

Emojis as a cash cow: Biaoqing-hatched economic practice in online China

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Visual resources online (e.g. emojis, emoticons, stickers) are regarded by some scholars as paralanguage which substitutes for non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, emotions (Kelly & Watts, 2015; Walther & D'Addario, 2001). In fact, visual resources are far more than paralanguage because they serve various pragmatic functions, for instance to work as punctuations (Duque, 2018) or phatic expressions (Stark & Crawford, 2015), to mediate interpersonal relations (Kelly & Watts, 2015), to indicate certain up-take of the message (Huang, Yen, & Zhang, 2008; Dresner & Herring, 2010). However, most of the current researches on online visual resources are restricted to textual level analysis. This means the relationships between society, semiotic resources and users are under researched. As a tentative attempt to fill in this gap, this research approaches visual resources as semiotic resources, and takes visual resources on Chinese social media as a case study.

On Chinese social media, including emojis, emoticons, stickers, memes are collectively referred to as Biaoqing (表情, literal meaning: facial expression), which are much more versatile and influential than emojis on western social media. In this paper, two popular Biaoqing figures, Eggy (the name of a cat) and Budding Pop (the name of an anthropomorphic figure), are followed to decipher the relationship between Biaoqing, society and users. The results indicate that Biaoqing are not semiotic resources not only for online communication, but also for identity performance. In this sense, Biaoqing are cultural capitals. Besides this, Biaoqing become a strong dynamo for the formation of light communities, i.e. communities without robust structure, enter threshold, membership duties, but only seemingly trivial commonalities (Blommaert & Varis, 2015). These communities are light, but they have “heavy” consequences: members perform various Biaoqing-initiated economic practices, including rewarding designers, buying Biaoqing-related merchandise, which are typical of the 21st century online culture.

Keywords: Chinese social media, Biaoqing, economic practice, light community