finding in our study is also the indication that there seems to be an inflationary process within and beyond the United States, especially with respect to the use of the English locution “I love you.” The expression of love may just be another feature of the low-context communication style guided by an independent self-construal. Reasons provided by the respondents include a movement toward greater openness concerning the expression of feelings, parenting advice to express love more consciously, the ease of sending love declarations via new technology (e.g., text messaging), and—for the increase of verbal love expression beyond the United States—the worldwide influence of US popular culture (through movies, TV, pop music, etc.).

While more research on all of these issues is necessary, anecdotal evidence suggests that the locution “I love you” was not as widely used in the United States until a number of sociological changes in the 20th century started extolling greater emotion expression: (1) Feminism promoted gender equality and female self-expression (Friedan, 1963), (2) the 1960s revolved around the theme of love (living on in slogans, such as “summer of love” and “make love, not war” as well as countless song titles, extolling not only romantic love), and (3) the men’s liberation movement

of the early 1970s encouraged men to express their feelings more openly (Farrell, 1975; Sattel, 1976). One hypothesis then is that the culture change started in the United States and has not only advanced to other cultures by means of media and culture exports, but has accelerated even within the United States since the advent of new technology (e-mail, text and instant messaging).

7. Conclusion

Due to its exploratory purpose, our study was limited in its scope. Several additions and changes suggest themselves for further studies on the topic of love expression. To begin with, the following demographic factors should be considered in similar future investigations:

- a greater balance between respondents of different ages (inclusion of senior citizens),
- a greater balance between male and female respondents,
- a greater balance between married and single respondents, and
- inclusion of homosexuality as a potential variable.

The study also indicates various promising future paths of inquiry on the subject of love communication. What follows are some possible avenues for research and/or factors warranting expansion:

- a comparison of love expression between United States and specific cultures,
- an exploration of reasons for the native/nonnative phenomenon, and
- an exploration of reasons for the culture change (e.g., influence of the English language and US culture, and the change in the interdependence of channels for the expression of love—especially the shift in the relative hierarchy for the spoken form over the written form).

No matter what path of inquiry is chosen, the research on love communication cross- and intercultural is valuable due to the relative scarcity of data on the topic and the importance of intercultural communication research in our increasingly globalized world, in general. Furthermore, with anti-American sentiments abroad often focusing on the negative aspects of cultural imports, the investigation of a largely positive cultural feature and its worldwide impact (as is the case with the influence of English “I love you” on other languages and cultures) also seems to be meaningful. While some respondents complained that verbal love expression is used too broadly in US culture and evaluated respective changes in their native cultures accordingly, more often than not informants seemed to see the broad use of love expression as positive and welcome the concomitant culture changes. In addition, the abundance of positive emotions expressed by respondents in studies on love expression (including the importance of nonverbal communication of love and the meaning of such communication) is persuasive and serves to entice readers to

incorporate some of the described practices into their own repertoires. Research in love expression thus not only expands our academic knowledge base in the area of communication but can also make at least a small contribution to international goodwill and serve to enrich our personal lives as well.

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