

Visual Communication in Social Media: Generation Z's Motivations and Social Impacts of Using Biaoqingbao on WeChat

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Abstract: In the digital age, the widespread use of social media and instant messaging applications has prompted Generation Z to adopt increasingly diverse and visually oriented modes of communication. As a uniquely Chinese form of visual language, Biaoqingbao has not only transcended the limitations of textual expression on platforms like WeChat but also plays a central role in emotional expression, identity formation, and cultural affiliation. While previous studies have examined the cross-cultural use and linguistic functions of emojis, empirical research on the psychological motivations and usage patterns of Biaoqingbao among China's Generation Z remains limited. This study employs Self-Determination Theory as a theoretical framework to investigate the practices of nine Chinese Gen Z users on WeChat, using (1) participant observation, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) focus group discussions. The findings reveal that Biaoqingbao serves not only as a tool for emotional expression but also as a strategy for fulfilling users' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Moreover, Biaoqingbao facilitates identity performance, social bonding, and subcultural affiliation, functioning as a key medium of symbolic interaction and cultural participation in the digital era. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of visual communication and offers practical insights for platform designers, communication professionals, and social psychologists working with digitally native youth.

Keywords: Chinese social media, Biaoqingbao, WeChat, Generation Z, Motivations, Visual communication.

1. Introduction

As digital communication becomes increasingly image-driven, emojis have emerged as a global visual language that transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries. According to the 2022 *Global Emoji Trends Report*, over six billion emojis are used daily worldwide, and 64% of users believe emojis enhance the fun of communication and serve as important tools for emotional expression.

In this study, Biaoqingbao refers to a specific visual communication form that has evolved in the Chinese digital ecosystem. Unlike standard emojis, Biaoqingbao includes a wide range of visual symbols such as animated GIFs, stickers, meme images, and user-generated text-image combinations, and is primarily used on platforms like WeChat. Biaoqingbao not only transcends the limitations of traditional text-based communication but also plays a central role in emotional expression, identity formation, and cultural affiliation. In China, the widespread use of Biaoqingbao has been significantly shaped by WeChat, a platform that promotes highly visual and interactive communication. This context has encouraged the localization and evolution of emoji usage patterns into Biaoqingbao within the Chinese digital ecosystem.

Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2010), having grown up in the mobile internet era, are often described as digital natives. They prefer visual and personalized communication styles. Biaoqingbao are used by Generation Z not only to regulate emotions and signal social belonging, but also to construct online identities and engage in cultural participation (Nurlaila et al., 2024; Chen, 2025). Their expressive behaviours reflect a high degree of sensitivity and creativity toward media interaction, visual semiotics, and digital social

norms (Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

Despite Biaoqingbao's wide popularity, their semantic openness, polysemy, and cultural dependency may lead to communicative challenges, including misinterpretation, relational ambiguity, and even emotional pressure in specific contexts (Zhang et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022). Existing research on emojis has largely focused on cross-cultural semantics, cultural decoding, and technical features (Minhas, 2025; Tariq, 2025), with relatively few studies systematically examining the motivations, psychological mechanisms, and identity construction related to Biaoqingbao among Generation Z users on WeChat.

This study explores the usage of Biaoqingbao on WeChat among Chinese Gen Z. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the research draws on three sources of data: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Based on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the study examines the motivations behind Biaoqingbao usage through expressive motivation, self-efficacy, and social regulation.

Two research questions guide this study.

- 1) What are the motivations and psychological mechanisms underlying Generation Z's use of Biaoqingbao on WeChat?
- 2) How does Biaoqingbao usage influence their emotional expression, interpersonal interaction, and digital identity construction?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition, Evolution, and Sociocultural Functions of

Biaoqingbao

With the rapid visualisation of digital communication, image-based language forms have gained central importance on social platforms. In the Chinese context, Biaoqingbao is a multimodal system that integrates images, text, and cultural symbols, and it has become a key component of online interaction. It not only expands emotional expression but also enables users to creatively articulate identity, cultural positioning, and affective intent within social contexts (Hu et al., 2023; Lu & Blommaert, 2020).

From a cultural perspective, Biaoqingbao is deeply embedded in China's grassroots internet culture. Often humorous, satirical, or exaggerated, these visual elements reflect collective sentiments and public discourse. Emoticons such as Ge You's Slouch or Socially Anxious Duck have become visual metaphors for youth fatigue, powerlessness, and social anxiety (Liang, 2017; Feng & Areerungruang, 2023). These visual codes function both as entertainment and as emotional responses to real-world pressures.

From a technological and communicative standpoint, Biaoqingbao has evolved from static icons into dynamic and personalised multimodal resources. Early static emojis gave way to animated GIFs, user-generated stickers, and meme-based formats. Tools on platforms like WeChat, including personalised sticker creators and third-party generators, have significantly increased user agency and creativity in visual communication (De Seta, 2018). Biaoqingbao thus functions not merely as a supplementary tool but as a medium for self-expression and social stance-taking.

Moreover, Biaoqingbao serves complex social functions in communication. Studies have shown that it is used to establish emotional bonds, mitigate tone, resist authority, and negotiate identity (Jiang & Vásquez, 2020). Its use is highly context-dependent and culturally situated, often reflecting users' perceived roles and relationships within a given interaction (Lu & Blommaert, 2020).

Importantly, Biaoqingbao demonstrates strong localness. Many stickers draw on dialects, ethnic references, or even Western celebrity imagery, recontextualised within Chinese social and emotional frames. For instance, repurposing international celebrity faces as localised emotional symbols is a common practice in cross-cultural dissemination (Jiang & Vásquez, 2020). This reflects the cultural creativity and symbolic fluency of China's Generation Z in the digital era.

2.2 Usage Characteristics of Biaoqingbao on WeChat

As WeChat has become the dominant platform for everyday communication in China, Biaoqingbao has developed into a rich semiotic resource for both practical communication and cultural expression. Beyond emotion-marking, it is now deeply embedded in relationship management, conversational tone adjustment, and digital identity performance.

Biaoqingbao helps compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues in text-based communication, serving as a pragmatic tool to reduce ambiguity and enhance affective clarity. Users often insert emoticons to provide contextual visual cues that support

or soften their written messages (Tang, 2024). Studies also suggest that their use can soften face-threatening acts, facilitating more polite or relationally sensitive interactions (Yang et al., 2025). WeChat's design has further amplified the expressive potential of Biaoqingbao. Features such as context-based sticker recommendations and selfie-based personalised sticker creation enhance interactivity and user engagement. These affordances encourage users to integrate Biaoqingbao into their self-presentation strategies and communication routines.

Generational differences in interpreting Biaoqingbao are particularly significant. Research shows that younger users often reassign ironic or sarcastic meanings to otherwise neutral emoticons, while older generations may interpret the same symbols literally. For instance, the smiling emoji, perceived by Generation Z as passive-aggressive or ironic, is often seen as polite or friendly by older users (Huang, 2022). This semantic drift highlights the context-sensitivity and cultural fluidity of Biaoqingbao.

Additionally, Biaoqingbao plays an important role in constructing multimodal metaphors. Wang et al. (2024) argue that emoticons work in tandem with text and visual grammar to create layered meaning, allowing users to express complex attitudes, emotions, and cultural references within constrained digital spaces.

2.3 Identity, Media Preferences, and Visual Expression Among China's Generation Z

Generation Z, typically defined as those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, constitutes a major demographic force in China's digital ecosystem. Accounting for roughly one-fifth of the national population, this group is characterised by high digital literacy, dependence on mobile devices, and an affinity for image-based communication (Bo, 2019; Wang, 2023). Culturally, Generation Z has cultivated distinct subcultural trends such as Sang culture and lying flat ideology, which reflect collective coping strategies under socio-economic stress and mobility stagnation (Yang et al., 2024; Zhu & Peng, 2024). They often use social media as a platform to critique traditional lifestyles and articulate their own identities through visual and symbolic expressions (Liu, 2025).

Their identity formation is shaped by an interplay of factors, including competitive educational systems, abundant material conditions, and complex parent-child dynamics (Yang, Wang & Hwang, 2020). Confucian values still influence their behavioural codes, but their preferred modes of online interaction tend to rely on visual and informal styles of communication (Sreeja, 2021; Qian & Liu, 2021).

Visual symbols, especially emoticons and Biaoqingbao, play a central role in Generation Z's digital socialisation. These elements are used to express mood, tone, attitude, and group affiliation. Research suggests that Generation Z actively redefines the meaning of visual symbols depending on context, imbuing them with humour, irony, or shared cultural references (Zeng, 2023; Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Shalevska, 2024). Intergenerational communication gaps also shape such usage. For example, Wu et al. (2024) found significant differences in emoji interpretation and aesthetic

preferences across age groups, which can lead to miscommunication or even conflict in cross-generational conversations. These dynamics underscore the layered nature of visual communication in culturally diverse and age-stratified settings.

External events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have further influenced Biaoqingbao use. Studies show a decline in positive emoticon use and an increase in supportive or sorrowful expressions during the pandemic, reflecting collective emotional adjustment (Liu et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Generation Z continues to favour informal, meme-driven visual language, demonstrating adaptability to fast-paced, image-heavy digital environments (Azad et al., 2023; Yang & Liu, 2021).

Nonetheless, the informality of Biaoqingbao has sparked critique in formal settings. In some contexts, they are deemed inappropriate or imprecise, especially in professional or intergenerational communication. This tension illustrates the complexity and dynamism of Generation Z's digital expression, as well as the evolving norms of visual communication across cultural boundaries.

2.4 Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), posits that individual motivation is driven by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000) (Figure 1 shows an example). Within the context of social media, this theory has been widely applied to explain user engagement and behavioural patterns (Uysal & Yildirim, 2016; Liu et al., 2024).

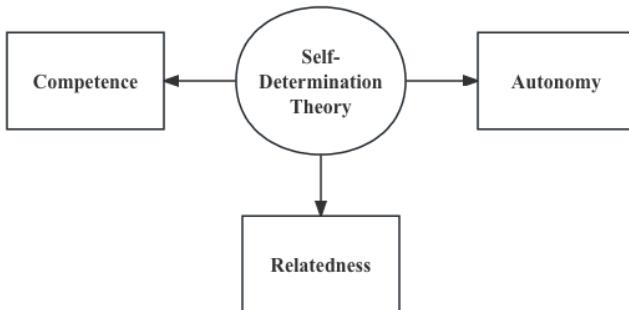


Figure 1: Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)

The use of Biaoqingbao contributes to the fulfilment of these psychological needs. First, in terms of autonomy, Generation Z expresses creativity and control through selecting, customising, and even creating personalised Biaoqingbao. These visual symbols offer diverse and flexible modes of communication, allowing users to exercise agency in how they express themselves, thereby enhancing their sense of communicative autonomy (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Dunn & Zimmer, 2020).

Second, the use of Biaoqingbao supports the need for competence, which refers to an individual's confidence in effectively performing a task. Biaoqingbao, as supplementary communicative cues, help users modulate tone, mitigate verbal tension, and convey humour, which can lead to more effective and satisfying interactions. This positive feedback reinforces users' confidence in their communicative abilities,

especially on platforms such as WeChat, where rapid and frequent exchanges are common (Gao et al., 2022; Moring, 2021).

Third, the need for relatedness is fulfilled through the emotional and relational connections that Biaoqingbao foster. Biaoqingbao on WeChat often carry emotional nuances and anthropomorphic features, enabling users to establish intimacy, express empathy, and reinforce a sense of belonging in digital interactions. In contexts such as long-distance communication, these visual symbols can serve as meaningful substitutes for non-verbal emotional cues (Martela, 2020; Al-Aghbari, 2023).

Moreover, SDT's distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation provides insight into the variability in Biaoqingbao usage among Generation Z. Some users engage with these symbols for intrinsic reasons, such as the enjoyment or psychological satisfaction of expression. For instance, repurposing the skull symbol to convey "laughing to death" exemplifies their creative play with language and humour (Liu et al., 2024). Others are motivated extrinsically, for example, using Biaoqingbao to conform to social norms, improve interaction flow, or manage their online image (Uysal & Yildirim, 2016).

Overall, Biaoqingbao usage among Generation Z on WeChat goes beyond linguistic supplementation. It reflects deeper psychological needs within digital communication settings. SDT offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how visual language supports emotional expression, identity construction, and social connection in online environments.

3. Design and Implementation

This study aims to explore Generation Z's perceptions of Biaoqingbao, their motivations for using it on the WeChat platform, and its potential implications for self-expression, interpersonal communication, and digital identity. A qualitative research design was adopted, incorporating three main data collection methods: (1) participant observation, (2) semi-structured online interviews, and (3) focus group discussions. Drawing on the dynamics of internet culture, media technologies, and online communities, the study observed WeChat interactions, including private messages, group chats, and Moments posts. Relevant instances of Biaoqingbao usage were identified and analysed to form a preliminary observation report.

A total of nine active Biaoqingbao users were invited to participate in follow-up interviews and focus group discussions. To ensure analytical rigour, the study employed inductive thematic analysis as its core methodological approach. This allowed for the identification of recurring themes and patterns across the data, facilitating a deeper understanding of the psychological and social dynamics underpinning Biaoqingbao usage among Generation Z.

3.1 Participants

The researchers invited nine participants from mainland China. Upon agreeing to participate, everyone received a formal research package including the informed consent form, study

purpose statement, data collection plan, risk disclosure, procedural guidelines, and related materials. All participants signed the consent form and agreed to the research process. In addition, participants were asked to meet all the following criteria.

- All were born between 1995 and 2010.
- Must all have personal, real-name authenticated WeChat accounts.
- Must have prior experience in using Biaoqingbao, including favouriting, reposting, or creating customised stickers.
- They are willing to share their stories.

3.2 Data Collection

First, WeChat was selected as the primary research platform. A large volume of data was collected through online observation, including private conversations, group chats, and Moments posts. These were analysed to document how Generation Z uses Biaoqingbao across different interactional scenarios. Additionally, the researcher noted topics or controversies involving emoticons, as well as users' reactions and comments in those contexts.

Second, approximately nine active Generation Z WeChat users were invited to participate in semi-structured online interviews. This method allowed flexibility in tailoring questions based on individual responses, yielding richer and more comprehensive data. An interview guide was developed, focusing on participants' interpretations of specific Biaoqingbao, their preferred usage contexts, and associated emotional experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and prepared for further analysis.

Finally, after completing the observation and interviews, focus group discussions were conducted to examine participants' broader attitudes and perceptions regarding Biaoqingbao use. Each focus group included three participants, and three sessions were held. Each session lasted approximately 50 to 65 minutes, including a 10-minute break.

3.3 Data Analysis

After all the data had been collected in the data collection procedure, the researchers transcribed the verbal accounts, observational notes, and interview narratives into textual records for analysis. A grounded theory approach was adopted (Saldana, 2013; Tang & Dos Santos, 2017). The data were read and reread to identify connections, themes, and subthemes. Initial coding was conducted using open coding techniques to categorise the first layer of themes and subthemes. At this stage, theme boundaries remained fluid. Subsequently, axial coding was applied to refine the structure and develop a coherent thematic framework. Through this process, the study generated a set of secondary themes that captured the key patterns underlying Biaoqingbao use among Generation Z.

4. Findings and Discussion

Based on two focus group discussions and one month of participant observation, this study identified three key themes:

motivations and psychological background, social interaction and impression management, and cultural identity and belonging. These findings reveal the diverse motivations and behavioural patterns behind Generation Z's use of Biaoqingbao on WeChat. The themes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes and subthemes of the chapter

Themes and subthemes				
4.1 Motivation and Psychological Needs	Psychological	Background: Meeting	Basic	
4.2 Social Interaction and Impression Management		Building Identity and	Enhancing Engagement	
4.3 Cultural Identity and Belonging		Visual Language and Group	Connection	

4.1 Motivation and Psychological Background: Meeting Basic Psychological Needs

The behaviour of Generation Z in digital communication strongly reflects their pursuit of autonomy. Participants often viewed Biaoqingbao as a tool for personal expression. Some said they used it to show feelings that were hard to express in words, to avoid direct replies, or to soften awkward situations.

.....*When I don't want to reply directly, I just send GIFs to avoid the awkwardness..... (Participant #6, Focus Group, Male)*

This kind of selective expression shows users' control over how they communicate, which relates to the need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Customising or choosing specific Biaoqingbao also reflects Generation Z's desire to shape communication in their own way and express their digital identity.

The study also found that Biaoqingbao meanings are highly context dependent. For example, the "smiling face" emoji is often understood by Generation Z as the "death smile," used to express sarcasm, awkwardness, or frustration, not happiness. This supports previous research on the polysemy of emoji (Wu et al., 2024) and shows how Generation Z has reinterpreted visual language in their own way.

The feeling of competence also plays a role. Many participants said they could express subtle feelings more effectively by choosing the right Biaoqingbao and often received positive feedback. This helped boost their confidence in communication, which is important for fulfilling the need for competence (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

In terms of relatedness, Biaoqingbao help users connect emotionally with close social groups. For example, using custom stickers in group chats has become a kind of "private language" among friends. One said,

.....*We use cartoon stickers that we made ourselves. Outsiders wouldn't understand them, but we know exactly what they mean.....(Participant #1, Focus Group, Male)*

This reflects the need for relatedness, one of the three core psychological needs in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Overall, the motivations behind Generation Z's Biaoqingbao use are not just functional. They are closely tied to basic psychological needs. Biaoqingbao helps them express

themselves, feel competent in communication, and stay connected in social life.

4.2 Social Interaction and Impression Management: Building Identity and Enhancing Engagement

Biaoqingbao are used not only for emotional expression but also to make conversations more engaging and interactive. Most participants said Biaoqingbao made chats more fun and helped improve communication flow.

.....*In group chats, we often have sticker battles. It's more fun than talking.....(Participant #3, Focus Group, Male)*

This supports the idea of Biaoqingbao as social lubricants that improve the quality and frequency of digital interaction (Gao et al., 2022).

Beyond communication, Generation Z also uses Biaoqingbao for impression management and personal branding. Some participants mentioned collecting and customising sticker packs that reflect their identity. They use these in specific situations to shape how others know them.

.....*Most of my meme images are anime characters, so people know I'm an anime fan.....(Participant #7, Focus Group, Female)*

This shows that Biaoqingbao are no longer just for fun. They've become a symbolic tool for self-representation. Generation Z expresses their humour, culture, and personality through the emoticon they choose and how they use them.

4.3 Cultural Identity and Belonging: Visual Language and Group Connection

The popularity of Biaoqingbao also reflects Generation Z's search for cultural belonging. Many participants said they prefer stickers related to idols, influencers, or TV shows, because these help them connect with certain cultural groups. Such stickers often carry clear subcultural or regional meanings, providing a shared emotional language for their community.

Biaoqingbao also serve as a tool for forming in-groups. Using a popular sticker pack can signal inclusion while not using it might lead to social distance. This shows that visual language has social meaning. It's no longer just decorative, but a kind of cultural currency or symbolic capital in online interactions.

With platforms like WeChat offering features like custom sticker creation, Generation Z is no longer just consuming visual content. They are actively producing and sharing it. This gives them a stronger sense of participation and belonging. It also supports cultural identity and has a positive impact on their emotional well-being (Martela, 2020).

5. Conclusions

This study shows that the use of Biaoqingbao by Generation Z is driven not only by the need for emotional expression but also by a strong desire for autonomy. Participants showed clear preferences for selecting, customising, and even creating

their own Biaoqingbao. This behaviour supports the motivational theory proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000) and echoes the findings of Liu et al. (2023), who suggest that Generation Z uses visual language to express their digital identity.

In addition, within WeChat's high-frequency communication environment, Generation Z uses Biaoqingbao to build a sense of competence. Interview data shows that accurate use of Biaoqingbao can improve communication efficiency and interaction quality, which often results in positive feedback. This supports Gagné and Deci's (2005) theory that perceived competence enhances motivation and is also consistent with the findings of Gao et al. (2022) on the communicative value of emojis in Chinese social platforms.

The findings also reveal that Generation Z uses specific Biaoqingbao styles to strengthen emotional bonds with friends and peer groups. In private or closed group chats, Biaoqingbao often carry shared emotional meanings or inside jokes, helping to build intimacy and a sense of community. This is consistent with Martela's (2020) view that emotional connection is a core psychological need and builds upon Wu et al. (2024), who examined the cultural interpretations of emoji meanings.

Moreover, Biaoqingbao is no longer seen by Generation Z as a simple language tool. Instead, it has gained symbolic value, often functioning as an identity marker within subcultural groups. This supports the discussion of the cultural capital embedded in Biaoqingbao and provides new insight into how visual discourse operates in digital settings.

In summary, Generation Z's use of Biaoqingbao on WeChat reflects a combination of psychological motivation and social strategy. This behaviour includes dimensions of self-expression, social belonging, and cultural engagement. Using Self-Determination Theory as the analytical framework, this study highlights how Generation Z acts as self-motivated participants in digital interaction and how visual language serves as a meaningful social tool. Future research could explore how Biaoqingbao evolves across different cultures and platforms, deepening our understanding of visual communication among digital natives.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations, which also point to directions for future research.

First, the study focuses on a specific regional group of Generation Z, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Future studies should include participants from a wider range of geographical and cultural backgrounds to enhance external validity.

Second, this research only examines Biaoqingbao use within the WeChat platform. As new social media and communication tools continue to emerge, Generation Z's Biaoqingbao practices may evolve. Future research should explore how Biaoqingbao usage patterns vary across different platforms and how these changes influence social interaction. Third, qualitative methods may be subject to bias due to the

tools used for data collection. To address this, future research can adopt a more diverse set of methods and strengthen data triangulation to improve validity and reliability.

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