

Sociology of Nonverbal Expressions through Doodles

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Abstract

Doodling, a spontaneous mark or drawing created without the intention of producing a finished artwork, operates at the intersection of psychology, sociology, and art, offering adolescents a quiet yet powerful medium of self-expression. Through a review of existing scholarship and interviews with four high school students, this study explores how doodling functions as a nonverbal language of identity and emotion. Prior research highlights the role of doodling in stress reduction, emotional externalization, and subtle acts of agency in contexts such as bullying or burnout. Building these insights, my findings reveal that adolescents serve doodling as a tool for processing emotions and shaping personal narratives. Professional examples from artists such as Andie Dinkin, Claire Barrow, and Jean-Michel Basquiat also demonstrate how doodling moves fluidly between raw creativity and polished art, emphasizing its duality as both process and product. These perspectives suggest that doodling deserves greater recognition in educational and counseling contexts, where it can be embraced as an accessible form of emotional expression, identity of formation, and creative exploration for adolescents.

Keywords

Adolescents, Creativity, Doodling, Emotional well-being, Identity, Self-Expression

1. Introduction

This paper explores how doodling reflects people's internal states and is a form of quiet, nonverbal self-expression. The research for this paper has been conducted through literature review and interviews. I collected peer-reviewed articles from journals in the fields of psychology, sociology, and art-based research that explore

doodling as a form of expression. The articles examine doodling's psychological functions, connection to identity and emotions, and the sociological implications among both adolescents and adults. By synthesizing the findings from these sources, I identify the common themes and patterns in how doodling works as a silent, personal way to express feelings, especially for adolescents. I also consider how different settings and environments influence this expression. I interviewed four students who have a doodling practice—peers of mine—in order to get firsthand accounts of the practice and how it is a form of expression for people. I also explored the work of professional artists who use doodling in their creative practice.

2. Academic Context

Research in the fields of psychology, sociology, and art has begun to examine doodling as more than a passive or unconscious activity. Scholars have been using it as a way to understand people's emotional states, cognitive states, and social environments.

Coward (2022) discusses how doodling builds self-efficacy and emotional agency in normally functioning adults. She positions doodling as a quiet tool for expressing inner thoughts, which may be particularly helpful in environments that suppress open emotional expression. Doodling acts like a visual diary—one participant mentioned that it helped her “externalize” feelings she hadn't fully understood until they appeared on paper. Through this calm and accessible activity, it is shown that people are able to express deep feelings and reflect on them, which helps them relieve stress they accumulate throughout the day and move away from the mindset of having to be “perfect”.

Hunt-Anderson and Shannon-Baker (2023) explore how doodling enables Jamaican adolescents to express feelings about covert bullying that they struggle to articulate verbally. Their doodles reveal hidden emotions like fear and sadness related to bullying, showing how unconscious doodling can express the students' emotional states. The researchers argue that visual methods like doodling allow students to reclaim narrative control, especially in traumatic or silencing contexts. For example, students drew symbolic barriers and fragmented spaces to express their disrupted sense of safety, indicating how spatial choices reflect emotional realities.

Nash (2020) looked at healthcare workers' doodles that reflected emotional stress through tense lines and dark shapes during periods of burnout from the difficulties of healthcare work. One nurse used dark, jagged lines to depict exhaustion—an image that sparked further conversation among her colleagues. As the contents of the doodles gave insight to their mental and emotional exhaustion, Nash claims that such drawing practices serve not only as emotional relief but also as an act of resistance against institutional pressure to suppress emotion. The article cites doodling as a peaceful method of emotional storytelling, where personal truths can surface without formal disclosure.

Poon (n.d.) explores how doodling is used intentionally in branding and visual communication. He highlights the conceptual and expressive power of doodles, further showing how they connect internal thought to external design, breaking away from rigid thinking patterns. In brainstorming sessions, doodles allow participants to express emerging emotional responses to concepts before they can articulate them verbally. For instance, circular, looping lines reflected a participant's desire for comfort and softness in the brand identity—an insight that might have been missed in verbal-only discussions. The doodles may also give more ideas for the visuals because branding work needs to be connected to the unconscious, and so doodling is a great way to access those unconscious desires and ideas.

Quinn (2021) writes about how people use slow, subtle activities such as doodling to understand and reflect on their place in the world. Quinn reflects on her own research practice, where she doodled in the margins of interview transcripts and notebooks while conducting qualitative research. She describes how doodling, as an embodied and informal act, helped her stay with data longer, access emotional responses, and reflect on the relational aspects of the research process. Doodling was not planned as a formal method, but became a personal way to think through complex ideas and emotions that did not come through in words alone.

3. My Research

While the majority of existing research papers explore doodling's emotional or communicative roles among adults, researchers have only recently begun to explore its role in the lives and emotional states of adolescents. My research addresses this gap by focusing specifically on adolescents who use doodling as a form of nonverbal self-expression tied to identity and emotion. Unlike studies centered on specific traumatic contexts such as bullying or burnout, my work investigates how everyday, casual doodles may serve as a quiet language of thought and feelings.

By synthesizing existing literature across art, sociology, and psychology, I aim to demonstrate how adolescents' doodling functions as a personal outlet—especially for the ones that don't feel comfortable expressing themselves verbally. I use ideas from developmental psychology and art-therapy perspectives to interpret how visual signs can relate to emotion and identity over time. I also consider practical and ethical issues for adults who might observe or respond to student doodles, including the need to protect privacy and avoid over-interpretation, which may affect how educators and counselors engage with students' artwork. While this study is limited in scope, its findings point to useful directions for future, larger-scale research. This research ultimately claims that, although some studies (e.g., Hunt-Anderson & Shannon-Baker, 2023) have explored adolescent doodling, there is limited research on everyday, nontraumatic doodling in educational settings. Doodling, and other forms of art therapy, should therefore be more centrally considered and incorporated into the advisory practices of educators and

counselors.

4. Art and Doodling

The use of doodling in art allows artists to create without overthinking or strictly planning. The spontaneity lets the drawings reveal their true selves—expressing emotions, thoughts, and ideas that might have remained hidden. Doodling captures raw creativity and personal expression, making it a unique and honest form of art.

To background this study, I explored drawings by professional artists who use doodling in their process. In an article in *Cultured Magazine*, artist Andie Dinkin and Claire Barrow share how doodling serves as an instinctive and personal form of expression. Dinkin describes doodling as a means of unlocking hidden thoughts and intuition and letting her mind surface ideas she did not know she had. Meanwhile, Barrow had found comfort in doodling while recovering from a head injury, using it to record her thoughts and feelings.

Andie Dinkin's pen sketches depict whimsical, surreal scenes that blend elegance with absurdity. In one, at a strange party at a ballroom, humans dance with fish, giraffes, and people with octopus legs, all dressed in formal wear under elegant chandeliers and drapes. The surreal mix of animal-headed guests and odd movements gives the scene a playful and dream-like feeling. In another, set at a bar, a bartender stretches his arm and places a chain of olives straight up, as if requested by a woman ordering a drink. The playful exaggeration and casual elegance of the characters create a humorous yet oddly sophisticated mood, like a caricature of elite social life. Furthermore, she says "the painting will tell you where to go" by doodling—"allowing the pen to take control" and letting her to "unleash her freest, rawest self" (McMichael, 2023).

One of Claire Barrow's rough sketches contains a human's face on a stone wall, a back of a head, a moon, and a sinking ship. The disjointed elements feel spontaneous and mysterious, as if they were drawn straight from a dream. Her other drawing features jagged white lines forming an unrecognizable figure, and it is surrounded by darker shades in a triangular shape with thick white lines that look like a curtain opening up. The indescribable doodles give the viewers room for imagination. The incomprehensibilities in her work invite viewers to explore their own interpretations as the "doodles can be the key to that process" which "help all of us think—and discover what we think", including both the artist and the audiences.

Another artist Jean-Michel Basquiat used his notebook everyday as an experimental canvas for his personal expressions. While Basquiat is primarily recognized as a graffiti and neo-expressionist painter, his notebooks document spontaneous sketches and notes that reveal raw ideas and thought processes. This habit allowed him to capture ideas the moment they appeared, without the pressure of creating a finished piece. The pages were filled with fragments of sketches, poetry, wordplay, and emotional observations with other expressive

elements. Many of these entries mixed texts and imagery in ways that reflected his unique visual language, blending cultural references, personal symbols, and raw emotion (Smith, 2016). These spontaneous scribbles can be deeply revealing, providing a vivid look into his thought process and the artistic evolution his mind goes through before creating artworks. They show how the act of doodling and note-making can serve as both a record of inspiration and a testing ground for new artistic directions.

The ballroom scene by Andie Dinkin, while personally engaging, is analytically significant because it demonstrates how doodling allows for unexpected combinations of elements—humans and animals, elegance and absurdity—reflecting the mind’s unfiltered creativity.

Beyond individual artists, doodling as part of the artistic process also challenges traditional ideas of what “counts” as art. Since it can be informal, unplanned, and personal, doodling blurs the line between casual sketching and intentional artistic creation. Many professional artists use doodles as the starting point for larger works, treating them as raw material that captures their first, most instinctive ideas. This suggests that doodling is not only valuable for personal expression but also plays an important role in the creative cycle, helping artists move from spontaneous thoughts to more developed pieces. Recognizing doodles as part of this process allows the audiences to see them not as incomplete art, but as a different kind of finished work that holds its own meaning and value.

The fact that doodling is often overlooked compared to a “finished” drawing or painting shows that, as a society, we value finished products over the processes that lead to them. This cultural observation highlights how experimental, problem-solving, and creative acts are frequently underappreciated, even though they form the foundation of artistic innovation. Expanding on this point emphasizes the importance of valuing artistic process alongside final products. Doodling allows artists to explore ideas freely without pressure, making it a valuable form of expression. Society often praises what is complete while ignoring the effort and exploration behind it. However, the process is where experimentation, problem-solving, and genuine creativity happen, making it just as important as the final result.

5. Doodling

Doodling is very innocent: one doesn’t think before drawing; it therefore shows what you’re really like and what you’re really thinking about. Because it is unplanned and free from judgement, it captures thoughts and feelings in their rawest form. In that way, doodling becomes a small but honest reflection of inner selves. Drawing in such a relaxed manner lets people experience a childlike joy. Not having to focus on perfection can actually enhance creativity. I doodle in different settings; sometimes I’m just focused on doodling, and sometimes I’m in school listening and doodling at the same time. At home, I draw mostly people, characters, and their accompanying stories that I come up with. At school, I doodle

simpler things like cats; I don't want others to see the stories I create at home. This reveals that doodling can be a highly private form of expression, connecting to earlier discussions of ethical considerations: the vulnerability inherent in sharing one's inner thoughts visually makes the act of doodling both personal and protective. I'm more insecure about people seeing doodles of characters and try not to draw them outside of my room. In neither setting do I think before drawing. It's just something I do. It calms my nerves and allows me to release some thoughts from my head.



Figure 1. Doodles on table.

During a three-week art program, I created these doodles shown in **Figure 1** after becoming much closer to my friends and the people around me. The time I spent doodling with my friends was the most enjoyable part of the program for me. I drew animation characters that I like, simple figures representing my mood, and some of the characters that I have created from my imagination. These include the two characters from a Japanese show called *Madoka Magica*, a girl ghost playing with another girl, and several faces of anime-style figures with large eyes, varying hairstyles, and different facial expressions. In addition to the human characters, there are small animals like a cat, one with earrings, and few simply drawn figures that each look irritated, tired, or excited. This accumulation demonstrates that comfort, familiarity, and sustained engagement can deepen creative expression; the longer and more relaxed the environment, the more freely ideas emerge.

I drew on brown paper that covered the table. As I would fill a part of a table, I didn't think "I will cover this table with my drawings" or try to make it look a certain way. The table, packed with the doodles I made after the three weeks, eventually revealed my style of expression. This demonstrates that prolonged, spontaneous doodling can produce a coherent visual language, emerging naturally from instinct rather than deliberate planning. Creating these doodles felt instinctive and calming, a way to release tension without judgement. My doodles, like

those of the students and artists I will discuss below, reveal a quiet personal language, showing how creativity and emotion can emerge without conscious planning or the pressure to produce a finished work.

To understand what doodling is for others and how it shows up in their emotional and artistic lives, I interviewed several of my classmates who doodle. Each interview was guided by five open-ended questions: “When do you find yourself doodling, such as during class or in your free time?”, “What kinds of things do you normally doodle?”, “Do you usually doodle without thinking, or are you sometimes aware of what you’re expressing?”, “Do you feel like doodling shows or helps you express things that you wouldn’t say out loud normally?”, and “Do your doodles ever include parts of your personal life, like things you’re worried about or excited for?” All participants provided verbal consent prior to being interviewed, and were informed that their names and identifying details would not appear in the paper, and that they could skip any question or withdraw from the study at any time.

From the interviews, I found that doodling appears in many different ways in adolescents’ daily lives, yet the act itself is often spontaneous and unplanned. Several students said they doodle during long classes, especially when they feel bored or find it difficult to focus. In those moments, doodling happens automatically, almost without thought, helping them stay mentally present while letting their hands move freely. This simple, repetitive motion seems to offer comfort and focus at the same time, showing how the act can hold meaning even when the students are not aware of it.

Although all students doodled instinctively, their reasons and emotions behind it were different. One student viewed doodling as a physical response to boredom rather than an emotional activity, while another described it as a calm way to express feelings she does not always say out loud. Some drew familiar, lighthearted subjects—cats, animals, or characters from animation and webtoons—while others included small traces of their personal lives, such as pets or faces of people they know. Even when they did not intend to express emotions directly, their doodles often reflected their moods or thoughts in subtle ways. These experiences relate to what Nash (2020) observed, that unconscious marks or repeated patterns can quietly reveal stress or exhaustion.

Privacy was also an important part of each student’s doodling practice. Several mentioned that they prefer not to show their doodles to others, especially when they include original characters or personal ideas. One student explained that she avoids drawing such characters at school because she does not want others to understand or judge them. For many, doodling is a personal space—something they can control and keep to themselves. This sense of protection connects to Coward’s (2022) point that doodling allows for emotional expression while also letting people decide how much to reveal.

Overall, the interviews show that doodling is both simple and meaningful. It can be a quiet habit that helps students focus, or a small, private form of emotional

release. Even when they say their doodles mean nothing, their descriptions suggest that doodling helps them manage thoughts, express feelings, and find calmness during the day. It becomes a flexible practice that adapts to each person's needs, revealing how adolescents use small, ordinary acts of drawing to understand and care for themselves.

6. Discussion

Artists such as Andie Dinkin, Claire Barrow, and Jean-Michael Basquiat demonstrate how not following the “expectations” of creating an artwork can lead to bold, authentic creations. Each of them uses their own unique styles to express themselves in their own ways: Dinkin was known for playful, spontaneous doodles, Barrow showed her flow of thoughts during her injury, and Basquiat used bold colors, lines, and words to express his thoughts and emotions. When I first saw their drawings, I realized that these doodles were not much different from those made outside the context of creating formal artworks. Being an artist does not automatically mean their doodles hold a deeper meaning. As I looked at them, I could picture the artist casually moving the pen across the page, perhaps following a thought, or simply letting the lines appear without any deliberate intention.

Doodling is a small and often overlooked act, yet it calmly carries meaning in the lives of many adolescents. It is a form of expression that can happen naturally, without the need for preparation or special skill, which makes it accessible to anyone. It can hold emotions that are hard to say out loud, provide a calm space in stressful moments, or simply offer a way to stay focused. Even simple shapes or repeated patterns can hold meaning, whether or not the person drawing them is aware of it at the time. For some, doodles become private reflections of identity, while for others, they remain light and playful. What makes doodling powerful is its freedom—free from the rules, judgment, or the pressure to be perfect. This freedom allows doodling to adapt to different needs, from emotional release to creative exploration. By recognizing doodling as more than a distraction, the educators and researchers are able to understand the subtle ways young people communicate, reflect, and navigate their inner worlds in their own time and on their own terms.

A common perception in educational settings is that doodling reflects inattentiveness or disengagement. However, the findings of this study suggest the opposite: rather than distracting from learning, doodling often helps students regulate attention and emotion during mentally demanding or monotonous tasks. Recognizing this can shift educators' assumptions and encourage a more nuanced understanding of how adolescents stay cognitively and emotionally present. From interviews with my peers and analysis of several professional artists, I learned that doodling is not just a way to distract from tasks, but a meaningful form of self-expression that communicates thoughts, emotions, and aspects of identity. It demonstrates that creativity can be free, unplanned, and still hold value in understanding ourselves, giving me a deeper appreciation for the meaning behind my

own doodles. Beyond personal insight, these findings suggest practical implications for educators and counselors. By recognizing doodling as a legitimate form of expression, adults can create supportive environments that allow adolescents to explore their thoughts without pressure or judgment. This could include providing spaces and time for doodling in classrooms or advisory sessions, refraining from interrupting or over-analyzing students' work, and using doodling as a nonverbal diagnostic tool to better understand students' emotions and needs.

By focusing on “everyday, non-traumatic doodling”, this research extends beyond existing trauma-centered studies to highlight how ordinary, casual doodles also carry psychological and sociological significance. The interview findings demonstrate that even routine doodles can serve as a form of agency, offering adolescents a space for self-reflection and identity formation in their daily environments. In conclusion, incorporating doodling into educational and counseling practices not only respects adolescents' privacy and creative autonomy, but also fosters emotional well-being and self-understanding. This aligns with the broader claim of my research: that doodling—and similar forms of art therapy—should be intentionally considered in the advisory of educators and counselors, helping them engage with students in a more empathetic and insightful way.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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