

Emotion work via digital visual communication: A comparative study between China and Japan

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Abstract

Through the smartphone, the production and circulation of digital visual media have become as costless and accessible as audio and text-based communication. It would be challenging to be a contemporary ethnographer without engaging with digital practices which in Japan and China at least, tend towards being highly visual. Digital visual communication is recognised in literature as an effective and accessible form of communication, with an increasing number of studies in the field of digital anthropology, media studies and Internet studies exploring the consequences of digital images on social media. There is a pressing need to understand local forms of visual communication in the digital age, where the visual has become an essential part of daily communication. This article deals particularly with the rise of visual digital communication among older adults in China and Japan. Drawing on 16-month ethnographies conducted simultaneously between 2018 and 2019 in China and Japan, this article contributes to the discussion of visual communication in light of this semiotic shift happening online, which is then contextualised within people's offline lives. The ethnographies in both China and Japan find that, first of all, visual communication via digital media enables more effective and efficient phatic communication and emotion work. In addition, the ethnographies point to a question about 'authenticity' in interpersonal communication. The ethnographies show that in some cases, the deployment of visual communication via the smartphone is not so much about being able to express 'authentic' personal feelings but rather, in being able to effectively establish a digital public façade according to social norms.

Keywords

China, communication theory, emotion work, Japan, older people, smartphones, social media, visual communication

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Introduction

Interpersonal communication has always been a key research area in social anthropology which is more broadly devoted to understanding people's lives (Horst & Miller, 2006). In the last 15 years, social media have had a profound impact upon how we communicate (Miller et al., 2016) and now, with the proliferation of smartphone use across all age groups worldwide, communication via smartphones has become increasingly integral to how we express care between and within generations, as well as in the maintenance of family relationships. This article deals particularly with the rise of digital visual communication among older adults in China and Japan. Our participants, mostly aged between 50 and 75 years, belong to a population who are largely absent from the literature on digital media communications. Through our comparative study, we seek to contribute to the effort of rethinking 'age through technology while rethinking technology through age' (Danely, 2015, p. 110). We present ethnographic accounts of the ways that older people are innovating the performance of care in China and Japan. In doing so, we show that there is much to be gained from looking at the digital practice of people later in the life course as a way to understand not only experiences of ageing but also more broadly how digital media are now implicated in what it means to care – a topic with relevance to all generations.

Through the smartphone, the production and circulation of digital visual media have become as costless and accessible as audio and text-based communication. In fact, it would be challenging to be a contemporary ethnographer without engaging with digital practices (Pink, 2013) which in Japan and China at least, tend towards being highly visual. Digital visual communication is recognised in literature as an effective and accessible form of communication (Cruz & Lehmuskallio, 2016; Kress, 2003; Sinanan et al., 2018), with an increasing number of studies in the field of digital anthropology, media studies and Internet studies exploring the consequences of digital images on social media (e.g. Jurgenson, 2019; Miller & Sinanan, 2014). Kress (2003) suggests that

the world told is a different world to the world shown. The effects of the move to the screen as the major medium of communication will produce far-reaching shifts in relations of power, and not just in the sphere of communication (p. 1).

There is a pressing need to understand local forms of visual communication in the digital age, where the visual has become an essential part of daily communication. Drawing on 16-month ethnographies conducted simultaneously between 2018 and 2019 in China and Japan, this article contributes to the discussion of visual communication in light of this semiotic shift happening online, which is then holistically contextualised within people's offline lives.

Meanwhile, the recent 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences has fostered a growing recognition of the importance of paying attention to 'affect' among scholars. In other words, this means recognising how emotion, feelings and affective states are intertwined with social and cultural life (Thomas & Correa, 2015). Considering affect includes the performance of 'affective labour' (Hardt & Negri, 2000), which can occur in the negotiation and maintenance of social relations, where individuals take care of the wellbeing and feelings of others. The widespread use of visual digital communication or 'paralinguistics', such as emoji and stickers, in interpersonal communication raises several key questions: why do the older adults in the Chinese and Japanese field sites discussed below often enthusiastically embrace the use of visual communication via smartphones, and what can this tell us about the way that care at a distance (Pols, 2012) is expressed through digital visual communication in the age of the smartphone?

Based on comparative ethnographic studies in China and Japan, this article focuses on the daily practice of emotion work through visual communication facilitated by smartphones. While there has been much previous work on the emotion capacities of emoji, the ‘visual’ in this article refers primarily to social media ‘stickers’ as well as short videos. The two social media platforms this article refers to are WeChat in China and LINE in Japan. The ethnographies in both China and Japan find that, first of all, visual communication via digital media enables more effective and efficient expression of feelings. We argue that visual communication through smartphones plays a significant role in phatic communication in people’s daily life, serving as a means of maintaining their various social relations. In addition, the ethnographies point to a question around the very social construction of ‘authenticity’ in interpersonal communication. The ethnographies show that in some cases, the deployment of visual communication via the smartphone is not so much about being able to express ‘authentic’ personal feelings but rather, in being able to effectively facilitate performative daily communication and establish a digital public façade according to social norms. We do not wish to veer into ‘techno-orientalist’ discourse (Coates, 2017) regarding China and Japan as inherently other to Western modes of digital or social practice, yet it is clear that both sites share a particular tendency towards visual communication which is worthy of investigation. In addition, as will be outlined below, visual communication via emoji and stickers may have originated in East Asia but it is now an integral part of global digital culture.

The comparison between China and Japan

The ethnographic research conducted by Wang in the Chinese site and Happio-Kirk in the Japanese site was part of a wider multi-sited project called the ‘Anthropology of Smartphone and Smart Ageing’ (ASSA), funded by the European Research Council and based at University College London. ASSA employed 11 anthropologists working in sites around the world to investigate the intersection of ageing, health and smartphones at a time when later life is undergoing radical shifts in many parts of the world. The systematic comparative research framework afforded by the project provided an ideal platform for the comparison between China and Japan outlined in this article. Furthermore, the comparison between China and Japan is salient within the ASSA project because of the cultural proximity of these neighbouring countries, which share the traditional Confucian ethics that give priority to social hierarchy and social harmony in interpersonal communication (Tu & Du, 1996; Zhang et al., 2005). In particular, when it comes to the visual element in communication, it is useful to take a step back and look at the two field sites in terms of the nature of language itself. A brief linguistic analysis of the social aspects of written characters in both field sites will allow us to establish a non-Eurocentric lens through which we can understand the relationship between visual and textual language.

Chinese characters are predominantly rebus and ideographic characters (Cooper, 2018). Visual communication is more than pictorial representation, but an entrenched feature of the language. In Japan, ‘kanji’ (literally meaning ‘Chinese characters’ in Japanese), were adopted into the writing system in the 5th century (Taylor & Taylor, 1995). The Chinese and Japanese writing systems are not the topic of this article, but it is nonetheless worthwhile to have an appreciation for their deep-rooted impact on both Chinese and Japanese language and visual culture. Thus, we can say that everyday digital visual communication through emoji and stickers is not something that is completely new; although its use is driven by the rise of the Internet and the smartphone, it is actually part of a wider tendency towards pictographic communication.¹ Furthermore, as we will show in this article, visual communication via the smartphone has come to represent a form of care for

many people, and in fact, the proliferation of visual forms available mean that people's selection of the appropriate visual form for different purposes is itself a kind of language of care.

'Emoticons' were early digital carriers of affectivity, referring to a sequence of keyboard symbols meant to capture facial expressions, such as :-). In Japan, these evolved into Kaomoji (literally meaning 'face character') comprising characters and punctuation marks, often used to express more complicated facial expressions or gestures such as m(_)_m, which depicts a person bowing. The 'm' on either side of the brackets indicate hands, with a head pressed to the floor in the middle. Some of the research participants in the Japanese field site would send this kaomoji to indicate an apology or thanks, and because there is now a bowing person emoji, many would now choose to use the latter instead. 'Emoji' refers to more pictorial and graphic symbols made with Unicode. 'Emoji' is a compound Japanese word meaning 'picture-character', with the 'e' referring to picture and 'moji' to character or letter. In the 1990s, the first emoji were created by a Japanese telecommunications worker called Shigetaka Kurita, who was influenced by the traditions of manga (Japanese comics) (Negishi, 2014). Japan has been at the forefront of digital visual communication developments such as emojis and stickers, which inevitably draw on the visual traditions of manga that dominate the aesthetic of much public and private discourse. From posters on trains to information booklets in doctors' clinics to private messaging, the conventions of manga are omnipresent in visual modes of communication in Japan. Research on the communicative role and influence of emoticons and emoji has been abundant (Lo, 2008; Luor et al., 2010; Stark & Crawford, 2015; Riordan, 2017). Compared to emoticons, emoji are perceived as more aesthetically appealing, more familiar, clearer and more meaningful (Riordan, 2017).

'Stickers' are the latest iteration of digital visual communication. They can be understood as large-format emoji, often sent as individual messages rather than embedded within text. Stickers display much more diversity in terms of expressive ability, styles and animation. On WeChat and LINE, there are two main types of stickers available: custom stickers and downloadable sticker sets. Sticker sets usually contain 16–24 individual stickers tied together by a cohesive theme. Custom stickers are individually made stickers uploaded by users, including those that users can tailor with their own images. As of April 2019, approximately 4.7 million LINE sticker sets were available, and stickers are sent on an average of 433 million times a day (Linecorp, 2019). There are even physical shops where people can buy merchandise based on LINE stickers, marketed around the official 'LINE Friends' characters. There is no clear figure available in terms of the total amount of WeChat emojis and stickers in use, even though there are official reports which list the most popular WeChat emojis (2019 WeChat Data Report, n.d.). A WeChat manager told Wang in an interview the following:

Everyday, there are thousands of new WeChat stickers produced by users. The total amount of stickers in use is beyond imagination. It is like not being able to count how many images there are on the internet, as the amount is literally uncountable.

Smartphone ownership among people in later life in both China and Japan is among the highest out of all the field sites in the ASSA project. In a survey (November 2018–July 2019) conducted by Wang with 260 Shanghai residents, smartphone ownership among research participants (who were aged between 50 and 90 years²) is 89% and among the under 70 group, the figure is 92%. WeChat, the most widely used multi-purpose app in China, was installed on 100% of the smartphone users surveyed, who say they use it every day. In Haapio-Kirk's survey of 146 people aged between 40 and 60 years living in Kyoto and Kochi Prefectures, Japan, 100% of respondents used

a smartphone, and 20% used a feature phone (*garakei*) in addition – primarily for calling. The popularity of the messaging app LINE among Japanese older people is high, with 76% of respondents listing LINE as among their most-used apps. The ethnography revealed that for older users, especially those obtaining their first smartphone in their 70s and 80s, LINE is often one of the very few apps used, to the degree that the smartphone was occasionally even referred to as ‘my LINE’.

Computer-mediated communication and emotion work

Interpersonal communication involves the exchange of information facilitated by both verbal and non-verbal cues. People continuously deliver and receive non-verbal information through gestures, facial expressions and other non-verbal channels in interpersonal communication (Knapp et al., 2013). One of the earliest research inquiries among media and Internet scholars has been into affective or emotional expression in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Previous communication studies were concerned with comparing face-to-face communication with CMC, asserting that the latter is less clear, personal, social and effective in providing affective and social gratification, arguing that it is ‘deindividuated’ (Rodrigues et al., 2017). For example, social presence theory (Cui, 2013) argues that the fewer the social cues a piece of communication media supports, the less warmth and involvement the user experience.

The reduction of social cues, especially non-verbal cues, in text-based CMC is said to prevent communicators from detecting and attuning to others’ individual characteristics (such as body language and affection), in-group dynamics and other normative behaviour that face-to-face interaction transmits non-verbally (Walther & Tidwell, 1995). Early studies of text-based CMC expressed concern about the lack of non-verbal cues and social contextual information, arguing that such media disrupts perceptions of the communication context for both the receiver and the sender (e.g. Ahn et al., 2011; Walther, 2015; Walther & Tidwell, 1995). It is also noted that because of the lower social presence found in CMC, the senders cannot freely express the ‘mood of message’ (Kiesler, 1986). About two decades ago, with the rise of emoticons and emojis, studies started to pay attention to the increasing significance of visual elements of message interpretation in CMC (e.g. Derks et al., 2007; Lo, 2008). The widespread use of these visual forms as indicators of emotional states and body language has been regarded as a way for users to clarify the intention of their messages, overcoming the shortcomings of text-dominated CMC (e.g. Thompson & Filik, 2016). For example, in the study of emoticons in CMC, Derks et al. (2007) highlight the demand for emotion expression in CMC and point out the possibilities of emotional expression facilitated by emoticons. Lo’s (2008) study showcases the way people use emoticons to articulate non-verbal cues in CMC. Furthermore, Dresner and Herring (2010) point out that, in practice, emoticons are more than emotional expression, as they can also indicate illocutionary forces in communication. Generally speaking, in prior studies, emoji and emoticons were regarded as a replacement or compensation for what was missing in early CMC.

Simultaneous with the rise of the Internet, semioticians have noticed an emerging shift in the semiotic landscape which indicates that visual communication should no longer be considered subordinate to text-based language (Kress, 2003). The advent of the age of smartphones has further accelerated a shift towards the visual in daily interpersonal communication. Media anthropologist de Seta (2018) argues for the need to recognise the circulation of such visual content as an emergent and malleable category of semiotic resources profoundly shaped by two decades of development of the Chinese Internet. In the Japanese context, Sugiyama’s (2015) work among teenagers shows how visual media such as emoji are used to both craft self-presentation through particular

aesthetics and create an amiable ‘atmosphere’ to maintain relationships. This topic will be picked up on below in the context of the Japanese terms ‘honne’ and ‘tatemae’ which refer to the management of internal feelings and outward expression which is integral to social interactions.

Other research has demonstrated how emoji are used as a form of play, whereby an entire conversation can consist of emoji with no additional textual content (Stark & Crawford, 2015). ‘Emotion work’ refers to the effort individuals intentionally make to induce or inhibit feelings so that they are appropriate to a given situation (Hochschild, 1979, 2012). According to sociologist Arlie Hochschild who pioneered the term, ‘emotion work’ is different from ‘emotional labour’ as the former refers to the management of feelings in private contexts dissociated with exchange value, whereas the latter is undertaken in the context of paid work (Hochschild, 2012).

As noted in both the Japanese and Chinese ethnographies that inform this article, the effort individuals made to have an ‘appropriately’ emotional conversation via smartphones with a variety of interlocutors is considerable. The consideration of such efforts as a form of ‘emotion work’ from the perspective of ordinary smartphone users, however, has been largely under-discussed, despite the centrality of the digital in interpersonal communication around the world. This article utilises the concepts of ‘emotion work’ in a wider context to encompass a whole range of emotional expression as well as care performed within social relations. The discussion of emotion work in this article is not confined to female research participants, as the ethnography witnessed that both men and women used smartphones to perform care and emotion in ways that adhere to dominant cultural scripts in both Chinese and Japanese field site, varying in interesting ways.

Visual phatic communication in daily life

In this article, ‘visual communication’ via smartphones refers to a wide range of visual materials. Visual content in both field sites primarily comprised images, videos and photographs circulated via messaging applications. Even though this content carries some similarities to traditional photography and visual art, in practice, the appropriation of visual material is now embedded in a networked context. In addition, there is an increasingly significant visual form of daily communication which consists of emoji, stickers, as well as ‘graphic interchange format’ (GIFs – an image format which allows images to be animated while retaining a small file size). Such visual materials are deeply embedded in the flow of interpersonal communication in both China and Japan. It therefore makes sense to pay as much attention to them as we do to text, as they have become an essential element of the conversation. Semiotically, these visual materials are explicitly different from writing and speaking (Kress, 2003). More recently, ethnographic (Sinanan, 2019) and interview-based (Villi, 2012) studies have offered insight into the role of digital photography for visual phatic communication in daily life.

Many research participants in both sites said that stickers allowed them to express more nuanced emotion, which, in turn, made them feel closer to the family and friends they were communicating with, creating warmer contact that was more fully expressive of their personalities. Sometimes, people would associate a particular friend with a certain character sticker, as they often used this character in group conversation. As one woman said, referring to her friend’s use of a dog character called Coco-chan, ‘Coco-chan is so her!’. In Japan, it is common to see LINE stickers being personalised in various ways, including through the purchase of tailored sticker sets with a person’s name embedded within the stickers. Such tailored sets usually cost the equivalent of £2–£3 and are sometimes given as virtual gifts between friends. Many people frequently used cute (*kawaii*) stickers when messaging



Figure 1. 'grandmother' LINE sticker set by ©ushiromae.

as part of the practice of care at a distance via the smartphone. Wada-san, in her late 70s, communicated via LINE messages daily with her daughter who lived in another city, often sending stickers that let her daughter know what she was up to throughout the day. The particular sticker set she downloaded featured a humorous and feisty grandmother character (Figure 1). Her daughter also sent her mother messages and photos of her everyday life. These messages kept their contact going throughout the day, while taken individually, they did not say a lot. In fact, Wada-san's daughter explained the following: 'she sends me meaningless things (muimina koto), things that are just part of her daily activities'. But added together, this constant flow of messages made them feel closer in a way that was less burdensome than frequent phone calls throughout the day might be. Scholars from science and technology studies provide ethnographic evidence for the potential of digital technologies for remote care in a telemedicine context (Oudshoorn, 2011; Pols, 2012), yet the ethnographies discussed

in this article suggest that the smartphone is becoming one of the most important tools for a daily practice of care at a distance for through regular visual messaging.

Similarly, one of the most common genres of communication among research participants in China consists of daily greetings and festival greetings. Suiqing, a 69-year-old retired teacher, would send a ‘good morning’ message to three WeChat groups on a daily basis. The three groups include her family group, which has 12 members; a group of work colleagues from a previous job, which had 41 members; and a group of people who were part of the same group of ‘educated youth’³ and once laboured at the same state-owned farm – this group had 45 members. Every morning, Suiqing would select an image of flowers or natural scenery (taken by herself or sourced from the Internet), edit a greeting text which she would overlay on top of the image (such as ‘good morning’ or ‘I wish you a happy day’) and send it to her various WeChat groups. This is such a common practice among older people, that from 5:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. WeChat groups are overwhelmed with visual greetings (Figure 2).

Suiqing and Wada-san are representative of the widespread use of stickers to enact ‘phatic communication’ among friends and family members. The concept of ‘phatic communion’ (communication) was originally introduced by anthropologist Malinowski (1923), in the context of exploring meanings in ‘primitive language’:

Are words in Phatic Communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! They fulfil a social function, and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. Once again, we may say that language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought. (p. 315)

The positive effect of visual communication is equally significant in terms of health and care-related communication, as observed in Shanghai. For instance, it is not rare for doctors to exchange WeChat contact details with their regular patients. Sulin, in her 50s, felt extremely touched when the doctor in charge of her care sent her a WeChat sticker with a thumbs up image and the text ‘you are amazing’ after an operation. People in general felt that visual elements added an element of ‘humanity’ to medical communication, where it is common for medical professionals to lack the human capacity to recognise the plight of their patients or to extend enough empathy towards them. Phatic communication does not function as a means of transmission of thought, but is crucial in social bonding (Malinowski, 1923, p. 316).

More recently, ‘short videos’ (*duan shipin*) also play a role in phatic communication among Chinese older people. The length of short videos ranges from 10 seconds to 2 minutes. Due to their short duration, the video files are small enough to be easily sent as messages. In most cases, people received short videos from a variety of WeChat contacts. The majority of research participants watch short videos on a daily basis and almost one-third of them watch short videos for more than an hour a day. Retirees are very keen on short videos and have accepted these as sources of information as well as a way to keep in contact with family, friends and various other contacts. For example, Kunlong, aged 70 years, would ask his wife to forward him new short videos from her WeChat groups so that he can further forward these videos to his friends and various WeChat groups. Kunlong wants to have as many short videos as possible so that he does not repeat what he has already sent. He explains,

It is important to keep in contact with people, but sometimes, it is difficult to find a topic to talk about. Some people keep sending greeting stickers every day, but I found these a bit tedious . . . Short videos are

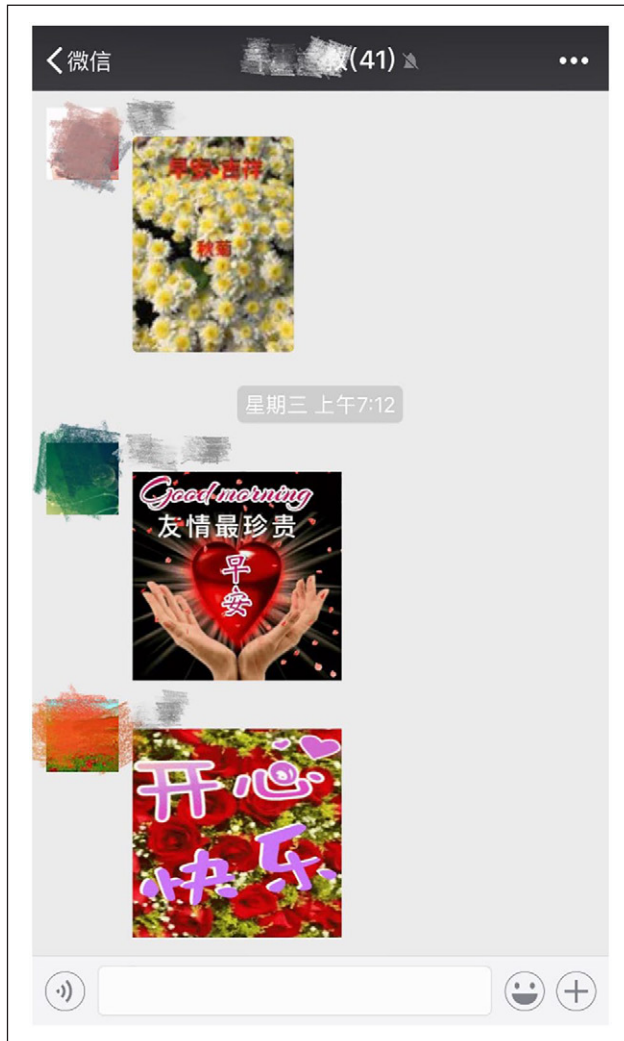


Figure 2. A screenshot of a WeChat group conversation among Suiqing’s old work colleagues. The first image reads ‘good morning, good luck, daisy’, the second reads ‘Friendship is the most precious thing, good morning’ and the third reads ‘be happy and joyful’.

perfect . . . I have sent these videos to my friends by simply clicking a few times . . . it is ok that they don’t watch them, but it shows that I care about them.

Like Kunlong, it is common to see that people care less about the content of the short videos than the action of sharing short videos to maintain and develop social bonding. By ‘simply clicking a few times’, social relationships are maintained at a relatively low cost. The practice of video watching and sharing is actually embedded in a wider social process than what we find online. People accessed online videos to get information and build their knowledge, but the learning and

dissemination of information is largely enacted in offline relationships that express caring and build solidarity among family members and friends. As van Dijck (2007) puts it, people 'take less interest in sharing photographs as objects than as sharing them as experiences' (p. 114). To analyse an image, sticker or a video without their 'social life' via the smartphone is by no means adequate. In both the China and the Japan cases, we find that visual communication through smartphones plays a significant role in phatic communication in people's daily life, serving as a means of maintaining their various social relations.

Feelings that are difficult to put into words: where language fails, stickers work

In human communication, the image has long been recognised as a medium which can carry complicated and subtle information and emotion, 'a picture is worth a thousand words', as the saying goes. In the Japanese research, the use of stickers was deeply intertwined with the cultural concept of 'reading the air' (*kuuki wo yomu*) which participants explained as the skill to intuit implicit understanding from non-verbal cues. In other words, people might say one thing but mean the exact opposite, so one has to pay attention to body language, facial expression and tone of voice to understand someone's true meaning and to avoid being labelled as someone who cannot read the air. In Kyoto, where strict social etiquette is highly valued especially among older generations, people explained that if someone invites you into their house, they might not actually be inviting you in and would deem it rude if you accepted their invitation. In rural Kōchi, this strictness was laughed about and pointed towards as a way in which their self-proclaimed open and friendly culture differed to that of Kyoto. Yet even in rural Kōchi, it was common to observe indirect communication to avoid potential conflict or embarrassment such as saying, 'it's a little difficult' rather than saying an outright 'no'. If one does not possess the skills to 'read the air' correctly, then there is danger of becoming socially ostracised. This can take place both offline in social circles, and online, such as being removed from a group LINE chat, or in the early days of smartphones with the use of the social media slang 'KY', a romanised abbreviation of *kuuki wo yomenai*. The Japanese ethnography revealed how stickers were used as a way to help others read the digital air and understand intentions and multi-layered meaning that could otherwise be lost in text-only messaging. Visual communication was especially important for older participants who might feel less confident with smartphone keyboards and would have to check their messages for typos so as to avoid embarrassment and misunderstanding. Stickers provided a convenient way to not only convey meaning implicitly rather than directly but also speed up their communication by quickly selecting stickers rather than laboriously typing out messages.

Given indirectness and ambiguity are considered highly social qualities in Japan, research participants often used LINE stickers and emoji in combination with text to create the 'atmosphere' that makes textual communication more comprehensible. As one research participant, Kimori-san, explained, it is easy to overthink what people mean when receiving short textual messages such as ones that just say something like 'ok'. Kimori-san prefers to write a lot and uses emojis and stickers to express feelings more clearly. 'I'm always thinking of the worst-case scenario so better to be more aware than to make mistakes'. The rise of visual communication through the smartphone has enabled people to express themselves in a way that conveys multiple layers of meaning. The plethora of available LINE stickers mean that they are useful for expressing feelings which are difficult to put into words – characters display emotions ranging from the depths of sadness, to passive

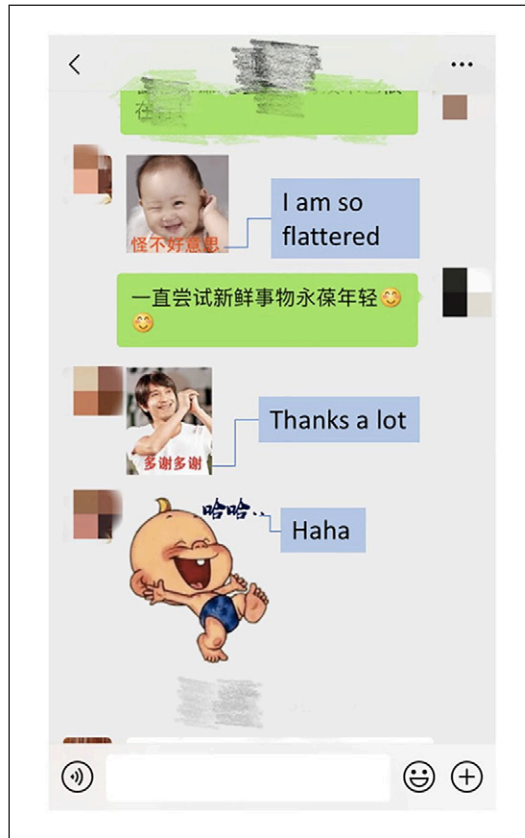


Figure 3. The screenshot of Di's WeChat conversation – Di's replies have been translated into English.

aggressiveness, to enraptured happiness. While the Japanese research participants always stressed that face-to-face communication was best for understanding what people truly meant, when communicating through messaging, they felt that stickers were integral to creating the kind of multi-layered communication that they would engage in offline, even if the stickers were far more exaggerated than the way they would convey indirect meaning offline.

People refer to all kinds of emojis and stickers as 'Biaoqing' in Chinese, which literally means 'facial expression'. The most common 'biaoqing' consists of both an image and an embedded text message (e.g. de Seta, 2018). Besides facilitating vivid emotion expressing via animated images, 'biaoqing' also provides a convenient way to add contextual clues and nuances to the conversation. It is common to see older people in China sending a string of WeChat stickers to render multi-layered emotions and feelings. For example, Di, aged 59 years, replied to her friend's praise with three WeChat stickers (Figure 3).

The first WeChat sticker shows a baby winking with a smile. The baby's hand is subconsciously touching his or her ear, which is a typical cue in body language, indicating slight embarrassment. With the embedded text 'I am so flattered' the meaning of the sticker is clear: I am so flattered and feel even embarrassed. After being further praised, Di sends a second sticker depicting a movie star

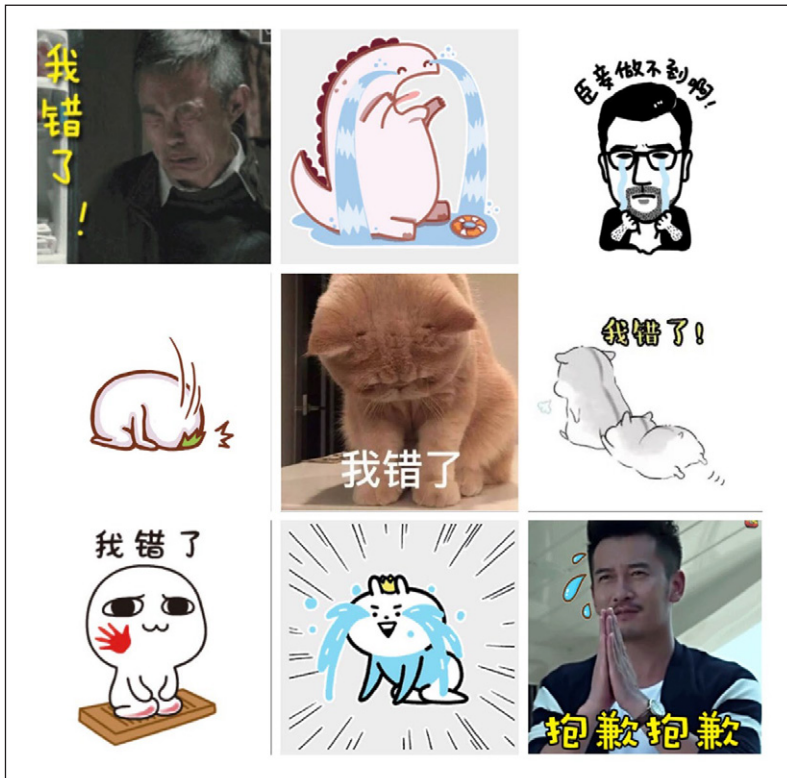


Figure 4. Screenshots of some of Mr Hong's WeChat stickers expressing that he is sorry.

with his fists held together in the gesture of gratitude. The text reads 'thanks a lot'. This was immediately followed by a third sticker of a baby dancing with joy. As Di explained, the string of the stickers is an effort to address others' compliments properly. Her feelings were expressed in a specific order, progressing in a way that accords with the social norms that indicate how individuals should receive praise from others: first, one is supposed to show embarrassment or even decline the compliment, otherwise he or she appears self-conceited (the first sticker); then, when the praise continues, it is time to say 'thank you' to acknowledge the other's kindness (represented by the second sticker). The last stage is expressing joyfulness, indicating that the other should excuse his or her childishness because deep inside, he or she is as happy as a child (represented by the third sticker).

People frequently use 'biaoqing' to tackle situations that would otherwise be regarded as awkward or embarrassing. Mr Hong, 67 years, a retired civil servant, has more than 100 'biaoqing' saved on his WeChat. Mr Hong also keeps a repository of 'biaoqing' for common emotions or social gestures, such as saying goodbye or saying sorry (Figure 4). He skilfully appropriates different *biaoqing*, depending on specific contexts and recipients. For example, he once used the *biaoqing* of a middle-aged man with a painfully sad face with the embedded text 'It is my fault' (Figure 4, left, top row), which he sent to an old work colleague. The figure is a character in a popular TV series about anti-corruption. In the show, the man, a government officer, made a huge fortune by

abusing his power, although he did not dare spend the money for fear of causing suspicion. The famous scene, as shown on the *biaoqing*, was the man expressing penitence when his crime was finally exposed. Mr Hong's old work colleague, a civil servant who retired later than Mr Hong, complained about the new pension regulations, which were less generous for the cohort of civil servants who retired after Mr Hong did. As the beneficiary of the earlier version of the pension regulations, Mr Hong somehow felt that it would be strange to show any solidarity. He therefore replied by using this *biaoqing* to ease the awkwardness:

'He knows that even though I got slightly more pension than him, in reality I can't spend a penny for myself as all the money come to my grandson's education . . . I am probably as pathetic as the guy who sits on piles of cash but doesn't dare spend them . . . haha,' he explained.

Through this 'It is my fault' *biaoqing*, Mr Hong managed to humorously convey his sympathy with some self-deprecation. Similarly, when Mr Hong had to turn down a friend's request for help, he replied with a crying cartoon figure, saying 'Your majesty, I really can't make it' (Figure 4, right, top row) to balance out the toughness of a rejection. This line comes from a popular TV show, where originally, it was the queen who poured out her grief to the emperor, asking for forgiveness. In other situations, Mr Hong would apply various *biaoqing* of bursting into tears to show sincerity. In a similar vein, after telling his wife some bad news (in this case, that their pet fish had died because of his negligence), Mr Hong sent his wife the *biaoqing* of an aggrieved cartoon figure (Figure 4, left, bottom row), begging on his knees on a washboard (a typical domestic corporal punishment in common jokes), saying 'my fault', or a desperate cartoon hamster who was trying to prevent his angry partner from storming out (Figure 4, right, middle row). Other examples include making a gentle apology to friends when he could not meet up with them by sending a *biaoqing* of a figure with clasped hands, showing manga-style perspiration and the embedded text 'sorry sorry' (Figure 4, right, bottom row) or teasing his grandson by sending a photo of a cat with its head down, staring at the floor, saying sorry (Figure 4, middle, middle row).

In terms of conveying subtle and complicated feelings, a proper picture is literally worth a thousand words. As we can see in the case of Mr Hong, the pictorial cue facilitated by WeChat stickers significantly helps people articulate complicated emotional states, modulate the tone of messages or reinforce the content of a message. Mr Hong once said, 'Sometimes I really wish I could also use these *biaoqing* in face-to-face conversation, that will make life much easier'. In face-to-face conversation, Mr Hong preserves his grave and dignified bearing which he has kept for decades as a respectable male adult, whereas on WeChat, the repository of '*biaoqing*' has brought out multiple layers of emotions and social skills which seem to be non-existent 'outside' of his visual communication on WeChat.

In the fieldwork in China, even though different people develop different preferences for WeChat stickers in terms of content, the majority agree that the use of stickers has an explicitly positive impact on various social relations and some would agree with Mr Hong that *biaoqing* can help them better express themselves even more than their own facial expression can. From cute animals to exaggerating cartoon figures, from well-known celebrities to classic screen actors, *biaoqing* allows the users to vividly express themselves through a much larger corpus of facial expressions than their normal repertoire of physical facial expressions. In many ways, the appropriation of *biaoqing* is a practical way of doing 'facial expression management' in interpersonal communication. In a sense, face-to-face communication can even be perceived as a relatively monotonous communication scenario, lacking the richness of the discourse that is found in online interactions.

In addition, *Biaoqing* is a type of ‘facial expression’ which has already been widely applied and approved by a vast number of users on a daily basis. Such social endorsement of the WeChat stickers provides further security for people in various scenarios of interpersonal communication.

Authentic or appropriate emotions?

‘Making life much easier’, in Mr Hong’s case, also means he is able to enjoy talking with his 15-year-old grandson on WeChat via a long string of ‘biaoqing’. Indeed, Mr Hong is one of the research participants who regard the ‘virtual’ facial expression (*biaoqing*) as doing a better job than the expression his physical face is capable of making. In that sense, visual communication via smartphones not only bridges physical distance but also transcends social and psychological distance among people, the latter being particularly difficult to overcome in hierarchical societies such as Japan and China. Face-to-face communication is by no means unmediated, however, and both the China and the Japan ethnographies showcase specific social expectations about a person’s performance in interpersonal communication, expectations that are influenced by physical markers such as gender and age as well as other socio-economic factors such as social roles.

Like many other WeChat groups among old work colleagues as observed in Wang’s fieldwork, there are three major topics of discussion in the ‘retired previous work colleagues’ WeChat group that 59-year-old Guifen joined: Daily greetings, information about health and care and grandchildren. From time to time, members share good news and photos of grandchildren on the group. There is usually a long string of WeChat stickers from many group members congratulating people on their nice photos and good news. Guifen usually follows suit:

‘I can understand that grandchildren are the major point of pride in life for many of us . . . and everybody wants to be praised. Thanks to WeChat “biaoqing”, whenever people share photos of their grandchildren or show off their achievements, I just send these “biaoqing” that say: “how cute” and “how wonderful” to boost their performance (*peng chang*)’, she explains.

Guifen is worried about her daughter not being married yet, so every time one of her peers shares photos of their grandchildren online, Guifen actually has mixed feelings about it. However, she is also fully aware that she has a duty to be a good member of the audience of the ‘show’; therefore, just like the other good members of the audience, she turns to the expressive WeChat stickers to live up to the social etiquette in such a situation. WeChat stickers work like an energy-saving emotion gadget in daily communication. Once, Guifen had dinner with a big group of her previous work colleagues. Over dinner, the topics of discussion seemed to remain the same, the only difference was that people took their smartphones out and started passing them around to show the others photos of their grandchildren.

‘I have to “wear” (*dai*) a big smile of admiration throughout the dinner, it’s so exhausting, my facial muscles had become so stiff after that . . . had it not been face-to-face, I would have saved a lot of emotion and energy by simply sending loads of *biaoqing*’, she jokingly remarks.

Guifen regarded complimentary facial expression as something she is supposed to perform out of politeness both online and offline. While online, she would simply send various WeChat stickers (thus using digital facial expression); in face-to-face situations, she needs to constantly use her facial muscles as well as doing other related body movements. In both the situations, Guifen

expressed herself according to perceived social expectation rather than her 'real feelings'. She described the situation by saying 'I have to wear a big smile', suggesting her smile is applied as a mask, just like an embodied WeChat sticker which she constantly sent online. However, online, Guifen 'outsources' the affective expression that she is supposed to perform to WeChat stickers.

Being able to accurately read the atmosphere, or 'air' by paying attention to bodily expression, and masking feelings if they might be problematic is also an important part of Japanese social relations. The concepts of *honne* (true voice) and *tatemae* (public facade) have a particular history in the post-war discourse on 'Japaneseness' (e.g. Lebra, 1976). Both facets are important for engaging competently in interpersonal communication, rather than the focus being on authenticity. For example, as research participant Akiko-san explained, when she worked in a call centre, she would have to expend a lot of energy saying sorry to people all day long. Yet apologising was not confined to her work life; she felt that apologising was a large part of daily communication to avoid awkwardness. However, with visual digital communication, Akiko-san was able to express the same sentiment with greater ease and efficiency: 'Saying sorry on LINE is so easy. It's just one sticker, "sorry!"'

Saying sorry is not limited to situations when there is legitimately something to apologise for; it is a catch-all phrase that smooths out social interactions. Saying sorry, like much of Japanese communication, often involves bodily actions. It therefore makes sense that there are a plethora of LINE stickers that express apology, ranging from bowing, to crying characters similar to the WeChat stickers expressing that one is sorry that Mr Hong uses. Stickers do the job of conveying feelings in a less emotionally taxing way than face-to-face communication. LINE stickers have become essential to Japanese online communication because they show the bodily communication that is missing in text alone. Emotions are also exaggerated in LINE stickers, ensuring that their meaning is not ambiguous. While most daily apologies do not require a person to actually get down on their knees and bow their head to the floor, the bowing emoji shows exactly this.

Bowing is another bodily action integral to many daily social interactions in Japan and is not restricted to apologies. When greeting someone, saying goodbye, thanking someone or asking them for help, bows of varying degrees are used to communicate a mixture of humility, respect and sociability. While bodily actions that involve touching, such as hugging and shaking hands, are not commonplace, bowing is a gesture that can communicate warmth and affection, despite its formal appearance. When leaving someone's home, it is not uncommon for the host to remain at their door, waving and bowing as guests walk the entire length of the street away. Saying goodbye is a point of rupture that needs to be smoothed over with embodied social action. On LINE, where bodies are visualised in stickers, it is no surprise that many people said stickers were particularly helpful when ending a conversation. People will send a cute sticker which conveys affection, perhaps blowing kisses to show that the conversation is over without the need to actually say goodbye. Likewise, if they want to start a conversation, they might send a sticker that shows a character peeking from behind a wall or door, to check if now is a good time to message. These sorts of stickers offer a softer and more indirect way of beginning a conversation than simply diving in with text first, which can seem too forthright.

Furthermore, the ethnography in Japan demonstrates that one should not let one's inner feelings, especially negative feelings, out to burden social connections. As one of the research participants, Kikuko-san, put it, 'Honne is like a shadow. You can see the shadow, but you can't touch the shadow . . . you can feel the honne but you can't actually know it'. This idea of 'honne', or one's true feelings, as an intangible shadow which must be 'felt' rather than 'known', is a powerful metaphor for understanding Japanese social relations. Now, with stickers and emoji, 'tatemae'

and 'honne' are materialised, and perhaps for the first time, it is possible to 'touch' the intangible. In selecting the appropriate image which perfectly captures one's inner state, or the emotion one wishes to project, people are participating in the same social performance that happens offline. Visual communication via the smartphone can be seen as conveying affect not only to the recipient of the message but also to the sender as well. In seeing their 'honne' and 'tatemae' materialised in digital illustration, the affective power of visual messaging works both ways and can perhaps help people such as Kikuko-san to 'know', or make more explicit, their expressions of public and private feelings.

In studies of the Internet and new media, there is a persistent concern about the issue of technology-mediated humanity. The underlying fear has been that the ubiquitous appropriation of digital communication technologies would make human beings lose some of their 'real' selves and lead to a decline in 'genuine' relationships (Turkle, 2011). Yet a growing body of research has argued that offline relationships are no more authentic than online ones (Miller et al., 2016; Miller & Sinanan, 2014), and indeed that online lives can be more real in terms of personal aspirations and the feeling of 'being-at-home' than offline (Wang, 2016, 2020). At first glance, the common discrepancy between a person's 'authentic feelings' and the exaggerated facial expression facilitated by WeChat and LINE stickers in both Chinese and Japanese cases can be seen as evidence supporting concerns about lack of authenticity in digitally mediated communication. However, the root of this discrepancy lies in the long-existing social expectation for individuals to engage with a highly performative daily communication that complies with the collective interests or the internalised normative order of organising social life. That is to say, discrepancies between one's real feelings and their facial expression always exist. To be aware of the sophisticated social etiquette and be able to perform the expected facial expression in various situations is regarded as an essential part of socialisation, and indeed, a form of care. Visual communication facilitated by the smartphone does not reduce the 'authenticity' of interpersonal communication; rather, it reduces the effort of living up to social expectations, which more often than not, goes against individuals' 'authentic feelings'. Rather than approaching visual communication as a direct conduit to inner, and therefore more 'authentic' feelings, stickers and emoji reveal the careful dance of sociality that lies at the heart of communication in Japan and China, where implicit meanings and multi-layered speech define social relations.

Conclusion

Social media and the smartphone have added a significant visual component through which ordinary people are able to communicate throughout the day, sending items such as LINE/WeChat stickers and photos without necessarily including either oral or textual elements in that conversation. The consideration and thoughts required in selecting the right LINE or WeChat stickers to articulate one's emotion and meanings as well as the atmosphere of the conversation are a new form of emotion work that everybody becomes committed to in the age of smartphones.

With the smartphone, as illustrated by the cases presented in this article, people have skillfully developed a whole set of strategies comprising emotion work, involving such as the sophisticated use of emojis and stickers. Older adults in both the Chinese and Japanese field sites embrace the use of visual communication via smartphones to create new ways of performing and communicating 'care at a distance' as well as fitting into various interpersonal interaction scenarios in daily life, from phatic communication to situations where 'read the air' is essential.

Furthermore, while visual documentation is often one of the primary purposes of photography in the age of the smartphone, it is only one of many uses of visual imagery, with users being aware of the several accessible audiences that may lie just a few taps away. As the term ‘social photography’ (Jurgenson, 2019) suggests, visual materials as well as other visual forms (e.g. emoji and short videos) require ethnographers to dive into the complex and dynamic sociality of different societies and online environments that the visual is embedded in. Unlike the age of print media which encouraged and even imposed the exclusive use of writing in most message-making media and domains of literacy, the current ‘Age of Smartphones’ allows and encourages different modalities of communication to be used in tandem with text scripts in the composition of messages. This ‘blended’ style harbours a broad range of implications within it, from the new possibilities of affective expression to the evolution of human communication practices via smartphones. The proliferation of social media stickers highlighted by this article demonstrates the rich visual form of contemporary communication.

The ethnographic material leads us to further ponder upon a fundamental question of authenticity. Digitally mediated communication has long been regarded as less ‘authentic’ or less effective than face-to-face communication, often being viewed as a substitute for the ‘real’ thing. However, as illustrated in both Chinese and Japanese field sites, by creating and articulating a visualised ‘atmosphere’ and facial expressions through social media stickers, at times, smartphone users skillfully made communication on smartphones as expressive and accessible as face-to-face communication, and in some cases even more so. Visual communication via the smartphone facilitates people invoking and appropriating various communication scenarios that may not have been possible in face-to-face communication. The reason lies not in the intrinsic qualities of face-to-face communication and digital communication. It is rather that the interpersonal communication by nature is beset by conventions and etiquettes that often limit what is appropriate. It is precisely because it is conventional that face-to-face communication may have developed a thicket of constraints and customs that limit what can be said to whom. Under such circumstances, far from being superficial, inauthentic and inadequate, social media stickers have the potential to better express people’s feelings and emotions than their own facial and bodily movements do during face-to-face communication. What was regarded as ‘authentic’ was actually often the conventional performance of given social roles, rather than the free expression of personal feelings. Digitally mediated communication is also subject to etiquette and constraint.

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Notes

1. What should be noted here, however, is the common concern among research participants in both field sites that the valued traditions of handwriting (calligraphy) and good penmanship are now under threat due to the rise of digital communication.
2. With 90 persons in their 50s (35%), 87 in 60s (34%), 62 in 70s (24%) and 21 in 80s (8%).
3. ‘Educated youth’ refers to the urban youth who were sent to the countryside to receive ‘re-education’ from Chinese peasants during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

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