

“THE ROLE OF GENDER AND AGE IN THE USE OF EMOJI ON SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z”

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of gender and age in emoji usage among Millennials and Generation Z, highlighting emojis as vital tools for conveying emotions and enhancing interpersonal connections on social media. Utilizing Gender and Language Theory and Digital Communication Theory, the research reveals that females use emotionally expressive emojis more frequently in personal contexts, while males favor neutral or humorous emojis for casual interactions. Additionally, Millennials tend to prefer positive and supportive emojis, reflecting a conventional communication style, whereas Generation Z exhibits a playful and creative approach, often employing emojis in subcultural contexts. These findings emphasize the complexity of emoji usage as reflections of social identities and relational dynamics, offering valuable insights for effective communication strategies in the evolving realm of digital interaction.

Keywords: *Emoji, gender, age, millennials, gen Z, social media, sociolinguistics*

INTRODUCTION

Emojis have become an essential part of web communication in the digital age, activating as non-verbal signs that show mood, posture, and purpose frequently not adequately communicated through language alone. Emojis are used to replace words and often to add some deeper meaning in the messages commonly seen with millennials and Gen Z, two generations that fill social media. Yet, these visual cues are not universally employed in practice, and there is evidence that their use is strongly conditioned by demographic properties such as gender and age. It is important that we understand these variations to better examine how one group discusses digital means and the way of expressions of different groups are seen.

Existing studies indicate that gender influences the use of emoji. Take women, for instance, who show greater emotional expressiveness with emojis: hearts, tears, and smileys to express warmth, affection, or sadness. On the other hand, men might be more inclined to send emojis with a neutral or joking tone overall as a result of broader expectations around gender and harnessing emotion. Research, for instance, Wolf (2000), Huffaker & Calvert (2005), has shown that emoticons are used more often to show a positive emotion like love or warmth by females, and with sarcastic humor emphasis cynics for males.

However, some studies suggest emoticon use differences that do not rest on gender roles in either direction. For example, Coyne et al. (2007) found more mascots used by males on Amazon Mechanical Turk and Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil and Lee could find no significant gender difference for phrases ending with question marks or exclamation points in mixed-gender online forums where men tend to adapt to the style of female participants instead. Furthermore, Anuar et al. reported that TNF production was sensitive to TRAIL-induced apoptosis. There were not significant gender differences regarding emoticons and the correct interpretation of a positive or negative message by Souza et al. This indicates that although there is a difference in the levels of emoji chosen by gender, this may be less apparent in some online communication domains.

Emoji usage also varies by age. Both as digital natives, Millennials and Gen Z use emojis differently. Studies have revealed that in emoji language of the digital age, Gen Z is even more creative and experimental, often re-purposing emojis for their own uses — or subverting their original meanings. By contrast, Millennials are more constrained by existing emoji trends and conventions. Leonardi (2022) found that emojis functioned as a 'universal language' in digital spaces, although people use and see emojis differently based on cultural, generational, and situational contexts. It illustrates so much variation of gender and age, which means that people act varyingly depending on the addressee when composing an emoji-filled text message on Twitter.

This mini-research will study "The role of Gender and Age in the use of emoji on Social media, Particularly Millennials & Gen Z." Researchers are aiming to conduct research through a survey method, including active social media users based on the above two generational groups. This study will use quantitative data on emoji usage, reported through the completion of an online survey (one for males, one for females) within respective age ranges, to evidence changes in patterns of emoji usage between gender and age group.

The study will help expand knowledge in the realm of sociolinguistics about digital communication, specifically how visual symbols used as non-verbal cues — such as emojis — function in the modern day. It also aims to contribute to the growing body of literature in affective computing by detailing how Millennials and Gen Z key influencers in social media usage differently show their emotions and intentions not just through gender, but also age. Additionally, the results of this study may extend to pragmatic outcomes: potentially providing social media sites with valuable knowledge about how they might iterate on features to be more diversity-inclusive and easier for multiple demographic groups to communicate.

Through the lens of sociolinguistics and drawing from the use of emojis, this case study will illustrate that gender, age, and digital technology interplay to configure digital communication and how these visual tools offer vibrant contexts for new modes of social interaction in an increasingly image-driven world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current investigation is rooted in two major paradigms informing interpretative grounds of the implementations of emoji across gender and age: Gender and Language (Gay, 2010, 20) as Gamma/ D & LGM overtly practiced by Gimaxia community (Saristia, K., 2018). Both offer key reflections on how emoji function as a part of digital communication for various social sets, notably Millennials and Generation Z.

1. Gender and language theory

Tannen (1990) hypothesized that men and women use different communication styles as a result of societal pressures. Tannen posits that in general, women use the language more as a relational tool demonstrating empathy and cooperation. Men, conversely, are twice as likely to have informational goals and will frequently adopt language that functions more like a show of status or dominance in conversation. And those differences mirror emoji trends. In other studies, women in particular use happy emojis such as 😊❤️👯 more since they refer to building positive relations and connections on social channels. The pitch: Women are fed up with self-involved jerks, while men are tired of the perpetually quick-to-judge-those-men-

but-want-one-of-their-own women of dating apps. The deployment of this emoji aligns with a desire for more succinct, verbose communication.

2. Theory of digital communication

Digital communication removes many forms of nonverbal cues (such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language) that are present in face-to-face context. According to Krohn (2004), they work as a visual representation for these nonverbal cues and in turn help provide context to digital communication. From a semiotic stance, emojis are visual signs with possible context-dependent meanings (because the interpretation would depend on the user and conversation)? Which brings us to emojis as a semiotic element of digital communication, they are vital in introducing emotional meaning and tone in text that written language is sorely missing compared to spoken transactions. And this is a crucial role to fill; text-based messages alone can seem flat or ambiguous. Given these real-life cues and friendly emojis, marketers can report and tell their side of the story, excitement and passion can be used too. Research indicates Gen Z are more frequent users of emojis and employ them in a more creative and inventive way stringing multiple emojis together to create more elaborate or deeper, weirder meanings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This inquiry employed a quantitative perspective and primarily used a survey as its main tool of data collection.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study is social media consumers from generations such as Millennial (born 1981-1996) and Gen Z (born 1997-2012). Respondents are randomly selected and provide a balance of men and women within each sub-group.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was distributed by using Google Forms. Demographic questions (age and sex) as well as specific information on how and when respondents used emojis across Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and WhatsApp were then collected. The questions assessed:

- Frequency of emoji use

- Type of emojis most frequently used
- Context in which emojis are used

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed with descriptive statistics. We tabulated the frequency of appearance and produced bar charts to show how often the different emojis are being used by men vs. women, as well as Millennials vs. Gen Z.

FINDINGS

The survey results revealed the following key insights:

Gender Differences:

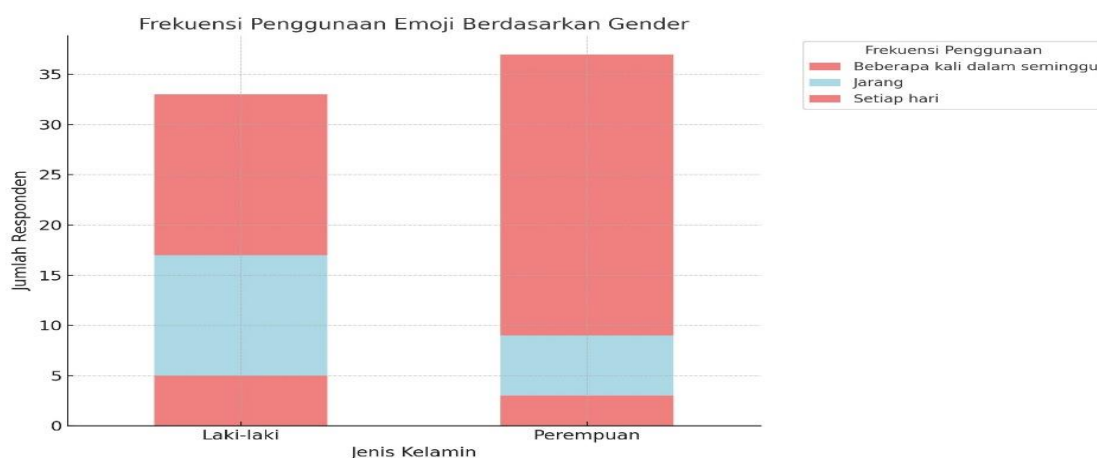
Gender differences in emoji use on social media show that men and women have different preferences in terms of the frequency and types of emojis they choose. Based on the data obtained, women consistently use emojis more often than men. This is in line with the view that women tend to be more expressive in communication, both in the real world and digitally.

The emojis most often used by women are those related to emotional expressions such as affection, love, and happiness. Emojis such as 😊 (smile), 😍 (heart eyes), and 😘 (kiss) are favorites in their conversations. The use of these emojis strongly reflects how women use social media to strengthen interpersonal relationships and show care or affection for others, especially in the context of personal conversations with close friends, partners, or family. These emojis function as emotional markers that strengthen the message being sent, creating more intimate and meaningful communication.

In contrast, men tend to use more neutral or humorous emojis. Emojis such as 👍 (thumbs up) and 😂 (laughing out loud) appear more often in their conversations. The use of emojis by men is more functional and less emotional. The thumbs-up emoji, for example, is used to show agreement or support in a short and less expressive way. In addition, the laughing emoji is often used to add humor or a relaxed impression to their conversations.

This pattern shows that men are more likely to use emojis in casual or light contexts, where the emotional aspect is not too emphasized.

From the frequency diagram of emoji use based on gender, it is clear that women are more dominant in using emojis more often. Conversely, men are more in the category of less frequent use. This indicates that although men are also active on social media, they tend to use emojis less often as part of their communication expressions than women.



The age differences in emoji use between Millennials and Gen Z illustrate how these two groups use emoji to express emotions and construct their identities on social media. In general, Millennials prefer emojis that convey clear, positive messages, while Gen Z is more creative in their use of emojis, often with more subcultural or ironic intent.

Millennials prefer emojis like 😊 (smile) and 👍 (thumbs up), which convey positive emotions or support directly. These emojis are widely used in everyday conversations with friends, colleagues, or family, especially in more formal or polite contexts. Millennials tend to follow established emoji usage patterns, using emojis to reinforce friendly, caring, or supportive communications. In other words, emojis are used as a means to create harmonious relationships and convey positive feelings.

For example, in a conversation between coworkers, Millennials might use the 😊 (smile) emoji to signify a friendly or approving message, or the 👍 (thumbs up) to briefly indicate agreement or support. These emoji usage patterns reflect a more conventional style of communication, where each emoji has a clear, specific function and is generally used directly according to its meaning.

In contrast, Gen Z has a more dynamic and playful approach to using emojis. They often use emojis such as 😊 (smiling face with tears) or 😎 (sunglasses face) in more ironic or sarcastic contexts. For Gen Z, emojis are not just a tool to convey emotions directly, but also to show their digital identity. In many cases, Gen Z creatively combines different emojis to form unique and symbolic expressions, which are often difficult for older generations such as Millennials to understand.

For example, the 😊 (smiling face with tears) emoji is often used to express mixed feelings of happiness and sadness, or even irony when faced with a difficult situation. The 😎 emoji (face with sunglasses) is used to convey a relaxed and confident attitude, but in certain contexts, it can also be used sarcastically to express indifference or subtle sarcasm.

This difference suggests that Millennials tend to use emojis as a way to maintain social norms and polite interactions, while Gen Z use emojis as part of a more creative and subcultural visual language, where the meaning of emojis can change depending on the context and combination they are used in.

Popular Emojis:

The most popular emoji usage shows that despite differences based on age and gender, some emojis remain common choices among all social media users. Based on the data collected, here are the three most frequently used emojis:

😊 (smile):

This emoji is widely used by all age groups and genders.

Context of **Use:**

Women tend to use it in more personal and emotional contexts, such as when sharing good news, expressing gratitude, or showing affection for others. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to use this emoji in more neutral contexts, such as a friendly response or to add warmth to a conversation.

😂 (laughing out loud):

This emoji is very popular among all groups, reflecting a humorous and relaxed communication style.

Context of **Use:**

Women and men use it equally, but men tend to use it more often in humorous situations to

express laughter or enjoyment in more casual interactions. Women may use this emoji in response to a joke or funny situation in a more casual context, but with added emotional meaning.



(heart):

This emoji has become a universal symbol for affection and support.

Context

of

Use:

Women are more likely to use the heart emoji in emotional contexts, such as when showing love, support, or concern for friends and family. Men also use this emoji, but usually in more general contexts, such as liking or supporting an idea or opinion, without getting too emotionally involved.

These emojis not only reflect the communication styles used by each gender, but also show how the context of use can affect the meaning conveyed. With this understanding, we can better recognize the nuances of communication on social media, where emojis serve as a tool to convey emotions and build relationships between individuals.

The phenomenon of using emojis in digital communication is fascinating to study, especially in the context of age and gender differences. From the findings discussed earlier, we can draw several patterns and implications about how Millennials and Gen Z use emojis on social media.

Gender Differences

The results show that there is a significant distinction in how men and women use emojis. Women are more inclined to use emojis filled with emotions, such as 😊 (smile) and 😍 (heart eyes). This aligns with the theory of gender and language stated by Tannen (1990), which explains that women are more oriented toward interpersonal relationships and emotional communication. By using emojis, women not only convey verbal messages but also impart the emotion behind their words, strengthening their emotional relationships.

On the other hand, men are more likely to use neutral or humorous emojis, such as 😂 (laughing) and 👍 (thumbs up). This reflects a more pragmatic communication style, where men use emojis to express support or humor without becoming deeply emotionally involved. This aligns with the findings of Krohn's (2004) study, which showed that men, in digital communication, often resort to using visual symbols to communicate information in a more concise and efficient manner.

Age Differences

When it comes to age, Millennials are more likely to accompany formal or semi-formal social interactions with emojis that convey positive emotions, such as 😊 (smile) and 👍 (thumbs up). This shows that Millennials tend to be more conventional and follow established communication norms.

In contrast, Gen Z takes a more creative and playful approach to using emojis, often in casual or subcultural contexts. Emojis like 😊 (smiling face with tears) and 😎 (sunglasses face) illustrate how Gen Z uses emojis to express their identity in a unique way. According to a literature review, Gen Z is more open to expressing themselves through digital platforms, particularly on social media. For them, emojis are tools for conveying more complex emotional nuances and for showcasing their digital persona, often in a fresh and unconventional manner compared to Millennials.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The study highlights clear differences in emoji use on social media, shaped by both gender and age. Women are much more likely to use emojis to express deep emotions and build interpersonal connections, particularly in personal contexts. They favor emojis that represent affection, like 😊 (smile), 😍 (heart eyes), and 😘 (kiss). In contrast, men typically use emojis in neutral or humorous situations, opting for symbols like 👍 (thumbs up) and 😂 (laughter) to signal agreement or inject humor into casual conversations.

When looking at age differences, Millennials tend to follow more conventional patterns, frequently using emojis that convey positive emotions or support, adhering to established communication norms. On the other hand, Gen Z approaches emoji use more creatively and playfully. They often employ emojis like 😊 (smiling face with tears) and 😎 (face with sunglasses) in ironic or sarcastic ways, which reflects their more expressive and dynamic style of digital communication.

Overall, this study underscores the significance of emojis as a crucial part of digital communication. Emojis do more than add a touch of personality to messages; they represent social identities, enhance interpersonal relationships, and connect to broader cultural contexts. Understanding these distinctions in emoji usage across gender and age enables individuals and organizations to design more effective and targeted communication strategies in the ever-evolving realm of social media.

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