A Peircean Semiotic Analysis of Visual Language Replacement in TikTok Comment Sections

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the utilization of visual stickers as communicative instruments in TikTok comment sections, with particular focus on audience responses to a public figure's clarification video. Adopting a descriptive qualitative methodology, the research examines data collected from three TikTok videos published by Indonesian media outlets in November 2024. The analytical framework is established upon Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotic model alongside Danesi's theoretical perspective on visual language replacement in digital communication. Findings indicate that commenters predominantly select stickers conveying mockery and anger, thereby generating collective patterns of distrust and frustration regarding the video content. Sticker selection additionally operates as a social marker facilitating users' identity expression, whether projecting critical, humorous, or skeptical personas within the interaction. These visual components extend beyond mere emotional expression, serving to establish users' discursive positioning within the broader conversation. The study substantiates that TikTok stickers constitute multimodal semiotic resources that fundamentally influence how individuals articulate attitudes, formulate interpretations, and engage in digital platform interactions. This phenomenon represents a significant transition from text-based communication toward visually-mediated expression in contemporary online discourse.

Keywords: Digital Communication, Peirce, Semiotics, TikTok Stickers, Visual Signs

INTRODUCTION

Human as social beings interact with each other through language. When someone knows a language, they can speak and be understood by other who speaks the same language. As it is stated by Fromkin et al. (2014) that language is the source of human life and power. For human, language becomes crucial because it is a powerful way to communicate with others. Through language, individuals can convey thought, express emotion, negotiate meaning, and build social relationship. This enables social communication between one another. In conclusion, language plays an essential role in human interaction because it is allowing people to share ideas, express feeling and maintain meaningful relationship within community. Without language, social cooperation and communication would be impossible, highlighting its fundamental position in shaping human life and society

Nowadays, communication is no longer limited to direct face to face interaction, but also takes place indirectly through digital platform. The rapid expansion of digital communication

has transformed how people interact, express meaning and construct online identities. Taking a flashback when internet technology was first developed, humans communicated in simple way by using words in everyday language (Yumeina et al., 2024). In this stage, the digital communication still emphasized written language, which followed conventional norms of grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure. At that time, digital interaction still reflected offline linguistics practices, where words served as main medium conveying information. Over time, online communication began to shift toward more flexible and simplified forms that do not strictly follow traditional literacy standards.

Since social media, especially TikTok become popular space for people to interact. Rully et al. (2021) stated that one application that is currently widely used and dominated by the generation is TikTok. This digital platform provides a clear example of the shift. In current digitalization period, this platform replaced the use of word by visual means of communication. This phenomenon aligns with the broaden evolution of digital semiotics, where signs such as emojis, images, GIFs and memes function as meaningful communicative tools replacing language. The type of language used on social media makes it obvious that the previous rules of literacy have less and less value, evidenced, as we saw, by the fact that orthographic and grammatical perfection are no longer strict requirements for "proper communication" (Danesi, 2017). Thus, digital communication now often replaces words with picture, making visual signs become the main way people express meaning online.

The comment sections of TikTok platform become particularly evident of the shift of words to visual signs. Tiktok users increasingly replace written word with pictures or visual signs to express their reactions, attitudes or emotions toward the content. The picture functions not merely as decorative additions, but also as meaningful signs that carry specific communicative intention. As it is stated by Danesi (2017) that picture signs are made to resemble what they stand for. The widespread use of pictures rather than words raises important question about how meaning is constructed when language is replaced by visual signs.

This phenomenon is highly relevant to semiotics study, especially with the triadic model of Charles Sanders Pierce. Pierce's semiotic theory views signs as relationship between the representment, the object and the interpretant. According to Short (2007) Saussure is said to have had a dyadic conception of a sign, as consisting of a signifier and what is signified, whereas Peirce had a triadic conception, by the addition of an 'interpretant'. The interpretant is a response to the sign that the sign elicits and in which that sign is taken to be a sign of an object: it is this that accords the sign its significance. By applying Pierce's framework, the analysis can figure out how TikTok users interpret pictures as signs, how this sign represents particular meaning and how the users interpret the sign without linguistic text.

Some research focusing on visual symbol in digital communication have conducted by other researchers. While the research specifically examines semiotics function of TikTok comment pictures remains limited. Most studies on digital communication focus on the use of emoji, sticker, memes or multimodal discourse, while the semiotics analysis of visual language replacement in TikTok comments are still under explored. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by analyzing pictures in TikTok comment as visual signs through the theory of Pierce's semiotics.
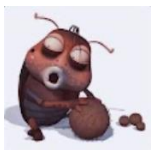
METHOD

To conduct this research, the researchers employ a descriptive qualitative method. This method was selected because this research does not measure numbers but it examines the meaning of signs that emerge in TikTok comment section Additionally, Creswell & Creswell (2018) explain that qualitative research is an approach for explaining and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human issue. In other words, this research focuses on understanding, explaining, and interpretation, not measurement.
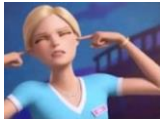
The source of data of this research is three media TikTok accounts such as, inilah.com, Jabar Express, and Retorika.com. Then, the data was taken from three clarification videos presented by Gus Elham. Inilah.com and Jabar Express account posted the video on November 13, 2025. Meanwhile, Retorika.com account was uploaded the video on November 14, 2025. According to Merriam & Tisdell (2016) the researcher is the primary instrument because he/she personally collects and analysis the data. The data were analyzed based on Charles Sanders Peirce's (1996) theory, and Danesi's (2017) theory.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter applies Peirce's Triadic Semiotic Theory (Peirce, 1931–1958) to visual stickers used in the comment section of Gus Elham's TikTok clarification video. The analysis is further supported by the theoretical frameworks of multimodality and visual language replacement as discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), Danesi (2017), and Crystal (2006). The following table presents the data display.

Table 1 Stickers Used in the Comment Section

Sticker	Representamen	Object	Interpretant
Sticker 1: cartoon bug	A cartoon bug hugging a ball with pale lip and tired posture.	Fatigue, emotional burden, exhaustion, fed up.	Represents viewers' emotional tiredness toward the controversy, the appearance of Gus Elham in the video look exactly like this cartoon bug mouth, and in this condition the researcher interpreted it as the imitating his situation.
	Two lip cream tubes held in a hand.	Beauty routines, readiness, performance, cover the real appearance.	Sarcastic stance signaling viewers being ready to watch the clarification video but before it they offer the lip cream to Gus Elham to cover

Sticker	Representamen	Object	Interpretant
Sticker 2: Lip Cream Products			his pale lip (that they think is faking by him).
Sticker 3: Broken Bricks	A pile of rubble and broken bricks.	Collapse, destruction, instability.	Symbolizes the perceived collapse of Gus Elham's argument or credibility, or even the worst they getting ready to away the broken bricks to him because they don't satisfy with his clarification statement.
Sticker 4: Girl Covering Ears	Animated girl plugging her ears.	Refusal, avoidance, annoyance.	Indicates dismissal or rejection to hear the clarification, the viewers are fed up and not satisfy with his clarification that's look like fake and no regret.
Sticker 5: cats gossiping something	Two cats side by side, one of them is covering the mouth with hand and whispering something to another cat (gossiping pose).	Avoidance, refusal, annoyance.	Represents viewers' emotional of fed up on this controversy by Gus Elham around the internet and start to gossiping and mocking of his statement in the clarification video.
Sticker 6: disbelief expression	Animation girl close her mouth and squint the eyes	Emotional burden, disbelief.	Disbelief stance signaling viewers the deep regret of his behavior that spread in internet video that doesn't make sense with his clarification and apology statement in that video.

Sticker	Representamen	Object	Interpretant
Sticker 7: sealed ear	Picture of sealed ear by a rubber band.	Refusal, avoidance, annoyance.	Indicates dismissal or rejection of the clarification, the viewers are fed up and start to avoid his voice with his clarification.
Sticker 8: Boy make mocking expression	Picture of a boy mocking someone.	Refusal, disbelief annoyance.	Indicates disbelief or rejection of the clarification, the viewers are start to make a joke around his unmake sense clarification statement.
Sticker 9: a guy with annoyed expression	A guy who looks at the back side of his body and make annoyed face.	Indescribable feeling, exhausted, mocking.	Represents viewers' emotional tiredness toward the controversy of Gus Elham that represented in many videos that with this sticker viewers show their disbelief of his apology and beliefs that he would do the same mistake again.
Sticker 2: girl make mocking face	a zoom in picture of the girl that make mocking face with pouting her lip	Refusal, avoidance, annoyance.	The viewer fed up and want to make this kind of face in front of Gus Elham's face and mocking his apology or clarification statement.

Source: Author's Analysis (2025)

The reactions shown through the pale-lipped insect, the brick-throwing symbol, and the girl covering her ears illustrate how TikTok users rely on visual signs rather than written comments when responding to Gus Elham's clarification. These stickers exaggerate emotional

cues such as sarcasm, anger, and rejection, allowing viewers to communicate feelings instantly. For example, the pale-lipped insect directly mocks Gus Elham's noticeably pale lips, while the brick icon represents the audience's anger and the urge to "throw bricks" as a form of symbolic punishment. By using these images, commenters avoid long explanations and instead deliver sharp emotional judgments with a single sticker. This shift reflects how digital users prefer fast and compressed communication, especially in controversial situations. Stickers offer simplicity and efficiency because they visually encode reactions that would normally require longer verbal statements. Bai et al. (2019) explain that emojis and similar visual icons function as clear emotional signifiers that users employ to express attitudes quickly and effectively in online spaces. This supports the idea that TikTok stickers function as visual shortcuts for articulating mockery, irritation, and frustration.

The stickers also help viewers build a shared emotional stance toward the clarification video. Many commenters used similar mocking, whispering-cat, and annoyed-expression stickers, creating a collective tone of disbelief and frustration. These repeated visual choices show that users are aligning themselves with the dominant interpretation of the controversy. In this sense, stickers do not only reflect individual reactions but actively shape group meaning-making. When many users select the same "mocking" or "fed-up" stickers, they reinforce the idea that Gus Elham's clarification lacks credibility. This shared usage forms a recognizable community reaction within the comment section. Zhou, Hentschel, and Kumar (2017) found that emojis and reaction images help online groups construct shared understanding and collective attitudes, especially in fast-paced comment-based interactions. This supports the interpretation that TikTok stickers guide users toward a unified emotional reading of the video.

In the comment section of Gus Elham's clarification video, TikTok users employ a diverse range of stickers that function as multimodal semiotic resources, each carrying layered meanings when examined through Peirce's triadic model. The sleepy bug sticker operates iconically as a shorthand for emotional exhaustion, visually encoding public fatigue. The lip cream sticker serves a metaphorical role, signaling sarcastic readiness to observe the unfolding drama. The broken-brick sticker indexes destruction, symbolizing the perceived collapse of the speaker's credibility. The animated girl covering her ears embodies symbolic and iconic refusal, representing rejection of the clarification. Finally, the screenshot of Gus Elham functions indexically, grounding the discourse in the source event while enabling commenters to emphasize perceived sincerity or insincerity. Collectively, these multimodal signs reaffirm Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) and Danesi's (2017) claims that contemporary digital interaction relies on visual language as a replacement for textual expression.

The sticker choices in the comment section also work as social signals that help users position themselves within the conversation. Instead of simply reacting to the video, commenters use certain stickers such as the whispering cat, the eye-rolling girl, or the sarcastic icons—to show the kind of persona or attitude they want to project to the audience. These stickers act as markers of irony, boldness, or skepticism, allowing users to express a social identity that fits the tone of the discussion. In this way, stickers do more than express emotions; they function as tools for users to align themselves with particular social roles, such as the sarcastic observer or the openly annoyed critic. Stark and Crawford (2015) note that reaction images often serve as affective cues that signal how users want to be perceived within digital interactions. This helps explain why certain stickers become popular in the comment section— they allow users to express a stance while also presenting a recognizable online identity.

The overall analysis indicates that TikTok commenters strategically employ stickers as condensed semiotic units that replace full verbal expressions. Through iconic resemblance,

indexical anchoring, and symbolic gestures, these stickers enable users to express psychological states, evaluative judgments, and stance-taking with high efficiency. This supports Crystal's (2006) notion of linguistic compression in digital communication, while illustrating how TikTok's multimodal affordances reshape meaning-making practices. The stickers not only reflect audience attitudes toward Gus Elham's clarification but also demonstrate the broader sociolinguistic shift toward visual language replacement in online discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that TikTok stickers in the comment section of Gus Elham's clarification video function as powerful visual signs that replace traditional written language in digital communication. Through Peirce's triadic semiotic model, the analysis shows that each sticker operates as a representamen connected to specific objects such as exhaustion, sarcasm, disbelief, or rejection and produces interpretants that guide viewers' understanding of the controversy. The commenters' reliance on visual symbols demonstrates a broader shift in digital communication, where meaning is often expressed more quickly and efficiently through images rather than words.

The findings also reveal that these stickers do more than convey individual emotions; they help shape collective interpretation and shared social attitudes toward the video. Users repeatedly select similar mocking or irritated stickers, forming recognizable patterns of disbelief and frustration. Additionally, sticker choices act as social signals, allowing individuals to project certain identities such as being sarcastic, critical, or skeptical within the online interaction. This supports the idea that TikTok's comment section is not only a space for emotional response but also a site for identity performance and community alignment.

Overall, this research shows that stickers in TikTok comments function as multimodal semiotic resources that reshape how people communicate, interpret, and participate in online discourse. Visual language has become a central tool for expressing attitudes, negotiating meaning, and constructing social relationships in digital environments. By examining these visual signs through semiotics, the study highlights the growing role of images in shaping communication practices and demonstrates how digital platforms encourage new forms of meaning-making that move beyond written language.

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