

Use of Stickers in the Context of Computer-Mediated Interpersonal Communication

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Abstract

Based on the method of case analysis, this paper probes into the characteristics of stickers applied in different interpersonal networks by reviewing the basic theories of interpersonal communication and summarizing the development, types as well as characteristics of stickers. It finds that people tend to use different types of stickers when facing different interpersonal networks and that the diversity of stickers is positively related to interpersonal intimacy.

Keywords

Interpersonal communication; sticker; networks.

1. Interpersonal Communication and Network Expression

1.1. Basic Theories of Interpersonal Communication

As social human beings, we are communicating with each other all the time, which enables interactive communication to be an indispensable part of our production activities. Through interpersonal communication, we construct self-awareness and establish connections with the outside world.

In 1958, American social psychologist Schutz proposed a theory of interpersonal relations he called Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO). According to the theory, inclusion, control and affection are the three basic needs for human interaction. And, in 1985, American sociologist George Casper Homans introduced the Exchange Theory which was then extended to interpersonal communication through the concept of economics and deemed that people engaged in interpersonal communication out of self-interest. Therefore, interpersonal communication was defined as follows: "Interpersonal communication is the process of transferring symbols in which two related parties share resources or negotiate exchanges of resources." [1]

Martin Buber mentioned in his book *I and Thou* that one had two different lives—I-It and I-Thou because he was involved in the double world. [2] Unlike the life of I-It, the encounter between "I and you" is not a relationship established to satisfy my any needs. Instead, Martin Buber believed that the real situation of man was between the uniqueness of "I-thou" and the inclusiveness of "I-it". Under the influence of "I-Thou" relationship proposed by Martin Burber, communication scholars believe that interpersonal communication exists in a gradually changing interval from extreme non-human to highly interpersonal, [3] which is what we've been after all our lives.

This paper believes that interpersonal communication refers to face-to-face or media-based information exchange activities between two or more people. [4] Besides, it can also be called information communication activities between individuals and individuals, that is, individual systems are interconnected to form a new information dissemination system. As one of the branches of communication, interpersonal communication is the basis of all communication.

Neither organizational communication nor mass communication is inseparable from the development of interpersonal communication.

1.2. Internet and Interpersonal Communication

In the 1960s, interpersonal communication gradually took shape and quickly separated from rhetorical-based personal training of oral skills. In the 1970s, interpersonal communication started to be a discipline and quickly became the main axis of communication. Later, in the 1990s, the emergence and popularity of the Internet extended the scope of interpersonal communication from reality to the Internet [5], and computer-mediated communication became increasingly popular. Besides, the development of network communication has also provided new thinking for the study of interpersonal communication. And nowadays, it is difficult to separate ourselves from the Internet for only one day. Interpersonal communication has gradually spread and expanded to the virtual world since the network shortens the spatial distance between each other. At the same time, computer-mediated interpersonal communication has been tightly intertwined with the methods of traditional interpersonal communication, which has promoted to research on the theory of computer-mediated interpersonal communication.

Computer-mediated interpersonal communication refers to the non-face-to-face information exchange and emotional communication between individuals and individuals who use characters and network symbols provides by computers and the networks. Compared with face-to-face interpersonal communication, computer-mediated interpersonal communication has four characteristics: openness and globality, virtuality and anonymity, limited sensory experience, and personalized objects. [6] To begin with, computer-mediated interpersonal communication overcomes geographical limitations. It breaks the limitation of face-to-face interpersonal relationship so that people can share information and communicate anytime and anywhere. Secondly, due to the anonymous mechanism of computer-mediated interpersonal communication, netizens prefer to use a pseudonym or new identity to get closer to the “ideal self”, which virtualize computer-mediated interpersonal communication. Besides, on the one hand, symbols and words are used a lot in computer-mediated interpersonal communication; on the other hand, texts are the biggest carrier of timely information transferring and non-verbal elements such as body language and facial expressions that affect communication are all gone. Therefore, this fact makes it difficult for both parties to observe each other’s expressions and movements during communication and ultimately leading to ineffective communication. This also shows that in computer-mediated interpersonal communication, language communication is excessively used while the equally important non-verbal communication is neglected. Finally, since different people have different hobbies, they can “decorate” themselves through different words and labels on the Internet to find a group that fits their interests and provides a sense of collective identity to communicate. Meanwhile, labeling oneself is, to a certain extent, shaping and presenting self-image.

1.3. Sticker—Personalized Interpersonal Communication

People have diversified ways of interaction in computer-mediated interpersonal communication. And as a special non-verbal communication method, stickers have two unique characteristics: it involves personalized users and different application of stickers in different relation networks. Besides, the personalized characteristic of network communication, this personalized use of stickers, makes it convenient for individuals to establish, develop and maintain relationships. The second characteristic of stickers conforms to that of online interpersonal relationship, namely, sending different messages to different recipients. This is exactly why people prefer to use stickers to convey inexpressible emotions. Combining the two characteristics of stickers and computer-mediated interpersonal communication, this paper

stickers which are based on cartoon images have appeared on the Internet and entered people's daily life since 2006.

2.2. Further Maturity of Personalized Expression

Stickers are a kind of network expression symbols mostly composed of static pictures or GIF dynamic pictures and combine expressions, actions, and concise texts, which makes them convenient for people to communicate emotionally.

In addition to being "cute" and "adorable", stickers of the mobile Internet era reflect the characteristics of anti-authority, anti-tradition and counter-mainstream of the minority sub-culture groups. At present, besides stickers possessing popular elements and designed for young people, the mobile Internet platform also provides various stickers that conforms to the aesthetics standards of the middle-aged and the old-aged, satisfying the diversified needs of netizens and making personalized expression further mature. According to the different forms of stickers, they can be divided into the following categories.

2.2.1. Personified and Cartoon Stickers

Since 2006, a large number of designers' stickers which are based on cartoon images have appeared on the Internet, including catsoul stickers, powpowbing stickers, and MarioGG stickers. Unlike small yellow face which can only convey common emotions of human beings, these designers' stickers emphasize venting individual emotions. These stickers were introduced into the emoticon stores by QQ and WeChat early, becoming the "official expressions" of these platforms.

In addition to cartoon stickers, there also appear a number of personified tailor-made stickers. Personification refers to making expressions and movements of stickers look like humans'. For example, the rage comic sticks combining vivid movements and expressions are used by netizens to bicker through sending each other stickers and to express strong emotions. Equally popular is the "doge" stickers which are derived from an online animation series called Homestar Runner. In the animation, the dog is called "doge" and becomes well-known for its cute image as a Shiba Inu as well as its hilarious personified interjections. Popular doge stickers on the Internet are mostly the Shiba Inu photos accompanied with simple English phrases in Comic Sans font, or photos of other objects on which the facial features of Shiba Inu is photoshopped. Sometimes, the PS technic is used to alter the face of Shiba Inu to make it look more human and "be lovely in a different appearance".

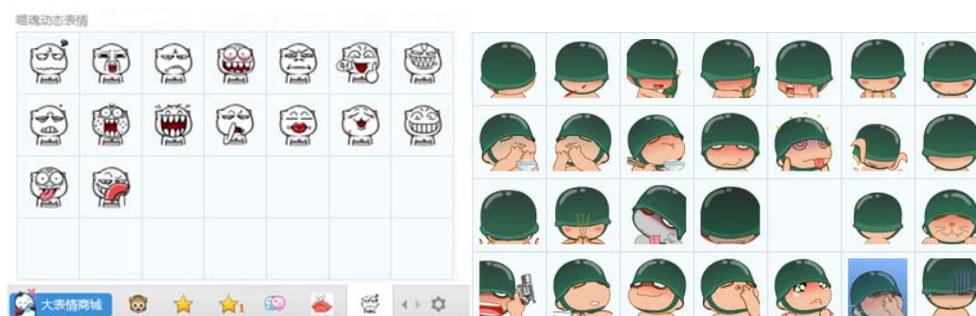


Fig 2. Catsoul stickers

Powpowbing stickers

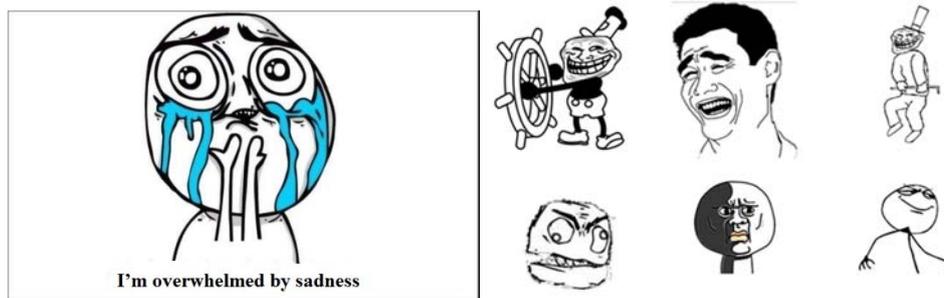


Fig 3. Rage comic sticks (I'm overwhelmed by sadness.)

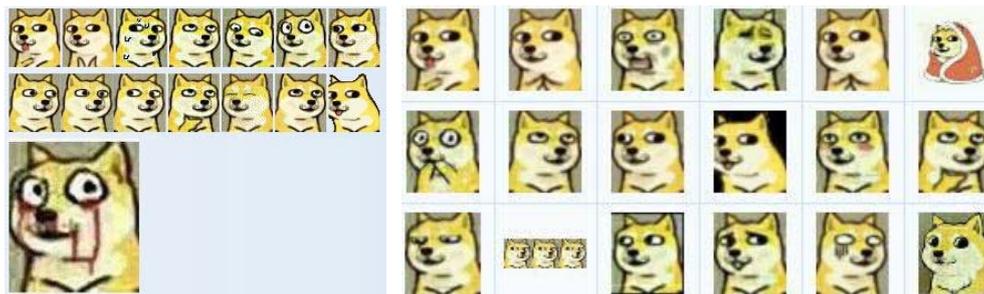


Fig 4. Doge

2.2.2. Stickers Featuring Real Persons

Stickers featuring real persons are made by taking screenshots from the films and television programs, or by selecting the images of ordinary people in daily life. These images of real people are abstracted and exaggerated to a certain extent. One category is represented by public figures such as characters in films and television programs, stars and politicians. In the beginning, stickers featuring real persons were used for commercial promotion. For instance, paid series of cute or crying stickers featuring popular stars such as Lu Han and Deng Chao in their daily lives could be obtained by their fans. Then, with the emergence of more and more stickers featuring stars, netizens began to extract exaggerated clips from movies and TV dramas and make them stickers with vivid words. For example, stickers featuring Yao Ming, Choi Seong-guk, and Hanazawa Kana are known as the three most popular Asian stickers; Stickers featuring Song Min-guk became popular because Song Min-guk's adorable performance in the program of "The Return of Superman"; stickers extracted from "Romance in the Rain" and "Princess of Pearl" used widely by Chinese for their classical plots; and Stickers featuring the boy with a fake smile caught in through the Internet.

The stickers featuring real persona are not only highly relevant to the network plot but also closely related to real life. In the meantime, such stickers are so ubiquitous that they are used by people to joke about each other. Another type of stickers featuring real persons is made according to ordinary people in everyday life. Some people even imitate popular online stickers and then make stickers featuring themselves for "self -ridicule" or mutual mockery between friends. There is also some image editing software and camera software such as Wuta Camera and B612 Camera can be used to create DIY stick



Three most popular Asian stickers (Hanazawa Kana, Yao Ming, and Choi Seong-guk)



Holding back tears

You, come here

Fig 5. Stickers featuring Song Min-guk (“Holding back tears” and “You, come here”)



Nice

Fig 6. Stickers featuring the boy with a fake smile (“Nice”)



Fig 7. Stickers derived from Romance in the Rain



Fig 8. Stickers derived from Princess of Pearl (Put on the red underpants Mom has tailored for you.)



Emoji Filming Video Music

Fig 9. Software for creating personal stickers

2.2.3. Stickers Popular among the Middle-aged and Aged

Stickers popular among the middle-aged and aged are generally colorful, using “red with green”, “blue with yellow” and other contrast colors, and accompanied with words in various fonts and big size. From the perspective of the themes, this age group generally uses stickers full of positive energy to express greetings and blessings. These stickers are usually pictures of people or flower patterns accompanied with phrases such as “Wish you health and happiness”, “Treat friends to tea”, “Good night”, etc. The use of stickers featuring real persons is not limited to the middle-aged and aged, but used widely by young people as well. However, meanings expressed by stickers popular among the two age groups are not the same. The middle-aged and aged usually express blessings through these stickers, while the young mostly use them for joking.



Fig 10. Stickers popular among the middle-aged and aged

You are very kind. You are the best. Life is like a cup of tea. Very good. How beautiful! Happy every day. Happy holiday. Blessing. Give you lucky money. Knowing each other is a fate. Good morning! Thank you! Let’s have a toast to our friendship. Being happy is the most important. Wish you a good dream! Flashing! Good morning! Another wonderful day! Let’s have a chat. Good evening! Thank you! Are you online? Honey! Good night! Alright. Hello. Good Afternoon! Goodbye!

In addition to being more personalized than the previous numerical symbols and emoji emoticons, stickers also give rise to a series of sensational “sticker” events which demonstrate that stickers have gradually penetrated into the lives of the public and become a symbol of expressing the public’s emotions. Therefore, it can be said that the connotation of stickers has become common knowledge.

In 2016, Zhou Ziyu, a member of the South Korean girl group TWICE, was reported to advocate Taiwan independence by Huang An, which led to the widespread boycott of Zhou Ziyu. Later, Zhou Ziyu publicly apologized on the social platform, but was ridiculed by the mainland artist Lin Gengxin who said that it was so sudden that she had no time to recite the manuscript. Lin

Gengxin's Facebook homepage was immediately full of criticisms from Taiwanese netizens. In order to protect their idol Lin, many netizens in the mainland took special weapons "stickers" to fight criticisms on Facebook, which was called the war of "Facebook VS Sticker". Those various stickers better reflected the participants' humor, jest, contempt and ridicule. Thus, personalized expression has become more and more intense, rising from personal emotions to the level of political culture.

Also, in 2017, some students of the Chinese University of Hong Kong appealed for Hong Kong independence, and the students from the mainland in the school were so angry that they took out use stickers to confront those separatists. The Democracy Wall of CUHK on which once a poster of advocating Hong Kong independence was put up was full of a variety of stickers overnight, which was the event of stickers taking up the Democracy Wall of CUHK. Stickers, which were a kind of entertainment expression, not only transmit information but also conveyed strong resistance to Hong Kong separatists as well as unswerving patriotism.

3. Interpersonal Information Conveyed from Online Stickers

3.1. Types of Computer-Mediated Interpersonal Communication Networks

Computer-mediated interpersonal communication refers to the interaction between people through computer networks. The use of computer networks as mediators gets rid of space and distance limitations, and is more likely to prevent the prejudice and anxiety of communicators that easily occur in face-to-face interactions and thus make interpersonal communication more convenient. For instance, people may communicate productively and contentedly with those who will avoided by them upon meeting. On the one hand, computer-mediated communication promotes the off-line networks of communication. On the other hand, the convenience of computer-mediated communication has also promoted the generation and intimacy of other interpersonal networks. Through the interview method, this paper takes a sophomore named Xiaohong as the study object. By organizing Xiaohong's relationship networks, the paper analyzes how the use of online stickers in interpersonal information differentiates when communicating interpersonal information.

As a college student, Xiaohong uses social software (such as WeChat and QQ) to communicate with parents, classmates, friends and other groups established based on hobbies and interest. Her relationship networks can be roughly classified into three categories: the network purely based on real relationships, the network based on realities and self-selection and the network entirely based on common hobbies and interests.

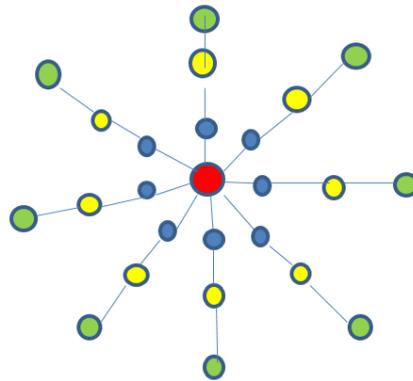
The network based purely on real relationships refers to the one that is led from the offline to the online. Communication parties in this network are familiar to her and are people whom she has to communicate with based on real relationship. Typical examples are parents, relatives, teachers, etc.

The network based on realities and self-selection refers to the relationships chosen freely by her according to realities. Typical examples are friends, etc.

The network based entirely on common hobbies and interests refers to the one composed of people who are purely gathered through the Internet and have no real connections. Typical examples are interest groups, fan groups, etc.

The diagram of Xiaohong's interpersonal networks is shown below. With Xiaohong as the center dot, the distance between each dot and the center dot is positively correlated with the intimacy between Xiaohong and the particular party it represents. In other words, the closer the distance is, the greater the intimacy is. Through interviews, it is known that Xiaohong was a college student far away from home and usually communicated with her parents online. With the development of the Internet and media technology, interpersonal networks have gradually evolved from offline to online, and generate new networks online. Based on the following

diagram, it can be concluded that Xiaohong usually interacted more with friends, followed by parents or people with whom she has to communicate based on real relationships, and finally interest groups. Therefore, we can conclude that the first circle of blue dots represents the network based on realities and self-selection, the second circle of yellow dots represents the network purely based on real relationships, and the third circle of green dots represents the network completely based on common hobbies and activities. At the same time, these three layers also constitute Xiaohong's entire networks of computer-mediated interpersonal communication.



3.2. Use of Stickers in Different Networks

Although CMC (computer-mediated communication) is extremely convenient, it lacks non-verbal cues which can be perceived in face-to-face interactions. [8] And stickers just compensate for this shortcoming to a certain extent, relatively succeeding in the stimulation of realistic sensory movements and body language. In addition to communicating intended messages, stickers can also help build identities and shape online identities to some extent [9]. Based on the analysis of Xiaohong's use of stickers, it can be concluded that she would use different types of stickers when facing different networks.

3.2.1. Use of Stickers in the Network Based on Real Relationships

When faced with a network purely based on real relationships, Xiaohong tended to use stickers based on factors such as age and seniority in the family. For example, when communicating with parents, she would use more personified and cartoon stickers but avoid stickers of popular network language so as to communicate with them more effectively. When it comes to elders such as grandparents, there would be more stickers appealing to this age group that wished good luck or good health. When faced with a teacher or a working partner of the club she joined in, Xiaohong used different stickers as well.

3.2.2. Use of Stickers in the Network Based on Realities and Self-selection

When confronted with a network based on realities and self-selection, people are more inclined to choose diversified stickers. For example, when chatting with a close friend online, one can even purely use stickers to communicate with the other party. When it comes to a movie or star that both of you like, you will choose stickers featuring the very star; sometimes, those stickers appealing to the middle-aged and aged are used to joke about oneself or others; but most of the time, one tends to use cartoon and personalized stickers to keep up with popular culture trends.

3.2.3. Use of Stickers in the Network Purely Based on Common Interests

When facing a network based entirely on common hobbies and interests, Xiaohong would use personalized stickers concerning topics of common interest more frequently, including cartoon, personalized stickers and stickers featuring real persons. When faced with people with whom we have no real connections, we focus more on building an identity and a sense of collective identity while communicating. Besides disseminating information and ensuring collective identity, one can also satisfy his own emotional and inclusive needs.

From the research into Xiaohong's computer-mediated interpersonal communication in different networks, it can be concluded that the use of stickers is related to both the type of interpersonal networks and the intimacy between her and the communicating object from a specific network.

As shown in the following diagram, stickers used tend to be more diversified in computer-mediated interpersonal communication when the intimacy increases. In other words, the closer the two parties are, the more diversified the stickers they use. For example, when Xiaohong communicated online with new members of the club she had never met, she would use the stickers that fit the current situation. Through stickers, she not only conveyed the intended information but also build her identity. When communicating with close friends, however, she would use a variety of stickers ranging from cartoon and personalized DIY stickers to stickers featuring real persons to even those appealing to the middle-aged and aged.



Although the use of stickers is related to the intimacy of a certain network, contexts should also be taken into account because different contexts will require different types of stickers. Nevertheless, the use of stickers in socializing with a certain party is still roughly within a relatively fixed interval. While sending a sticker, one is also carrying out impression management. Normally, the certain kind of image one expects to be perceived by the other party does not change much, thus demonstrating one's preference for a relatively fixed type of stickers.

4. Conclusion

Computer-mediated interpersonal communication is a contemporary interpersonal communication type that worth attention and researching. On the one hand, with the development of network technology, the Internet has become an important platform for interpersonal communication. On the other hand, the Internet has expanded the scope of interpersonal communication, and enabled both parties not to be subject to geographical restrictions anymore and to exchange information anytime and anywhere. While the content and speed of interpersonal communication have been qualitatively improved, the stickers, as figurative expressions used in information exchanges, have also witnessed profound development in recent years.

As an integral part of online interpersonal communication, stickers were active in people's online interaction and make up for the shortcoming of the original interactive interpersonal communication in which the two sides couldn't exchange information through body language and facial expression. Furthermore, as stickers are used more and more widely, people will gradually further their understanding of stickers' deep-seated meanings. Therefore, information conveyed by stickers will be increasingly precise and eventually become an indispensably essential tool for computer-mediated interpersonal communication.

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