

Cognition of Legal Risks in Romantic Relationships Among Contemporary College Students and Educational Countermeasures

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Abstract: *Objective:* To investigate the current status, characteristics, and influencing factors of college students' cognition of legal risks in romantic relationships. *Methods:* A questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews were adopted. A total of 384 valid questionnaires were collected and 60 students were interviewed. *Results:* The questionnaire survey showed that only 15.1% of the respondents considered legal risks in romantic relationships; female students were 2.09 times more likely to consider such risks than male students ($p < 0.05$). Interview analysis revealed an overall cognition rate of 21.7%. Female students paid more attention to personal safety risks, while male students focused more on property risks. Students in ambiguous dating stages or stable romantic relationships showed significantly higher levels of legal risk cognition than other groups. *Conclusion:* College students' cognition of legal risks in romantic relationships is generally at a low level with significant gender differences. Emotional status influences risk cognition through "depth of interaction", and the sources of risk cognition show a "non-professional" characteristic. Universities should strengthen education on legal risks in romantic relationships and promote the integration of legal awareness into affective education systems.

Keywords: College students; Romantic relationships; Cognition of legal risks; Gender differences; University affective education

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1. Introduction

At present, China's population development is characterized by low birth rates^[1]. Marriage and love issues have gradually shifted from the private life sphere to a social issue with public significance, becoming a core category concerned by the national population development strategy and public policies. The *Medium and Long-Term Youth Development Plan (2016–2025)* issued by the State Council points out that young people's views on love and marriage should be more civilized, rational and healthy^[2]. The love and marriage status of young people is not only related to individual mental health and life choices, but also affects family stability,

population development and social operation order at a deeper level. In this context, how to guide young people to form rational and healthy views on love has gradually become an important issue jointly faced by higher education and social governance.

Contemporary college students are at a critical stage of transition from adolescence to adulthood, and are the core group for the formation of love concepts and exploration of love practices. However, college students generally have a vague cognition of the “boundary between emotion and law”, and issues such as property transactions and privacy infringements in love urgently need the intervention of legal knowledge^[3]. On the one hand, media have reshaped the love patterns of contemporary young people, exposing them to new risks such as online fraud and personal information leakage; on the other hand, traditional risks such as personal injury and economic disputes in romantic relationships still exist. Based on 5,099 questionnaires and 121 interview manuscripts, Sha Kaiwen et al. (2025) found that intimate partner violence among college students is characterized by complex forms of violence and insufficient coping ability^[4]. When encountering such situations, college students often choose to remain silent due to insufficient legal cognition, missing the opportunity to protect their rights^[5].

This phenomenon raises a key question: Do the objectively existing legal risks in romantic relationships really enter college students' cognitive structure of love? If legal risks fail to enter their cognitive vision, even if relevant legal norms are continuously improved, their preventive function will be difficult to exert truly. Based on this, this study adopts a combination of questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews to investigate the current status, characteristics and influencing factors of contemporary college students' cognition of legal risks in love, so as to provide empirical evidence and practical reference for universities to carry out education on the prevention of legal risks in love and improve the affective education system for college students.

2. Research design and methods

2.1. Research objects

The research objects of this study are college students from universities across the country, covering 20 provinces and autonomous regions including Beijing, Sichuan and Henan.

2.2. Research methods

2.2.1. Questionnaire survey

A total of 403 questionnaires were distributed in the questionnaire survey, and 384 valid questionnaires were recovered, with an effective recovery rate of 95.3%. Among them, 212 were female students, accounting for 55.2%. Majors included science, engineering, agriculture and medicine (66.7%), economics, management and law (17.2%), humanities and social sciences (14.6%), and art and physical education (1.6%). The ages ranged from 17 to 23 years old, with an average age of 18.80 ± 1.02 years old. The question “Before starting a romantic relationship or living with a partner, will you consciously think about or understand the legal risks involved?” was taken as the core measurement index to investigate their real risk perception status.

2.2.2. In-depth interview

A total of 60 students were invited for the interview, including 31 females, accounting for 51.7%. Majors included science, engineering, agriculture and medicine (65%), economics, management and law (21.7%), and humanities and social sciences (13.3%). The average age of the interviewees was 18.87 ± 1.35 years. All

interviews were conducted on the premise of ensuring anonymity and voluntariness. The interview outline followed the principle of “natural cognitive presentation”, avoiding directly mentioning the keyword “legal risks”. Through a combination of open and guiding questions, respondents were gradually guided to express their cognition and experience related to love. The core modules of the interview included: collection of basic sample information, exploration of love cognition and risk perception. Each interview lasted 20–40 minutes.

2.2.3. Data analysis methods

SPSS software was used for data processing and analysis in the quantitative part, and the binary Logistic regression model was mainly used to investigate the influence of factors such as gender and love status on legal risk cognition. In the qualitative part, a combination of categorical analysis and situational analysis was adopted to conduct open coding, category integration and theme refinement on the interview texts, so as to explore the deep logic, expression characteristics and influencing factors of legal risk cognition.

3. Results of the questionnaire survey

3.1. Overall status of legal risk mentions

Without prompting the concept of “legal risks”, only 15.1% (58/384) of the respondents voluntarily mentioned legal risks related to love. The respondents’ love cognition mainly focused on dimensions such as emotional experience, relationship quality and realistic adaptation, and legal risks were significantly “absent” in college students’ love cognition. In terms of the distribution of risk types, property-related risks and personal safety risks were the main concerns in the voluntarily mentioned risk contents, but the overall cognition was still scattered experience without forming a systematic awareness of legal protection.

3.2. Influence of gender and love status on legal risk cognition

The results showed significant gender differences: females were 2.09 times more likely to consider legal risks in love than males ($\text{Exp}(B) = 2.09, p < 0.05$). This result indicates that females are more sensitive to legal risks in love than males. The difference in love status was not significant: although there were differences in the rate of legal risk mention among respondents with different love statuses, the overall difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). In other words, whether in a romantic relationship and what stage of love did not significantly affect college students’ attention to legal risks in love.

This finding has important implications: gender is a key variable affecting college students’ cognition of legal risks in love, while emotional status itself does not constitute a significant dividing line of risk cognition. This suggests that the shaping of legal risk cognition in love stems more from differences in risk perception in the process of gender socialization rather than immediate experience brought by current emotional status.

4. Analysis of interview results

4.1. Overall characteristics of cognition of legal risks in love

Based on text mining and coding analysis of 60 interview data, 13 respondents clearly mentioned legal risks related to love, with an overall cognition rate of 21.7%. According to the nature of legal risks, the legal risks in love mentioned by respondents can be divided into two categories: property risks and personal risks. Both types of risks were mentioned 7 times, accounting for 50% each, and no other types of legal risks were

mentioned.

Property risks mainly focus on economic disputes and property rights issues in romantic relationships, specifically including scenarios such as prevention of betrothal gift disputes, division of joint expenses, and property fraud. Personal risks mainly focus on personal safety and infringement of personality rights in intimate relationships, specifically including scenarios such as rights protection against domestic violence and prevention of mental control.

4.2. Correlation between cognition of legal risks in love and gender

The interview results further confirmed the gender differences found in the quantitative analysis and revealed the internal logic of the differences. In terms of risk cognition rate, females (29%) were higher than males (13.8%). Among females, 9 out of 31 mentioned legal risks, with a cognition rate of 29%; 66.7% of females focused on personal risks and 44.4% on property risks. Among males, 4 out of 29 mentioned legal risks, with a cognition rate of 13.8%; 75% of males focused on property risks and only 25% mentioned personal risks.

4.3. Correlation between cognition of legal risks in love and emotional status

The “depth of interaction” and “degree of interest binding” of love status have become key factors affecting risk levels. Students in the ambiguous stage are more alert to personal safety (such as boundary violations and emotional manipulation), while those in stable romantic relationships have a simultaneous increase in awareness of property risks due to deep interest binding. This result reveals that the cognition of legal risks in love is not static, but dynamically changes with the evolution of emotional status.

5. Discussion

5.1. Absence of cognition of legal risks in love

Young people’s legal awareness lags behind emotional practice, and the formation of this “absence” can be explained from multiple perspectives. From the perspective of legal system supply, China’s current *Anti-Domestic Violence Law* does not apply to non-cohabiting romantic relationships, and the “absence” of the legal system has kept legal risks in love in an “invisible” state for a long time [8]. From a psychological perspective, a survey by the Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences (2025) showed that love status is closely related to college students’ depression risk, and students in romantic relationships have higher mental health levels, which may make students weaken their attention to potential risks in the process of pursuing intimate relationships^[9]. As a highly emotionally involved activity, love makes individuals tend to prioritize emotional information, and legal risks, as “atypical” cognitive content, are difficult to enter the cognitive framework spontaneously.

5.2. Deep logic of gender and risk cognition

Females have significantly higher cognition of legal risks in love than males, showing a strong correlation between “gender-risk type”: females pay more attention to personal risks, while males focus more on property risks. From the perspective of social gender role theory, in traditional gender division of labor, females are assigned the role of “caregivers”, and the socialization process emphasizes sensitivity to personal safety; males are assigned the role of “breadwinners”, and the socialization process emphasizes responsibility for economic obligations. Based on a national large-scale survey, Mao Zhuoyan et al. (2024) found that there are significant

gender differences in contemporary college students' views on love and marriage, and females have more negative willingness to marry and have children, which is related to females' higher sensitivity to marriage and love risks^[10].

5.3. Educational suggestions

Zhao Zhaoxia (2024) pointed out that one of the core points of cultivating college students' views on marriage and family under the background of the *Civil Code* is “rationality and legal responsibility in love”^[11]. To achieve the cultivation goal of “rationality and legal responsibility”, educational forms must conform to the cognitive habits and media preferences of contemporary college students. First, build a systematic education system on legal risks in love. Second, carry out gender-differentiated risk education. Third, conduct precise education for different emotional statuses.

6. Conclusion

First, college students' cognition of legal risks in love is generally in a state of “absence”. Second, gender is a key variable affecting legal risk cognition, while the influence of love status is not significant. Third, emotional status indirectly affects risk cognition through “depth of interaction” and “degree of interest binding”. Fourth, the sources of risk cognition show a “non-professional” characteristic.

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