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## Generational Differences in Emoji Interpretation: A Study of Millennial, Gen Z, and Baby Boomers

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### ABSTRACT

Today, using emojis makes it easier to add emotion, tone and what you intend to say in messages. Still, given that emojis are understood differently by age groups, there is a chance for misunderstandings. This paper looks into how emojis are interpreted differently by members of the millennial generation, Gen Z and the Baby Boomers. To understand how each generation views common emojis, we use surveys, gather discussions in focus groups and analyze how they are used on the internet. It is revealed by our study that while Gen Z might mean something else with emojis, Millennials seem to take them at face value and Baby Boomers tend to use them plainly. According to the study, emojis such as thumbs up, crying laughing and skull are more likely to cause mix-ups between generations. Such examples illustrate that digital language is changing and that culture and generation matter in online communication. They relate to digital literacy, how people from different generations communicate and the creation of platforms designed for all ages.

**Keywords:** Emoji, Interpretation, Gen Z, Baby Boomers, Thumbs Up, Digital Literacy.

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, emojis have become important for making feelings and meanings understood in online communications (Riordan, 2017). These songs are listened to in many parts of the world, yet their meanings vary (Walther & D'Addario, 2001; Danet & Herring, 2007). People from different age groups may understand emojis differently (Weiß et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020).

Many people who grew up in the millennial era use emojis to express how they feel and connect a smiley face and thumbs up to showing agreement or good feelings toward someone (Forgays et al., 2014; An et al., 2018). Alternatively, people born after 1997 in Generation Z usually include ironic emojis such as the skull or upside-down face when communicating (Cavalheiro et al., 2022; Brinson et al., 2023). It has been found in studies that people in Gen Z would modify emojis to suit the unique language of their social group (Jaeger & Ares, 2017; Zhou & Gui, 2017).

On the other hand, Baby Boomers often assign regular meanings to emojis and frequently misunderstand those with a hinted meaning (Boutet et al., 2024; Hsiao & Hsieh, 2014). It seems that older people tend to interpret emojis how they are originally meant, rather than notice their meanings change over time (Gavazzeni et al., 2008; Mather & Carstensen, 2005). It happens that people of various ages

misunderstand one another when they use emojis with each other at home or at work (Kim, Yang, 2016; Brinson et al., 2023).

Additionally, emojis help in marketing and play an important role in connecting people on the internet (Li et al., 2019; Naidu, 2022). People from Generation Z usually enjoy ads with emoji, unlike Baby Boomers who stick to text-only messages. Being conscious of how age groups use emojis plays a big role for anyone aiming for better diversity in communication (Mladenović, 2023).

This research also suggests that how people use emojis is influenced by age, since older adults sometimes have difficulties recognizing certain emotions and naturally focus on more positive aspects in their lives (Ekman, 1992; Vodanovich et al., 2010). The meaning behind digital messages can be easily distorted if read-emoticons are misunderstood (Rosen et al., 2013; Purwanto et al., 2020).

The purpose of this study is to find out how Millennials, Gen Z and Baby Boomers communicate using emojis. The analysis of generational differences aims to extend the field of digital communication, sociolinguistics and human-computer interaction (Tandyonomanu & Tsuroyya, 2018; Kaye et al., 2017). As a result, it is clear that knowing about different generations' digital trends would make it easier for everyone to communicate clearly and understand one another.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To find out how each group interprets emojis that are popularly used in digital conversations.
2. To spot which emojis are frequently misunderstood by members of different generations and discover what leads to such misunderstandings.
3. To assess how different generations understand and use emojis in emails and messages.

### **Research Questions**

1. Do Millennials, Generation Z and Baby Boomers interpret standard emojis differently?
2. What is the list of emojis that people misunderstand the most and what causes these differences in understanding?
3. Do differences in emoji interpretation among generations affect the clarity and mood of texts and online messages?

### **2. Theoretical Framework**

To look at generational differences in reading emojis, I rely on Semiotics, Media Richness Theory and Socioemotional Selectivity Theory. As a result, the frameworks reveal how meaning is made, how emojis fit into talking online and how important things are to different generations when expressing emotions.

For Ferdinand de Saussure, signs consist of an element that represents (the signifier) and what it represents (the signified). Different people interpret emojis differently, depending on their culture (Danet & Herring, 2007). Since each culture instills its own values, those from different backgrounds can misunderstand emojis. Therefore, a person born in Generation Z may think the emoji expresses mockery, but for Baby Boomers, it might simply remind them of the word emoji, associated with death. When we see emojis as signs, it's interesting to watch as their meanings develop with the times.

The second idea is referred to as Media Richness Theory (MRT). It is claimed by Media Richness Theory that some communication tools contribute much more to sending

messages that contain emotion or detail than others do. Since nonverbal details are missing in written communication, it is seen as closed. Expressing feelings and ideas with emojis makes communication on the Internet easier (Kaye et al., 2017). All of these subcultural things work for group members when they are aware of their own and the others' role. If individuals interpret emojis differently, it can pose a challenge to communications. When someone in Generation Z gets a thumbs-up, they might interpret it as laughing at you, but Baby Boomers commonly feel that it symbolizes agreement instead (Brinson et al., 2023).

Carstensen's Socioemotional Selectivity Theory suggests that individuals tend to focus their conversations on emotionally important matters as they grow older. People who are Baby Boomers often value messages that have simple and positive emotions and choose to use straight-forward emojis (Mather & Carstensen, 2005). In comparison, Gen Z tends to use emojis in a more relaxed way, because they can express many emotions in a light-hearted or flexible manner. Because of varying emotions, there are noticeable differences in how each generation uses and understands emojis.

### **3. Methodology**

The study is designed using different methods to analyze emoji interpretation by people from different age groups. Using both data and interpretative methods, the study explores both general and specific aspects of how emojis influence communication among Millennials, Generation Z and Baby Boomers. Triangulating the results from using both quantitative and qualitative methods ensures that the study is supported by strong evidence.

Data were collected from three groups of people: Generation Z (1997–2012), Millennials (1981–1996) and Baby Boomers (1946–1964). The researcher used a purposive approach to ensure an even representation of these factors. In total, one hundred individuals from the first generation, one hundred from the mid-life group and one hundred from the younger group completed the survey online. Additionally, focus groups were held and there were two groups per group and six to eight individuals in each group.

Three different techniques were used to collect data. First, a survey was published online, gathering demographic information, getting participants' opinions on 20 emoji meanings using Likert scales and asking them to explain the meanings of emojis used in different online messages. Before being fully implemented, the survey was tested with a group to confirm it was clear and correct. Furthermore, semi-structured focus groups were organized over video conference calls to look more closely into the ways people use emojis and how they view them. In these classes, people had the opportunity to talk about how the thumbs-up, crying laughing and skull emojis are interpreted in various ways and the differences in these interpretations between generations. The discussions in the focus groups were recorded and written down in full for examination. In the end, an agreed number of anonymous message samples from each group were collected and examined for evidence of emoji usage and its meanings.

Study results were analyzed based on descriptive statistics, ANOVA and chi-square tests to determine if emoji usage varies by generation. All statistical work was performed using the SPSS software program. To analyze the information from the focus groups and digital messages, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method was applied. Thanks to this process, we identified all kinds of topics linked to

emoji meaning, the tone of messages and the chance for misunderstandings among people of all ages.

Throughout the study, every effort was made to act ethically. People involved in the study gave their consent after learning what the study was focused on, whether their participation was required and how their information was being protected. The affiliated university's IRB approved the research protocol. All the collected information was made anonymous and safely stored to ensure privacy for the participants.

While the mixed-methods technique gives in-depth insights, it has a few drawbacks. Those reporting data on their own might want to appear more favorable and during online focus groups, people cannot be watched for subtle facial expressions that affect the meaning of emojis. Furthermore and some older adults may be less likely than others to use and know about digital communication.

All in all, the research team used the mixed-methods approach to examine how people interpret emojis at different ages. Integrating numbers and observations allows the research to provide greater understanding of the current culture and moods shaping digital conversations.

#### **4. Literature Review**

Emojis help people express their feelings and moods using visual symbols that can complement or take the place of words in messages (Alshenqeeti, 2016). The ability to be easily interpreted gives them strength, but at times, they are not clear in what they mean (Kelly & Watts, 2015). The use and understanding of emojis depend mostly on generational identity and the background of users (Barbieri et al., 2018).

The popularity of emojis corresponds to changes in how different generations communicate. Millennials tend to add emojis to their texts as they grew up with the rise of smartphones and social media (Tossell et al., 2012). In comparison, people from Generation Z incorporate emojis differently, using them with both humor, sarcasm and references that others might not get (Chesley & Johnson, 2020). Later adopters of digital communication like Baby Boomers usually chose emojis that express themselves as directly as possible, rather than using humorous or deliberately ironic ones (Derks et al., 2008).

From Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973), we can understand that people respond differently when they use emojis. It suggests that individuals will change their style of speaking to either match or contrast their interlocutors, depending on what they want to achieve and who they interact with. While Millennials focus on being like their peers, Baby Boomers remain true to their individual style of using emojis. Whether or not certain ages can easily use emojis can affect the ways these icons are interpreted by people of various generations.

In addition, Tajfel and Turner (1979) state that using emojis symbolizes belonging to a certain social identity. Younger members of the internet community might use funny emoji to confirm their online association, in contrast to older people using traditional ones that agree with their image (Vissers & Staehr, 2021). As a result of this type of interpreting, some emojis may be perceived with wrong emotional values and cause misunderstandings between age groups.

Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) suggests that emojis are used to create politeness strategies that help individuals maintain good social relations. Sometimes, using emojis helps to lessen disagreements or soften other serious situations,

however, this mainly depends on how different generations communicate. To illustrate, while Baby Boomers use emojis to display politeness directly, Millennials and Gen Z may use them in humorous or sarcastic ways which can make it difficult for them to understand each other (Derks et al., 2007).

The results of many studies suggest that people use emojis differently than expected, based on their age. While the crying laughing emoji represents honest laughter to many elders, it can also be used with sarcasm by younger crowds (Kelly & Watts, 2015). Likewise, the “thumbs up” might mean you agree or you are simply neutral, depending on what generation you are part of (Lu et al., 2016). This demonstrates that the use of emojis varies greatly and can make it tough for older and younger people to understand each other.

Although more attention is being given to generational differences in using emojis, few studies have tried to link these findings in a scientific study. Most researchers have looked at a single platform or only a few emoji sets, overlooking the cultural changes that affect our use of emojis (Gesselman et al., 2019). We aim to address these issues by examining how emojis are understood by different generations and by using several methods to analyze how the use of emojis depends on the emotional tone, context and suitability of the communication.

## 5. Results

Studying the data gathered from different sources indicated that people from different generations have their own ways of using and understanding emojis. Several themes came out in all age groups: perceiving emotions differently, manual emoji use and learning the many meanings behind emojis.

Respondents from Generation Z used emojis in the most flexible and interesting ways. Sometimes, they included emojis with ironic or sarcastic meanings, instead of using them as others normally would. In particular, while Baby Boomers would relate the “skull” emoji to risk, for Gen Z it meant stereotypical laughing hysterically or acting as if shocked by something funny. Earlier research on how young people use emojis is also supported by our evidence (Boutet et al., 2024; Chesley & Johnson, 2020). Nevertheless, engaging new meanings this way occasionally confused people in the past, who considered them unclear or inappropriate.

Millennials seemed more interested in taking a middle-of-the-road stance. They focused on taking a literal approach with the text, but they incorporated some fresh and emotional elements. To illustrate, Millennials tended to use the “crying laughing” emoji to display true happiness or to make things less confusing in their text messages. Since Millennials were around when smartphones and social media platforms became common, they commonly use standard emojis (Tossell et al., 2012). Unlike Gen Z, Millennials tended to use straightforward emojis more than ironic ones.

As for Baby Boomers, they mostly used less bold emojis. Many composers chose to show their emotions in a natural and matter-of-fact way. Using the “thumbs up” emoji, most people thought it meant that a person agreed with something. It was also found that Baby Boomers were not familiar with the ironic uses of emojis that younger people often use. This is consistent with previous studies that found digital immigrants prefer to communicate simply to avoid any possibility of misunderstanding (Derks et al., 2008). This was true for Baby Boomers, who generally did not understand the use of the “skull” emoji and didn’t have the digital experience most people now have today.

This analysis found that some emojis could easily be mistaken by people from different generations. One example is that Baby Boomers usually take the emoji with the thumbs up as a friendly gesture, whereas some Gen Z participants may see it as an expression of disbelief or doubt. It proves that emojis are understood in different ways by people of different ages.

Furthermore, the research indicated that both one's age and the circumstances and types of relationships can alter how people understand emojis. When close peers and friends used emojis, both parties used the same shared knowledge and experiences to understand each person's intent. While emojis were not commonly used among Baby Boomers with their colleagues or older friends for fear of misunderstanding or seeming unprofessional.

Overall, the study found that people interpret emojis differently, depending on how much they've been exposed to both modern technology and popular culture. Due to the creative use of emojis by younger generations and clear, traditional use by older generations, communicating with people from other age groups can be challenging and must be improved for clearer messages.

## 6. Conclusion

It looked into the manner in which Millennials, Generation Z and Baby Boomers employ emojis while communicating on the internet. The research suggests that members of Generation Z communicate using emojis with the most irony and many hidden meanings which reveals their enjoyment of playing with digital language and their comfort using it. Millennials generally take emojis as they are, maintaining both creativity and a clear meaning, but Baby Boomers usually choose to express emotions straight and to the point. Because people of different ages use emojis differently, many misunderstandings can occur such as the "thumbs up" often meaning something different to young people and adults.

According to the results, emojis do not belong to everyone, they are shaped by people's background and skills in using technology to communicate. It is important to understand how our generation and older ones use language differently in order to improve our communication and limit miscommunications. Therefore, teachers, developers and communicators should take the age of learners and users into account when promoting learning online and communicating with them.

More studies are needed to understand the influence of born-digital versus born-analog generations on digital communication, including work communication, interactions among people from different cultures and expressing mental health online. Overall, we should learn the different meanings of emojis and continue to invest in improving the way people from different generations communicate digitally.

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