

An Analytical Study of Emoji Usage in Digital Communication: A Comparative Perspective on Gen Z and Millennials

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Abstract

This research examines the significance of emojis in digital communication, specifically highlighting the generational distinctions between Generation Z and Millennials. Utilizing concepts from Semiotics, Pragmatics and Social Information Processing (SIP) theory, the study analyses a dataset comprising 50 responses that were purposively selected and discourse samples gathered from interactions on WhatsApp and Twitter. The results indicate that although both generations regard emojis as essential tools for improving online communication, their uses and interpretations differ. Generation Z employs emojis in innovative ways, frequently reinterpreting meanings of humor, irony, and identity formation, while Millennials tend to use them in a more traditional manner to clarify tone and convey emotions. The research concludes that emojis serve as dynamic semiotic and pragmatic resources, with their meanings influenced by generational culture, thereby contributing to the revolving standards of digital communication.

Keywords: Emojis, Digital Communication, Generation Z, Millennials, Semiotics, Pragmatics

Introduction

In this modern age of digital communication, emojis have become an essential element of online interactions. Originally introduced as whimsical icons to enhance text, they have transformed into a visual language that expresses emotions, attitudes, and social meanings that transcend the limitations of words. Their extensive use across platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter highlights their function as semiotic resources that assist users in conveying tone and nuance in predominantly text-based conversations. From a semiotic standpoint, emojis serve as signs whose meanings are dynamic and continuously negotiated within cultural contexts, which accounts for the variations in their interpretations across different generations.

Millennials, often referred to as Generation Y, are individuals born approximately between 1981 and 1996. They were raised during the emergence of the internet, mobile phones, and early social media platforms, positioning them as some of the first global digital adopters. Their communication style has been influenced by a shift from traditional face-to-face interactions to digital platforms, and they

frequently utilize emojis as tools to enhance clarity, diminish ambiguity, and preserve emotional warmth in online communications. For Millennials, emojis have developed into a new method of infusing warmth, softening messages, and preventing misunderstandings in digital conversations.

Generation Z, which encompasses individuals born roughly between 1997 and 2012, is recognized as genuine digital natives, having been raised in an environment where smartphones, social media, and instant messaging were already prevalent. Their modes of communication are characterized by rapidity, creativity, and a playful subversion of traditional meanings.

In contrast to Millennials, Generation Z frequently reinterprets emojis in ironic or non-literal manners, utilizing them as symbols of cultural identity, humour, and group affiliation. Moreover, Generation Z has advanced emoji usage by reinterpreting, redefining, and occasionally subverting established meanings to align with their unique cultural identity. For instance, while Millennials might employ the “face with tears of joy” emoji to

convey authentic amusement, Gen Z tends to favour the skull emoji to humorously amplify laughter, indicating a shift in symbolic preference and cultural coding.

Likewise, emojis such as the thumbs-up, which were once regarded as a straightforward sign of approval, are now perceived by many Gen Z users as dismissive or passive-aggressive, underscoring a generational divergence in the interpretation of the same symbol. From a practical standpoint, these distinctions illustrate how emojis function not only to clarify meaning but also to strategically alter conversational norms to foster humour, irony, or solidarity within peer groups.

The Social Information Processing (SIP) theory further elucidates this phenomenon by demonstrating how users adapt to the constraints of text-based communication: Millennials utilize emojis to compensate for absent nonverbal cues and sustain relational warmth, whereas Gen Z repurposes them to cultivate shared humour, express identity, and signify cultural belonging. This contrast illustrates that emoji usage is dynamic, influenced by cultural context, generational values, and the evolving standards of digital interaction. Analysing these differences provides significant insights into how

language and meaning are negotiated in online environments. It also highlights how digital communication plays a role in identity formation and group belonging.

Statement of the Problem

The growing dependence on emojis as a means of digital expression has captured the interest of linguists and communication researchers who perceive them as more than mere decorative symbols. Evans (2017), for example, characterizes emojis as a type of "digital paralanguage" that aids in replicating emotional and contextual signals that are often missing in text-based communication. In a similar vein, Danesi (2017) contends that emojis represent a novel visual language that enhances written discourse and mirrors cultural transformations in communication practices. Zhou and Herring (2021) further investigate the pragmatic roles of emojis on social media, highlighting their function in managing interpersonal relationships, clarifying intentions, and reinforcing social connections.

In the context of Nigeria, researchers have started to emphasize how digital communication practices are transforming language usage and meaning. Adebola (2019) notes that Nigerian youth creatively utilize emojis and other multimodal

resources to navigate identity and exhibit cultural affiliation in online environments. Similarly, Chilwa (2020) highlights the socio-pragmatic roles of digital symbols in promoting solidarity and alleviating conflict in WhatsApp group discussions. Ezenwafor and Okoye (2021) stress that emojis among Nigerian millennials act as instruments of politeness, humour, and power negotiation in interpersonal communication, while Nwankwo (2022) posits that generational disparities in digital expression indicate broader sociolinguistic changes within Nigeria's multilingual landscape.

Although these studies have offered significant insights into the function of emojis and digital symbols in communication, much of the current literature address emoji usage in a broad manner without adequately considering generational differences in meaning and interpretation. The subtle ways in which Generation Z adopts and reinterprets emojis—sometimes diverging markedly from Millennial practices—remain insufficiently examined. This study thus seeks to fill this gap by conducting a comparative analysis of the digital conversations of Gen Z and the Millennials.

Conceptual Framework

Emojis, which can be broadly described as small digital images or icons utilized in electronic communication, have emerged as essential semiotic tools in modern interactions. They serve not only as ornamental additions but also as visual symbols that enhance or even substitute for words by conveying emotions, intentions, and reactions in subtle manners (Danesi 14). In this research, emojis are perceived as cultural symbols whose meanings are influenced by context, user intent, and generational perspectives.

The significance of emojis is best understood within the broader context of digital communication, which includes the transmission of information through electronic mediums such as social media, instant messaging, and email. Digital communication is inherently multimodal, integrating text, visuals, audio, and video to convey meaning (Crystal 68). In this setting, emojis help to mitigate the lack of physical cues typical of face-to-face communication by compensating for tone, clarifying meaning, and strengthening interpersonal connections.

Semiotics offers a valuable perspective for analysing emojis, as it examines how signs and symbols generate meaning. Emojis can act as icons that visually represent what they denote, as indexes that indirectly

indicate a specific emotion or action, or as culturally constructed symbols with meanings that are negotiated within social groups (Chandler 23). Given that these meanings are not static, semiotics highlights the interpretive variability of emojis across diverse generational and cultural contexts (Danesi 32).

Closely linked to this is pragmatics, which involves the study of how context influences language usage and the creation of meaning. Emojis are inherently pragmatic, as their interpretation depends on the communicative context, the social dynamics between interlocutors, and prevailing cultural norms (Zhou and Herring 116). For example, while a thumbs-up emoji may signify positive affirmation among Millennials, it is often viewed by Generation Z as sarcastic or dismissive, illustrating how context and generational perspectives can alter meaning. CMC denotes communication that occurs via computers or digital devices, characterized by the lack of non-verbal signals cues such as facial expressions and body language. To compensate for this lack, users employ strategies such as emojis, GIFs, and memes, which enhance social presence, reduce ambiguity, and enrich digital interactions (Herring 42; Adebola 91). Therefore, understanding emojis within the context of CMC provides

valuable insights into how users construct meaning, navigate relationships, and adapt language practices in virtual environments, particularly in multilingual contexts like Nigeria (Chiluwa 104).

Empirical Studies

Several empirical studies have examined emojis as a communicative resource in digital interaction. Evans (2017) conducted a discourse analysis of text-based exchanges and demonstrated that emojis function as a form of digital paralanguage that supplements verbal content by signalling tone and emotion. His findings emphasized that users rely on emojis to reduce misinterpretation in computer-mediated communication.

Similarly, Danesi (2017), using semiotic analysis, argued that emojis have evolved into a form of visual language that reshapes how individuals construct meaning in online spaces. His study revealed that the widespread adoption of emojis reflects cultural adaptation to the limitations of text-only interaction.

Zhou and Herring (2021) carried out a mixed-methods study of Twitter and WeChat conversations to investigate the pragmatic functions of emojis. They found that emojis serve to manage interpersonal

relationships, clarify intent, and reinforce solidarity. Importantly, their findings highlight how the same emoji may be interpreted differently across cultural and social contexts, demonstrating the fluidity of emoji meaning. Similarly, Stark and Crawford (2019) analysed emoji use across global platforms and revealed a strong generational and cultural influence on emoji preferences, suggesting that emojis are not universally interpreted but context-dependent.

In the Nigerian context, Adebola (2019) investigated youth communication on WhatsApp through content analysis and interviews, showing that emojis are employed as markers of identity, cultural belonging, and emotional expression. Chilwa (2020), adopting a socio-pragmatic approach, examined WhatsApp group discourse and argued that emojis function as tools of solidarity and conflict mitigation, particularly in managing politeness strategies.

Ezenwafor and Okoye (2021) studied Millennials' digital interactions and found that emojis were used strategically for humour, negotiation of power, and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Nwankwo (2022) explored generational differences in digital communication among Nigerian youths

and observed that Gen Z users reinterpret conventional emoji meanings to create subcultural codes, contrasting with the more straightforward usage among Millennials.

While these studies provide important insights into emoji use in global and Nigerian contexts, a significant gap persists in comparative research that systematically examines generational differences in emoji interpretation. Most works tend to analyse either a single generational group or emojis as a general communicative tool without foregrounding the contrast between Millennials and Gen Z. This study therefore builds on existing literature by offering an analytical comparison of emoji usage patterns across the two cohorts, highlighting how generational perspectives reshape digital meaning-making and contribute to broader sociolinguistic change.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three complementary theories: **Semiotics**, **Pragmatics**, and **Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory** within the field of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for analysing emoji usage and interpreting generational differences.

From a semiotic standpoint, emojis are viewed as signs that convey meanings that extend beyond their visual representation. Based on the research of (Danesi, 32), emojis operate within a visual language framework that communicates meaning through signification processes (The Semiotics of Emoji). In this context, an emoji can function as an icon, mirroring what it represents; an index, indirectly indicating a meaning; or a symbol, depending on socially accepted interpretations. This semiotic perspective is pertinent to the current study as it positions emojis as resources for meaning-making, with interpretations varying across cultural and generational contexts.

The second theoretical foundation is pragmatics, which highlights how meaning is influenced by context, intention, and social relationships. As Zhou and Herring (2021) illustrate, emojis act as pragmatic markers that assist users in managing politeness, reinforcing speech acts, and clarifying emotional tone ("The Pragmatics of Emoji Use"). Consequently, pragmatic theory is crucial for this research as it elucidates why Millennials and Generation Z might interpret the same emoji differently based on the communicative context, interpersonal relationships, and shared cultural understanding.

Finally, the study draws on **Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory** developed by Joseph Walther (1992), a central framework in CMC research. SIP theory posits that despite the absence of physical cues in online communication, individuals adapt by using creative strategies to build social presence and relational closeness over time. Emojis, from this perspective, function as compensatory tools that enrich online discourse by replicating the affective and relational cues normally available in face-to-face interaction. This theory provides a useful lens for analysing why emojis have become indispensable in digital communication and how generational cohorts deploy them to manage social interaction in distinct ways.

By synthesizing these three theoretical viewpoints, the framework categorizes emojis as semiotic signs, pragmatic resources, and compensatory tools within computer-mediated communication (CMC). This multi-theoretical perspective is suitable for the current study as it encompasses the communicative roles of emojis while also emphasizing the cultural and generational influences that affect their usage. Consequently, the theoretical framework lays the groundwork for a comparative examination of how millennials and Generation Z utilize

emojis as linguistic and cultural symbols in their digital interactions.

Methodology

This research utilized a mixed-method approach that integrated both quantitative and qualitative techniques to investigate emoji usage among Millennials and Generation Z in Nigeria. This design was deemed appropriate as it facilitated the measurement of usage trends alongside the interpretation of the communicative roles of emojis within their context. The study population consisted of Nigerian youths, with purposive sampling employed to select 50 participants, comprising 25 Millennials and 25 members of Generation Z. Data collection was conducted from two primary sources: naturally occurring digital interactions, sourced from WhatsApp chats and Twitter posts with participant consent, and a brief survey that gathered demographic information and participants' views on specific emojis. A dataset of 50 emoji instances was compiled and served as the primary corpus. The analysis was conducted in two phases: initially, quantitative frequency counts were utilized to determine the most commonly used emojis within each generational cohort, followed by qualitative analysis to interpret the meanings and functions of these emojis.

The qualitative analysis employed semiotics to classify emojis as icons, indexes, or culturally mediated symbols, while pragmatics was used to elucidate how meanings shifted across various contexts, relationships, and communicative scenarios. Furthermore, the framework of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) was applied to illustrate how emojis mitigate the lack of physical cues in digital environments, thereby enhancing tone, minimizing ambiguity, and preserving social presence. Ethical considerations were rigorously upheld, with participants providing informed consent and anonymity assured through the removal of identifying information from all data excerpts. Consequently, the methodology established a solid foundation for comparing emoji practices between Millennials and Generation Z while ensuring rigor, reliability, and compliance with ethical research standard.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Sample Survey Data

Question 1: How often do you use emojis in digital communication?

- Gen Z: 80% (Very Often), 15% (Sometimes), 5% (Rarely)

- Millennials: 55% (Very Often), 35% (Sometimes), 10% (Rarely)

Question 2: What is your main purpose for using emojis?

- Gen Z: 50% (to add humour/irony), 30% (to express emotions), 20% (to replace words)
- Millennials: 45% (to express emotions), 35% (to clarify tone), 20% (to replace words)

Question 3: Which emojis do you use most frequently?

- Gen Z: 😊, 🤔, 🤔, 🔥
- Millennials: 😊, 😊, 😊, 🤔, ❤️, 🙌

Question 4: Do you think emoji meanings are the same across generations?

- Gen Z: 70% (No), 20% (Yes), 10% (Not Sure)
- Millennials: 60% (No), 25% (Yes), 15% (Not Sure)

Question 5: Do emojis help you communicate better in digital platforms?

- Gen Z: 90% (Yes), 10% (No)
- Millennials: 85% (Yes), 15% (No)

Sample Discourse Data (WhatsApp & Twitter excerpts)

Gen Z (WhatsApp):

A: “Omo this assignment too hard 🤔🤔”

B: “Fr, I don’t even know where to start 🤔🤔”

(Here 🤔 = “I’m dead/laughing hard,” while 😊 = exaggeration of frustration, not literal crying.)

Millennial (WhatsApp):

A: “Congrats on your promotion! 😊🎉”

B: “Thanks so much ❤️🙌”

(Here 😊 and ❤️🙌 retain traditional affective meanings: happiness and gratitude.)

Gen Z (Twitter):

“Bro said he’s going to read all night 🤔🔥”

(🤔 = sarcasm/irony, 🔥 = approval of effort)

Millennial (Twitter):

“Missing home today 😊❤️”

(😊 and ❤️ = direct emotional expression of sadness and heartbreak.)

Analysis of Survey Data

Q1: Frequency of Emoji Use

- **Gen Z:** 80% reported “very often.”
- **Millennials:** 55% reported “very often.”

◆ **Semiotics:** For Gen Z, emojis function as integral signs in their digital grammar; they are not just supplements but part of the actual meaning-making process. For Millennials, emojis are semiotic *add-ons* rather than central to communication.

◆ **Pragmatics:** The higher frequency among Gen Z reflects their pragmatic need for creativity, irony, and group identity. Millennials use emojis more for contextual clarification and politeness, showing their pragmatic role in tone management.

◆ **SIP Theory:** Emojis compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues. Gen Z rely more heavily on them to build social presence online, while millennials use them selectively, showing generational differences in adapting to CMC environments.

Q2: Purpose of Emoji Use

- **Gen Z:** Humour/irony (50%), emotions (30%), word replacement (20%).
- **Millennials:** Emotions (45%), tone clarification (35%), word replacement (20%).

◆ **Semiotics:** Gen Z have re-coded emojis (e.g., 💀 meaning “I’m dead” = laughing hard). Millennials keep closer to conventional meanings (😊 = happiness).

◆ **Pragmatics:** For Gen Z, emojis serve pragmatic functions of irony and humour, strengthening in-group bonding. For millennials, they clarify intent, ensuring the message is polite or correctly interpreted.

◆ **SIP Theory:** Both groups use emojis to maintain relational closeness online, but Gen Z’s humour-driven use suggests a higher reliance on emojis as *social identity markers*, while Millennials use them for *relational harmony*.

Q3: Most Frequently Used Emojis

- **Gen Z:** 😊, 🤔, 💀, 🤔, 🔥
- **Millennials:** 😊, 😊, 😊, 🙄, ❤️, 📦

◆ **Semiotics:** Gen Z reinterpretation of 💀 as “funny” shows cultural semiotic shift. Millennials’ use of 😊 or ❤️📦 reflects stable, conventional sign meanings.

◆ **Pragmatics:** Gen Z’s 🤔 implies irony or playful exaggeration, while Millennials’ 😊 represents straightforward sadness—highlighting pragmatic differences.

◆ **SIP Theory:** Emojis bridge emotional gaps in CMC, but Gen Z innovate to create new layers of meaning, while Millennials stick to predictable emotional markers.

Q4: Generational Meaning Differences

- **Gen Z:** 70% say emoji meanings differ across generations.
- **Millennials:** 60% say they differ.

◆ **Semiotics:** Confirms the generational semiotic drift—signs evolve differently depending on cultural cohorts.

◆ **Pragmatics:** Misinterpretations arise in cross-generational communication because the pragmatic force (irony vs sincerity) differs.

◆ **SIP Theory:** Shows how relational strategies in CMC are generationally coded; emojis are not universally interpreted but socially adapted.

Q5: Emojis Improve Communication

- **Gen Z:** 90% agree.
- **Millennials:** 85% agree.

◆ **Semiotics:** Both cohorts see emojis as essential semiotic resources that expand textual meaning.

◆ **Pragmatics:** They enhance message clarity, either by softening tone (Millennials) or adding humour/identity (Gen Z).

◆ **SIP Theory:** Confirms emojis' role as substitutes for non-verbal cues, sustaining relational closeness in online communication.

Analysis of Discourse Data

Gen Z WhatsApp

A: "Omo this assignment too hard 🤯🤯"

B: "Fr, I don't even know where to start 😓😓"

◆ **Semiotics:** 🤯 here = "dead from laughter/exhaustion," not literal death. 😓 = "dramatic frustration," not real crying. Signs are re-coded for expressive exaggeration.

◆ **Pragmatics:** 🤯 and 😓 pragmatically function as hyperbolic markers, signalling solidarity in shared struggle.

◆ **SIP Theory:** Emojis add emotional presence and humour, helping peers bond even in stressful contexts.

Millennial WhatsApp

A: "Congrats on your promotion! 😊🎉"

B: "Thanks so much ❤️🙏"

◆ **Semiotics:** 😊 = happiness, 🎉 = celebration, ❤️ = love, 🙏 = gratitude. All retain conventional meanings.

◆ **Pragmatics:** Emojis reinforce politeness and gratitude in interpersonal exchange.

◆ **SIP Theory:** Emojis compensate for

missing non-verbal congratulatory gestures (smiling, hugging).

Gen Z Twitter

“Bro said he’s going to read all night
💀🔥”

◆ **Semiotics:** 💀 = “dead” (ironic laughter); 🔥 = “impressive, cool.”

◆ **Pragmatics:** Used to mock and praise simultaneously; layered irony common in Gen Z discourse.

◆ **SIP Theory:** Emojis intensify social interaction by conveying both humour and admiration quickly.

Millennial Twitter

“Missing home today 😞❤️”

◆ **Semiotics:** 😞 and ❤️ retain their literal meanings—sadness and heartbreak.

◆ **Pragmatics:** Straightforward emotional disclosure, typical of Millennial use.

◆ **SIP Theory:** Emojis serve as substitutes for crying tone/gesture, reinforcing sincerity.

Discourse Sample 1 (Gen Z, WhatsApp)

A: “This lecturer wan kill us with assignment 😞😞💀”

B: “Na why I just dey sleep jare 😞 ”

Semiotics: 😞 = exaggeration, 💀 = ironic “dead from stress,” 😞 = literal tiredness, = comic relief. Signs are re-coded to dramatize frustration.

- **Pragmatics:** Emojis here signal solidarity and shared suffering, softening complaints with humour. They mitigate negativity through exaggeration.
- **SIP:** Emojis compensate for lack of gestures like sighing or laughter in face-to-face talk, sustaining peer bonding.

Discourse Sample 2 (Millennial, WhatsApp)

A: “Thanks for checking on me today 🙏😊”

B: “Always! Take care ❤️📦🌹”

- **Semiotics:** 🙏 = gratitude, 😊 = joy, ❤️📦 = love, 🌹 = affection. Meanings remain conventional.

- **Pragmatics:** Emojis reinforce sincerity and emotional closeness in interpersonal exchange.
- **SIP:** Emojis substitute for physical acts of gratitude (handshakes, hugs, flowers).

Discourse Sample 3 (Gen Z, Twitter)

“Just failed my driving test again 🤡😏”

- **Semiotics:** 🤡 = “I’m dead” (mock self), 😏 = humour. Both recode failure into comic irony.
- **Pragmatics:** Emojis pragmatically downplay personal failure, inviting sympathetic laughter rather than pity.
- **SIP:** Emojis soften the negative disclosure, allowing relational connection without embarrassment.

Discourse Sample 4 (Millennial, Twitter)

“Finally got the job! 🎉👏😊”

- **Semiotics:** 🎉 = celebration, 👏 = triumph, 😊 = happiness. Straightforward positive signs.
- **Pragmatics:** Emojis intensify joy and highlight personal achievement.

- **SIP:** Emojis replicate cheering gestures, helping convey affect in absence of face-to-face cheering.

Discourse Sample 5 (Gen Z, WhatsApp)

A: “Who still uses 😭 for crying? We use it for laughing now 🤡 ”

B: “True, only my mum still thinks it’s sad 😭😭”

- **Semiotics:** This shows a semiotic shift—😭 has evolved from literal sadness to comic exaggeration among Gen Z.
- **Pragmatics:** They highlight generational misinterpretation: same emoji, different pragmatic force (irony vs sincerity).
- **SIP:** Emojis adapt to Gen Z’s need for playful digital identity; they use them to build in-group codes.

Discourse Sample 6 (Millennial, WhatsApp)

A: “I miss you dear 😭❤️👉”

B: “Miss you too 😭❤️👉”

- **Semiotics:** 😭 = sadness, ❤️👉 = love, 😭❤️👉 = affection. Conventional romantic set.

- **Pragmatics:** Emojis emphasize genuine intimacy. Straightforward pragmatic use.
- **SIP:** Emojis act as proxies for physical intimacy (crying face, kiss, heart).

Discourse Sample 7 (Gen Z, Twitter)

“Bro just cooked indomie at 2am 🔥👹”

- **Semiotics:** 🔥 = tired/dazed, 👹 = “cool,” 🤡 = “funny.” Emojis show a playful re-coding of symbols.
- **Pragmatics:** Communicates humour about late-night activity, shared cultural understanding of “student life.”
- **SIP:** Emojis bring flavour to mundane narration, creating relatability and presence.

Discourse Sample 8 (Millennial, Twitter)

“May her soul rest in peace 🙏🕊️”

- **Semiotics:** 🙏 = prayer, 🕊️ = peace dove. Strong traditional semiotic grounding.
- **Pragmatics:** Emojis maintain solemn tone; pragmatic function is respectful solidarity.
- **SIP:** Emojis substitute religious/ceremonial gestures (praying hands, dove release).

Survey-Style Expansion

- **Gen Z response:**
 - Uses 😬 in 90% of jokes, rarely for sadness.
 - Uses 🤡 as primary humour marker.
 - Thinks ❤️👉 is “cringe” when overused.
- **Millennial response:**
 - Uses 😬 mostly for sadness.
 - Uses 🤡 literally for death.
 - Sees ❤️👉 as universal sign of love.

◆ **Semiotics:** Same emoji (😬, 🤡, ❤️👉) interpreted differently across cohorts.

◆ **Pragmatics:** Gen Z = irony/inside jokes; Millennials = sincerity/straightforwardness.

◆ **SIP:** Emojis compensate differently: Gen Z for creativity and bonding, Millennials for clarity and emotion.

Findings of the Study

The analysis of the data revealed clear generational differences in the use and interpretation of emojis in digital communication. First, it was found that **Generation Z employs emojis more frequently and innovatively than Millennials.** Whereas 80% of Gen Z

respondents indicated that they use emojis “very often,” only 55% of Millennials reported the same. This higher frequency of use among Gen Z demonstrates their reliance on emojis as an integral part of meaning-making in online interaction, in contrast to Millennials who deploy them more selectively.

In terms of **purpose**, the study found that Gen Z primarily use emojis to create humour, irony, and playful exaggeration, with 50% of respondents highlighting this function. On the other hand, Millennials mainly use emojis to express emotions (45%) and clarify tone (35%). This suggests that **Gen Z sees emojis as creative semiotic tools for constructing digital identity and in-group solidarity**, while Millennials treat them as pragmatic devices for preserving clarity and politeness in online conversations.

The findings also showed marked differences in the **most frequently used emojis** between the two cohorts.

Generation Z commonly use 😊, 🤔, 🤪, 🤯, and 🤡. Importantly, many of these emojis are **re-coded**; for example, 🤪 is interpreted not as death but as “I’m dead from laughter,” while 😊, conventionally associated with sadness, is often used to signal laughter or exaggerated frustration. By contrast, Millennials’ most used

emojis—😄, 😊, 😞, 🤝, ❤️, 🍷—retain their conventional meanings, indicating **greater stability in interpretation**. This confirms that emojis undergo generational semiotic shifts, with Gen Z pushing symbolic boundaries and Millennials maintaining traditional usage.

When asked whether emoji meanings remain constant across generations, 70% of Gen Z and 60% of Millennials believed that meanings differ. This supports the finding that **emoji interpretation is socially and generationally constructed** rather than fixed. Misunderstandings between cohorts are therefore common, as seen in discourse samples where millennials interpreted 😞 as literal sadness while Gen Z used it as comic irony.

Despite these differences, both groups strongly affirmed the **usefulness of emojis in digital communication**. Ninety percent of Gen Z and 85% of Millennials agreed that emojis improve communication by adding nuance, emotion, or humour. This suggests that while the **functions of emojis diverge**, their **value as communicative resources is widely shared across generations**.

Discourse samples further highlighted these contrasts. Gen Z tended to employ emojis in creative, ironic, and playful

ways—for example, using 🤔 and 😫 to dramatize exhaustion or failure—while Millennials used emojis in more **direct and affective manners**, such as ❤️ for love, 🙏 for gratitude, and 😞 for sadness. These patterns demonstrate that **Gen Z uses emojis as identity markers and tools of cultural innovation**, whereas **Millennials use them as emotional reinforcers and tone managers**.

Overall, the findings establish that emojis play crucial roles in shaping digital communication across generations but with distinct functions and meanings. **Gen Z favours innovation, irony, and semiotic re-coding**, while **Millennials maintain conventional meanings and employ emojis for clarity and sincerity**. These results highlight the dynamic nature of emojis as semiotic and pragmatic resources in computer-mediated communication.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the divergent roles that emojis play in the digital communication practices of Generation Z and Millennials, and these results resonate strongly with the theoretical perspectives employed. From a **semiotic perspective**, emojis function as signs whose meanings are socially

constructed and context-dependent. The data demonstrated that Generation Z frequently re-codes emojis, such as 🤔 to mean “dead from laughter” and 😞 to signify exaggerated amusement rather than sadness. This pattern confirms Barthes’s (1977) view that signs are not static but acquire new meanings through social usage. For millennials, however, emojis like ❤️, 🙏, and 😞 retain their conventional meanings, thereby reinforcing the idea that symbols can stabilize within certain cultural or generational communities. Thus, the semiotic analysis reveals that Gen Z treats emojis as **dynamic and fluid signs**, while millennials employ them as **stable symbols of affective expression**.

From a **pragmatic perspective**, the findings reflect how emojis serve different communicative purposes across the two generations. Drawing on Grice’s cooperative principle, it is evident that Millennials use emojis to ensure clarity and avoid misinterpretation, as seen in their reliance on 🙏 and 😊 to reinforce intended tones. Gen Z, in contrast, often employs emojis to flout conversational maxims in playful ways that generate irony or humour. For instance, the use of 😞 to express laughter rather than sadness intentionally violates the maxim of quality,

yet it is understood by in-group members as a shared joke. This supports Crystal's (2006) argument that pragmatic competence in digital contexts involves both clarifying meaning and creatively bending norms. Hence, while Millennials' emoji usage demonstrates a concern for **mutual intelligibility**, Gen Z's practice demonstrates a pragmatic orientation toward **innovation and identity performance**.

The **Social Information Processing (SIP) theory** further illuminates these differences by emphasizing how users adapt digital resources to build relationships and convey emotions in text-based communication. The findings show that both generations rely heavily on emojis to enrich their messages, but with different emphases. Millennials, consistent with Walther's (1992) claims, employ emojis to reduce the limitations of text-only communication by supplementing emotional cues. In contrast, Gen Z adapts emojis not just to compensate for missing cues but also to create **novel relational markers** that reflect shared humour, irony, and group identity. This indicates that SIP theory must be extended beyond compensatory functions to account for the **creative, identity-driven use of emojis** in digital communities, particularly among younger users.

These findings align with and expand upon prior empirical studies. For instance, Li (2020) reported that Gen Z tends to innovate with emojis, while Millennials preserve conventional meanings, a trend confirmed in this research. Similarly, Park and Lee (2021) highlighted generational gaps in emoji interpretation that can lead to misunderstandings, a phenomenon observed in this study where millennials misinterpreted 😞 as sadness while Gen Z intended it as humour. However, unlike earlier works that primarily focused on frequency and perception, this study integrates semiotic and pragmatic perspectives to show **how generational groups actively construct meaning through emojis**. This theoretical synthesis establishes the gap that this study fills: by combining semiotics, pragmatics, and SIP theory, it provides a more nuanced understanding of emoji usage as both a **meaning-making resource** and a **cultural identity marker** across generations.

In sum, the discussion underscores that while both Gen Z and millennials perceive emojis as valuable tools in digital communication, their functions and meanings diverge significantly. For millennials, emojis reinforce clarity and sincerity, while for Gen Z, they serve as playful, ironic, and identity-laden signs. These insights advance our theoretical

understanding of emojis by situating them at the intersection of semiotics, pragmatics, and social information processing, thereby showing how generational cohorts shape and reshape the evolving grammar of digital communication.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the role of emojis in digital communication, focusing on the comparative usage patterns of Generation Z and Millennials. The findings revealed that while both generations consider emojis essential tools for enriching online communication, their functions and interpretations differ significantly. Generation Z employs emojis creatively, often re-coding their meanings for humour, irony, and identity construction, whereas millennials rely on emojis in more conventional ways to clarify tone, reinforce emotion, and maintain mutual understanding. The theoretical lenses of semiotics, pragmatics, and Social Information Processing (SIP) theory helped illuminate these differences, showing that emojis function simultaneously as signs, pragmatic strategies, and adaptive tools for relational communication in digital contexts.

The contribution of this study lies in its integrated theoretical approach, which goes beyond previous research that focused narrowly on frequency of use or perception. By demonstrating how emojis are reinterpreted semiotically, deployed pragmatically, and adapted relationally, this research provides a holistic account of their communicative role across generations. It also highlights the dynamic nature of digital symbols, which are constantly reshaped by cultural and generational forces.

In conclusion, emojis are not trivial or secondary features of digital interaction but are central to how users construct meaning, express identity, and manage relationships online. The study affirms that while Millennials anchor their communication in stability and clarity, Generation Z embraces fluidity, creativity, and playful innovation, thereby re-shaping the semiotic and pragmatic landscape of digital communication.

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