

Analyzing Winnie the Pooh Characters' Modifications through Susanne Langer's Semiotic Framework

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Abstract

This study explores the characters in the "Winnie the Pooh" series by A. A. Milne, with a specific focus on the evolution of character design in Disney adaptations. Four main characters—Pooh, Piglet, Eeyore, and Tigger—are the subjects of this investigation. The analysis dissects the messages conveyed through each character utilizing Susanne K. Langer's semiotics. Langer posits that if one symbolism is inadequate, human intelligence will seek out alternative symbolism. Hence, effective character design plays a crucial role in conveying specific emotions and messages. Character colors, such as the yellow and red hues of Pooh, the pink of Piglet, the gray of Eeyore, and the orange of Tigger, reflect the characters' traits and emotions, establishing distinctive visual identities. According to Susanne Langer's theory, the conclusion underscores the complexity of the relationship between color, character, and narrative in visual art, particularly within the context of design alterations undertaken by Disney. The results also show each character's relation to mental health issues. These characters appeal as a new meaning in supporting social concerns about mental health and educate new generations to overcome their mental health problems.

Keywords: adaptation strategies, creative industry, heritage, Omah Lowo.

Introduction

Winnie the Pooh, created by A.A. Milne and illustrated by E.H. Shepard has been a beloved literary and cinematic icon since the 20th century. Initially introduced in children's stories commissioned by the London Evening News in 1925, Pooh was inspired by a teddy bear owned by Milne's son, Christopher. The character debuted in "Winnie-the-Pooh" (1926) and continued in "The House at Pooh Corner" (1928). Milne also penned poems about Pooh in "When We Were Very Young" (1924) and "Now We Are Six" (1927), all illustrated by Shepard. In 1961, The Walt Disney Company secured rights to adapt the Pooh tales, launching one of its most successful franchises.



Figure 1. Classic Winnie The Pooh Characters (Source: *Winnie-The-Pooh*, 2024)

In addition to Pooh the bear, the series also includes other characters based on A.A. Milne's son's toys. Characters such as Piglet, Eeyore, Kanga, Roo, and Tigger were incorporated into Milne's stories. Owl and Rabbit were created by Milne, while Gopher was added by Disney. Each character possesses unique traits and quirks, reflecting both human strengths and weaknesses. The fictional spaces of Winnie-the-Pooh reflect English pride in outdoor pursuits and traditions of natural enclosure and how those traditions were affected by the war, industrialization, and urbanization. In Milne's books, Pooh is depicted as a naive, slow-witted bear, but also friendly, wise, and resilient. Piglet is kind-hearted and appreciates beauty, while Tigger is cheerful, friendly, and competitive. Eeyore is consistently pessimistic, often expecting misfortune.

Character design plays a pivotal role in children's literature and television, extending beyond mere illustration. It functions as a medium to convey emotions, personalities, and messages to the audience. Pooh's illustrations by E.H. Shepard in Milne's books differ from those in Disney's franchise, reflecting subtle changes in other Hundred Acre Wood inhabitants as well. Milne acknowledged Winnie the Pooh's evolving character design, highlighting the significance of color emphasis on accessories and character colors imbued with distinct meanings.

Method

The application of semiotic principles is an effective method for indirectly conveying characters' emotions and feelings. Semiotics is crucial in character design, aiding in imbuing aesthetic character and meaning into the design (Eves, 2008). This is particularly vital in design education, where semiotics is utilized to comprehend and construct objects, communications, and services aligned with users' needs and practices (Deni, 2017). The ability to decode and encode messages through symbols is what gives character design its depth and relatability. For instance, the choice of shapes, lines, and colors can evoke specific emotional responses and cultural connotations, making the characters more engaging and meaningful to the audience.

This approach allows designers to create a visual language that resonates with viewers on a subconscious level, enhancing the overall storytelling experience.

Color theory, as described by Agoston in Brocklebank (1989), involves a complex interaction of the visual system, where color perception is often less distinct than shape perception due to the integration of the visual system, creating a unified world across multiple dimensions. The use of color in art and design is further elaborated, emphasizing the concept of "shapes plus value plus color." This means that color is not just an additive element but a transformative one that can alter the perception of shape and form. By understanding the psychological and emotional impacts of color, designers can manipulate visual elements to create desired atmospheres and character traits. For example, warm colors like red and orange can evoke feelings of warmth and energy, while cool colors like blue and green can create a sense of calm and tranquility. This intricate dance between color and form is essential in crafting characters that are visually appealing and emotionally resonant.

To delve deeper into the significance of color changes in the characters, we can apply semiotic theory. Semiotics allows for analyzing the symbolic meanings conveyed through visual elements like color, making it crucial in character design. Through semiotics, we can understand how color choices and alterations create symbolic narratives, influencing how observers interpret characters visually and narratively. For instance, the use of muted colors in a character's design might symbolize a melancholic or introspective personality, while bright, saturated colors might indicate a more vibrant and energetic character. This symbolic use of color can guide the audience's perception and emotional response, making the characters more relatable and memorable.

Langer's statement in Reichling (1993) supports this, suggesting that if one symbolism fails, humans seek another. Therefore, if character designs don't engage audiences, they'll seek more compelling entertainment. This underscores the importance of continually evolving and adapting character designs to meet the changing tastes and expectations of the audience. Thus, the success of an artwork or design depends on its ability to convey messages or emotions connecting with the audience's experiences. Attention to diverse and appealing symbolism is key to maintaining audience interest and engagement. By leveraging semiotic principles and color theory, designers can create characters that not only capture the audience's attention but also resonate with their emotions and experiences, ensuring lasting impact and relevance in the ever-evolving landscape of media and entertainment.

Result and Discussion

Traditionally, images are divided into four categories: the visible and tangible world, emphasizing the depiction of events and objects, conveying messages, and representing stored

memories. Based on the table above, E.H. Shepard's illustrations of the Winnie the Pooh characters were masterfully crafted to captivate children's imaginations by mimicking the simplistic and charming animal drawings typical of 5 to 7-year-old students. In the narratives, while Milne portrays the earnest perspective of his child protagonists, Shepard's illustrations often playfully undermine the gravity of the character's situation. Based on the research of Don A. Norman (2004), color plays an important role in enhancing attractiveness, perceived credibility, and user acceptance. This approach made the characters instantly relatable and endearing to young readers. A successful design is not only addressing what the user's functional needs are but to also cater to their emotional needs.

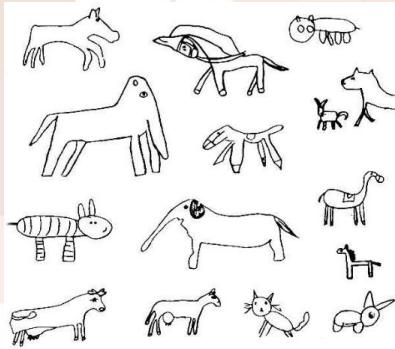


Figure 2. Animal drawings by five- to seven-year-old children
Source: Mahamood, & Mustaqim (2013)

In the 1920s, the aesthetics of children's books were distinctively different, with a preference for pastel colors over brighter ones. According to a study on the effects of colors on emotions by Valdez and Mehrabian (1994), Pastel colors were believed to have a calming effect on children, promoting a sense of tranquility and focus. Additionally, the printing techniques of the time significantly influenced the final appearance of Shepard's illustrations. The limited color palettes and less advanced printing technology of the 1920s often resulted in muted, less saturated images, which inadvertently aligned with the pastel aesthetic recommended for children. This convergence of artistic style and printing capabilities helped ensure that Shepard's illustrations were both visually pleasing and psychologically beneficial for young readers.

Table 1. Analysis on E.H Shepard's Winnie the Pooh Characters Design.
Source: author

Character Design	Art Style	Character Colors
	Raw sketch with watercolor painting technique.	Pastel yellow & muted deep brown outline.
		Muted pastel pink and green & muted deep brown outline.
		Muted blueish gray & muted deep brown outline.
		Muted pastel orange with muted deep brown accent color & muted deep brown outline.

Table 2. Analysis on Disney's Winnie the Pooh Character Designs.
Source: author

Character Design	Art Style	Character Colors	Disney's Modifications
	Vector image with solid colors and more expressive facial features.	Medium to deep yellow, red accent color & black outline	Enhanced facial features for more expressive expressions and a red shirt added for accessories.
		Pastel cherry pink and deep misty rose & black outline	Enhanced details for more expressiveness in the facial expressions, with the torso color of Piglet changed to a darker shade of pink.
		Gray and light gray with black details, pink accent color & black outline.	Enhanced details for increased expressiveness in the facial expressions, with brighter colors added to specific parts of the body, along with the addition of ribbon accessories.
		Bright orange and black with cream details & black outline	Enhanced details for a more expressive look, with brighter colors added to certain parts of the body.

The analysis of the illustrations of the four main characters in A. A. Milne's works and the Disney television adaptation of "Winnie the Pooh" reveals several modifications by Disney. These alterations include adding bright-colored accessories and adjusting existing character colors. Importantly, the significance of these colors extends beyond brightness to encompass deep connotations and significance.

In the cartoon characters of Winnie the Pooh, the yellow and red colors on the main character, Pooh Bear, can have specific connotations. The yellow color on Pooh's body reflects the simplicity and friendliness of his character. Pooh is often depicted as a friendly and sincere character. The yellow color can also express politeness and cheerfulness, consistent with Pooh's optimistic and friendly nature. The red color on Pooh's clothing symbolizes bravery and spirit. Despite appearing plain, this red color can create contrast and reveal the brave and enthusiastic side of Pooh's character. Red can also be associated with loyalty and friendship.

Pink is often connoted with joy and warmth, which aligns perfectly with Piglet's character traits as Pooh's friend. Its use on Piglet aims to create a friendly and adorable image while highlighting Piglet's cute and innocent qualities. Piglet is known as a gentle character, and the pink color can give the impression of gentleness and caring, reflecting Piglet's attentive and sensitive nature.

Eeyore, the gloomy and pessimistic donkey, also has a body color that reflects his nature. The gray color on Eeyore reflects the feelings of sadness and pessimism often associated with this character. Eeyore is often portrayed as an individual who tends to look at the dark side of life. In the context of gray as a neutral color, it reflects uncertainty or balance in Eeyore's emotions. Although the dominance of worries and sadness is evident, the gray color can also symbolize complexity and nuances in his feelings. This neutral color also reflects Eeyore's stable and dependable nature despite often being pessimistic.

Orange is a bright and warm color, often associated with joy and cheerfulness. This color reflects the cheerful and spirited nature of Tigger. Orange can refer to energy and enthusiasm. Tigger, famous for his speed and enthusiasm, is represented by this color to showcase his lively qualities. Orange can also be associated with creativity and innovation. Tigger, as a unique and creative character, can be represented by this color.

Disney's illustrations of Winnie the Pooh utilize bright and cheerful colors to engage their primary audience, children, and create a positive and friendly atmosphere while conveying the story's message effectively. By employing vibrant visuals, Disney aims to capture children's attention and ensure that Pooh's character is presented in an engaging manner, facilitating the conveyance of moral messages. This approach aligns with Langer's principle that if symbolism lacks engagement, viewers will seek alternative symbolism. By

leveraging children's positive response to colorful visuals, Disney enhances the appeal of Pooh's character designs and illustrations, ultimately improving memory retention of these beloved characters. These techniques show us that these characters have a connection to mental health conditions and how to overcome them through relationships with these characters. Mimicry theory helps readers personalize themselves with the characters in Winnie the Pooh.

Disney's Winnie the Pooh's character representations also play a crucial role in society for shaping children's understanding and perceptions of mental health. Through the diverse characters in the Hundred Acre Wood, children are gently introduced to various mental health conditions in a relatable and non-threatening way. For example, Tigger's hyperactivity and Eeyore's sadness each represent different aspects of mental health challenges. By interacting with and accepting these characters, children learn empathy, understanding, and the importance of supportive relationships. This narrative approach by storytelling helps destigmatize mental health issues, encouraging children to recognize and discuss their own feelings and those of others.

Conclusion

A conclusion drawn from this analysis is that the colors in the cartoon characters of "Winnie the Pooh" are not merely decorative visual elements but also carry symbolic meanings and play a significant role in portraying the personality and emotions of each character, particularly concerning the modifications made by Disney in character design. Digital visual culture gives a new perspective of all characters to use as mental health treatment suggestions. Children will understand and appreciate the new world view where people also have different spectrums of mental illnesses. Thus, we can see how psychology and design support each other in understanding the impact on everyday life.

The application of semiotic theory and color theory as part of visual culture, aids in approaching this analysis by revealing how color choices create symbolic narratives and influence audience interpretation. The yellow and red hues on Pooh, pink on Piglet, gray on Eeyore, and orange on Tigger respectively reflect the traits and emotions of these characters, establishing distinctive visual identities. Overall, this analysis demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between color, character, and narrative in the context of visual art. Disney employs bright colors to capture children's attention, aligning with Langer's principle that engaging symbolism is necessary for effective message delivery. For mental health issues these characters give us the perspective on how to overcome mental illness.

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