Study on the Pragmatic Functions of Stickers from the Perspective of Multimodal Metaphor

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With the popularization of social media, stickers have become an important tool for young students to express themselves and resist mainstream culture due to their unique visual and emotional expressiveness. Most existing studies focus on the negative impacts of spoof stickers, while paying insufficient attention to their positive functions. From the perspective of multimodal metaphor, this paper uses methods such as virtual ethnography and image-text analysis to clarify the connotation of stickers, understand the evolution of their digital dissemination forms, and explore the multiple functions of subcultural stickers in the social interactions between teachers and students. Young students use stickers to convey emotions and information. Their expressive function, social function, and cultural metaphor function progress in a progressive manner. This not only shapes students' values but also promotes self-expression and teacher-student interaction. It also reminds teachers to correct students' negative thoughts by using stickers, achieving the effect of "cultivating and influencing people through culture."

Keywords: stickers, pragmatic functions, multimodal metaphor, teacher-student social interactions, subculture

Stickers, as a form of visual symbols, serve the purpose of self-expression and emotional catharsis. Human communication patterns are diverse and result from the synergistic effect of verbal and non-verbal communication. In face-to-face interactions, people communicate using verbal expressions. However, in virtual interactions, simple text expressions cannot fully convey emotions, and emotions are crucial for understanding expressions. Therefore, means of emotional expression are constantly being innovated. Stickers make up for the lack of emotional expression and possess a sense of presence that text alone does not have. With the normalization of social networking, face-to-face communication between teachers and students has decreased. Although this has brought difficulties to teacher-student interactions, it has also presented possibilities for building a new type of teacher-student relationship. Moreover, the dependence of teacher-student communication on the Internet is gradually increasing, and virtual communication is fully manifested in these interactions.

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Introduction to Stickers

Stickers refer to images used to express emotions and feelings, mainly composed of real human portraits, cute pets, cartoon characters, and sometimes accompanied by online slang (Zhao, 2011, pp. 1-10+112). The evolution of stickers has undergone a transformation from simple symbols to complex images and cultural symbols, primarily through stages such as emoticons, emojis, and sticker images (Konrad, Herring, & Choi, 2020, pp. 217-235). In this study, the term "stickers" refers specifically to sticker images.

Emoticons are a blend of "emotion" and "icon," indicating that they are icons used to express emotional expressions. Emoticons originated in internet chat rooms and forums in the 1990s, specifically based on ASCII and composed of keyboard symbols. The most typical example is the character ":-)" created by Professor Scott Falm of Carnegie Mellon University, representing happiness. This stage emphasized expressing basic emotions through limited characters. Subsequently, Japan adjusted the arrangement of characters and incorporated more character elements to create kaomoji, such as "^_^". Compared to ASCII characters, kaomoji are more visually appealing to humans and more expressive, making them widely spread in the era of text messaging.

With the proliferation of mobile devices and smartphones, stickers entered the emoji stage. Japan first introduced modern emojis in 1999, originally created based on various childhood elements such as Japanese comics. The term "emoji" combines the Japanese words for "picture" (e) and "character" (moji), and was later widely adopted by companies such as Apple and gained popularity globally. Besides imitating human facial expressions, they continue to include sports, weather, animals, and more. Emojis reflected the continuous enrichment of content and forms on social platforms while meeting basic communication needs.

Sticker images were first introduced by South Korean internet company Naver in 2011, which is a more vivid, complex, and personalized form of stickers based on images. As a combination of text, facial expressions, and external environment images, users can create their own sticker images to express emotions and opinions more accurately and creatively (Tang & Hew, 2019, p. 27). Furthermore, stickers can incorporate current social events and figures, integrating internet slang and filled with a sense of humor. Therefore, the sticker quickly swept through users of Asia-Based IM Services (such as Line and WeChat) and further expanded to other platforms like Facebook (Ma, 2016, pp. 15-27), becoming one of the highlights of many social media platforms.

Overall, the development of stickers reflected changes in people's communication methods and needs. Stickers are not just a symbolic language but also a cultural phenomenon that has had a profound impact on internet culture and social communication.

The Influence of Subculture on Adolescents' Use of Stickers

In recent years, subculture has gained widespread popularity and exerted a significant impact on adolescents. Subculture refers to a secondary culture formed among marginal groups outside the mainstream culture, associated with specific communities or subgroups (Yang, 2008, pp. 53-56). It is usually dominated by young people, among whom adolescents and students are one of the most significantly affected groups. They share common interests, values, and resist or even subvert mainstream culture. Students, being in their youth and having open minds with values still in the process of formation, often question traditional values and are in a stage of self-exploration. Meanwhile, mainstream culture has established fixed and conventionally accepted

standards and norms, which instead stimulate their desire for individual expression and unique identity. Subculture provides a space against the mainstream, satisfying young people's need for free expression and individuality. Furthermore, the expansion of media channels and advancements in the internet have broadened the influence of subculture. However, subculture does not involve direct rebellion; instead, it creates its own symbols by decoding mainstream cultural symbols, which includes transformation, borrowing, dissection, and parody (Yang, 2008, pp. 53-56). In the field of education, students may also develop their own "subculture," forming specific social circles and sharing specific linguistic symbols. In this context, students convey their true emotions through stickers, which teachers process and interpret to understand and guide students during their emotional development.

Stickers in the context of teacher-student interaction are not merely simple images but rather a means of emotional communication and expression. Jonathan Turner believes that among the four basic universal human emotions (happiness, fear, anger, and sadness), three are negative emotions, which are more dominant than positive emotions and are not constructive for the formation of social unity (Sun et al., 2007, pp. 9-10). For example, under the prevalence of "subculture," the "mourning culture" with a negative attitude as its core emerges, often manifested in stickers expressing negativity and sadness on the internet, using exaggeration and ridicule to express setbacks and difficulties in life. This is a typical example of negative emotions. Negative emotions are not completely opposed to positive emotions; they also contain positive elements. When facing academic pressure, interpersonal relationships, and other issues, students can use these stickers to express their emotions and attitudes. On the other hand, their dissatisfaction with reality precisely indicates their expectations for progress. Teachers can enhance the diversity and depth of emotional communication by analyzing students' expressions, establishing emotional connections and resonance with them.

Functional Analysis of Stickers in the Context of Subculture

The metaphor of stickers lies in their extraction of representative features between the emotional characteristics of the superficial structure of symbols and the specific cultural contexts as the deep cultural structure, using these features as pre-set matrices for meaning interpretation and endowing them with high universality and adaptability (Qu & Li, 2018, pp. 45-50). In the context of subculture, stickers further demonstrate their unique value and functions. This section aims to delve into the multiple functions of stickers in the context of subculture, from expressive functions, relational functions, to cultural metaphorical functions, revealing their unique roles in promoting individual emotional communication, enhancing group cohesion, and driving the innovation and development of folk culture.

Expressive Function: Self-expression and Emotional Catharsis.

Metaphor is a common technique used to express abstract emotions. Sadness is often embodied in stickers through multimodal metaphors, predominantly in the form of embodied metaphors. For example, in Figure 1, a sticker with a dual-modal structure combines an image of a dog with drooping ears and tears, accompanied by the text "Sad Puppy." For teachers and students, sad stickers can convey emotional understanding and support for difficulties, challenges, or losses, expressing concern and empathy for students. At the same time, for students, using sad stickers can also vent inner emotions and seek care and comfort. This contextualized metaphor makes the use of sad stickers more flexible and diverse, enabling more precise emotional expression.

To further verify the relationship between stickers and embodied metaphors, a data analysis of 376 stickers was conducted. The research sample of this section consists of 376 stickers, all sourced from WeChat. When "sadness" is typed into the chatbox, 376 related stickers are automatically suggested. The specific distribution of representation types is shown in Table 1. According to the data analysis, people use embodied movements to metaphorically express sadness. In virtual communication, what cannot be expressed through language needs to be conveyed through non-verbal forms. Meanwhile, images have a stronger evocative power than words, and stickers are easier to understand than images. The metaphor of stickers lies in their extraction of representative features between the emotional characteristics of the superficial structure of symbols and the specific cultural contexts as the deep cultural structure, endowing them with universality and adaptability. Thus, obscure personal emotions are transformed into commonly recognized expressions.

Figure 1. "Sad Puppy" Stickers.

Table 1
Distribution of Representation Types of "Sadness" Stickers

Representation Methods	Frequency	Percentage
Physical Reactions (Tears, Crying)	164	43.6%
Directional Orientation (Downward)	227	60.4%
Action Responses (Bowing head, kneeling and et al.)	104	27.7%

In the internet environment, students tend to use stickers as an extension of body language to metaphorically express sadness. Teachers should actively learn about and accept this subcultural phenomenon, recognizing the significance of such stickers among student groups. When students send such stickers, teachers should sensitively identify and capture this signal, avoiding viewing it as unserious or unenthusiastic through traditional lenses. Instead, teachers should adopt an open and inclusive attitude, actively responding to students and actively guide students to handle sadness through positive channel. Most students are embarrassed to express their confusion and seek help from teachers face-to-face in real life. The anonymity of the internet effectively addresses this issue. Through the interaction on internet platforms, it not only helps students reveal their true emotions under the guidance of teachers, reduces psychological pressure, and regulates their emotions but also allows teachers to establish closer relationships, jointly promoting the healthy growth of students.

Relational Function: Fostering Relationships and Group Identity.

The use of stickers serves as an expression and catharsis of emotions for individuals, while for groups, it plays a role in fostering group identity. Group identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a

particular organization or group, originating from their recognition of group membership relationships and the values and emotional meanings derived from being a group member (Mei & Xu, 2015, pp. 118-127). The essence of human nature is to rely on emotions in forming social bonds and constructing complex social structures, and the closeness of emotions largely influences the closeness of interpersonal relationships. In the Internet era, the openness of the internet and the diversification and popularity of social media connect people together. Members establish increasingly differentiated emotional communities in cyberspace by sharing stickers and when members holding the same attitudes accumulate to a certain number, the stickers are endowed with social emotions. Under these conditions, stickers not only convey personal attitudes but also reflect the common views of society.

Figure 2. "Squidward" Series of Stickers.

As shown in the figure 2, both belong to the category of stickers created by netizens. The first sticker depicts Squidward standing with his hands on his hips, wearing a sardonic expression, accompanied by the text modality "You're young, low-paid, and full of energy. Which boss wouldn't like you?" These two modalities form a contrast, metaphorically expressing self-deprecation and humor, and satirizing some workplace realities or contradictions in life. The overall humorous effect of the sticker is enhanced through exaggeration and sarcasm. The second sticker shows Squidward happily walking on the road, with the surrounding stones also smiling, accompanied by the text modality "The sun shines brightly, the flowers smile at me, it's time to get off work." This relaxed and joyful atmosphere resonates emotionally with the text modality, conveying a sense of relaxation and liberation, evoking resonance among viewers. As one of the supporting characters, Squidward has become popular again after years. Unlike the protagonist who loves his work, Squidward is remembered for his decadence, which stems largely from his "daily work." The stickers showing Squidward's cynicism and anti-mainstream values have a certain depth and inspiration in terms of metaphorically achieving emotional identification between teachers and students. These stickers are not merely elements of entertainment but carriers of cultural symbols and metaphors that can be used to provoke thoughts on realities.

In the educational context of teacher-student interaction, the use of stickers is not merely a tool for emotional expression but also an important means to promote emotional identification, resonance, and the formation of emotional communities. In education, students may face various challenges and difficulties, experiencing pressures and depressions similar to Squidward's emotions. In modern society, there often exists a

lack of smooth communication and emotional exchange between teachers and students. The use of these stickers can break the traditional educational model and the gap. Traditional education often focuses on authority and discipline while neglecting emotional exchange and understanding between teachers and students. Educators can convey a more open and inclusive attitude to students, encouraging them to express their emotions and opinions. At the same time, this can also help educators better understand the inner world of students, promote interaction and communication between teachers and students, thereby establishing a closer teacher-student relationship, enhancing mutual understanding and identification, and thus establishing closer emotional ties and a community. The reason why universities exist is for uniting the young and the older generations in the "imaginative" exploration of learning. The exciting atmosphere generated by active imagination transforms knowledge (Li & Chen, 2023, pp. 82-88). In the context of the teacher-student community, the two major themes of education, students and teachers, continuously engage in normalized exchanges, giving them new meanings and values through the fusion of old and new.

Cultural Metaphor Function: Folk Innovation and Cultivation through Literature.

Stickers play a role in the inheritance and development of culture, thereby achieving the purpose of cultivating individuals through culture. When stickers are infused with cultural connotations, they can reflect cultural backgrounds and disseminate meanings to a certain extent. Symbols are arbitrary, and the pairing of symbols and meanings is not static; context gives meaning to symbols. As a special type of symbol, stickers, for students immersed in subculture, combine traditional Chinese culture with modern trends. This not only facilitates the creative transformation and innovative development of excellent traditional culture but also corrects negative emotions through paper-cutting stickers. In this process, metaphor serves as a bridge between the two, making traditional culture innovative and more entertaining, while also injecting stickers with strong vitality. Paper-cutting-themed stickers are particularly representative of stickers with cultural metaphor functions.

Taking traditional paper-cutting art as an example, paper-cutting, as a part of Chinese traditional culture, boasts a long history and unique artistic charm. By combining traditional paper-cutting art with modern sticker culture, novel and interesting paper-cutting stickers can be created, which can both attract students' attention and convey positive emotions. Multimodal metaphors in paper-cutting stickers can be divided into two types: metaphors based on similarity associations and metaphors based on homophones. Under these conditions, related stickers can be designed according to different images. For instance, a sticker featuring a phoenix prototype in the form of a paper-cutting of a phoenix spreading its wings and flying. In Chinese traditional culture, the phoenix symbolizes hope and rebirth, aiming to subtly correct students' sadness in teacher-student interactions and encourage them to be positive. In terms of visuals, colors like red can be chosen, which not only conform to traditional colors and have a visual impact but also metaphorically convey excitement and joy in the realm of emotional projection. Some concise text can be overlaid on the sticker, such as "bravely go forward" and "soar into the sky," which further emphasizes the positive meaning conveyed by the sticker.

Through the fusion of traditional culture and network innovation, creators combine cultural heritage with culturally meaningful symbols that are acceptable to the public. When teachers and students use stickers, they will notice the paper-cutting culture deeply rooted in the Chinese nation carried by them, which also revitalizes

traditional culture. From the perspective of multimodal metaphors, utilizing paper-cutting stickers can subtly correct the current situation of students overly immersed in online subculture. It is of great significance for achieving the purpose of inheriting and innovating traditional culture and educating individuals. We should actively explore and practice this educational approach to make positive contributions to cultivating a new generation of teenagers with cultural literacy and innovative spirits.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of subculture, this paper explores the multimodal characteristics and multiple pragmatic functions of stickers in teacher-student online communication. Young students use subcultural stickers. Seemingly expressing opinions, they are actually venting their dissatisfaction with and criticism of social reality and expressing their desire for change. By analyzing their application in teacher-student communication, the intuitive expressiveness and deep meanings of stickers are revealed. With their unique visual and symbolic features, stickers, intertwined with online language, construct a multi-dimensional educational space. This enhances the effectiveness of education, corrects students' negative psychology, nourishes their hearts, and achieves an educational effect. In the future, more research should be conducted to explore the potential applications of stickers in the field of education.

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