

## **Pragmatics Analysis of Emojis Usage in Digital Communication Based on Age Groups**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study conducted a pragmatic analysis to explore the functions and cross-generational differences in emoji usage within digital communication among Millennials, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha. The research aimed to identify the pragmatic functions of emojis and compare their interpretation across age groups. Findings indicate that emojis serve various pragmatic roles, including expressing emotions, clarifying messages, and adding humor or sarcasm. From a Speech Act perspective, emojis primarily function as expressive acts, compensating for the absence of nonverbal cues in written digital communication. A key result revealed significant generational differences: Gen Z and Alpha demonstrated greater flexibility and creativity, often assigning non-literal meanings to emojis (e.g., the cry emoji signifying excessive laughter), while Millennials tended toward more conventional use. This difference reflects distinct communication styles influenced by each generation's digital background, although individual habits were also noted as a contributing factor. The findings highlight the necessity of understanding these interpretive differences to create effective communication and avoid misunderstandings in digital environments. Despite its limitations in sample size and informal scope, this study provides a novel approach by combining pragmatic analysis with a cross-generational comparison of visual symbols. Future research should expand the scope to include a larger, more formal context.

**Keywords:** *Pragmatics; Emoji; Generational Communication.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The rapid evolution of digital technology has fundamentally transformed human communication, moving beyond mere text to incorporate nonverbal visual elements such as emojis (Fauzia, 2016). Emojis, as visual symbols, serve critical pragmatic functions by expressing emotions, clarifying meaning, and strengthening social relationships in online discourse (Telaumbanua et al., 2024). Their existence introduces a new dimension to linguistic study, as their meaning is inherently contextual and highly dependent on the recipient's interpretation. However, a significant problem arises because the use and meaning of emojis are not uniform across all age groups (Alharbi & Mahzari, 2023). Since Generation Alpha, Gen Z, and Millennials grew up in distinct social and technological contexts, an emoji that carries a positive meaning for one generation may be interpreted as sarcastic or humorous by another, leading to potential miscommunication. This disparity highlights the pressing need to understand how these visual symbols function pragmatically across diverse digital populations to ensure effective and inclusive

communication in the digital era.

Several studies have already addressed the functional relevance of emojis in digital communication. Chen (2023) demonstrated that emojis enrich emotional nuances and clarify messages, but noted frequent misunderstandings rooted in cultural and contextual differences. Moving beyond personal contexts, Dürscheid (2020) found that emoji usage is dynamic and extends into public domains like professional platforms, noting that young users are not always the most active. Furthermore, Li & Yang (2018) analyzed the pragmatic functions of emojis in detail, categorizing them most often as emotional markers and interaction tools that soften the meaning of speech, thus underscoring their profound pragmatic flexibility. These studies collectively establish that emoji interpretation is highly dynamic, contextual, and influenced by age and culture.

While previous research has established the general function and contextual dynamics of emojis, a significant research gap remains: there is limited study that specifically compares the use and meaning of emojis based on distinct age groups (Generations Alpha, Z, and Millennials). Previous work, such as Telaumbanua et al. (2024), focused only on students (a broad group), and Dürscheid (2020) emphasized platform and pandemic-related use, while Li and Yang (2018) focused on functional classification rather than cross-generational interpretive differences. The current study aims to address this gap by focusing on the crucial variations in pragmatic function and semantic interpretation between these three generations, exploring how generational factors influence the meaning and intent conveyed by these visual symbols in daily digital conversations.

This research focuses on a pragmatic study of emoji use in digital communication, specifically comparing the differences in function and meaning across Generation Alpha, Generation Z, and Millennials. The primary purpose is to examine the pragmatic functions and identify the differences in interpretation and use of emojis between these groups. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of modern pragmatics studies by enriching the understanding of the relationship between language, visual symbols, and social generation. Practically, the findings will serve as a vital reference for educators, communication practitioners, and social media developers to facilitate more effective, inclusive, and responsive digital communication across the age diversity of digital media users.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design and Subject of Research**

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach to explore and analyze the meaning and function of emoji use in digital communication across different age groups. This design was specifically chosen to enable the researcher to gain an in-

depth and holistic understanding of participants' communication behavior through contextual and descriptive data, aligning with the principles emphasized by Sugiyono for capturing subjective experiences and interpretations in real-life social contexts. The subject of research is the pragmatic use and semantic interpretation of emojis within digital communication discourse. The research focuses on comparing data obtained from three distinct age groups: Generation Alpha (specific age range needed), Generation Z (15–25 years), and Millennials.

### **Instrument**

The study utilizes two primary instruments. The first is a semi-open-ended questionnaire, which was designed to gather information regarding the habits, perceptions, and contextual use of emojis. This instrument strategically combines open-ended questions to elicit narrative and in-depth qualitative data, and closed-ended questions to identify quantitative supplements and common usage patterns. The second instrument is the digital conversation documentation, consisting of real-life examples, such as screenshots from instant messaging applications (e.g., WhatsApp and Instagram Direct Message). This documentation serves to provide authentic, contextual data on how emojis are utilized in everyday, spontaneous communication. To ensure research integrity, all documentation was obtained voluntarily based on the full informed consent of the respondents, guaranteeing the principles of privacy and anonymity were strictly adhered to.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection was executed by distributing the semi-open-ended questionnaire online, typically utilizing platforms like Google Forms. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and voluntarily submit two to three relevant screenshots of their digital conversations containing emoji usage. The data analysis was conducted using a qualitative descriptive technique with a focus on comparative analysis between age groups. This process involves coding the narrative responses and contextualizing the screenshot data to identify: (1) the frequency of emoji use, (2) the communication goals (pragmatic functions), and (3) the differences in the semantic interpretation of specific emojis across Generation Alpha, Generation Z, and Millennials. This comparative approach is essential for identifying the contrasting patterns of use and interpretation of emoji meaning in digital communication.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Research Findings**

This research involved six respondents from different generations, namely Generation Alpha, Generation Z, and the Millennial Generation. The following is a summary of respondent characteristics and key findings from the questionnaire:

**Table 1.** Profile of Emoji Usage and Pragmatic Functions in Digital Communication by Respondent Age Group

R	Gen	Chatting Media	Frequency of Emoji Use	Purpose of Emoji Use	Experience	Differences in use Between Generations of Respondents
R1	Milenial	WhatsApp, Telegram	Often	Conveying emotions, relaxing, sarcasm/jokes	Available	Generation Z and Alpha use emojis more often
R2	Z	WhatsApp	Often	Clarify the meaning of the sentence	No	There are differences in the use of emoji
R3	Z	WhatsApp, Twitter	Often	Conveying emotions, relaxing, sarcasm/jokes	Available	There are differences in the use of emoji
R4	Alpha	WhatsApp	Sometimes	Making fun, sarcasm/jokes	Available	There are differences in the use of emoji
R5	Alpha	WhatsApp	Often	Conveying emotions	Available	Does not see generational differences
R6	Milenial	WhatsApp	Rare	Sarcasm/joke	Available	Generation Z uses emoji more casually than Millennials

The questionnaire responses indicate a distinct generational disparity in usage frequency: Gen Z and Gen Alpha respondents reported a notably higher frequency of emoji use compared to Millennials. Regarding pragmatic function, the purposes of emoji application were diverse, ranging from the fundamental act of conveying explicit emotions and clarifying communicative intent to more nuanced functions such as establishing a relaxed atmosphere or delivering sarcasm and humor. Crucially, the data demonstrated that the interpretive meaning of some emojis shifts significantly across generations. For instance, the 'crying face' emoji was often interpreted by Gen Z not as sadness, but as a marker for 'laughing out loud' or an extreme reaction to humor, a clear semantic divergence from its original conceptual meaning. This shift underlies the finding that a number of respondents across all groups reported experiencing misunderstandings due to divergent emoji interpretations. Generally, most respondents perceived a clear generational difference in emoji usage patterns, though one Gen Alpha respondent (R.5) considered emojis to be a universal communicative tool.

Collectively, the analysis of the chat conversations confirms that emojis are essential tools used to reinforce emotional messages, establish an intimate

atmosphere, or deliberately shift the tone of a conversation to a lighter one. Ultimately, the interpretation and pragmatic function of an emoji are highly dependent on the immediate context and the pre-existing social relationships between the digital communicators.

### **The Pragmatic Functions of Emojis and Generational Differences in Digital Communication**

The findings of this study conclusively indicate that emojis fulfill a variety of crucial pragmatic functions within digital communication across different age groups. These primary functions include expressing emotions, clarifying messages, adding humor or sarcasm, and fostering a more relaxed communication atmosphere. These roles are most frequently observed among Generation Z and Alpha respondents, who generally exhibit a more active and expressive utilization of emojis in their daily digital interactions

In alignment with pragmatic theory, which posits that intended meaning is highly context-dependent and extends beyond the literal meaning of words or symbols, the analysis shows that emojis are not always interpreted literally. For instance, common emojis such as Face with Tears of Joy or Upside-Down Face are often used to convey deeper, non-literal meanings such as sarcasm, surprise, or irony. This function as a contextual enhancer is crucial; as one Gen Z respondent confirmed, emojis actively help to clarify the intended meaning of a written sentence where tonal cues are absent. Furthermore, when analyzed through the lens of Speech Act Theory, emojis predominantly function as expressive speech acts, as their fundamental purpose is to convey the speaker's emotional state or attitude. In digital communication, emojis effectively replace absent nonverbal cues like facial expressions, voice intonation, and body language. Thus, emojis are far from being merely decorative elements; they possess strong communicative value, particularly in bridging the nonverbal connection between interlocutors.

A comparison of the data reveals clear differences in how emojis are used and interpreted by Millennials, Gen Z, and Gen Alpha. Specifically, Gen Z and Gen Alpha utilize emojis more frequently and demonstrate greater flexibility and creativity in interpreting these visual symbols. A stark example of this divergence is the emoji Loudly Crying Face: while Millennials tend to use it in its literal sense (sadness), Gen Z predominantly interprets it as an expression of "laughing uncontrollably" or exaggerated laughter. Millennial respondents often acknowledge that the younger generations employ emojis in a more casual and spontaneous manner, suggesting a fundamental difference in communication styles shaped by distinct digital socialization backgrounds. The younger generations, having grown up immersed in technological advancements and social media, are naturally more acclimated to

using visual symbols as primary communicative tools. This strongly supports the notion that the meaning of emojis is dynamically influenced by age, culture, and context of usage. However, it is important to note that not all Gen Alpha respondents perceived distinct generational differences, with one suggesting that emoji usage relies more on individual preference than age alone, indicating that individual variation also plays a role in the understanding and deployment of emojis.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, it was found that emoji have various pragmatic functions in digital communication. These functions include expressing emotions, clarifying messages, adding elements of humor or sarcasm, and creating a more relaxed communication atmosphere. These functions are seen most predominantly in respondents from Generation Z and Alpha, who use emoji more actively and expressively. From the perspective of pragmatics and speech act theory, emojis can function as expressive speech acts because they convey the speaker's attitude and emotions, and replace nonverbal elements that are not present in digital written communication such as facial expressions or voice intonation. This research also shows that there are differences in the use and interpretation of emoji between generations. Generation Z and Alpha tend to be more flexible and creative in their use of emojis, even giving them new meanings that differ from their literal meanings such as the use of the cry emoji as a sign of laughing out loud. In contrast, respondents from the Millennial Generation tend to use emojis more conventionally. This difference reflects the communication style influenced by each generation's digital background. However, some respondents from Generation Alpha argued that emoji usage is more determined by individual habits, not solely by age. This shows that in addition to age, personal factors also influence the way a person understands and uses emoji in digital communication. These findings are expected to provide insight for social media users and digital communicators to better understand the differences in the meaning of emojis in order to create effective communication and avoid misunderstandings. For educators and language researchers, these results can be utilized as material for teaching digital pragmatics in a contemporary context. Although this study is still limited in terms of the number of respondents and its informal scope, it offers a novel approach by combining pragmatic analysis with cross-generational analysis of visual symbols in digital communication, an area that has not been extensively studied at the local level.

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