

ADAD5004/C Research in Practice

Student Name: Pan Yujie

Student ID: 2303763

Tutor: Donna Williams

Submission Date: April 24, 2026

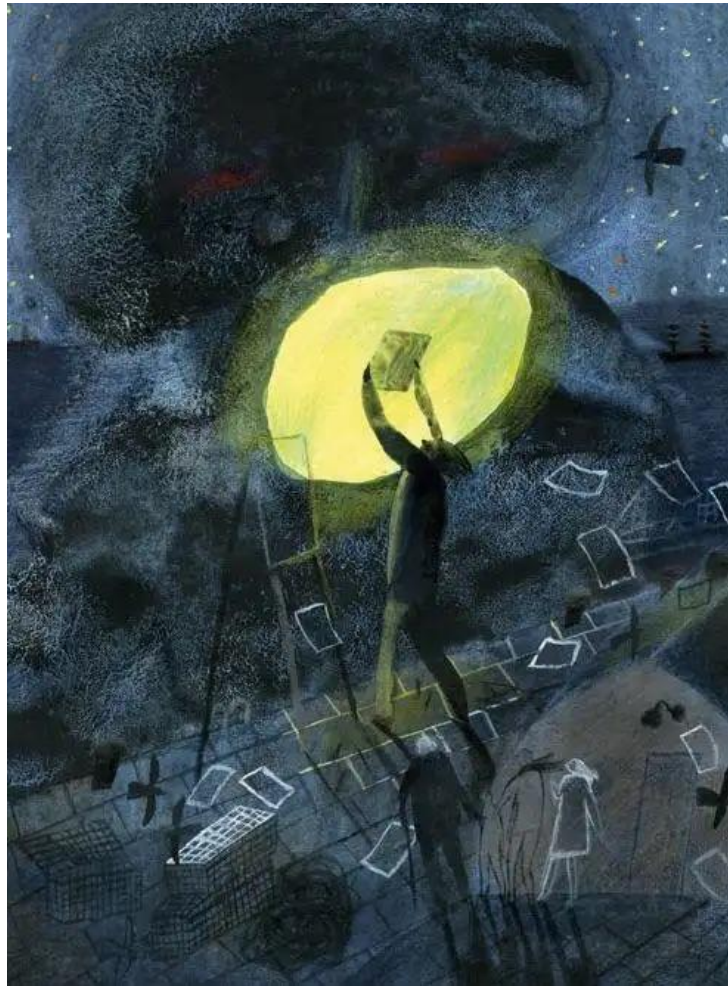
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Currently, adolescents in both China and the United Kingdom are generally faced with multiple pressures from academic studies, social interactions, growth environments, and the online environment. Psychological problems such as anxiety, loneliness, emotional exhaustion, and self-doubt have become increasingly prominent. Although young people in the two countries face very similar psychological distress, due to differences in cultural backgrounds, social concepts, family models, and emotional expression habits, there are obvious differences in the ways they perceive, accept, and express emotions. In many cases, negative emotions are difficult to convey accurately through language and are not easy to be understood. Visual art and illustration creation can just cross language barriers, present inner states in an intuitive, gentle, and empathetic way, and become a very effective way of emotional expression and psychological healing. Through the narrative power of images, not only can the real feelings of adolescents be seen and accepted, but also the psychological difficulties in different cultural backgrounds can be understood and concerned more widely from a cross-cultural perspective.

Based on the above background, I have identified three core keywords for this research:

Youth mental health, Visual narrative, and Cross-culture. This research will take the psychological status of adolescents in China and the United Kingdom as the entry point, use a cross-cultural comparative perspective to explore how visual narrative can become an effective way to express, convey, and heal adolescents' psychological emotions, and through the practical path of illustration and visual art, provide a more empathetic and communicative visual expression possibility for the issue of adolescent mental health.

My first keyword is Youth mental health. Youth mental health has emerged as one of the most pressing global issues for young people today, with adolescents across both China and the United Kingdom facing unprecedented levels of stress stemming from academic pressure, social media exposure, cultural expectations, and the complexities of growing up in a rapidly changing world. Anxiety, loneliness, emotional exhaustion, and self-doubt are no longer niche struggles but widespread experiences, yet the ways in which these emotions are perceived, expressed, and understood often remain silenced or misunderstood. Language, while powerful, can fail to capture the nuance of these internal battles; words may feel insufficient, awkward, or even unsafe to share, especially in cultures where emotional vulnerability is stigmatized or discouraged. In this context, visual art and illustration have proven to be uniquely effective tools for emotional expression and psychological healing, offering a non-verbal, accessible, and empathetic medium through which young people can externalize their inner worlds and feel seen.



Carlin, L. (2015). **A World of Your Own** [Book illustration]. Phaidon Press.

The work of British illustrator Laura Carlin exemplifies how visual narrative can articulate the quiet despair and resilience of mental health struggles. Her atmospheric illustration, rendered in a moody palette of deep blues, blacks, and a stark, luminous yellow, centers on a lone figure raising a book against a dark, overwhelming backdrop. The dominant yellow light acts as a beacon, cutting through the oppressive darkness that surrounds the figure, symbolizing hope, self-expression, or the act of finding meaning through creativity. The scattered papers floating around the figure may represent unspoken thoughts, unprocessed emotions, or the pressure to “perform” normality, while the ladder leaning against the light suggests a tentative, precarious climb toward understanding or healing.

Carlin's work is known for its focus on people "lost in their thoughts and battles," and this piece is no exception: it captures the isolation of mental health struggles while also honoring the quiet courage of trying to keep going. The grainy, textured quality of the medium adds to the raw, unpolished feel of the work, mirroring the messy, unfiltered reality of emotional pain, and inviting viewers to connect with the figure's experience without needing explicit explanation.



Ager, C. (n.d.). Office Environment [Illustration].

Similarly, Charlotte Ager's illustrations use everyday scenes to explore the quiet dissonance and alienation that often accompany poor mental health, particularly in the

context of modern life. Her office scene, drawn in soft pastels with a limited color palette of blues, greens, and muted oranges, depicts a crowded workspace filled with people engaged in routine tasks—typing at computers, talking on phones, going through the motions of work. Yet despite the apparent busyness of the scene, there is a pervasive sense of loneliness and disconnection: each figure is absorbed in their own world, their faces neutral or slightly vacant, as if going through the motions without truly being present. Ager's work often explores the "poetry in everyday experience," and here she captures the subtle way in which mental health struggles can make even routine activities feel alienating. The blue-toned figures and cool color scheme evoke a sense of emotional numbness, while the faint, sketch-like lines give the work a tentative, unmoored quality, as if the scene itself is fragile or half-remembered. The office, often seen as a symbol of productivity and order, becomes a space of quiet alienation, reflecting the way in which mental health struggles can make even the most "normal" environments feel overwhelming or disconnected.

Both artists' work demonstrates how visual narrative can communicate the complexities of youth mental health in ways that language cannot. Carlin's piece leans into the dramatic, using light and shadow to externalize the internal battle of hope against despair, while Ager's work uses quiet, mundane scenes to highlight the subtle dissonance of everyday life with poor mental health. Together, they illustrate the power of visual art to validate, normalize, and humanize these struggles, offering young people a way to see their own experiences reflected back at them, and to feel less alone in their pain. This kind of

empathetic visual storytelling is particularly vital in cross-cultural contexts, where different norms around emotional expression can make it difficult for young people to share their struggles openly. By using images to bridge these gaps, visual art creates a universal language of emotion, one that can be understood across cultures, and that invites connection rather than judgment.

My second keyword is Visual narrative. Visual narrative, with imagery as its core carrier, transcends linguistic barriers to convey ineffable inner emotions and psychological states with intuitive, delicate precision. Unlike verbal communication, which is often constrained by vocabulary, cultural norms, and the pressure to articulate “correctly,” visual storytelling offers a non-linear, sensory language that can capture the complexity of feelings—from quiet loneliness to tentative hope—that words struggle to contain. For young people navigating mental health challenges, this form of expression becomes a vital tool: it allows them to externalize their experiences without fear of judgment, while inviting viewers to connect with universal emotional truths beyond cultural or linguistic differences. The work of Taiwanese-British illustrator Pei-Hsin Cho and Chinese contemporary artist Zhang Zhazhan exemplifies how visual narrative transforms abstract emotions into tangible, resonant stories, creating bridges of empathy that speak directly to the human experience.



Cho, P.-H. (2021). Crown Shyness [Illustration]. Bologna Children's Book Fair, Italy

Pei-Hsin Cho's illustration, a bird's-eye view of a forest where tree canopies form a dense, almost suffocating pattern around a single small white bird, masterfully visualizes the tension between isolation and quiet resilience. The piece draws inspiration from her short comic Crown Shyness, a metaphor for the complex dynamics of emotional distance in the modern world. The repetitive, textured tree branches, rendered in soft monochrome, create a sense of overwhelming sameness and enclosure, mirroring the way anxiety or social pressure can make individuals feel trapped or unseen. Yet the single white bird at the center—small, bright, and unassuming—acts as a beacon of individuality, a reminder that even in the midst of collective pressure, there is space for quiet presence. Cho's work,

which often weaves personal emotional experiences into universal visual metaphors, avoids explicit labels or dialogue, instead using composition, texture, and negative space to evoke the “texture of emotions.” Here, the negative space between the trees, where the bird rests, becomes a visual metaphor for emotional vulnerability—a space that is both exposed and protected, a gap between expectations and the self. This kind of visual storytelling does not explain; it invites interpretation, allowing viewers to project their own feelings of loneliness, hope, or alienation onto the scene, making the narrative deeply personal yet universally accessible.



Zhang, Z. Z. (n.d.). PUPU Bear Series [Illustrations]



Zhang, Z. Z. (n.d.). PUPU Bear Series [Illustrations]

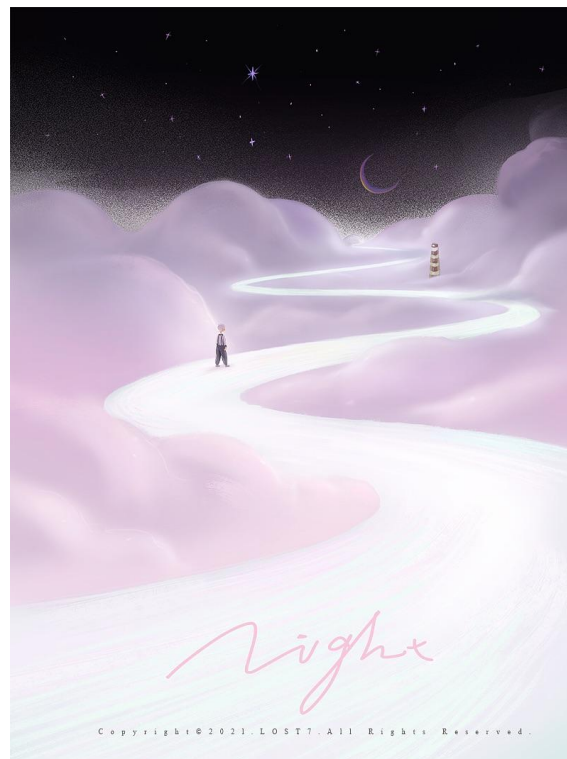
Zhang Zhanzhan's iconic "PUPU Bear" series further demonstrates the power of minimalist visual narrative to articulate the quiet dissonance of mental health struggles. His two illustrations of the red bear—one holding a sunflower against a starry black sky, the other sitting alone on grass—use simple forms and limited color palettes to tell stories of loneliness, longing, and gentle healing. The bear, with its round, soft shape and expressionless face, is intentionally ambiguous: it has no dialogue, no complex features, and yet its posture and context speak volumes. In the first image, the bear's outstretched arm holding a sunflower against the vast, dark sky visualizes the quiet act of reaching for hope in despair; the stark contrast between the bright yellow flower and the deep black background amplifies the fragility of this gesture, mirroring the way small acts of self-care or connection can feel both precious and precarious. In the second image, the bear sits motionless on the grass, its body angled away, capturing the stillness and disconnection that often accompany emotional numbness. Zhang's work, centered on the theme of

loneliness, intentionally avoids sentimentality, instead using understated visual language to honor the quiet, unspoken moments of mental health struggles. The bear's lack of expression is not a sign of indifference but a reflection of the inarticulacy of these feelings: it does not need to "perform" emotion to be understood, because the visual narrative—the vast empty space, the solitary figure, the contrast between light and dark—carries the emotional weight.

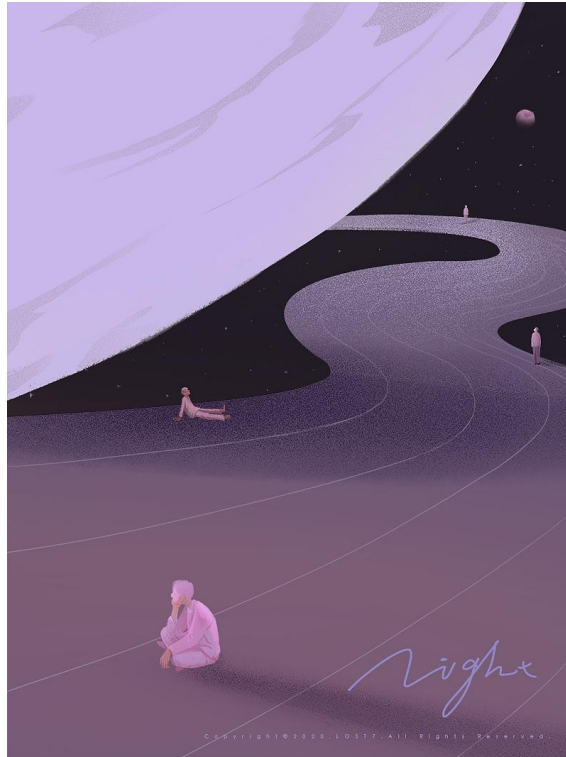
Together, Cho and Zhang's work reveals how visual narrative transforms abstract mental health experiences into tangible, empathetic stories. Cho's forest uses texture and composition to visualize the pressure and isolation of emotional vulnerability, while Zhang's bear uses simplicity and contrast to capture the quiet resilience of navigating loneliness. Neither relies on words to explain their meaning; instead, they trust the language of imagery to connect with viewers, creating a universal dialogue of emotion that transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries. For young people, this kind of visual storytelling is particularly powerful: it validates their experiences without demanding they articulate them, offering a safe space to feel seen and understood, even when words fail.

My last keyword is Cross-culture. From a cross-cultural perspective, the distinct social, cultural, and value systems of China and the United Kingdom directly shape how adolescents perceive, experience, and express their emotions. In collectivist Chinese contexts, emotional restraint is often valued as a sign of maturity and social harmony, discouraging overt displays of vulnerability; conversely, individualist Western cultures,

such as the UK, often encourage open emotional expression as a form of authenticity and mental health care. These differing norms create unique challenges for young people navigating mental health struggles: while British youth may face pressure to “perform” emotional openness, Chinese adolescents may feel silenced by the stigma around discussing negative feelings. Visual narrative, however, transcends these cultural divides, offering a universal language through which artists from both backgrounds can articulate the nuanced, culturally specific experiences of emotional expression. The work of Chinese illustrator LOST7 and British artist Holly Warburton exemplifies how cross-cultural visual storytelling reveals both shared emotional truths and distinct cultural attitudes toward mental health.



LOST7. (2021). Night [Illustration]

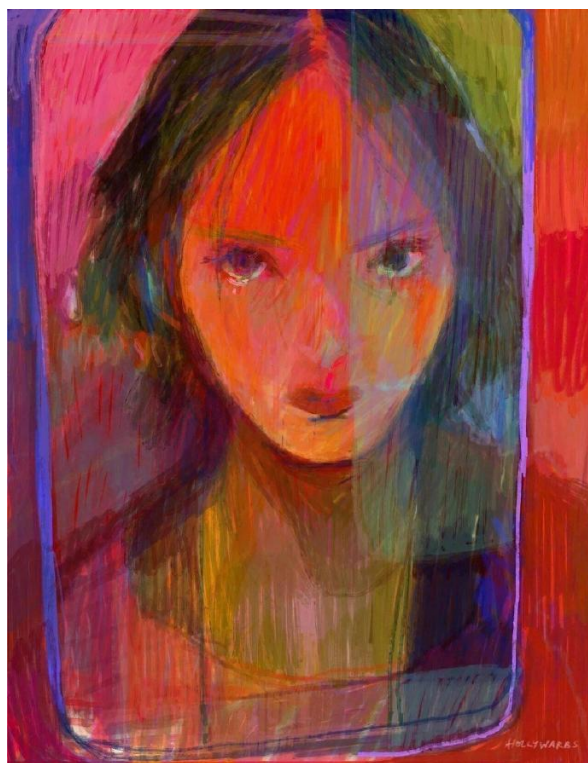


LOST7. (2020). Night [Illustration]

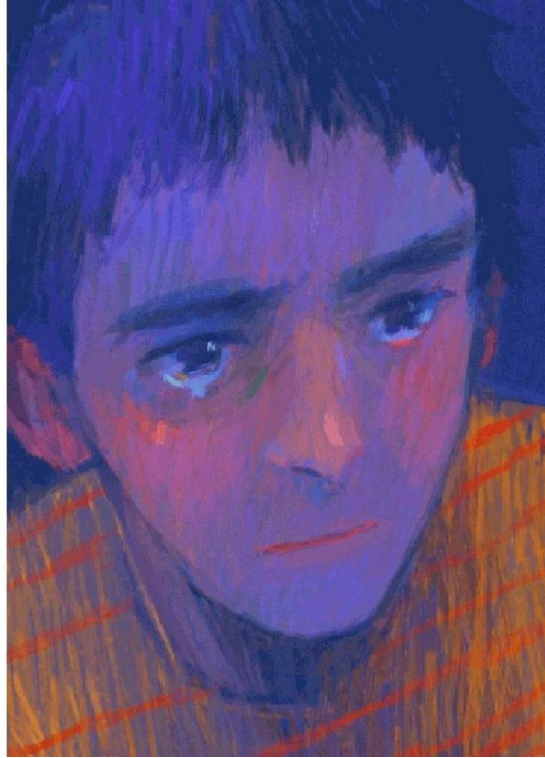
LOST7's ethereal, muted illustrations capture the quiet, introspective loneliness that often characterizes emotional experiences in Chinese contexts, where emotional restraint is normalized. In the first piece, a lone figure stands at the start of a winding, glowing path that stretches through soft, dreamlike clouds beneath a starry night sky. The vast, empty landscape and small, isolated figure visualize the sense of disconnection many Chinese adolescents feel when navigating their struggles alone, without a safe space to voice their pain. The path, winding and uncertain, mirrors the quiet, unspoken journey of navigating emotional distress in a culture that discourages overt vulnerability, while the soft pastel palette evokes the gentle, suppressed nature of these feelings. In the second illustration, multiple figures sit alone along separate, curved paths beneath a giant celestial body, each lost in their own quiet world. The physical distance between the figures, despite their shared environment, visualizes the way cultural norms of emotional restraint can create

invisible barriers between people, even when they are experiencing similar struggles.

LOST7's work avoids dramatic emotional displays, instead using vast negative space, soft textures, and symbolic landscapes to convey the internalized, unspoken loneliness of youth mental health struggles in China, reflecting the cultural emphasis on quiet resilience over overt expression.



Holly Warburton. (n.d.). Untitled Portrait (Mirror Reflection) [Illustration]



Holly Warburton. (n.d.). Untitled Portrait (Boy in Purple Light) [Illustration]

In contrast, Holly Warburton's bold, expressive paintings visualize the raw, unfiltered emotional expression common in Western contexts, where authenticity and openness are celebrated. Her portraits, rendered in vibrant, layered hues of purple, blue, and orange, capture moments of unguarded vulnerability: in one piece, a young boy's eyes glisten with tears, his face flushed with emotion, set against a dark, moody background. The thick, textured brushstrokes and intense color palette mirror the overwhelming, unruly nature of unexpressed feelings, reflecting the Western emphasis on acknowledging and processing emotions openly. In the second portrait, a girl's face is split by a mirrored frame, her expression complex and conflicted, rendered in a kaleidoscope of warm and cool tones. The mirror, a symbol of self-reflection, visualizes the Western focus on individual identity and emotional authenticity, while the layered colors convey the messy, contradictory

nature of mental health struggles. Warburton's work does not shy away from raw emotion; instead, it embraces it, using bold visual language to honor the Western ideal of emotional honesty, even when those feelings are painful or chaotic.

Together, LOST7 and Warburton's work reveals how cross-cultural visual narrative both unites and differentiates adolescent mental health experiences. LOST7's quiet, symbolic landscapes reflect the cultural pressure to suppress vulnerability in Chinese contexts, while Warburton's bold, expressive paintings embody the Western emphasis on emotional openness. Despite these differences, both artists capture the universal experience of feeling unseen or misunderstood, offering young people a way to connect with their own emotions, regardless of cultural background. For cross-cultural research, this kind of comparative visual storytelling is invaluable: it highlights how cultural norms shape emotional expression, while also revealing the shared humanity that connects all young people navigating mental health struggles. In doing so, it challenges stereotypes about emotional expression and encourages empathy across cultural divides, proving that visual narrative can bridge even the widest cultural gaps.

This overall study centres on youth mental health, visual narrative and cross-cultural comparison, summarising how young people across China and the UK face widespread emotional challenges in contemporary society. Although adolescents from both cultural contexts endure similar anxiety, loneliness and mental pressure, deeply rooted cultural values and social norms shape significant differences in how they recognise, express and

regulate inner emotions. Restricted by verbal language and cultural stigma, countless young people struggle to articulate vulnerable feelings, making visual creation an essential and compassionate alternative medium.

Through the analysis of a wide range of illustrators from both Eastern and Western backgrounds, this paper illustrates the unique power of visual narrative. Artists including Laura Carlin, Charlotte Ager, Zhang Zhanzhan, Pei-Hsin Cho, LOST7 and Holly Warburton utilise colour, composition, symbolism and visual metaphor to externalise complex psychological experiences that words cannot fully describe. Gentle, restrained Eastern visual styles and bold, expressive Western art practices further reflect cross-cultural distinctions in emotional cognition, while simultaneously revealing shared human feelings behind individual cultural differences.

Ultimately, this research confirms that visual narrative acts as a universal, boundary-crossing emotional language. It bridges cross-cultural gaps, validates adolescent inner struggles, and provides gentle psychological comfort and healing. It also offers valuable inspiration for my own visual design practice, proving that cross-cultural visual creation can continuously convey empathy, care and understanding for global youth mental health issues.

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