

## **An alternative way for young people to market themselves through personal branding in close relationships: Gender roles and emotions conveyed through nonverbal communication using LINE stickers**

**年輕人在親密關係中建構個人品牌之另類行銷自我：使用 LINE 貼圖之非語言溝通傳達性別角色與情感**

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**Abstract:** LINE is a mobile messaging app, and LINE stickers are increasingly providing a way for young people (particularly young couples) to market themselves through person branding and nonverbal communication, experience dynamic gender stereotypes, and develop close relationships. LINE communication has the potential to challenge traditional social roles and communication through personal branding processes. The aim of this study was to expand branding theory by applying social role theory (SRT) and nonverbal communication to personal branding. Methodologically, the research followed an interpretive phenomenological approach. The results of this study reveal that gender stereotypes may become fluid and malleable through nonverbal communication using LINE stickers, since they give both young males and females nontraditional opportunities to explore gender roles and emotions and develop close relationships. Importantly, this study provides a theoretical framework for structuring personal branding processes in emoticon-based environments. This paper explains the theoretical and practical implications of the research for both scholars and marketers, presents the limitations of the study and

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proposes avenues for future research.

**Keywords:** Close relationships, emotion, gender roles, LINE sticker, personal branding, nonverbal communication, social role theory.

**摘要：**LINE 是一款行動通訊軟體，LINE 貼圖提供給很多年輕人（尤其是年輕情侶）一種行銷自我的方式，藉由個人品牌建立、非語言溝通、體驗動態性別刻板印象，從而發展親密關係。在個人品牌發展中，LINE 具潛力挑戰傳統的社會角色和溝通方式。本研究的目的是在於透過將社會角色理論（SRT）和非語言溝通方式探索品牌理論拓展至個人品牌理論的可行性。在研究方法上，本研究遵循解釋現象學方法。整體研究結果顯示，透過使用 LINE 貼圖的非語言交流，性別刻板印象變得流動性且可塑性。因此，它為年輕男性和女性在親密關係發展中提供一種非傳統的機會來探索性別角色和情感。更重要的是，在圖像表情的環境中，本研究提出一個個人品牌流程理論框架。此外，全文也詮釋學術理論和行銷的實踐意義，同時，也提出研究的局限性，以及未來研究的途徑。

**關鍵詞：**親密關係、情感、性別角色、LINE 貼圖、個人品牌、非語言溝通、社會角色理論

## 1. Introduction

Undoubtedly [virtual] stickers are becoming more popular among new audiences ... Japan and the rest of Asia are willing to pay to express themselves beyond what words can already convey (Russell, 2013).



The secret language of LINE stickers. Picture retrieved from (Shu, 2015)

The above quotation and graphics convey the unprecedented and prevalent phenomenon of young people marketing themselves through personal branding using LINE mobile instant messaging (MIM) stickers to negotiate gender roles, express emotions/feelings, and establish interpersonal relationships, especially in Asian Pacific countries (Chen, 2020b, 2021b). Sticker use has led to new nonverbal communication styles/patterns and contributed to MIM companies' business success. According to sticker industry statistics (2024), the Asia Pacific region led the sticker market with a revenue share of more than 39% in 2020, and the global sticker market is expected to expand at a compound annual growth rate of 5.4% between 2021 and 2028. The first formalized sticker was introduced in Japan in 2011, and MIM companies have since continued to develop increasingly diverse styles of stickers, including animated stickers that feature moving characters, sound stickers that play voice or sound clips, and even customized stickers that allow users to manage their own personal brand characters (Chen, 2020b, 2021b). Over 8.55 million sticker sets have been purchased by users worldwide (LINE Company, 2020). For example, the LINE MIM app had 178 million active monthly users across its four key markets — Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand—in 2021 (Iqbal, 2024). LINE had 21 million registered Taiwanese users in 2019, each of which downloaded an average of 18 sets of stickers—twice as many as Japanese users (Huang and Xie, 2020). Due to the increase in LINE sticker usage, young users in Taiwan are now marketing themselves with MIM stickers to explore dynamic gender stereotypes and develop close relationships (Chen, 2021b), potentially challenging traditional social roles and communication styles/patterns in the personal branding process.

Although this novel aspect of personal branding (self-marketing) has been largely ignored until recently, it is a rapidly growing area of research. Three major gaps exist in the literature concerning personal branding. First, despite the diverse array of branding theories, there are large gaps between commercial and personal branding in MIM environments (Chen, 2021b; Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016). Emojis are increasingly being used for computer-mediated communication (CMC) and MIM branding and have been examined to understand what perceptions and

meanings of emojis extend to the brands themselves or foster brand loyalty between consumers and brands (Cavalheiro *et al.*, 2022; Das *et al.*, 2019; Hand *et al.*, 2022). However, little research has been conducted from the perspective of personal branding on young adults marketing themselves through personal branding to develop close relationships with partners. Second, a clear gender gap exists in research on personal branding when it comes to disclosing gender roles and communicating nonverbally using LINE stickers (or emojis) (Anglin *et al.*, 2018; Blom and Hewitt, 2020; Eagly *et al.*, 2020; Lesch *et al.*, 2023; Maurer *et al.*, 2024). In general, social role theory (SRT) and nonverbal communication theory (NVCT) have expanded our knowledge of gender gaps. SRT postulates that gender stereotypes in communication are partially the result of gender differences that align women with caregiving, communal roles, and men with wage-earning, agentic roles. Gender roles have been underexplored in recent research on nonverbal communication using LINE stickers. Young people may be expected to express gender-stereotypic expectations in their nonverbal communication with their partners that (perhaps unknowingly) conform to the previously mentioned stereotypes. However, Whitty and Carr (2006) argued that the digital/virtual world provides romantic couples with opportunities to practice roles that they do not or cannot adopt in offline contexts. Thus, gender stereotypes may be dynamic because they emerge from new forms of nonverbal communication in emoticon-based environments (e.g., LINE stickers; Russell, 2013). In other words, there is a need to explore how young people (especially young couples) disclose/present social roles and communicate with each other in emoticon-based environments. The third research gap concerns the methodologies used to explore how nonverbal communication styles/patterns influence young people's engagement in personal branding/self-marketing to demonstrate social roles and express emotions. Most previous relevant studies have used quantitative approaches (Blom and Hewitt, 2020; Eagly *et al.*, 2020; Gorbatov *et al.*, 2018; Johnson, 2019; Lesch *et al.*, 2023; Maurer *et al.*, 2024), but few qualitative studies have integrated personal branding with relevant theories (e.g., SRT and NVCT) to build a theoretical framework for this area of research.

To bridge these three research gaps, we focused on how young people (especially young couples) market themselves through personal branding to negotiate gender roles, nonverbally communicate using LINE stickers, and develop close relationships. Importantly, we combined personal branding theory with SRT and NVCT to explore this new phenomenon in emoticon-based environments based on the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do young females and males use gender roles to market themselves to their partners through personal branding using LINE stickers?

RQ2: What do young couples express and communicate (apart from words) in emoticon-based environments to develop close relationships?

The article continues with a discussion of the theoretical framework based on a systematic review of the relevant literature on personal branding, SRT, and NVCT. Following the theoretical framework, we describe the qualitative methods used for this study, including the data collection and analysis. Third, we interpret and discuss the research findings. Subsequently, we present the conclusion and implications of this study for both academia and practicality. Finally, we highlight the limitations of the research and avenues for future studies on this topic.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Personal branding**

The concept of personal branding has been of great academic and practical interest for several decades (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 2013; Kotler and Armstrong, 2012; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). However, in recent years, social media and MIM have created a digital/virtual world that provides leaders, celebrities, and even ordinary users with personal branding opportunities (Chen, 2013, 2016a, 2021a, 2021b; Khedher, 2015). Theoretically, personal branding has evolved from commercial branding and follows the same principles (Khedher, 2019). Thus, a review of the academic literature on brands and branding provides a starting point for understanding the principles and practices of personal branding (Scheidt *et al.*, 2020). Previous studies on this topic have been conducted from multiple

perspectives. Aaker (1991) argued that brands are intended to support consumers' decision-making processes by reflecting the quality of products. Aaker (1997) subsequently stressed the importance of brand personality and "the human characteristics associated with a brand" (p. 347). Additionally, Kapferer (2004) characterized brands as collections of consumer experiences. Biel (1997, cited in Fill, 2005) claimed that a strong brand is constructed based on three main pillars: brand skills, brand personality, and brand relationships. These practices and principles can be applied to personal branding on diverse social media platforms.

The significant attention paid to personal branding in recent decades has led to an increase in academic studies on this widespread, albeit fragmentary, contemporary phenomenon. Drawing on the body of branding literature, Wright (2009) stated that "personal branding involves managing your reputation, style, look, attitude, and skill set the same way that a marketing team would run the brand for a bag of Doritos or bottle of shampoo" (p. 6). Manai and Holmlund (2015) argued that one of the most important aspects of personal branding is knowing how to market a personality in a manner that appeals to the intended audience. Moreover, many researchers and marketers have examined the strategic use of social media to build strong personal brand relationships (Gorbatov *et al.*, 2018; Johnson, 2019; Labrecque *et al.*, 2011; Thompson-Whiteside *et al.*, 2018). Online information and symbols (in this study, LINE stickers) establish digital footprints that implicitly market individuals (Smith, 2018). Wilson and Blumenthal (2008) showed that it is critical to establish a personal brand that includes the individual's background, philosophy, lifestyle, and passions. Brooks and Anumudu (2016) emphasized that personal branding occurs through people's interactions, such as marketing strategies and the fostering of first impressions. Social media has enabled individuals to create personal "profiles" on various sites and social media apps through which they can construct and present themselves to audiences (Holt, 2016), which can be understood as a way for individuals to build their identities and images through personal branding (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, Chen (2016a) explained that personal branding on YouTube follows a three-stage process: 1) constructing a digital self, 2) adopting digital self-presentation

strategies to attract attention, and 3) building parasocial relationships through digital self-impression management. Similarly, Kucharska and Confente (2017) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on personal branding, including the use of social media as a personal branding strategy, focusing on the relationship between selfies and personal branding.

Accordingly, several theoretical personal branding frameworks have been developed, some of which have been based on empirical studies (Chen, 2021a; Thompson-Whiteside *et al.*, 2018) and conceptual research (Khedher, 2019). However, a comprehensive framework for personal branding and sustainable theory is lacking in the academic literature. Shepherd (2005) argued that extending traditional branding theories to personal branding is challenging. In the present study, we followed Shepherd (2005) and adopted a multidisciplinary approach that combined sociological theories (e.g., SRT and NVCT) with branding theories to explore the novel phenomenon of this emoticon personal branding research area.

## **2.2 Social role theory (SRT)**

A systematic review of the extant research on personal issues (i.e., leadership, relationships, etc.) and personal job management showed that SRT (see Table 1) is a powerful framework for exploring how gender roles and expectations influence women's and men's nonverbal communication in personal branding or interpersonal relationships (Anglin *et al.*, 2018; Blom and Hewitt, 2020; Eagly, 1987; Eagly *et al.*, 2020; Lesch *et al.*, 2023; Maurer *et al.*, 2024; Roethlisberger *et al.*, 2023; Senden *et al.*, 2019). In particular, SRT is useful for examining the different social roles of women and men seeking long-term partners (Eagly, 2009). Eastwick *et al.* (2006) noted:

Within the conventional family system based on a male provider and a female homemaker, women can maximize their outcomes by seeking a mate who is likely to be successful in the wage-earning role—in short, a good provider. In turn, men can maximize their outcomes by seeking a mate who is likely to be successful in the domestic role—in short, a good homemaker and child caretaker who will allow men to devote their attention to work outside the home. (p. 604)

**Table 1**  
**Current literature on SRT**

<b>Pattern</b>	<b>Advocator</b>	<b>Arguments/Statements</b>
SRT	Bosak <i>et al.</i> (2017) Senden <i>et al.</i> (2019) Vogel <i>et al.</i> (2003)	Dynamic gender stereotypes: The female stereotype increased in agentic traits, whereas the male stereotype showed no change in either agentic or communal traits.
SRT	Cuddy <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Men as a cultural ideal: Cultural values moderate gender stereotype content
SRT	Anglin <i>et al.</i> (2018); Gupta <i>et al.</i> (2019) Maurer <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Gender roles are the fit between personality and that of the stereotypical entrepreneurial personality profile regarding different forms of entrepreneurship.
SRT	Blom and Hewitt (2020)	Becoming a female-breadwinner household: Changes in relationship satisfaction
SRT	Perez-Quintana <i>et al.</i> (2017)	The influence of sex and gender-role orientation in the decision to become an entrepreneur
SRT	Schmitt <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Personality and gender differences from a global perspective
SRT	Onozaka and Hafzi (2019)	Household production in an egalitarian society
SRT	He and Zhou (2018)	Gender difference in early occupational attainment: The roles of study field, gender norms, and gender attitudes
SRT	Duxbury <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Role overload and stress in a multi-role environment: Developing reciprocal relationships during young adulthood.
SRT Role congruity theory	Lesch <i>et al.</i> (2023)	In the social sport sciences, women are perceived as a better fit for the role of an academic than men.
SRT	Zhao <i>et al.</i> (2015)	People can play multiple social roles, and each social role serves to fulfill different duties.
SRT	Goncalves <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Women's financial well-being can be assigned to three categories at the individual, household, community, and societal levels.
SRT Uses & Gratifications	Jansz <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Gender differences in motivation for playing the Sims2.
SRT Personality	Roethlisberger <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Personality traits and social norms are operationalized to address the gender wage



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traits		gap.
Social norms		
SRT	Kaur <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Gender stereotypes of male nurses can be examined using an SRT framework and a stereotype content model.
Role congruity theory		
SRT	Koenig and Eagly (2019)	Typical roles and intergroup relations shape stereotypes.
SRT	Hoyt <i>et al.</i> (2013) Johnson <i>et al.</i> (2008) Mistry <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Leadership barriers exist for female leaders.
SRT	Schneider and Bos (2019)	Gender stereotypes exist in politics.
SRT	Woods <i>et al.</i> (2024)	SRT can be used to predict how the gender and ethnicity of aviation job candidates affect perceived job classifications.

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These social roles create gender stereotypes regarding competence, fitness for certain roles, and the development of (close) relationships (Babic and Hansez, 2021; Cohen *et al.*, 2020). These social roles also result in gendered expectations about appropriate behaviors and communication styles for men and women (Babic and Hansez, 2021; Cohen *et al.*, 2020; Eagly, 1987; Eagly *et al.*, 2020). Theoretically, agency and communion are core dimensions of gender stereotypes. Some researchers have investigated masculinity and femininity (Abele, 2003; Diekmann and Eagly, 2000; Rucker *et al.*, 2018) and identified the most common respective components as agency and the communion (Eagly *et al.*, 2020; Haines *et al.*, 2016; Hentschel *et al.*, 2019; Sczesny *et al.*, 2019). Agency is associated with masculine characteristics and communion with feminine characteristics (Abele and Wojciszke, 2014; Babic and Hansez, 2021). Hence, men are typically expected to have more agentic (e.g., assertive, controlling, independent, and unemotional) communication styles, while women are expected to have more communal communication styles and be oriented toward interpersonal relationships (e.g., interpersonally sensitive, empathetic, caring, or emotionally expressive) (Babic and Hansez, 2021; Cohen *et al.*, 2020; Haines *et al.*, 2016;

Meeussen *et al.*, 2020). Thus, such distinct traits are labeled agency and communion (Eagly *et al.*, 2020; Lesch *et al.*, 2023; Sczesny *et al.*, 2019; Schmitt *et al.*, 2017), with agency being a masculine stereotype and communion being a female stereotype. Such social stereotypes make it difficult for individuals to break free from their expected roles and communication styles (Elkhwesky *et al.*, 2022).

However, recent literature on dynamic stereotypes has shown that participants perceive a typical woman today as more agentic than a typical woman in earlier times (Bosak *et al.*, 2017; Diekman and Eagly, 2000; Diekman and Goodfriend, 2006; Diekman *et al.*, 2005; Garcia-Retamero *et al.*, 2011; Senden *et al.*, 2019; Wilde and Diekman, 2005). Hence, new nonverbal communication styles/patterns are providing opportunities for young people to adopt alternative social roles when developing close relationships.

### **2.3 Nonverbal communication and close relationships**

Today, nonverbal communication is omnipresent in physical and virtual/digital environments (Burgoon *et al.*, 2016). Marketing scholars have provided substantial support for the effectiveness of nonverbal communication in personal branding or personal selling on social media (Chen, 2021a, 2021b, 2023; Pauser and Wagner, 2019; Stewart *et al.*, 1987). In general, nonverbal communication is defined as any communication that is not expressed with words (Leigh and Summers, 2002). In face-to face interactions, nonverbal communication is “how we say things with our body postures and movements, facial expressions, gestures, touching, eye contact, use of space, and so on” (Henley, 1977, p. 2). Hall (2003) described nonverbal communication as “the study of behaviors other than words that create shared meaning between people who are interacting with one another” (cited in Tanenbaum *et al.*, 2014, p. 11). Burluson (2003) defined it as “any kind of expression, (digital/virtual graphic) gesture or symbolic behavior that is either intended to convey meaning or happens to convey meaning” (cited in Tanenbaum *et al.*, 2014, p. 11). In this sense, nonverbal cues are used for almost all communication purposes (Johnson, 2015), and they can be enlisted to create a favorable impression during a conversation

(Chen, 2020a). Burgoon *et al.* (1989) suggested that “successful human relations hinge on the ability to express oneself nonverbally and to understand the nonverbal communication of others” (p. 3). First introduced as a way to provide nonverbal expression in CMC, online visual communicative elements are termed “graphics” (graphic icons) and include emoticons, emojis, stickers, images, and videos (De Seta, 2018; Herring and Dainas, 2017; Murphy, 2017; Sampietro, 2020). In a graphic/emoticon-based environment, the LINE app integrates multiple print-linguistic and nonlinguistic forms of digital/virtual aesthetic representation.

According to a systematic review of current studies on the functions of graphics in nonverbal communication (see Table 2), emojis (or stickers) are used to express emotions and feelings to convey or intensify the tone and intent of written messages and to provide context that can clarify meaning and reduce ambiguity (Boutet *et al.*, 2024; Chen, 2021b; Das *et al.*, 2019; Erle *et al.*, 2022; Hand *et al.*, 2022; Herring and Dainas, 2020; McShane *et al.*, 2021; Yu and Zhao, 2022). Like other forms of nonverbal communication, graphics (e.g., emojis or stickers) can facilitate social interactions, help regulate relationships, and enable users to meet their emotional and social needs (Boutet *et al.*, 2024; Jack and Schyns, 2015; Kim *et al.*, 2022). Utz (2000) found that multiuser dungeon and dragons players used increasing numbers of emoticons over time and that using emoticons positively correlated with the development of online friendships. Kelly and Watts (2015) explored people’s use of “appropriate” emojis to present digital identities and express emotions to maintain connections with others. Their findings showed that an emoji was considered a playful element of communication and a way to create “shared uniqueness.” Since many romantic connections are initiated via CMC, graphics (e.g., emojis) may be useful tools for creating elementary units of intimacy between partners wishing to develop close relationships (Boutet *et al.*, 2023; Kim *et al.*, 2022).

Another body of research has highlighted less biased information regarding gender differences in nonverbal communication styles/patterns and their contribution to gender attribution and/or perceived masculinity or femininity in the development of (close) relationships (Chen, 2021c; Hardy *et al.*, 2019). To

**Table 2**  
**Current literature on NVCT**

<b>Pattern</b>	<b>Advocator</b>	<b>Arguments</b>
Nonverbal communication Personal selling	Pauser and Wagner (2019)	The dynamic nonverbal cues of technology assistants are influenced by a salesperson's characteristics.
Nonverbal communication	Bonaccio <i>et al.</i> (2016); Gkorezis <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Nonverbal communication embodies gender differences in power cues in organizational settings.
Nonverbal cues Regulatory-fit theory	Cesario and Higgins (2008)	The nonverbal cues of a message source sustain the motivational orientation of the recipient, the recipient experiences a regulatory fit that feels right, and this experience influences the message's effectiveness.
Nonverbal communication Gender differences	Hardy <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Voice and nonverbal communication reflect perceived masculinity and femininity.
Nonverbal communication Emotional support	Abbas and Khan (2023)	Nonverbal communication and affectivity can help develop relationships.
Nonverbal communication Affect theory	Gesselman <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Emoji can be seen as affective signals for relationship development and communication
Nonverbal communication	Das <i>et al.</i> (2019) McShane <i>et al.</i> (2021) Yu and Zhao (2024)	Emojis can enhance chatbot interactions and heighten chatbot's perceived warmth.
Nonverbal communication	Boutet <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Incorporating visual cues from facial expressions into emojis can reduce ambiguous interpretation.
Nonverbal communication	Erle <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Emojis function as social information in digital communication.
Nonverbal communication	Hand <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Interactions between text content and emoji types can determine messagers' and senders' perceptions.
Nonverbal communication	Herring and Dainas (2020)	Gender and age can influence the interpretation of emojis.
Nonverbal communication	Kim <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Emoji can be seen as catalysts for relationship building.
Visual	Sampietro (2020)	The meaning of emojis in electronic-

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communication		mediated communication can be interpreted by people.
Nonverbal communication	Cavalheiro <i>et al.</i> (2020)	The use of emojis can influence perceived brand meanings in different brand–consumer communication contexts.
Brand perceptions		

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explain the differences in verbal or nonverbal communication styles/patterns between men and women, scholars have relied on two broad theoretical perspectives. First, the socialization/expectations perspective suggests that men and women develop different norms for their (nonverbal) communication through stereotypes and experiences (Tannen, 1990). For example, women are better at sending and decoding nonverbal cues, are better at expressing certain emotions, and are more concerned about maintaining intimacy in their close relationships than men (Chen, 2021b; Haines *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, men are better at controlling their nonverbal expressions, are more instrumental or individual-oriented, and are more concerned about maintaining autonomy in their close relationships than women (Chen, 2021b). Tannen (1990) claimed that men’s need for independence causes them to communicate their feelings nonverbally less often than women. In contrast, when women voice their emotions and problems to their romantic partners, they seek validation and intimacy.

Second, the structuralist perspective posits that men and women communicate differently because of the different opportunities linked to their distinct stratified social roles (Henley, 1977). According to SRT, Buss and Schmitt (1993) explained that women are focused on—and, in fact, depend on—relationship with partners; hence, they are much more inclined than men to tell their partners how they feel to develop or maintain the strength of their relationships. Men, on the other hand, are far less relationship-oriented because of their biological need to impregnate as many women as possible; thus, they prefer independence marked by emotional reserve (Briton and Hall, 1995). In addition, nonverbal communication regarding emotional vulnerability causes people involved in close relationships to adhere to gender roles—a behavioral strategy that ultimately causes women and men to communicate consistently according to

gender stereotypes (Chen, 2020a, 2021b). Gender roles are normative expectations that people learn at an early age. They represent consensually shared beliefs, manifest themselves across a wide variety of contexts, and are socially sanctioned (Eagly *et al.*, 2000). Consequently, normative expectations guide people's nonverbal communication styles/patterns when they encounter emotionally aversive, difficult, or ambiguous situations.

Gender stereotypes in the physical and digital/virtual worlds tend to be based on gender role differences and expectations in communication. A society (e.g., Taiwan) will have specific expectations of women and men that construct feminine and masculine roles, respectively. However, in emoticon-based environments, such as the LINE app, stickers foster playfulness and imagination (Chen, 2020a; Johnson, 2015), enabling young adults to nonverbally communicate “what can be.” LINE sticker may serve as masks or function as interfaces while allowing young adults/couples to play certain roles and market themselves by adopting alternative styles of nonverbal communication, thus exploring what they want to be.

### **3. Research methods**

The methodological approach for this research followed a combination of the qualitative principles (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and interpretive phenomenology (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). We employed netnographic fieldwork to maintain naturalism in the research (Kozinets, 1998). Only two young people (e.g., romantic partners) can post stickers and exchange emotions and opinions about close relationships in the private space of LINE. To overcome this barrier, we conducted inductive theory building by triangulating users' personal diary reports, long interviews, and participatory observations.

#### **3.1 Recruitment of study participants**

Due to privacy concerns, the LINE Company could not disclose personal information, which limited our access to young people. Thus, we first adopted a “posting” and “snowballing” strategy to recruit volunteer participants in many of LINE's chat groups and to reach friends of friends who might be interested in

**Table 3**  
**Participants' profiles**

<b>Female</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years in a close relationship</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years in a close relationship</b>
<i>Belle</i>	22	3	<i>Will</i>	23	3
<i>Carol</i>	21	1.8	<i>Victor</i>	20	1
<i>Becky</i>	22	3	<i>Ted</i>	21	2
<i>Diane</i>	20	1.5	<i>Peter</i>	21	2.5
<i>Irene</i>	21	2	<i>Oscar</i>	21	1
<i>Olivia</i>	21	1.7	<i>Eric</i>	21	2
<i>Sally</i>	20	0.5	<i>Albert</i>	20	0.5
<i>Rene</i>	21	1.5	<i>Duncan</i>	22	2.5
<i>Angela</i>	21	1	<i>Clark</i>	21	1
<i>Dolly</i>	23	2.2	<i>Howard</i>	22	2.3
<i>Ellie</i>	21	1	<i>Jesper</i>	21	1.5
<i>Gloria</i>	20	0.5	<i>Sean</i>	23	2
<i>Gene</i>	21	1	<i>John</i>	22	1.5
<i>Janet</i>	21	2	<i>Geoffrey</i>	23	2
<i>Hilary</i>	21	1.4	<i>Otto</i>	22	1
<i>Tina</i>	21	2.5	<i>Darren</i>	23	1
<i>Winnie</i>	22	2			

participating in the study. Using snowball sampling, we gained access to a population of 33 young Taiwanese females and males who had boyfriends or girlfriends. They had also bought at least four packs of LINE stickers during the research period from January 2015 to June 2017 and had communicated with their significant partners daily via LINE sticker conversations for more than two years. These individuals were recruited for the study. The 17 female and 16 male participants were aged 20–23. Table 3 lists the participants' profiles.

### **3.2 Data collection**

We collected data over a period of two years and six months, from January 2015 to June 2017, using diary reports, long interviews, and online and offline participatory observations. The author and four young Taiwanese research assistants (2 males and 2 females) collected the primary data. They had real LINE interactive experiences with their friends in daily life and were familiar with the social gender norms and the language of the country. This configuration enabled

our interpretations to benefit from diverse perspectives and varying levels of familiarity with the LINE sticker context.

The study included two research stages. In the first stage, data collection consisted primarily of a netnographic approach that involved immersion in the context through online observations of the participants' diary reports and the LINE sticker interactions the research assistants could access. All participants were asked to complete diary reports from January 2015 to December 2016. These were then recorded using memos, and mutual interactions using text and sticker exchanges were examined to capture some of the visual richness. The participants emailed their daily mutual text interactions, posting sticker documents and personal diaries to the researchers weekly. This process also solved the problem of locked private chat zones. The posting stickers generated a great deal of interest, and we were contacted by all participants who agreed to be observed and interviewed about their experiences. Diary data were gathered during the research period for general descriptive purposes, and they provided a source of field notes that were then used to offer a useful orientation knowledge of nonverbal communication styles during the analysis.

The second stage involved long interviews and physical offline participatory observations to develop an account of the participants' "live" LINE experiences. This stage of the research lasted 18 months, from January 2016 to June 2017. The emphasis was on exploring each individual's thoughts, feelings, and interpretations regarding nonverbal communication practices from their own perspective via their stories about their LINE sticker usage in various romantic LINE conversation contexts. In the first stage, the researcher and research assistants conducted background research, collecting a wide range of LINE stickers to familiarize themselves with the participants' nonverbal communication via LINE sticker terminology, customs, and etiquette and to build rapport through shared understanding. Later, long interviews were conducted using McCracken's (1988) long interview procedure. All 33 interviews were tape-recorded and consisted of one-on-one two-to-three hour dialogues between the researcher and individual participants.



### **3.3 Data analysis**

For interpretive phenomenology, this research followed the guidelines suggested by Thompson and Haytko (1997). Although the researcher had predefined a set of questions, there was no predetermined format for interviews. The interview questions were shaped by the participants' specific responses. The primary idea behind the interviews, to quote Thompson and Haytko (1997), was to "allow each participant to articulate the network of meanings that constituted his/her personalized understanding of [nonverbal communication using LINE stickers] phenomena" (p. 19). Furthermore, the interpretive process began primarily with textual data. The process of coding is central to any textual data analysis. Coding involves breaking down data into discrete parts and then examining, conceptualizing, and reconfiguring these parts into new forms. The three stages of coding (open, axial, and selective) progressed from elemental categories and properties to a high level of abstraction in the form of a storyline. Meanwhile, the researcher independently reread the data to discover relationships between the codes and condense the codes into themes. The research team members compared their findings until they agreed on the emergent themes that best captured the participants' lived experiences. In developing and recording our interpretations, we alternated between the literature and the data as well as between the parts of each transcript and the entire body of transcripts.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

In general, our data showed that most participants sought to accommodate normative expectations of gender roles by adopting specific styles of nonverbal communication when using LINE stickers to develop close relationships. However, the results also revealed that gender stereotypes seemed to be fluid and malleable in nonverbal communication using LINE stickers, since both young males and females played with and explored gender roles and emotions in nontraditional ways. Conceptually expanding the above phenomena and positioning personal branding within an emoticon-based environment, the data analyses showed that

personal brands were constructed through four factors: personal brand identity, personal brand skills, personal brand image, and personal brand relationships.

#### **4.1 Personal brand identity: Playing with gender roles via LINE stickers**

In the initial stage of the personal branding process, LINE stickers permitted young couples to step outside of constricting gender stereotypes and normative gender roles to nonverbally communicate and develop close relationships in an unfettered manner (Chen, 2021a, 2021b; Whitty and Carr, 2006). However, in an emoticon-based world, gender stereotypes can simply be reinforced without inevitable consequences. The findings revealed that traditional gender stereotypes were mostly adhered to by the young female participants, who took the normative expectations of gender for granted. For those who espoused a traditional gender ideology, traditional attitudes and beliefs strongly guided their nonverbal communication using LINE stickers, and they tended to assume communal roles when establishing close relationships (Babic and Hansez, 2021; Cohen *et al.*, 2020; Haines *et al.*, 2016; Meeussen *et al.*, 2020). As Angela stated, she preferred to act “a little womanly” and did not dare express her own opinions to her boyfriend (or ex-boyfriends), even via LINE stickers communication.

	<p><i>In my communication using LINE stickers, you understand that I try to act “a little womanly” in front of my boyfriend. For example, I deliberately post cute rabbit stickers, and I seldom reply to him with weird stickers. As in real life, I act a little womanly and pretend to be cute when I chat with him. I am afraid to make him angry or fight with him. To be honest, my attitudes toward most of my ex-boyfriends were gentle, too. In romantic relationships, I am a little woman and do not have my own opinions. (Angela, female, age 21)</i></p>
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Our data showed that gender influenced nonverbal displays of power for each

sex and the extent to which having power also influenced young people's nonverbal behavior (Chen, 2021c; Hardy *et al.*, 2019). In traditional Taiwanese close relationships, females have a lower status. Women have been taught that they should subordinate their own needs to those of their lovers and never express their own opinions (Chen, 2016b). In Dolly's case, not only did she fulfill the traditional feminine role in nonverbal communication using LINE stickers, but her boyfriend also actively demonstrated his masculine power to dominate their intimate relationship development. The main reason for this was that nonverbal communication consistent with normative expectations was less risky than nontraditional nonverbal communication. Consequently, the gender roles performed by individual women and men shaped their nonverbal communication styles via LINE stickers over time (Eagly *et al.*, 2020).

<p>情侶逛月老廟會分手 哦 下午5:05</p> <p>哈哈哈哈哈 下午5:05</p> <p>已讀 下午5:06 哈哈哈哈哈</p> <p>已讀 下午5:06 那你不要帶我去月老廟</p> <p>已讀 下午5:06</p> <p>哪天你惹我我就綁著 你去 下午5:06</p>	<p><i>For most things, I rely on my boyfriend's thoughts and decisions. For example, when chatting with him through the LINE app, I told him that a friend of mine went to the Xia-Hai God (Chinese Cupid) Temple [a famous temple for the God of Love in Taiwan]. My boyfriend said that they would break up after visiting this temple, according to a superstition. I immediately asked him not to take me to this temple and then posted a crying and hugging sticker to him. I tried to act like a weak girl who needed to be protected by him. He was happy to show his male side and said, "I will kidnap you and make you go with me if you make me angry one day." (Dolly, female, age 23)</i></p>
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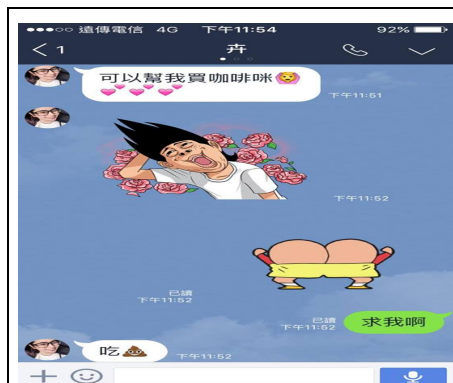
It is worth noting that men in Taiwanese society hesitate to disclose their feminine characteristics in public because they are afraid of being teased and labeled a "sissy" or "girlie." In this study, young male participants asserted their masculinity and their own thoughts about daily life. When managing their close relationships in the LINE app, they tried to "reform their [virtual] daily life practices and alter their characters" to fulfill gender roles using LINE stickers

(Giddens, 1990, p. 38). However, they also knowingly sought to take “the road not taken ... the one less traveled” regarding their past experiences (Giddens, 1990, p. 38). Their desire to play a vivid role using LINE stickers drove them to deviate from gender stereotypic practices by devising alternative stickers (Chen, 2020a; Kelly and Watts, 2015). The findings confirmed that they adapted their personal brand identities to market their personalities in a positive manner that would appeal to their partners in close relationships (Manai and Holmlund, 2015). For example, Jesper found that his own romantic behaviors were limited by gender stereotypes in real life. He enjoyed playing a communal role in the LINE environment, using cute warm stickers to form his alternative personal brand identity and reveal his implicit feminine characteristics (e.g., sensitivity to his girlfriend’s thoughts), although there were few opportunities to do this in real life.

	<p><i>In real life, I tried to say sweet words to my girlfriend, but if I played a masculine role, I failed to do so. When we use LINE communications, graphic stickers help me flirt with my girlfriend. For example, she told me that she liked eating sweets, but she worried about gaining weight. My mission was to tell her through lovely stickers that her body was thin enough to enjoy such sweets. Furthermore, I showed that I don't mind what size she is by posting an animal with a lot of love hearts to show that I love her very much. To be honest, I do not dare to show such lovely manners to anyone except her in LINE.</i></p> <p><i>(Jesper, male, age 21)</i></p>
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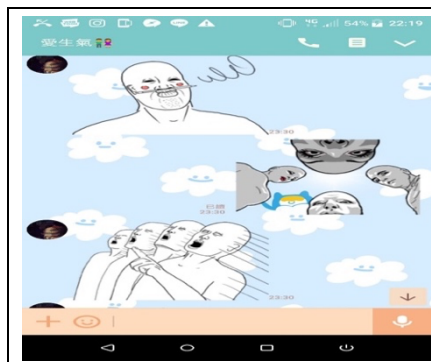
Gender roles seemed to be fluid in nonverbal communication using LINE stickers, since both young males and females acknowledged the opportunity to be imaginative in LINE’s romantic space (Babic and Hansez, 2021; Cohen *et al.*, 2020; Johnson, 2015). LINE allowed them to enjoy a fantasy, explore what stickers could offer, and try out alternative roles (Chen, 2020a). It also helped create an “upward spiral” of relational well-being between the members of a dyad. In

contrast to traditional, more formal ways of acting out gender roles in other relationships, Will offered an interesting example of young couples enjoyed playing alternative roles by exchanging ludic stickers to disclose the naughtiness or humorousness of their personalities while maintaining close relationships.




*In real life, I am not humorous and am always concerned about saving face, but in LINE, I feel carefree enough to chat with my girlfriend and express humor by posting naughty stickers to create joy. For example, I tried to act like a spoiled kid with my girlfriend once. I sent her a sticker with a lot of “love kisses” to show her, “I miss you.” Interestingly, she replied to me with masculine behavior, showing a naked hip sticker. Ha ha ... How naughty she is! (Will, male, age 23)*

In the personal branding process using LINE stickers, play provided “a toy situation” that allowed young couples to reveal and commit themselves “in its unreality” (Turkle, 1995, p. 184). They actively created aesthetic selves and played alternative roles through nonverbal communication. Young couples visualized themselves and their gender roles according to imaginary possibilities. Meanwhile, they added playful stickers to create “shared meanings” and connect with their partners (Kelly and Watts, 2015). In other words, they learned not only to play alternative roles but also to agree on the shared meanings of some symbols (Tanenbaum *et al.*, 2014). As Tina mentioned:



*When I feel bored, I like sending a lot of weird stickers to my boyfriend. He replies to me with weird stickers, too. ... In real life, I am not known as a cute or sweet girl, but my parents want me to be so. ... In LINE communications, there is no need for me to act like a buddy with my boyfriend. I think that is an alternative to me playing a “cute” role with my boyfriend. These stickers are useful for allowing us to share meanings between us. (Tina, female, age 21)*

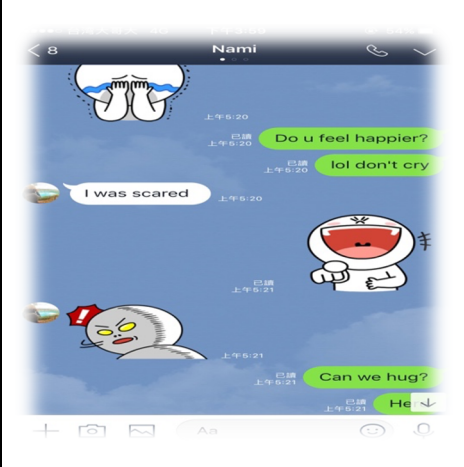
Playfulness in LINE sticker interactions does not necessarily threaten gender roles because a protective boundary between the virtual/digital and real worlds has been established. Young couples understand (or accept) that the virtual/digital world is a “game” or “only playing.” As Geoffrey explained, LINE stickers provide young couples with “the opportunity to abandon the confines of a limiting self” (Burnett and Marshall, 2003, p. 63), escape from traditional gender stereotypes, and adopt fantasy gender roles without feeling threatened (Babic and Hansez, 2021; Chen, 2020a; Cohen *et al.*, 2020). This may include changing aspects of the real-life self and creating an illusory ideal personal brand identity.

	<p><i>When I chat with my girlfriend in LINE communications, it sometimes looks like we are buddies fighting with each other. There is a certain chemistry between us. We are often sarcastic or flirt a lot through the feminine style of stickers. For example, she yelled at me, “You’re stupid.” I subsequently posted an “upside down animal” and an ancient woman figure with sarcastic Chinese “I can’t see you” stickers to her. I do not dare to use such a female tone with other friends. I must maintain a certain role in the minds of my friends, but my girlfriend and I allow each other to “play” in LINE communications. (Geoffrey, male, age 23)</i></p>
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## 4.2 Personal brand skills: Playing and sharing emotions with LINE stickers

The results further showed that personal brand skills were necessary in the second stage of the personal branding process using LINE stickers for enabling young people to play or share emotions via nonverbal communication. They helped our participants maintain relationships. Young partners moved beyond the initial stage of communicating emotions and providing social or emotional support (Abbas and Khan, 2023). Ted (male, age 21) proclaimed, “I seldom display sadness in public and rarely share it with even parents and friends in LINE

interactions.” Even in close relationships, men have been trained to control their own emotions to show their dominance (Chen, 2020a; Schmid *et al.*, 2011). For example, Otto was happy to dominate everything and even made a joke to his girlfriend in real life using stickers in LINE communications.

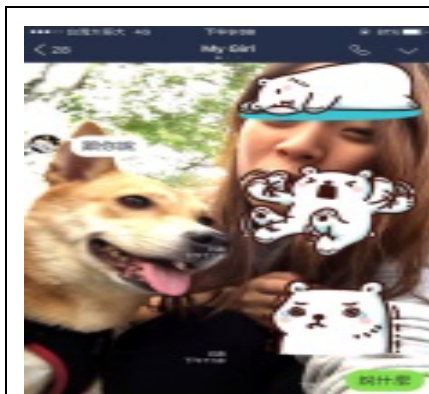
	<p><i>My girlfriend asked me to do her a favor and bring food from Japan before I visited her. I deliberately made a joke that I had forgotten to bring it. (I am a bad guy, right? Hahaha ...) When I sent her this information at the airport, she posted a shocked, crying sticker to me. My purpose was achieved; I was playing with her. Then I replied by sending her a sticker in a teasing pose. My girlfriend kept posting a shocked face with an exclamation mark. I didn't want to make her cry. Then I asked, "Can we hug?" ... My girlfriend always does what I say. (Otto, male, age 22)</i></p>
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Unlike previous studies revealing that nonverbal communication causes people in close relationships to adhere to gender roles (Eagly *et al.*, 2000), our results showed that playing with emotions via alternative stickers caused young couples to dynamically negotiate gender stereotypes. Our data regarding dynamic stereotypes showed that young female participants shared emotions using more agentic LINE stickers (i.e., exhibiting characteristics associated with masculinity) than traditional women of earlier times (Bosak *et al.*, 2017; Diekman *et al.*, 2005; Senden *et al.*, 2019). For example, Hilary was willing to agentially overturn gender-stereotypic expectations to playfully express her anger. Her emotional reactions were her own way of outrageously dominating interactions with her boyfriend when expressing dissatisfaction.



*My boyfriend is very quiet, but I love to share things with him, even in LINE communications. For example, one night at midnight, I was bothered by an annoying mosquito. It drove me crazy, so I posted a sticker of hitting a mosquito and a series of threatening stickers to my boyfriend. He knew this creature made me crazy, but he only replied with OK. I was real angry at him, so I angrily sent a “pointing to him” sticker, showing, “Be careful to mind your manners” ... I do not suppress my feelings to pretend to be a gentle girl or a little bird leaning on my boyfriend in LINE conversations. I try to show him my real self. (Hilary, female, age 21)*

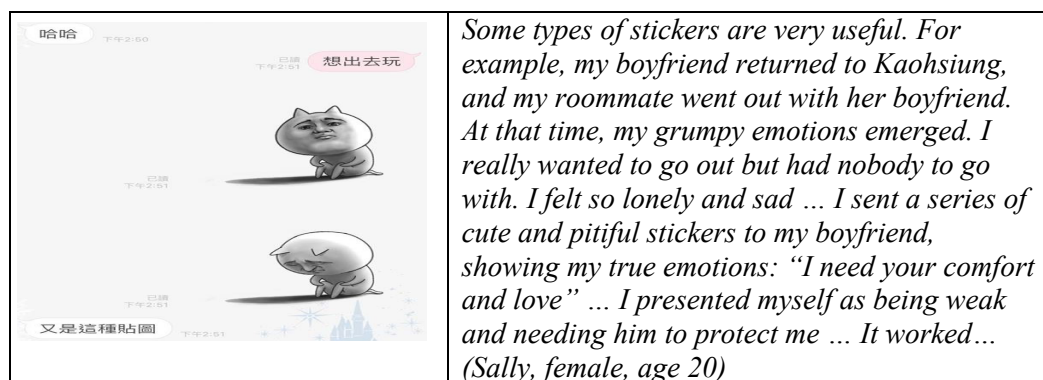
Clark and Mills (1979) described close relationships as communal in character, since they motivate young couples to act in each other’s interests. Profoundly, nonverbal communication with alternative stickers may not be shared with others (particularly parents), but young couples understand them as useful for meeting their own needs and achieving closeness with their partners (Blom and Hewitt, 2020; Lesch *et al.*, 2023; Maurer *et al.*, 2024). For example, Eric tried not to suppress his intimate needs and shared his intimate feelings using communal styles. It reminded him of his own feelings for his girlfriend and prompted communality, which strengthened the bond between them.



*I don't want to suppress my feelings and emotions toward my girlfriend. You know, it is impossible for me to post cute stickers to others, pretending I need to be cared for, but I always post humorous and cute stickers to my girlfriend because such stickers show my love. Once, when she didn't reply to me ... I naughtily posted a sequence of cute doggy stickers to show my childish attitudes. She liked them and quickly replied to me... You know, it worked to improve our relationship. (Eric, male, age 21)*



Similarly, Sally selected a series of theatrical stickers with “pitiful” metaphors attached to suggest that her partner should be sensitive to her feelings while actively calling for her communal needs to be met (Boutet *et al.*, 2024; Jack and Schyns, 2015; Kim *et al.*, 2022). This helped establish a positive relationship with her partner.



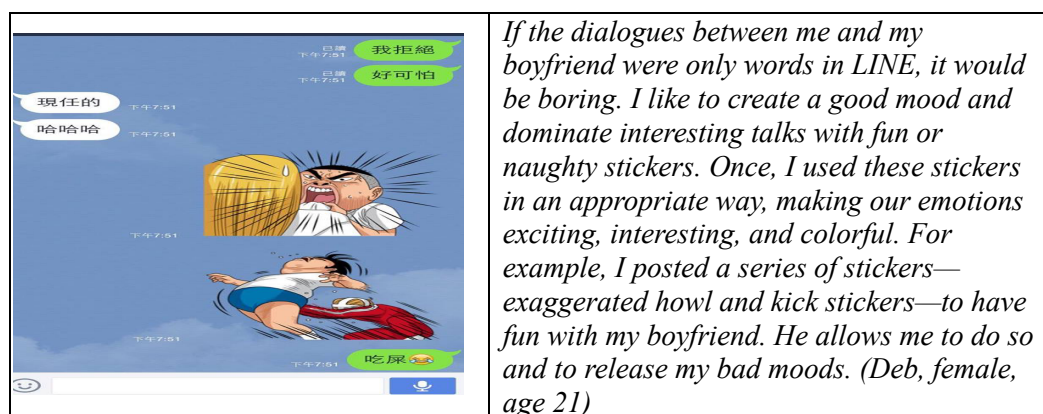
Stoll (1995) expressed concern that intimacy in the digital/virtual world is just an illusion. He stated that virtual communication “is an instantaneous and illusory contact that creates a sense of intimacy without the emotional investment that leads to close friendships” (p. 24). The findings of this study indicated that this is not the case. Young couples sometimes shared playful emotions with alternative stickers, suggesting that such nonverbal communication styles/patterns increase intimacy and foster close relationships (Chen, 2020a). For example, Sean (male, age 23) asserted, “To be honest, it is difficult for me to say intimate words to my girlfriend, but it works with stickers. ... If people saw me playing with my girlfriend with such intimacy in LINE, they would get goose bumps!” Although Darren insisted on using agentic styles to suppress his intimacy, his anger dissipated when his girlfriend sent an intimate apology with a cute sticker.

	<p><i>In real life, I am very quiet with my girlfriend. When we have an argument in real life, I always keep quiet to show that I am unhappy. Once, we had a quarrel in a LINE communication. I posted a sticker of an animal standing with folded arms. It showed that I was not happy, so my girlfriend replied with a dog sticker with a lot of love hearts to make her apology. My negative emotions were gone ... I posted a sticker touching an animal's (her) head, showing that "I accepted her loving apology." In real life, we are unable to communicate in intimate ways. It helps us maintain our relationship. (Darren, male, age 23)</i></p>
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Previous research has shown that normative expectations guide people's communication styles/patterns when they are in emotionally aversive or difficult situations (Hardy *et al.*, 2019). In contrast to stereotypic gender expectations, our data showed that both young male and female participants played communal roles by considering their partners' emotional needs and preferences while playing or sharing emotions with alternative stickers, which helped them cope in difficult times and flourish in good times. Specifically, when they felt angry or were treated unjustly and needed to release their emotions by talking to someone. Their partners acted as listeners and comforted them through playful sticker interactions (Boutet *et al.*, 2023; Kim *et al.*, 2022). In Kent's case, spitting venom at a manager standing in front of him would probably not have been acceptable behavior. However, his girlfriend empathized about the difficulty he was facing and allowed him to share his negative emotions as a dramatic show.

	<p><i>My (part-time job) boss scolded me ... I was so angry ... I understand that I shouldn't stay in a bad mood, so I always use LINE with my girlfriend to release my angry feelings. For example, I posted a sticker to my girlfriend showing a character virtually and theatrically spitting in my boss's face. She could imagine and feel how angry I was and understand that I was trying to release my angry feelings. (Kent, male, age 21)</i></p>
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Through the expression of playful emotion stickers, “you rent a shell and then you enter that actor or actress. You feel what they feel. They’re yours ...” (Stone, 1996, p. 47). Deb was happy to rent an agentic shell to express her negative emotions through a nonverbal communication style/pattern using alternative stickers. Such stickers can embody sarcasm and aggressive attitudes that might hurt other people’s feelings in real life, but she was delighted to use them to express and learn how to control outraged emotions by employing an agentic style (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015). Her boyfriend allowed her to share negative emotions and play an alternative agentic gender role because anything goes in emoticon-based environments. This shows that gender stereotypes are dynamic and malleable and that alternative stickers allow young people to practice new nonverbal communication styles/patterns by using alternative stickers to release true emotions or temporary feelings in the personal branding process (Chen, 2021b, 2023; Pauser and Wagner, 2019; Stewart *et al.*, 1987). Young couples generally find it enjoyable to practice new nonverbal communication styles/patterns when they want to express emotions. This increases the chances of initiating close relationships.

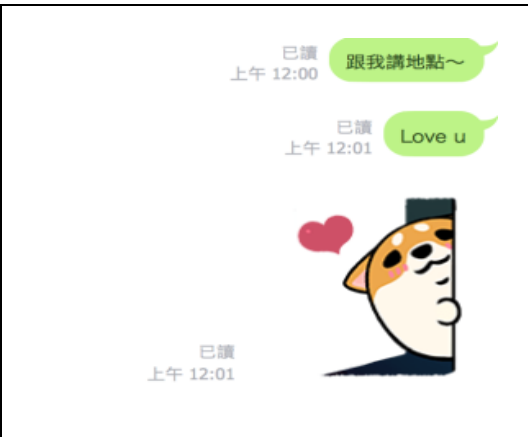


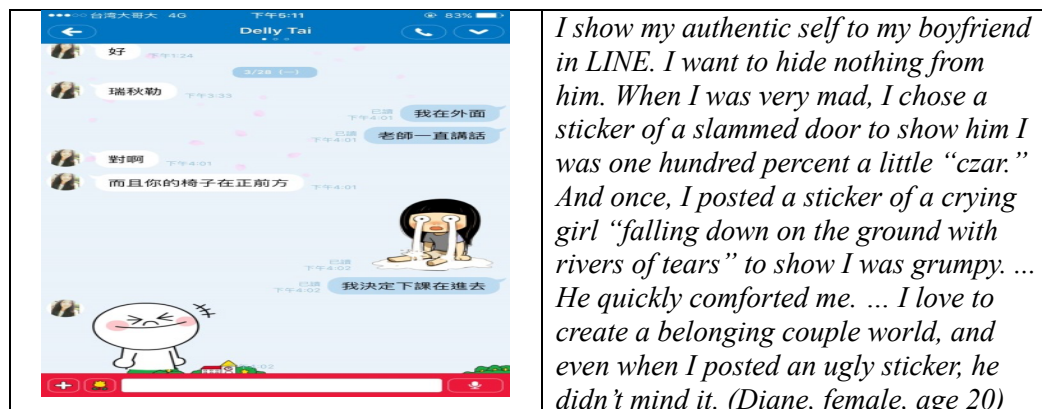
Consequently, when personal brand skills are demonstrated in nonverbal communication styles/patterns using LINE stickers, it inevitably leads to greater diversity in expressed emotions and allows gender roles to be practiced. It

contributes to moving from a preexisting stereotypic gender expectation to a way of living between genders or beyond gender.

### 4.3 Personal brand image and relationships: Sharing an impression as couples

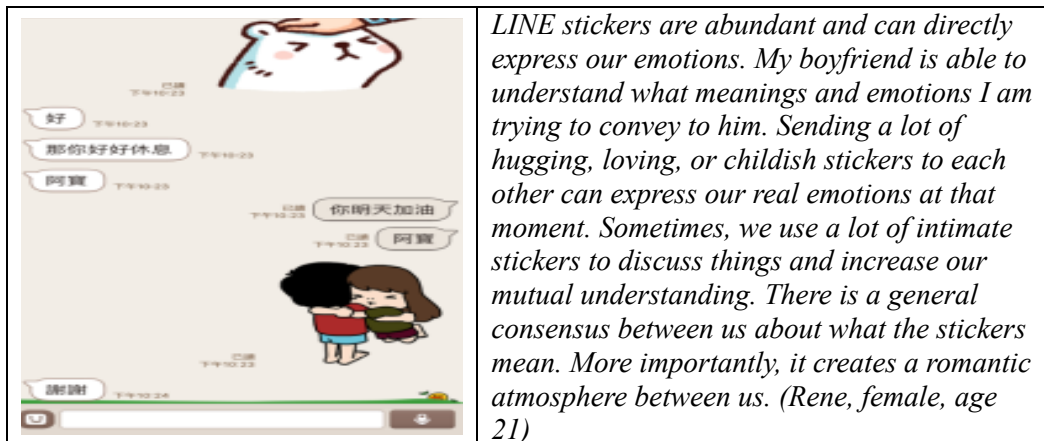
In the third stage of personal branding using LINE stickers, building a personal brand image goes beyond self-marketing, self-description, and the traditional attachment of a profile picture. The creation of a graphic image using LINE stickers has become an interesting process for constructing a desired symbolic impression and developing a close relationship (Chen, 2016a, 2016b; Chen, 2020a). With the stickers and statements shown below, Albert could act out a role as a cute little puppy to share his intimacy with his girlfriend, whereas a woman like Diane could fabricate a role as an overlord and vividly act out her bad temper with her boyfriend without inhibition. Nonverbal communication styles/patterns using LINE stickers are liberating for young couples when they act out alternative roles. This successfully and nontraditionally establishes close relationships and engages young people in gender play or emotion play (Chen, 2016b). Albert, who had these experiences, claimed, “I just want to create a relaxing and romantic atmosphere in a couple world.” Importantly, young couples enjoyed exploring new ways of engaging in nonverbal communication styles/patterns using LINE stickers to create specific meanings with their partners.

	<p><i>My girlfriend and I share a mutual understanding when posting new types of stickers. In LINE, there is no pressure between us. No matter how weird or theatrical the stickers we choose are, they are accepted by the other. For example, I always tease her about something and then text “Love u” plus a cute love sticker to make her happy ... Basically, she doesn’t think I am a sissy guy when I post cute stickers to her. She understands that I want her to take it easy every day. (Albert, male, age 20)</i></p>
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*I show my authentic self to my boyfriend in LINE. I want to hide nothing from him. When I was very mad, I chose a sticker of a slammed door to show him I was one hundred percent a little “czar.” And once, I posted a sticker of a crying girl “falling down on the ground with rivers of tears” to show I was grumpy. ... He quickly comforted me. ... I love to create a belonging couple world, and even when I posted an ugly sticker, he didn’t mind it. (Diane, female, age 20)*

When young couples market themselves using specific personal brand images constructed with LINE stickers, it has implications for them reaching the final/stable stage of developing close relationships. Particularly, “close interpersonal relationships are the setting in which people most frequently experience intense emotions, both the positive emotions, such as joy and love, and the negative emotions, such as anger and fear” (Berscheid and Ammazalorso, 2001, p. 308). Taken together, young couples play gender roles and share positive or negative emotions with alternative stickers that evoke great emotion, which should be effective for strengthening close relationships. The findings of this study further revealed that nonverbal communication styles/patterns using LINE stickers (e.g., colors, shapes, actions, and emotional expressions) allowed young couples not only to create their own unique personal brand images, but also to promote affective expressions and meaningful communications (Boutet *et al.*, 2024; Kim *et al.*, 2022). The more communal expressions young couples shared using appropriate stickers as personal brand images, the more they captured the ascribed meanings of those stickers to develop close relationships. As Rene emphasized:



Ted explained the meaning of the personal brand image created and shared by each person in a couple: “I just don’t want to pretend in front of my lover. It is important to show the ‘real’ me for her to understand who I am.” As relationships advance, interpersonal communication moves from superficial to more intimate levels. This development occurs primarily through greater self-disclosure and emotional expression using LINE stickers. For example, Ted advanced to deeper levels of intimacy by engaging in more affective nonverbal communication with his partner (De Seta, 2018; Herring and Dainas, 2017; Murphy, 2017; Sampietro, 2020). Eventually, he believed that the more LINE stickers were sent by each of them, the more belonging impressions (e.g., “I’m hers” and “He is mine”) were embodied in a virtual couple world to express their shared uniqueness and commitment to each other (Boutet *et al.*, 2023; Chen, 2021a).



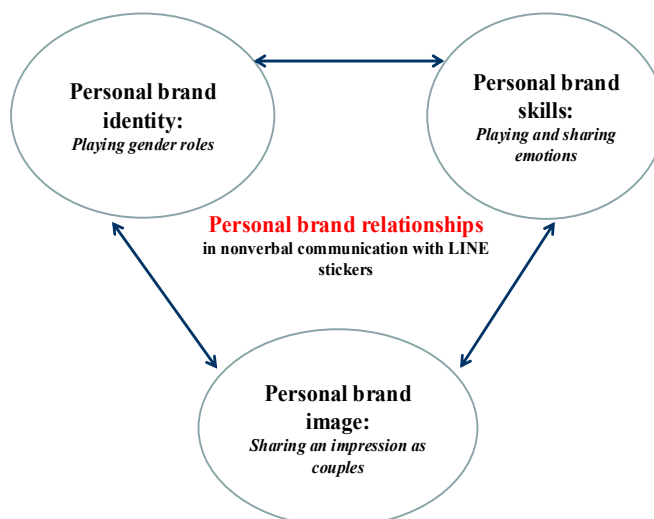
## 5. Conclusion and implications

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrated that nonverbal communication styles/patterns using LINE stickers provide opportunities for young couples to market themselves through personal branding, establish close relationships in nontraditional ways through gender role- and emotion-play, and share impressions of themselves as couples. Most young female participants adhered to feminine social roles and engaged in communal styles of nonverbal communication using LINE stickers (e.g., by being sensitive to their partners’ feelings to the maintain relationships), while most young male participants adhered to their masculine social roles and insisted on more agentic (assertive, dominant) styles when interacting with their partners. However, our data echoed the recent literature (Erle *et al.*, 2022; Hand *et al.*, 2022; Herring and Dainas, 2020) claiming that dynamic gender stereotypes influence social roles. In other words, some female participants displayed agentic roles and nonverbal communication styles (i.e., by exhibiting characteristics associated with masculinity) when they were using LINE stickers to explore social roles and express emotions in close relationships. In contrast, some male participants adopted communal roles and nonverbal communication styles (i.e., exhibiting characteristics associated with femininity) when they used LINE stickers to communicate with their partners

nonverbally. The results of this study suggest that gender stereotypes are dynamic and malleable because young couples market themselves through unique personal branding to play alternative roles and explore positive and negative emotions through new nonverbal communication styles/patterns in emoticon-based environments. Nonverbal communication styles/patterns that employ alternative stickers are, in some ways, liberating because they let young couples openly play out their gender roles and emotions and successfully establish close relationships in nontraditional ways. Such alternative roles create a relaxing atmosphere in which young couples can express intimacy or negative emotions as they would never dare to do in face-to-face communication (Henley, 1977). Particularly in traditional Taiwanese close relationships, men find it difficult to play communal roles. However, when practicing alternative nonverbal communication styles/patterns, young couples generally find it enjoyable to pay more attention to expressing emotions, which strengthens their close relationships.

Taken together, these findings theoretically elucidate personal branding processes in emoticon-based environments. Figure 1 shows how a personal brand is constructed by four main factors: personal brand identity, personal brand skills, personal brand image, and personal brand relationships. In this study, a personal brand identity is formed through what an individual discloses or the gender roles he/she plays by using LINE stickers to market his/her specific characteristics. Essentially, a personal brand identity associates a personality with a personal brand and constitutes a promise to a partner. Brand skills refer to the functional abilities need to create and deliver a personal brand. In emoticon-based environments, personal brand skills are a particular set of nonverbal communication styles/patterns that help individuals express emotions and offer social or emotional support to each other. Personal brand image refers to how an individual creates a unique impression to attract his/her partner's attention, and how a partner feels about specific experiences with this personal brand. Finally, personal brand relationships are the core value of a personal brand and explain the importance of a personal brand's interaction with a partner. Unlike traditional text-based communication styles/patterns, which lack sensory information, nonverbal





**Figure 1**

**An alternative way for young couples to manage personal branding in relationships through nonverbal communication using LINE stickers**

communication styles/patterns using LINE stickers allow young people/couples to promote affective expressions and meaningful communications (Boutet *et al.*, 2024; Kim *et al.*, 2022). Building meaningful or affective personal brands helps young people/couples foster closer relationships.

The findings of this study contribute to filling the three research gaps discussed in the introduction. Furthermore, they have three important theoretical and practical implications for scholars and marketers. First, this study offers new insights and a theoretical framework for personal branding in emoticon-based environments. In other words, this study extends the present knowledge of branding to personal branding and further elucidates the personal branding nonverbal communication process using LINE stickers. For scholars, this concrete process not only fills the gap in theories of personal branding but is also valuable for examining personal branding in the future. For marketers, personal branding allows celebrities in business, politics, the entertainment industry, and the sport industry to manage their personal brands and relationships with followers. This study highlights that ordinary people (particularly young couples) are a potential

market for personal branding management, which may enable marketers to create new virtual/digital tools (e.g., emoji, stickers, graphics, etc.) and offer appropriate communication styles for managing (personal brand) relationships nonverbally or graphically.

Second, this research contributes to bridging the gender gap and adds to the body of knowledge by integrating SRT and NVCT to explore how young couples market themselves using LINE stickers. Connecting these two theories is increasingly valuable for examining emoticon-based environments, in which young people/couples brand themselves with specific identities to play alternative gender roles, express negative and positive emotions, and establish close relationships healthily in nontraditional ways. For scholars, personal branding and self-marketing are strongly related to social roles and (verbal or nonverbal) communication styles/patterns in the digital era. In emoticon-based environments, this study suggests that LINE stickers weaken gender stereotypes and expectations about appropriate communication styles/patterns for men and women when young couples play alternative roles and express playful emotions to learn from each other. Marketing practitioners and IT designers should set aside gender stereotypes when designing new digital tools for young people to communicate verbally or nonverbally with each other. When young people/couples can satisfy their needs and curiosity by using alternative styles of communication, they will keep using the new tools you offer and actively engage in the dynamic and malleable gender roles they create with their partners to develop close relationships.

Third, based on a qualitative research method, this research extends the findings of previous studies on MIM personal branding and self-marketing. The qualitative approach we employed provided detailed descriptions of and in-depth insights into how young people/couples play gender roles and share emotions to market themselves and maintain close relationships in emoticon-based environments. These descriptive and meaningful findings can help marketers develop appropriate marketing campaigns to attract more young adults/couples to engage with such environments. Furthermore, based on the descriptive results of the qualitative research, marketers should understand the impressions young

couples are eager to foster and design relevant marketing campaigns to attract their engagement. Digital graphic designers should offer trendy, advanced styles of graphics.

## 6. Limitations and future studies

This study has some limitations that should be addressed in future studies. This research focused on how young couples market themselves through personal branding to play social roles and use nonverbal communication styles/patterns to develop close relationships in emoticon-based environments. Although we adopted a netnographic methodology and triangulated users' diary reports, long interviews, and participatory observations, unfortunately, our data were not collected for couples on this occasion. It may be a limitation of the results that the voices and thoughts of the participants' partners were not heard and confirmed in this research. Pair validation is required in future studies. Furthermore, the LINE app is popular in Asian countries (i.e., Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand). Gender stereotypes depend to a great extent on cultural context, and the sample in this study was restricted to Taiwanese individuals to achieve cultural homogeneity, which might have limited the generalizability of the results. Cross-country or cross-generation (young versus older couple) validation using a larger sample gathered elsewhere is required to ensure broader generalization in future studies.

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