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Digital Stickers in Japanese LINE Communication

Abstract

This study examines the usage of digital stickers in Japanese LINE communication by analyzing 764 cases in authentic data. Digital stickers are often described as emojis, just larger in size. I argue, however, that stickers differ from emojis in that they are more expressive and fulfill more functions as a result of their ability to perform a distinct speech act on their own, such as intensifying a text message, softening a request, or serving as decoration to indicate one's positive attitude. Additionally, the analysis of sticker usage among university students brought to light that the majority of stickers are sent independently, i.e., without an accompanying text message, thus revealing a way of communicating visually without words. Moreover, further examination of textual features and gender differences showed that female students used more animal stickers than male students, that men used fewer stickers with an integrated text when communicating with women than with other men, and that women used fewer criticizing stickers than men. Overall, the analysis of the stickers actually employed indicates that sticker usage combines many cultural features that are closely connected to the Japanese way of communicating.

Introduction

LINE is a popular Japanese messaging application for smartphones and not only includes common emoticons like *kaomoji* and emojis, but >stickers< (*sutanpu*, スタンプ), which provide users with a great variety of visual stimuli. Stickers are larger than common emojis and have more stylistic variation. Wang (2016) describes them as more expressive than traditional emoticons like *kaomoji* and emojis. This is one of the reasons why they have become so popular in Japan (cf. NISHIKAWA/

NAKAMURA 2015). The Korean instant messaging service known as LINE started to include stickers in Japan in 2011 when its internet-based application was first launched there. By 2013, LINE had expanded to become Japan's biggest social network. Its users worldwide sent approximately 2.4 billion stickers a day in 2015 (cf. SHU 2015). Moreover, LINE had the largest number of active users per month in Japan.^[1]

LINE features a sticker shop^[2] that offers stickers depicting original characters created by LINE developers as well as other well-known characters from manga, anime, and computer games. Stickers are available as free downloads or for a small fee. New sets of stickers are released each week by LINE, but it is also possible to create and sell your own virtual LINE stickers. As Kato (2017) points out, the popularity of LINE is mainly due to the sticker function it provides. Because Japanese stickers have gained such an important status in communication via LINE, it is necessary to investigate their linguistic role in a broader way. In order to meet this desideratum, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: What kind of stickers do LINE users actually employ and in what kinds of situations? What are the characteristics of a typical sticker, especially in contrast to *kaomoji* and emojis? A small-scale corpus of actual LINE communication that includes stickers provided the source material for this study.

1. Research on different visual supplements in online communication

The term ›emoticon‹ is often used as a generic term for different variants of visual supplements to online communication, but several terms are used for it in Japan that mean different things: *kaomoji* (顔文字), *emoji* (絵文字), *ekigō* (絵記号, graphical symbols) and *sutanpu* (スタンプ, stickers). Figure 1 shows an example of each of these visual supplements.^[3]

Since research on stickers is based on earlier work about simpler visual supplements, I will include a short overview of all four elements mentioned above, first of all. This is to lay the foundation for the subsequent analysis of the collected data.

1 Cf. <https://gaiax-socialmedialab.jp/post-30833/> [accessed May 30, 2023].

2 Cf. <https://store.line.me/stickershop/> [accessed May 30, 2023].

3 Herring and Dianas (2017) use the term ›graphicon‹, which includes GIFs, images, and videos.


<i>kaomoji</i> (顔文字)	emoji (絵文字)	graphical symbol (<i>ekigō</i> , 絵記号)	sticker (<i>sutanpu</i> , スタンプ)
(^o^)	😊	♪	

Figure 1: Visual supplements

1.1 Research on kaomoji

Facial images mainly produced using ASCII punctuation marks are called *kaomoji*.⁴ *Kao* is the Japanese word for >face< and *moji* means >letter< or >character<. These images are combinations of characters and depict upright faces, unlike the traditional Western >smiley<, which is similarly made of multiple punctuation characters but oriented sideways. In most cases, *kaomoji* are enclosed in brackets to create the outline of a face. Since *kaomoji* are text-based, they can be created easily by exchanging, omitting, or adding some graphical symbols. It is also possible to omit the brackets of a *kaomoji*. *Kaomoji* are used in emails, blogs, and other social media. Many lists of them are available on the internet to help unfamiliar users find the appropriate *kaomoji* for a particular situation.⁵ In comparison, Western emoticons (excluding emojis) are much less complex – the most popular emoticon in America is the smiley face :), which is made up of two punctuation characters (cf. OLESZIEWICZ et al. 2017).

Research on emoticons follows various approaches. Some researchers have analyzed them in conjunction with the intentions of emoticon senders (cf., e.g., GARRISON et al. 2011; AMAGHLOBELI 2012; KAYE et al. 2016; CHEN/SIU 2017). Others have concentrated on interpretations by the emoticons’ recipients (cf., e.g., WALTHER/ADDARIO 2001; ARAKAWA/SUZUKI 2004; LO 2008; TAGUCHI 2014; TAKAHASHI et al. 2014; DUAN et al. 2018). Further research on emoticons has focused on their functions. However, many researchers have investigated their playfulness (cf., e.g., MIYAKE 2002; HARADA 2004; HSIEH/TSEN 2017). In contrast, Huang, Yen, and Zhang (2008) stress the facilitation of information richness. Some researchers regard emoticons as paralinguistic devices and as substitutions for nonverbal cues (cf. KIESLER et al. 1984; MARCOCCIA 2000; MIYAKA 2007; DUAN et al. 2018). Others argue that emoticons have an additional function as structural markers (cf. AMAGHLOBELI 2012). Dresner and Herring (2010: 250) stress that such

4 Kishimoto (2017) calls them >face marks< (*fēsu māku*).

5 Cf., for instance, <http://kaomojiya.com> [accessed May 30, 2023].

structural markers should be »understood in linguistic, rather than extralinguistic, terms«. Thus, Skovholt, Gronning, and Kankaanranta (2014) differentiate three main functions: emoticons (i) serve to mark a positive attitude, (ii) signal the usage of jokes and irony, and (iii) serve as hedges.

Research on gender-related issues has mostly found that women use more emoticons than men (cf. WITMER/KATZMAN 1997; HERRING 2003; BARON 2004; TOSSELL et al. 2012; OLESZIEWICZ et al. 2017). One exception to this rule is in the case of teenage emoticon usage in weblogs; Huffaker and Calvert (2005) reported more frequent use by boys than girls. Moreover, Tossell et al. (2012) found that men used a more diverse range of emoticons than women. Conversely, Fullwood, Orchard, and Floyd (2013) observed a general convergence of emoticon usage towards a female style of expression. According to Wolf (2000), however, gender differences appear in the senders' purpose: women use emoticons to indicate humor, while men tend to use them to express sarcasm. Baron and Campbell (2012) argue that cultural differences often outweigh gender differences; their study involved them comparing mobile phone use by university students in Sweden, the U.S., Italy, Japan, and South Korea. Kavanagh (2016) also discusses cultural differences between American and Japanese users and shows that Japanese users employ emoticons more as positive politeness strategies than American users do.

1.2 Research on emojis

Graphically rendered pictograms are called emojis. Emojis were first used in Japanese mobile phones in the late 1990s (cf. DANESI 2017: 2). Since then, they have become increasingly popular worldwide, which is why well over 1,000 emojis have been incorporated into Unicode over the years. Unlike *kaomoji*, emojis are single characters rather than a composite of multiple characters. Each emoji is a little picture, in fact, as the meaning of the Japanese term indicates: >e< (絵) means >picture< and >moji< (文字) means >letter< or >character<, as in *kaomoji* above. As they become more widely used, emojis are gradually pushing out *kaomoji*. In areas of the internet where emojis are not yet integrated, however, *kaomoji* continue to be used frequently, as on the famous Japanese textboard 2channel, for example.⁶ Sugiyama (2015) highlights two functions of emoji use among Japanese teens: Emojis stabilize the communication mood of their social interactions and help to establish and fashion their >aesthetic self<. In contrast to this positive view, Rodrigues et al. (2017) contend that emojis use does not always have positive effects on romantic partners: Usage of emojis in serious relationship issues can have a detrimental effect and may lead to an escalation of the problem.

6 Cf. <http://2ch.sc/> [accessed May 30, 2023].

Marengo, Giannotta, and Settanni (2017) link emoji usage to personality traits, namely emotional stability, extraversion, and agreeableness. Lu et al. (2016) investigated cultural differences and analyzed emoji usage in nine different countries, producing the result that French messages contain the highest proportion of emojis and that French users tend to use more emojis that fall into the category of ›heart-related‹, while other countries prefer emojis related to faces.

The size of emojis usually corresponds to the font size of the written text, but in LINE, if a message is only composed of one emoji, it is automatically enlarged (cf. fig. 2). In this case, it is hard to distinguish emojis from stickers if one is not familiar with the respective lists.

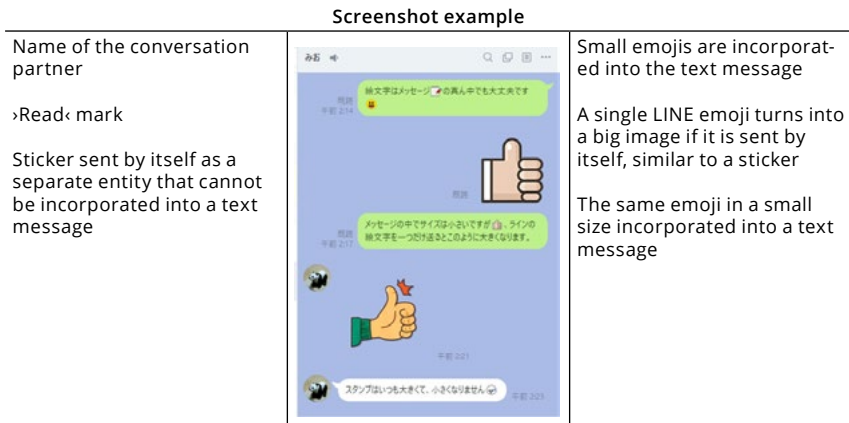


Figure 2: A screenshot example showing an emoji and a sticker

1.3 Research on graphical symbols

Such symbols are similar to emojis in the sense that they are pictograms that cannot be composed of internal ASCII elements like *kaomoji*. There has been less research on symbols than on *kaomoji* and emojis so far, but in an earlier publication (cf. OBERWINKLER 2006: 250), I analyzed a Japanese text corpus of 160 mails from Japanese ›mail magazines‹, as they are known, and identified 1,429 tokens consisting of three types of graphical symbols: a white asterisk ☆, a black asterisk ★, and a note of music ♪, the white asterisk being the most commonly used (49.5%), followed by the black asterisk (35.1%), and finally the music note (15.4%). Nishimura (2015: 109) also addresses the use of other non-linguistic symbols, like ♥ and ♂. Like *kaomoji*, the use of ASCII graphical symbols has lessened since sets of emojis have been available on smartphones, as these provide so many graphical

symbols (even in various colors, like the heart symbol). This is why many Japanese no longer differentiate between graphical symbols and emojis.

1.4 Research on stickers (*sutanpu*)

As mentioned earlier, stickers are much bigger than other visual supplements (cf. fig. 1). Stickers can only be sent alone, too, i.e., as separate entities (like a GIF or JPEG image) and cannot be sent together with a typed text message. Hence, stickers cannot be inserted into a sentence in a text message (which is possible with emojis). LINE provides a small set of stickers for free, but a much greater variety of them are available for purchase or free of charge under certain conditions, like adding the company to one's friends list and receiving advertising, answering a questionnaire, or registering with a particular internet portal first. A sticker earned this way is generally available for 180 days, after which it cannot be used any more and new stickers have to be downloaded instead. Stickers that have been paid for remain available, though (a normal set of stickers cost 240 Yen in May 2023). On the one hand, communication via LINE is described as fast, since messages are often short and easy to read and write (they can contain anything between one and ten characters; cf. KUSUI 2017: 294). On the other hand, LINE users have the opportunity to put breaks in between individual messages and continue the stream of conversation later (after several hours or even a whole night) (cf. NISHIKAWA/NAKAMURA 2015: 49).

One major reason for quick exchanges of messages is the appearance of the >Read< mark (*kidoku*) after a message has been viewed, as Kusui points out (2017: 294). Many researchers have reported stress and trouble caused by this mark, however (cf. ISHIZAKI et al. 2015; SAKAI/SHIOTA 2015; TANEMURA 2015). LINE communication can take place quickly and easily just by sending a sticker without a text message. According to Wang (2016: 461), »the combination of text and stickers may convey the current mood of the message sender more clearly«. Porn-tipa (2015: 112) came to a similar conclusion for Japanese and Thai students who were participating in LINE communication role-play, namely, turning down an invitation to watch a movie together: The Thai students used single-sticker communication more often than the Japanese participants, who combined stickers with text messages more often. Suda et al. (2016) attempted to classify stickers by their degree of ambiguity. According to their analysis, 57% of the stickers had a clearly understandable content, while 24% were ambiguous and 19% did not have any communicative function at all. Okamoto (2016: 228) distinguishes stickers matching facial expressions, gestures, and emotional expressions, but does not provide any information on quantities. Kato (2017) analyzed differences caused by gender and reported that text messages used in conjunction with stickers in LINE communication were most often sent by women rather than men; the latter

wrote to their friends rather than members of their family, their romantic partners, or seniors.

Research on the functions of stickers – especially in comparison to the other visual supplements described above – is still in its infancy, and published results are not consistent. Wang (2016: 471) mentions that »stickers [...] may serve the same function as the emoticons used in text-based CMC, which can compensate for the facial mimics and gestures that would otherwise be hard to express in writing and that support verbal communication«. But Nishikawa and Nakamura (2015: 54) argue, to the contrary, that conventional emoticons function as intensifiers of the verbal context, while stickers help to clarify emotional expressions and to avert misunderstandings of the expressed emotions. Kato (2017: 32) takes the view that stickers are similar to *kaomoji* and emojis in that they all express emotions, but in the case of stickers the emotions are more complex and more complicated than in *kaomoji* and emojis. The present research aims to shed more light on these questions and to clarify the functions of stickers: What specific role can stickers fulfill?

2. The screenshot corpus

To gain an insight into the actual usage of LINE communication with stickers, I collected and analyzed a small-scale corpus of 505 screenshots showing 764 stickers. The screenshots were provided by 140 university students at the three big universities in Kyoto (Doshisha University, Ritsumeikan University, and Kansai Gaidai University) in September and October 2017. I asked the students to send me screenshots of three of their latest conversations in which they had used stickers since it was not technically possible to copy individual parts of a LINE chat and forward it to another person at the time. Screenshots were the only way to document sticker usage in their natural environment in a conversation. Additionally, I asked the students to provide me with some ethnographic information about the sender and recipient of the stickers along with the screenshots, namely, their age, gender, occupation or subject of study, and the relationship between the sender and recipient. This information was incomplete or ambiguous in some cases, so not all the collected stickers could be evaluated for gender comparison, for example. Apart from these unclear cases, each collected sticker was categorized in terms of the senders' and recipients' gender. The clear cases revealed the following situation: The vast majority of stickers (511 or 72 %) were sent by women, while 198 stickers were sent by men (28 %). From a gender point of view, 338 stickers were sent by women to women, 125 stickers were sent by men to men, 100 stickers were sent by women to men, and 56 stickers were sent by men to women. When I analyzed the gender situation, I only took cases that were clear into account.

3. Analysis and discussion

3.1 Sticker motifs

The images presented by the stickers were categorized into three groups: (a) human motifs, (b) animal motifs, and (c) any other figures. The last category included fantasy (manga) characters with non-human body features, food, and other things like vehicles or flowers. However, even things like food and flowers tend to be depicted anthropomorphically – with faces and sometimes with hands and legs as well, which makes them different from emoji figures, which depict things in the simplest and clearest way possible.

Animal motifs were sent most often (64.5%). This result can be linked to the previous finding that cuteness is important for stickers (cf. OBERWINKLER / OIE 2022). Most of the animal pictures that are used for the stickers look cuter than their human counterparts. The women sent more animals than the men did, and they tended to do so especially if the recipient was a man (76.0%; cf. fig. 3). Although cuteness is a positive concept regardless of gender, women are even more active in using cute things in Japan. This may be the reason why they send more animal stickers than men do.

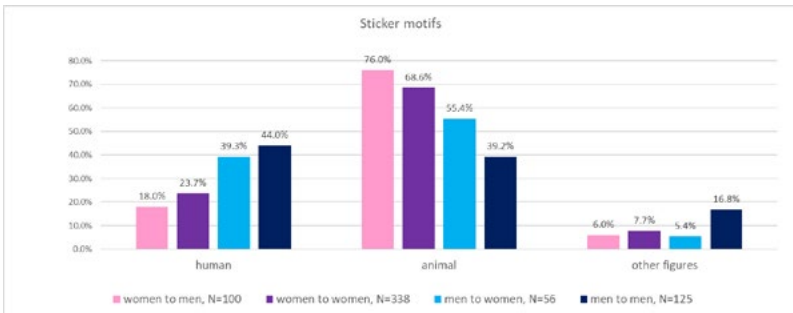


Figure 3: Sticker motifs

83.9% of the sticker images only show one animal, including a human or another figure as well. The animals in the corpus that were sent most frequently were rabbits (24.7%), followed by bears (19.3%), cats (15.6%), panda bears (8.5%), dogs (6.9%), birds (5.3%), and seals (3.7%). Many of the animals look very similar to each other, so familiarity with the sets of stickers provided by different companies is necessary for users to be able to recognize the different types of animals (which are often not intuitively recognizable to people outside the Japanese cultural sphere). According to one of the students who provided screenshots, it is not particularly important to know what kind of animal the sticker represents;

what matters more is that the stickers look cute and convey a positive vibe. This statement is supported by the fact that some animals are presented in costumes or even disguises, making it even more difficult to discern what kind of animal the sticker shows (cf. fig. 4, especially the last example).



Figure 4: Examples of animal stickers

3.2 Stickers with integrated texts

As Paul Duncum has said (2004: 252), »visual culture isn't just visual« – text is frequently an integral part of visual communication, too. This is also true for the vast majority of the stickers in my corpus, namely 75.1%, as they share the feature of integrated text. Sometimes the integrated sticker text is packed in speech bubbles, but most of the time it is written without them, i.e. without any limiting ›frame‹. The reason for the high percentage of stickers containing texts is that they are a means of avoiding ambiguity and possible misinterpretation. In my study, men frequently sent women stickers with integrated texts (83.9%) but did not do so quite as often when they wrote to other men (60.8%; cf. fig. 5). Conversely, the opposite applies to stickers without any texts: These were not used by men very often when they wrote to women (16.1%), but the usage more than doubled when men wrote to other men (39.2%). In the collected LINE data, men strove to prevent misunderstandings and tended to use easily comprehensible stickers with integrated texts in conversations with women.

7 <https://store.line.me/stickershop/product/1518300/ja> [accessed May 30, 2023].

8 <https://store.line.me/stickershop/product/1434023/ja> [accessed May 30, 2023].

9 <https://store.line.me/stickershop/product/1759964/ja> [accessed May 30, 2023].

10 <https://store.line.me/stickershop/product/1143809/ja> [accessed May 30, 2023].

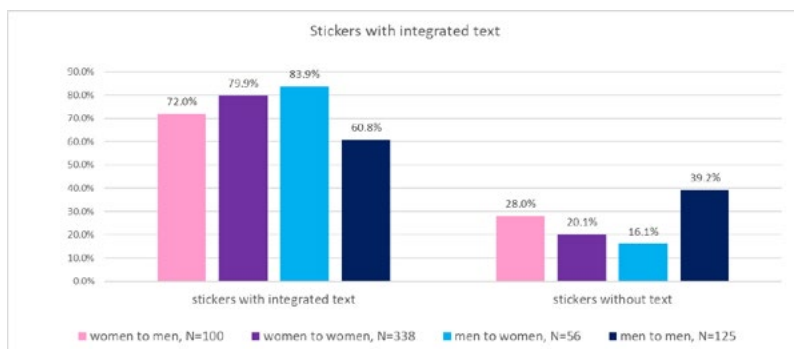


Figure 5: Stickers with integrated texts

In the collected data analyzed in this study, all the writing systems used in Japan were found in stickers integrating texts: kanji, hiragana, katakana, and Latin letters. The statistical distribution of the usage of the respective systems is shown in figure 6.

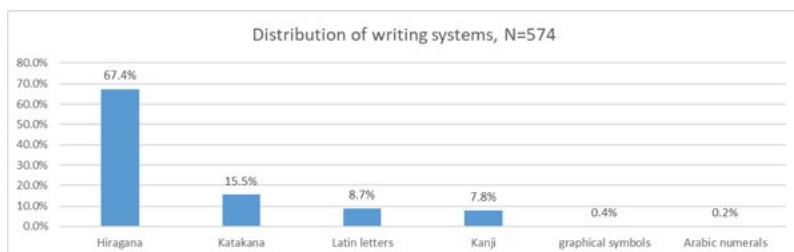


Figure 6: Distribution of the writing systems used for the texts in stickers

Hiragana was used most often in the collected data (67.4%). Katakana, in contrast, was only used in 15.5% of the stickers. The percentage of Latin letters (8.7%) was slightly higher than that of kanji (7.8%). For good readability, a kanji–kana ratio of 30% is recommended for average educated adult Japanese readers.¹¹⁾ However, since stickers that integrate texts do not have to convey fact-rich content, it makes sense to write them with fewer kanji and more hiragana characters. The high percentage of Latin letters can partly be explained by the fact that the screenshot providers were university students with a keen interest in foreign languages. Even so, the use of Latin letters was above average. These letters seem to fit the requirements of a sticker with a simple message that is clear and precise,

11 <https://科研費.com/kanji-kana-ratio> [accessed May 30, 2023].

such as »OK« (the most frequent term with 17 instances and »Okay« with three instances) or »Thank you« (four instances). A list of the words used most is provided in figures 7 and 8:

Types	Tokens
OK	17
Happy Birthday	4
Thank you	4
Okay	3

Figure 7: Words in Latin letters often used in texts in stickers

Types	Tokens	Types	Tokens	Types	Tokens
›thank you‹	37	›I understand‹	34	›bowing‹	22
ありがとう	24	了解	7	ぺこり	12
ありがとうございます	4	りよーかい	7	ぺコリ	6
ありがとうー	2	りよ	7	ぺコー	1
あざ〜っす	2	りよ〜かい	6	ぺコッ	1
アリガトウ	1	了解です	3	ぺコ	1
ありがとうございますーす	1	了解しました	1	ぺこっ	1
ありがたい	1	りよーかいです	1		
感謝です	1	りようかいです	1		
感謝	1	りようかい	1		

Figure 8: Japanese expressions used most often in texts in stickers

From a statistical point of view, graphical symbols rarely appear in sticker texts, but this is an interesting phenomenon that shows the integration of one visual supplement into another. The heart symbol was used most frequently (in eight instances), as figure 9 shows:

Types	Tokens
♡	8
♪	2
♪	1
○	1
🌸	1

Figure 9: Graphical symbols used in texts in stickers

Stickers with integrated texts can include whole sentences (13.9%), but short comments that consist of one word occur much more often (one-word comments: 72.8%; two-word comments: 13.9%). The lexical analysis of the sticker texts shows a high incidence of onomatopoeic expressions (27.9%). The one used most

frequently in the data is *»pekoru«* (with 22 instances in various writing styles), which refers to bowing (22 instances in various writing styles). In Japanese culture, bowing is multi-functional: It is used for thanking, requesting, apologizing, and greeting people. Due to its multi-functional usage, it is often mentioned in cross-cultural studies as a specifically Japanese behavior (cf. DE MENTE 2015: 37ff.). The findings of this analysis of stickers with integrated texts reveal the importance of bowing humbly even in Japan’s digital culture.

3.3 Stickers’ functions

The stickers collected for this study performed various speech acts. The ten most frequent ones are shown in figure 10:

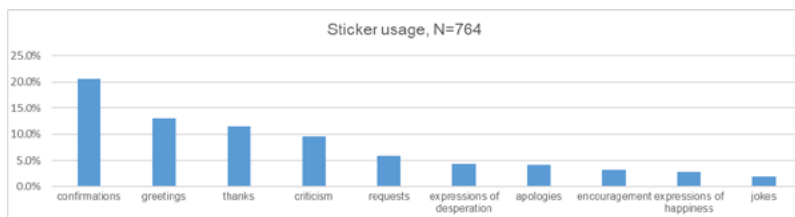


Figure 10: Stickers’ functions

In this study, broad categorizations of speech acts were used for the analysis. Further research should undertake a more detailed analysis with a more defined categorization of speech acts in conjunction with the conversational function of the stickers. Nonetheless, the findings in this study already show that stickers are not only used to clarify emotional expressions and avert misunderstandings, as stated by Nishikawa and Nakamura (2015: 54). Nor do stickers only serve to compensate for facial mimicry and gestures, as Wang postulates (2016: 471). Rather, the analysis of the data in this study confirms Kato’s (2017: 32) view that stickers are more complex than *kaomoji* and emojis. It contradicts the claim that they all express emotions, however. As figure 10 shows, the analysis in my study concludes that stickers are most often used for confirmation (20.5%), which does not necessarily involve emotions. As shown in a previous study of mine (cf. OBERWINKLER/OIE 2022), LINE users send stickers because it is easier and faster to send them than to type a text message. A suggestion can simply be confirmed by sending a sticker saying *»OK«* without a preceding or following text message (cf. fig. 11). A sticker can therefore fulfill the function of performing a speech act that the sender wants to realize.

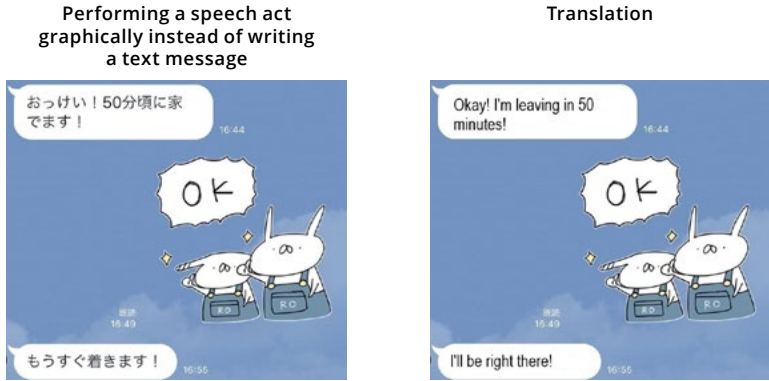


Figure 11: Performing a speech act with a sticker instead of writing a text message

Most of the stickers in this study were sent independently without an accompanying text message (61.1%; cf. fig. 12). In these cases, the stickers’ function was to convey important information and not just play the role of a visual supplement. This is an important difference compared to the function of *kaomoji* and emojis.

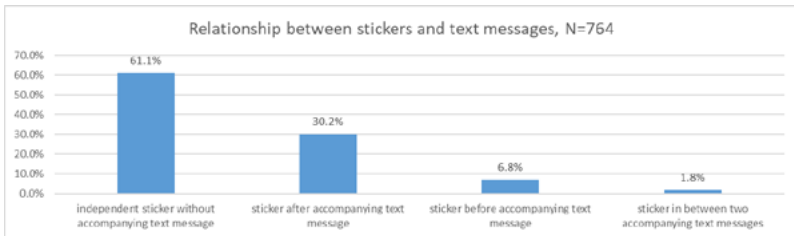


Figure 12: The relationship between stickers and text messages

Although emojis such as the thumbs-up image can be used alone without any accompanying text, this generally only occurs in situations where it is quite clear what is being agreed to. There does not seem to be any difference between the visual supplements in such cases. Nevertheless, the situation is quite different in more complex contexts: If the sender not only wishes to agree to a clearly stated fact or to confirm it but also wants to encourage their conversation partner, then a single emoji without any accompanying text would be inadequate. Stickers can easily fulfill this task, though, depending on the depicted image. Stickers with integrated texts are especially convenient for this purpose. For instance, one of the collected screenshots is a message from an unconfident student indicating that he has to present a paper in class that day (cf. fig. 13). His friend’s response

was to send him a single sticker showing a colorful bird beaming with confidence and shouting »Fight!!«. Thus, a single sticker can express the sender’s empathy and indicate support and encouragement:

Independent sticker without an accompanying text message: a way of expressing empathy and encouragement

Translation



Figure 13: A single encouraging sticker without an accompanying text message

The advantage of stickers is particularly evident when more intense emotions are associated with the conversation: a simple ›thank you‹ could be expressed by a single heart emoji, for example. This might be a conceivable option for familiar conversation partners regarding a small favor. However, the more closely the gratitude is connected with deeper emotions, the less likely it is for a single emoji to be used; that would not be enough. A sticker, on the other hand, takes up more space due to its size, shows more details, and can thus express deeper feelings of gratitude even if it is sent without a message to explain it. Although the Japanese communication style is often considered minimalistic according to the high-context theory (cf. HALL 1976), it is also claimed that politeness plays an important role in it, especially when expressing gratitude (cf. COULMAS 1981). In a digital context, politeness is expressed by choosing an appropriate sticker for one’s conversation partner. Therefore, it seems that a refined sticker fits Japanese communication practices better than a plain emoji without any text.

In one example from the corpus, a student thanked someone for a compliment the student was very happy to receive (cf. fig. 14): The single sticker shows a cat with wings floating happily on cloud nine. Above the cat’s head, it says »Thank you«. The student can express several feelings at once this way, such as happiness and gratitude, which would not be as easy if a single emoji were used, as the message would not be as clear.

Independent sticker without an accompanying text message: expressing happiness and gratitude

Translation



Figure 14: An independent sticker without an accompanying text message

The above statement also applies to apologies. A single emoji can hardly convey a sincere and humble apology without an accompanying text, because an explicit expression of the established catchphrases is expected in Japanese communication. A sticker, on the other hand, is more effective in conveying a sincere apology due to the detail in the image and the ability to anchor text in it. Several examples in the corpus demonstrate this usage. It can therefore be argued that single uses of emojis without any further text may well be conceivable, but their effectiveness is markedly limited compared to stickers. The latter can be used in a much wider range of situations without an accompanying text message and can convey several emotions at the same time. This is a specific feature of them.

The second most frequent usage of stickers in this study is for performing greetings (13.1%), as can be seen in figure 10. Like the examples above, greetings can also be performed by using a single sticker. However, the data analyzed in this study showed many instances of combining greeting stickers with a text message fulfilling the same speech act (cf. fig. 15).

Serving as decoration to indicate a positive attitude: saying goodbye



Translation



Figure 15: Serving as decoration to indicate a positive attitude

In this combination, the sticker is a decoration that serves to indicate a positive attitude (cf. SKOVHOLT et al. 2014: 788).¹²

The third most frequent use of stickers in this study is in the speech act of thanking someone (11.4%; cf. fig. 10). Combinations of stickers with text messages of the same content could also be observed in this group. In this case, the sticker intensifies the text message and thus serves as emphasis (cf. fig. 16).

Acting as an intensifier by repeating a preceding text message



Translation

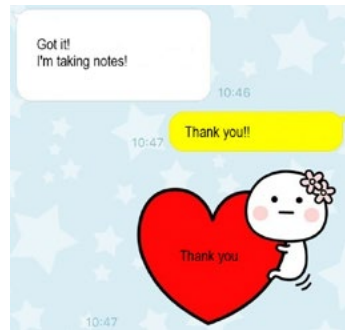


Figure 16: Acting as an intensifier by repeating a preceding text message in an appropriate image (here a heart to indicate heartfelt thanks)

12 Skovholt, Gronning, and Kankaanranta (2014) categorize the function of emoticons that follow greetings as strengtheners of expressive speech acts, but emoticons that follow signatures as markers of a positive attitude.

The opposite function is seen in the use of stickers in requests (5.9%; cf. fig. 10): The stickers serve as softeners showing a new manifestation of politeness, as seen above in the case of the onomatopoetic term for bowing, *pekori*. *Pekori* stickers are able to soften the illocutionary force of a request (cf. fig. 17). Skovholt, Gronning, and Kankaanranta (2014: 789) explain that emoticons »serve to modify the propositional content of the utterance and functions as a softening hedge«. This is similar in sticker usage.

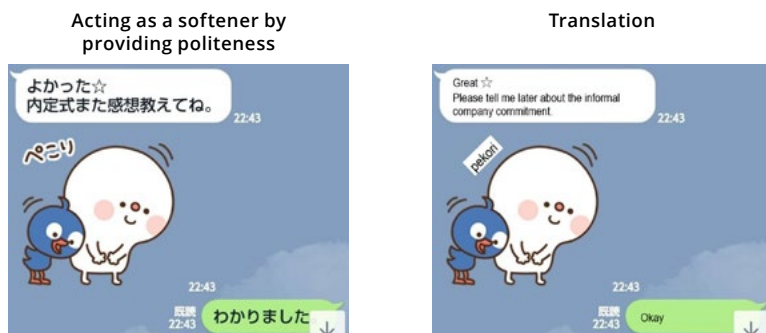
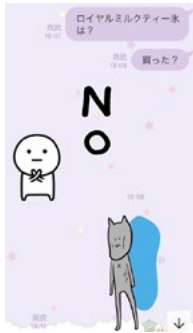


Figure 17: Acting as a softener by providing politeness

Stickers that reveal criticism reached an unexpectedly high percentage (9.6%; cf. fig. 10). The ones in this group were often sent without an accompanying text message and performed the entire speech act, as seen in the case of confirmations. They only had a contradictory meaning in relation to the accompanying text message in a small number of cases, thus functioning as a means of fulfilling a face-threatening act and being a way to reveal covert emotions (cf. fig. 18).

Gender differences are very prominent in the use of critical stickers, as figure 19 shows; it indicates that female students sent fewer criticizing stickers to other women (5.0%), while male students sent the most to other men (20.8%).

Performing a face-threatening act



Translation

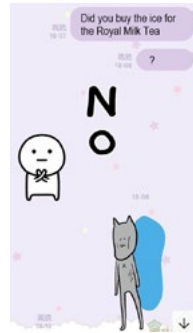


Figure 18: Performing a face-threatening act

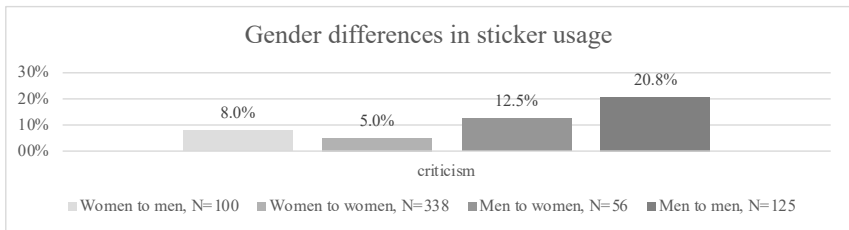


Figure 19: Gender differences in sticker usage expressing criticism

These gender differences can also be explained by cultural inclinations. As Nakamura (2014: 378) demonstrates, there are precise societal expectations regarding women’s language in Japan: »the polite, indirect, and soft ways of speaking are established as normative ways of expressing the speaker’s femininity«, she says. In my own data, it appears that women follow these expectations in their use of language, even in digital communication via a messenger. In terms of sticker use, the majority of female students adhered to the polite and courteous language style that conforms to normative expectations, and refrained from using stickers that represented critical statements. Herring (2003: 207) has stated that »[p]oliteness is one common means through which gender is cued in asynchronous CMC. Women are more likely to thank, appreciate, and apologize«. Gender differences in communicative style may possibly be related to social expectations and norms in Japanese society: Women are expected to be more polite and indirect in their communication, while men are not subject to these normative expectations to the same extent, so it is easier – and more natural – for them to express criticism more openly, partly through sticker use.

4. Conclusion

Previous research (cf. OBERWINKLER/OIE 2022) has shown that in comparison to *kaomoji* and emojis, stickers are more often used at the end of a conversation and/or when it is bothersome to type a sentence. Regardless of the fact that a huge number of stickers are provided in LINE and the effort needed to pick the right one is considerable, many Japanese LINE users find it easier, faster, and more convenient to send a sticker than to type a text message. Furthermore, because stickers are considered cuter than *kaomoji* or emojis, I maintain that LINE users enjoy looking through them, choosing one, and sending it to a recipient (cf. OBERWINKLER/OIE 2022 again).

In the present study, the analysis of 764 stickers in actual LINE conversations revealed some interesting gender-related differences in the choice of stickers. Women tended to choose more stickers with animal motifs and more stickers with integrated texts than men did. Even though it is possible to integrate a complicated sentence into a sticker's design, most of the stickers in my dataset only included simple text messages like »OK« or »understood« (*ryōkai*). Various functions of the stickers could be identified according to the situation in which they were used and whether the sticker was sent without an accompanying text message or along with one beforehand or afterward. Stickers can perform a speech act independently instead of a text message, or (albeit rarely) even contradict a preceding or an ensuing text message. Even if they are sent without an accompanying text, they can convey multiple emotions at the same time. They can act as intensifiers in conjunction with a text message expressing the same content or as softeners in conjunction with a text message expressing a request by conforming to the standards of expected politeness. Stickers can also serve as pure decorations indicating a positive attitude. Thus, they are more expressive than *kaomoji* or emojis and have a broader variety of functions. The complexity of Japanese stickers shows a new dimension of CMC. In conclusion, digital LINE stickers reflect traditional patterns of the Japanese style of communication and at the same time show aspects of a new visual way of communicating.

Suggestions for further research

This study analyses sticker usage among male and female university students in Kyoto. Future studies should not just investigate gender aspects but generational characteristics as well, since the Japanese vernacular differs substantially for each generation. Furthermore, research on different sticker use due to regional variations (e.g., in Kyoto as opposed to Tokyo) and cross-cultural comparison may also lead to some interesting insights and to a better understanding of this complex tool for visualization in Japan's digital world.

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