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The Semantics of Social Media Reactions among Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z: An Exploratory Sequential Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

In the fast-changing world of social media, reactions, including "like," "love," "haha," "wow," "care," "sad," and "angry," are not only icons but also a modern vocabulary of emotions. To what degree do different age demographics comprehend and utilize these phrases within the linguistic framework? This research reveals a significant gap in understanding how emojis are interpreted across different age cohorts, including Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. To bridge this gap, a sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach was utilized, beginning with qualitative theme analysis from interviews, followed by a quantitative survey with 660 respondent across four age demographics. The findings indicate notable

generational differences: Millennials and Gen Z interpret reactions with greater flexibility, irony, humor, or intense emotion, while Baby Boomers and Gen X regard them literally as direct emotional support. Moreover, they use these emojis to downplay the most severe judgments and bring in social bonding. These findings have implications for the growth of intergenerational communication, providing platform providers, marketers, and educators with essential knowledge to overcome generational differences in online contexts.

Keywords: Social Media Reactions, Emoji Interpretation, Generational Differences

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of digital communication, social media reactions such as "like," "love," "haha," "wow," "care," "sad," and "angry" have transcended their initial functions to become a nuanced vocabulary of emotions, social cues, and interpersonal dynamics. Each generational cohort—Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z—engages with these reactions differently, shaped by unique historical, technological, and cultural experiences.

Previous studies have highlighted generational distinctions in digital communication behaviors. For instance, Gen Z in India utilizes social media for education, entertainment, shopping, and socialization more intensively than Millennials, though both generations equally seek information online (Mude & Undale, 2023). Gen Z users also view social media comments and reactions as tools to assess public sentiment (Chen & Ha, 2023). Meanwhile, Millennials and Gen Xers employ reactions to affirm social belonging and competence (Krishen et al., 2016), while Baby Boomers are often more cautious, influenced by age-related stereotypes and intergenerational tensions amplified during events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Meisner, 2020).

Despite these insights, there remains a notable gap in academic literature specifically exploring how different generations interpret and utilize social media reactions within a linguistic and semiotic framework. Existing studies often focus broadly on generational media use without examining the semantics of reactions as distinct communicative acts. Furthermore, misunderstandings between generations often stem not from a true "generation gap," but rather from misperceptions of opposing generational attitudes (Andersson, 1973).

This study addresses this gap by examining the use and interpretation of top social media reactions among Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z. Anchored in Generational Cohort Theory (Strauss & Howe, 1991) and Semiotic Theory (Barthes, 1977), it investigates how historical experiences and cultural contexts influence the semantics of digital reactions. Understanding these differences is crucial for enhancing intergenerational communication and informing strategies for educators, platform designers, and marketers.

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How do baby boomers, Gen Xs, Millennials, and Gen Zs rank the reactions in terms of preference and usage?

2. How do baby boomers, Gen Xs, Millennials, and Gen Zs interpret and utilize the top social media reactions based on the context of its usage and individual experiences?

3. Are there generational differences in the use, interpretation, and assignment of meanings of the reactions among baby boomers, Gen Xs, Millennials, and Gen Zs?

Review of Related Literature

The rapid growth of social media has transformed the way generations communicate, and symbols like emojis and reactions play a large role in online expression. This study will consider two frameworks that have been applied to understand how each generational cohort, whether it is the Baby Boomer, Gen X, Millennials, or Gen Z, interprets and exploits reactions on various social media sites.

According to Generational Cohort Theory, society events and technological changes constitute each generation's collective identity, attitudes, and behavior (Strauss & Howe, 1991). This theory explains why Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z respond differently to new forms of communication, such as social media reactions. These include "likes" and emojis, which are both a way of expressing emotion and a shortcut for confirming social bonds and participating in discourse.

According to Parry and Urwin (2011), it is values and preferences of a generation rooted in formative experiences common to a cohort that guide patterns of digital interaction. Baby Boomers may, for instance, react on social media as a means of expressing relatively simple emotions or showing support because they are often less savvy in digital communication than other generations. Gen X, having adopted the culture of digital communications when they were adults, resort to reactions to complement and temper written text. Millennials and Gen Z are native speakers of the digital culture, so the emojis and reactions are already part of their vocabulary. This also includes complex and nuanced means of expression which are more than sentimental.

Use of Emoji and Reaction Among Generations

Age further influences the interpretation of emojis according to Herring and Dainas (2020). "Younger generations tend to interpret emojis more readily as tone and mood markers than as literal meaning.". The Millennial and Gen Z populations have

really mastered the application of reactions to create sophisticated meaning using, for example, the laughing emoji to indicate the text is meant to be funny or ironic. In contrast, Baby Boomers and Gen X are often more conservative in their reaction use and tend to interpret them more as a means to italicize or underline the emotion or tone of the text itself and not necessarily as ornamental or playfully intended.

Semiotic Theory: Digital Symbols of Reactions and Emojis

The semiotic theory explains the way symbols may mean otherwise and illustrates the way the users impose their own meaning that is generationally induced upon emojis and reactions. In the words of Barthes (1977), "the meaning of signs or symbols lies not in them itself but in its culture." Taking this to the realm of digital reactions, one finds different meanings as dictated by variables of generations and cultures.

Reactions as a Symbol of Social Bond and Emotional Support

As noted by Spottswood and Wohn (2019), social media reactions, such as on Facebook and Instagram, are ways of showing perceived social support where the user can react to a post in a way that endorses social ties with no need for further verbal exchange. Younger users most of the time use the reactions not only to give approval but also to portray irony or add a playfulness to the post. Reactions of Baby Boomers and Gen X are used directly, communicatively-to express empathy or approval-than mood indicators.

Sumner et al. (2020) states that a set of reactions, from "like" to "heart," convey different emotional inflections and influence how users interpret interactions on the platform. Baby Boomers and Gen X tend to favor reactions that express agreement or general approval, whereas Millennials and Gen Z view reactions as fluid emojis that can be used to convey sarcasm, irony, or nuanced emotions.

Generational Patterns in Social Media Responses: Roles and Differences Social Bonding and Phatic Use of Reactions

The use of reactions as phatic communication, that is, language intended to strengthen social bonds rather than communicate information, is widespread among all generations. A thumbs-up or heart reaction can be a simple way for Baby Boomers to show support, and be a phatic marker requiring little interpretation (Spottswood & Wohn, 2019). Millennials and Gen Z, however, use reactions more diversely and creatively in a way to serve as expressive amplifiers. Herring and Dainas (2020) argued

that these ages might also use the same emoji several times, as is with the crying-laughing face, just to amplify emotional cues, therefore making the communication style highly visually expressive and performative.

Decorative and Aesthetic Use of Reactions

The younger generations use reactions for their functionality as well as for the beauty of them. According to Parry and Urwin (2011), one possible reason why the younger generation likes using reactions is due to the visual appeal in storytelling. For these audiences, a reaction adds aesthetic content to a message and may therefore be used solely as digital decoration that reinforces or signals. In this respect they are different from the much more instrumental use of emoji by Baby Boomers.

For Gen Z and Millennials, digital reactions increase the extent of emotional expression further, and an effect to visually add onto the reaction also occurs (Sumner et al., 2020). Repeating an emoji as a reaction (such as a heart or laughing face) can take it into a state that is considered heightened, almost as an extension of oral language by having vocal emphasis. Younger audiences would frequently employ such usage when utter excitement or amusement could be demonstrated with sympathy-this is among one of the critical concerns regarding Semiotic Theory.

Theoretical Framework

This study anchors to the Generational Cohort Theory. The concept of generational cohorts was first notably explored by Karl Mannheim in 1923 which was later expanded and popularized by William Strauss and Neil Howe in 1991. The Generational Cohort Theory is a sociological concept that posits individuals born within the same period and who experience similar significant historical events and social changes during their formative years (typically adolescence and early adulthood) develop a shared set of values, attitudes, and behaviors. This shared cultural and historical context forms the basis of their generational identity. The theory is grounded in the idea that these collective experiences shape a generational cohort's worldview, influencing their responses to social, economic, political, and technological changes.

According to Okros (2020), the Generational Cohort Theory (GCT) explains how each generation's psychological and sociological traits are influenced by a variety of elements, such as common historical events, social interactions, and birth year. Furthermore, the moral standards and values that bind a generation together are impacted by historical occurrences such as the industrial revolution, political movements, and technological breakthroughs (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). The Generational Cohort Theory can then help explain why Baby Boomers, Gen X,

Millennials, and Gen Z might have distinct reactions to Reels, reflecting their unique and historical backgrounds.

In addition, this study will be supported by the Semiotic Theory which provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing how meaning is constructed through signs and symbols. In semiotics, anything that conveys meanings is a sign. In this study, semiotic analysis will be used to analyze the signs, symbols, and meanings in Reels content and explore how different generations interpret and assign meaning to these elements. Integrating Generational Cohort Theory and Semiotics into this study will allow the researchers to explore how generational differences influence the interpretation of Reels content through the lens of signs and symbols.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, appropriate for investigating phenomena where existing measurement tools are insufficient (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The design involved two distinct phases: qualitative exploration followed by quantitative validation. In the qualitative phase, thematic analysis of interviews identified core patterns and interpretations of social media reactions among different generational cohorts. Insights from this phase informed the development of a structured survey instrument administered in the subsequent quantitative phase.

This approach allows for the initial discovery of rich, contextual meanings in participants' own words, followed by statistical validation across a broader sample, thus enhancing both the depth and generalizability of findings.

Research Subjects and Locale

Participants were drawn from Region XI, Philippines, and represented the four targeted generational cohorts: Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), Generation X (born 1965–1980), Millennials (born 1981–1996), and Generation Z (born 1997–2012). Eligibility criteria included the ability to operate mobile devices and active experience with social media platforms, particularly Facebook.

A total of 660 respondents participated, ensuring heterogeneous representation. Recruitment was conducted through convenience sampling supplemented by stratification to balance generational representation. All participants provided informed consent, and ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly observed.

Research Instrument

The quantitative survey instrument was developed based on a systematic review of existing studies (Bai et al., 2019; Boutet et al., 2021; Schneebeli, 2017) and further refined using the qualitative findings of the study. Items measured dimensions such as the lexical substitution role of emojis, emotional signaling, tone clarification, phatic communication, and aesthetic usage.

The questionnaire employed Likert-scale items, capturing agreement levels on various functions of emoji and reaction use. Internal consistency reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's alpha, yielding a value of 0.84, indicating good reliability (Campo-Arias & Oviedo, 2008).

Data Collection Procedures

The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews conducted across generational groups, recorded, and transcribed for thematic analysis. Themes emerging from these interviews directly informed the design of the survey instrument.

In the quantitative phase, the survey was distributed both online and face-to-face, depending on respondents' accessibility. Data were cleaned and checked for completeness prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) method. For quantitative data, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were computed, and inferential analyses were conducted using Welch's ANOVA to account for potential heterogeneity of variances. Post-hoc comparisons utilized the Tukey HSD test to explore intergenerational differences in greater detail.

This methodological integration provides a robust exploration of how generational cohorts use and interpret social media reactions, with implications for digital communication theory and practice.

Results and Discussion

Results from Qualitative Data

Table 1 presents the frequencies of each generation represented in the study. Of the overall sample population of 660 respondents, the largest segment was Generation Z at 46.60% (n=307). This is then followed by millennials, taking 21.50% of all the respondents (n=142). The Baby Boomer Generation was at 15.70% (n=104) who were

also represented, but to a low extent. Generation X was at 16.20% (n=107) with an almost balanced percentage in the middle-aged age group. In general, the generational representation of the study in Facebook Reacts was heterogeneous, dominated mostly by the Generation Z group. Analysis of the gender distribution among the respondents indicated that 428 females comprise 64.90% of the entire sample size. The males constituted a mere 232 individuals and hence accounted for only 35.10%. The cumulative percentage is then ensured to be at 100.00% for the gender. It therefore means the data is all-inclusive.

Table 1: Frequency of each generation

Generation	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
The Baby Boomer Generation (born 1946-1964)	104	15.70%	15.70%
Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	307	46.60%	62.30%
Millennials (born 1981-1996)	142	21.50%	83.80%
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	107	16.20%	100.00%

Table 2 shows the instrument's internal consistency which was confirmed using reliability analysis. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess reliability. Cronbach alpha indicates the extent to which the items in a questionnaire are related to each other, assessing the internal consistency of the items (Kotian et al., 2022). The results of the reliability test show Cronbach's alpha of 0.84 for the overall scale, which falls within the range of $0.8 \leq \alpha \leq 0.9$. This indicates a good level of internal consistency (Campo-Arias & Oviedo, 2008). This suggests that items together measure an integrated construct concerning the semantics of reactions and emojis.

Table 2: Scale reliability statistics

Scale	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
	0.840	Good

Table 3 highlights descriptive statistics on the use of reactions and emojis as lexical substitutes and thematic elements in communication. Emojis as word substitutes scored a mean of 3.71 (SD = 0.551), with a mode of 3.50, indicating a prevalent perception of their effectiveness in replacing words. Within this theme, "Reactions/Emojis as a Replacement for Words" had the highest mean score of 3.82

(SD = 0.774), showing strong agreement among respondents. Emojis also play a role in indicating emotional intention, evidenced by a high mean score of 3.84 (SD = 0.744), and their capability to enhance emotional or situational context is supported by findings from Cramer (2016). However, emojis received moderate scores as a universal language (mean = 3.60, SD = 0.614) and as tools for tone clarification (mean = 3.32, SD = 0.659). These scores suggest a more limited perception of emojis' universality and their ability to clarify tone in communication.

Although emojis enhance social bonding, their effectiveness in creating real connections is weaker compared to facial expressions in direct communication (Weib et al., 2019). For instance, the "Phatic Function and Social Bonding" had a mean of 2.86 (SD = 0.632), with some agreement on their role in fostering empathy and connection (mean = 2.55, SD = 0.882). Emojis are seen as aesthetic tools, with moderate acceptance reflected in the "Aesthetic and Decorative Use" theme (mean = 3.09, SD = 0.541). While they effectively convey emotions and enrich digital communication, their limitations include less efficacy in softening criticism or making requests less direct. Additionally, the interpretation of emojis varies across contexts, reflecting the nuanced and evolving role they play in modern communication.

Table 3: Descriptives of themes and subthemes

	N	Mean	Mode	SD	Variance
1. Reactions/Emojis as Lexical Substitutes	660	3.71	3.50	0.551	0.304
Reactions/Emojis as a Replacement for Words	660	3.82	4.80	0.774	0.598
Reactions/Emojis as a Universal Language	660	3.6	3.80	0.614	0.377
2. Reactions/Emojis as Indicators of Illocutionary Force	660	3.58	3.00	0.568	0.323
Reactions/Emojis for Tone Clarification	660	3.32	3.00	0.659	0.434
Emoji to Signal Emotional Intent	660	3.84	4.40	0.744	0.554
3. Mitigation of Negative or Imposing Remarks	660	2.98	3.00	0.639	0.408
Softening Critical Remarks	660	3.12	3.00	0.717	0.514

Making Requests or Orders Less Imposing	660	2.84	3.00	0.771	0.594
4. Emoticons and Emoji as Emphasis Markers	660	3.32	3.00	0.527	0.278
Strengthening Emotional Tone	660	3.55	3.00	0.728	0.53
Reinforcing Verbal Statements	660	3.09	3.00	0.584	0.341
5. Phatic Function and Social Bonding	660	2.86	3.00	0.632	0.4
Creating Empathy and Connection	660	2.55	1.60	0.882	0.778
Enhancing Social Presence	660	3.17	3.00	0.74	0.548
6. Aesthetic and Decorative Use of Emoji	660	3.09	3.00	0.541	0.293
Visual Enhancement	660	3.24	3.00	0.724	0.524
Expressing Personality through Emoji	660	2.94	3.00	0.612	0.374

Table 4 displays the One-Way ANOVA (Welch's) test findings, which show notable variations among the different types of reactions. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine whether there are significant differences in the usage and interpretation of different generational groups (Larson, 2008).

The study found significant differences in how emojis are used across various functions of communication, particularly as lexical substitutes and indicators of illocutionary force. Emojis effectively communicate emotions and meaning, with older generations avoiding negative emotional expressions, while younger users better understand subtle emoji contexts (Memon & Ansari, 2022). Emojis also serve as nonverbal cues, influencing affective and behavioral responses (Erle et al., 2021). When used to soften negative remarks, emojis like "haha" often lighten the tone, though friendly emojis can be misinterpreted as sarcastic. Additionally, younger participants, especially women, frequently use emojis as emphasis markers to convey emotions, while older generations prefer straightforward emoji use (Prada et al., 2018). ANOVA results also showed significant differences in emoji use for social bonding,

with generational and gender variations impacting their interpretation (Aljasir, 2023; Liu, 2023). However, there was no significant difference in the aesthetic and decorative use of emojis, though Japanese teens use them to express their aesthetic selves (Sugiyama, 2015). Overall, these findings highlight the complexity and context-dependent nature of emoji use in digital communication across generations.

Table 4: One-way ANOVA (Welch's)

Themes	F	df1	df2	p
Reactions/Emojis as Lexical Substitutes	61.03	3	265	<.001
Reactions/Emojis as Indicators of Illocutionary Force	39.22	3	264	<.001
Mitigation of Negative or Imposing Remarks	5.17	3	287	0.002
Emoticons and Emoji as Emphasis Markers	10.11	3	268	<.001
Phatic Function and Social Bonding	4.54	3	278	0.004
Aesthetic and Decorative Use of Emoji	1.66	3	296	0.176

Post hoc analysis of variance (ANOVA) refers to statistical procedures conducted after an initial ANOVA test to determine which specific group means are significantly different from each other. These analyses are crucial for drawing detailed conclusions from experimental data. Post-hoc data analysis offers benefits and limitations, depending on the type of data and the context in which it is used (Curran-Everett & Milgrom, 2013).

Table 5.1. Tukey Post-Hoc Test – Reactions/Emojis as Lexical Substitutes					
Generations		The Baby (born 1946-1964)	Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Generation X (born 1965-1980)
The Baby Boomer Generation (born 1946-1964)	Mean difference	—	-0.645***	-0.5619***	-0.161
	p-value	—	<.001	<.001	0.08
Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Mean difference		—	0.0833	0.484***
	p-value		—	0.337	<.001
Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Mean difference			—	0.401***
	p-value			—	<.001
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	Mean difference				—
	p-value				—

The Tukey Post-Hoc Test results, as shown in Table 5.1, reveal significant differences in emoji usage across generational cohorts. Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) use emojis significantly less than Generation Z (born 1997-2012), with a mean difference of -0.645 ($p < .001$), likely due to differing levels of familiarity with technology and social media norms. Similarly, Baby Boomers used emojis less than Millennials (born 1981-1996), with a mean difference of -0.5619 ($p < .001$), confirming that younger generations are more open to emoji use in digital communication. However, the difference between Baby Boomers and Generation X (born 1965-1980) was insignificant, with a mean difference of -0.161 ($p = 0.08$), suggesting a similarity in their communication patterns. In contrast, no significant difference was found between Generation Z and Millennials in emoji usage (mean difference = 0.0833, $p = 0.337$), showing both younger generations embrace emojis as tools for expression. Generation Z used emojis more frequently as lexical substitutes than Generation X, with a mean difference of 0.484 ($p < .001$), further highlighting a generational gap. Millennials also used emojis significantly more than Generation X (mean difference = 0.401, $p < .001$), possibly due to their increased exposure to digital communications during their formative years. Younger generations tend to use emojis frequently and

favorably, especially in branding contexts (Prada et al., 2018), and are more likely to respond positively to brands that incorporate emojis in their messaging (Dürscheid & Haralambous, 2021; Cavalheiro et al., 2022).

Table 5.2. Tukey Post-Hoc Test – Reactions/Emojis as Indicators of Illocutionary Force

Generations		The Baby (born 1946-1964)	Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Generation X (born 1965-1980)
The Baby Boomer Generation (born 1946-1964)	Mean difference	—	-0.525***	-0.340***	-0.5962***
	p-value	—	<.001	<.001	<.001
Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Mean difference		—	0.185**	-0.0713
	p-value		—	0.004	0.632
Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Mean difference			—	-0.2565**
	p-value			—	0.001
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	Mean difference				—
	p-value				—

The Tukey Post-Hoc Test results for the use of reactions/emojis as indicators of illocutionary force revealed significant generational differences. Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) used reactions/emojis significantly less than Generation Z (born 1997-2012), with a mean difference of -0.525 ($p < 0.001$). A similar trend was observed between Baby Boomers and Millennials (born 1981-1996), with a mean difference of -0.340 ($p < 0.001$), and between Baby Boomers and Generation X (born 1965-1980), where the difference was -0.5962 ($p < 0.001$), further confirming that Baby Boomers use emojis less frequently than younger generations. Generation Z used more reactions/emojis compared to Millennials, with a mean difference of 0.185 ($p = 0.004$), while the difference between Generation Z and Generation X was statistically

insignificant (mean difference = -0.0713, p = 0.632), indicating similar usage between the two. Millennials, however, used significantly more reactions/emojis than Generation X, with a mean difference of -0.2565 (p = 0.001). These results suggest that younger generations tend to use emojis more frequently than older ones. Younger adults also tend to use more negative emotive emojis, while older adults are less likely to do so. Additionally, Garcia et al. (2022) found that older adults often struggle with perceiving sarcasm, but a winking face emoji improves their understanding.

Table 5.3. Tukey Post-Hoc Test – Mitigation of Negative or Imposing Remarks

Generations		The Baby (born 1946-1964)	Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Generation X (born 1965-1980)
The Baby Boomer Generation (born 1946-1964)	Mean difference	—	0.0189	0.0511	0.306**
	p-value	—	0.994	0.924	0.003
Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Mean difference		—	0.0322	0.287***
	p-value		—	0.959	<.001
Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Mean difference			—	0.255**
	p-value			—	0.009
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	Mean difference				—
	p-value				—

The Tukey Post-Hoc Test results on the mitigation of negative or imposing remarks revealed significant generational differences in the use of reactions/emojis. Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) used reactions/emojis significantly more than Generation X (born 1965-1980), with a mean difference of 0.306 (p = 0.003). However, no significant difference was found between Generation Z (born 1997-2012) and Millennials (born 1981-1996), as indicated by a mean difference of 0.0322 (p = 0.959). A statistically significant difference emerged between Generation Z and Generation X, with Generation Z showing greater use of reactions/emojis for mitigating negative remarks (mean difference = 0.287, p < 0.001). Millennials also used more

reactions/emojis for mitigation compared to Generation X, with a mean difference of 0.255 (p = 0.009). Overall, older generations, such as Generation X, tend to use fewer reactions/emojis when softening negative comments than younger generations, suggesting a generational shift in communication styles, where younger people rely more on digital tools to cushion their communication. This is supported by Tian et al. (2017), who found that younger generations use fewer emojis with lower frequencies when softening negative remarks compared to Generation X. Garcia et al. (2022) also noted that older adults struggle with interpreting sarcasm but improve when a smiling face emoji is added. Furthermore, Prada et al. (2018) found that younger individuals use emojis more frequently and have more positive attitudes toward their use than older participants.

Table 5.4. Tukey Post-Hoc Test – Emoticons and Emoji as Emphasis Markers

Generations		The Baby (born 1946-1964)	Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Generation X (born 1965-1980)
The Baby Boomer Generation (born 1946-1964)	Mean difference	—	-0.245***	-0.1994*	-0.365***
	p-value	—	<.001	0.016	<.001
Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Mean difference		—	0.0457	-0.12
	p-value		—	0.821	0.165
Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Mean difference			—	-0.166
	p-value			—	0.061
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	Mean difference				—
	p-value				—

The results show significant generational differences in the use of emoticons and emojis as emphasis markers. Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) used these tools more than Generation Z (born 1997-2012), with a mean difference of -0.245 (p < .001), and more than Millennials (born 1981-1996), with a mean difference of -0.1994 (p = .016). Compared to Generation X (born 1965-1980), Baby Boomers also used

emoticons and emojis significantly more, with a mean difference of -0.365 ($p < .001$). No significant difference was found between Generation Z and Generation X (mean difference = -0.12, $p = .165$), or between Millennials and Generation X (mean difference = -0.166, $p = .061$). This suggests that Baby Boomers tend to overemphasize visual markers in communication more than younger generations. The COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced this trend, as Tula (2023) noted that Baby Boomers used emojis more during the pandemic to share information.

Table 5.5. Tukey Post-Hoc Test – Phatic Function and Social Bonding

Generations		The Baby (born 1946-1964)	Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Generation X (born 1965-1980)
The Baby Boomer Generation (born 1946-1964)	Mean difference	—	0.0356	0.0707	0.259 *
	p-value	—	0.959	0.82	0.015
Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Mean difference		—	0.0351	0.223 **
	p-value		—	0.947	0.009
Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Mean difference			—	0.188
	p-value			—	0.092
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	Mean difference				—
	p-value				—

The Tukey post-hoc test revealed both similarities and differences in the use of emoticons and emojis for phatic functions and social bonding across generations. Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) used emoticons and emojis more than Generation X (born 1965-1980), with a significant mean difference of 0.259 ($p = 0.015$), indicating that Baby Boomers rely more on digital expressions for maintaining social connections. There was no significant difference between Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born 1997-2012), as both groups use emoticons and emojis similarly for social bonding. The mean difference between Generation Z and Baby Boomers was

0.0356 (p = 0.959), showing they also use these tools in similar ways, suggesting that emoticons and emojis serve as universal communication tools. No significant difference was found between Millennials and Generation X (mean difference = 0.188, p = 0.092). In summary, Baby Boomers use emoticons and emojis more frequently for social bonding than Generation X, while Millennials and Generation Z show similar usage patterns. These findings highlight the evolving role of digital expressions in fostering social connections and suggest Baby Boomers are adapting well to digital communication. Prada et al. (2018) noted that Generation Z and Millennials are more inclined to use emojis for social bonding compared to Generation X. These digital expressions are vital for improving social interaction and understanding, as noted by Sadia and Hussain (2023) reinforcing the importance of digital tools in modern communication.

Table 5.6. Tukey Post-Hoc Test – Aesthetic and Decorative Use of Emoji

Generations		The Baby (born 1946-1964)	Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Generation X (born 1965-1980)
The Baby Boomer Generation (born 1946-1964)	Mean difference	—	-0.0514	-0.051	-0.1178
	p-value	—	0.837	0.885	0.39
Generation Z (born 1997-2012)	Mean difference		—	4.03E-04	-0.0664
	p-value		—	1	0.694
Millennials (born 1981-1996)	Mean difference			—	-0.0668
	p-value			—	0.771
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	Mean difference				—
	p-value				—

The Tukey post-hoc test for the aesthetic and decorative use of emojis revealed no significant generational differences in how emojis are used for decoration, indicating a general consistency across groups. When comparing Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) with Generation Z (born 1997-2012), the mean difference was -0.0514 (p =

0.837), showing no significant difference in their use of emojis for aesthetic purposes. Similarly, Baby Boomers had almost identical usage patterns compared to Millennials (mean difference = -0.051, p = 0.885) and Generation X (mean difference = -0.1178, p = 0.39), suggesting a uniform approach across these generations. The comparison between Generation Z and Millennials also showed no significant difference (mean difference = 0.0004, p = 1), as did the comparison between Generation Z and Generation X (mean difference = -0.0664, p = 0.694). Millennials and Generation X showed a similar trend with no meaningful difference in how they use emojis for decorative purposes (mean difference = -0.0668, p = 0.771). Overall, these results suggest that while generational differences exist in other aspects of digital communication, the use of emojis for aesthetic purposes is largely consistent across all groups. This aligns with the view that emojis and reactions have become a neutral, universally understood tool for enhancing digital communication, regardless of generational background. This trend reflects how emojis have evolved into commonplace markers for emotional expression, with each generation adapting to them in line with their unique digital experiences.

This study's findings, showing the different values and practices between generational cohorts, hold significant implications for the evolution of GCT. According to GCT, generations with a common experience and social and historical events that they share are said to inform attitudes, values, and behaviors (Howe & Strauss, 2000). It is possible to determine the behaviors and preferences of different age groups across generations by considering their shared experiences in economic events such as first-time jobs, high school graduation rates, according to the research. The study concluded that the millennials, who were brought up in the age of the internet and digital technologies, value work-life balance more than digital communication. This is particularly true for older adults. Baby Boomers, who were affected by the optimism of the post-World War II era and a more conventional workforce, are more inclined to place importance on direct communication and job security.

The study results also demonstrate the relevance of GCT in today's context, particularly in organizational behavior and consumer marketing. Organizations can utilize generational experiences as guidelines for their behavior and tailor their strategies for communication, recruitment, and employee retention. Gen Z is exposed to the accelerated development of technology and social media and prefers flexible and inclusive, tech-driven workplaces and, at the same time, appreciates diversity and inclusion in corporate cultures (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2019). Generational preferences need to be understood so that organizational practices are customized for different cohorts.

Conclusion

Results show obvious distinctions in generations regarding ranking and usage of the social media reaction. "Love," "haha," and "wow" were ranked to be the ones they most often used by Gen Z as emotional engagement and social connection come down to the interaction done. In contrast to Millennials, who tend to produce similar patterns but utilize slightly broader ranges of interpretation often drenched in humor, irony, or even subtext. On the other hand, Baby Boomers and Gen X were more conservative in terms of reaction usage, relying on simple expressions such as "like" and "love," which reflected their bias toward more literal and emotional interpretations. Younger generations, especially Gen Z and Millennials, are more flexible in assigning meanings in terms of interpretation for reactions based on the context of use. For them, a reaction "haha" might evoke laughter due to amusement, sarcasm, or even polite dismissal depending on the situation, but Baby Boomers and Gen X apply reactions in a much more fixed and literal way. Often, they rely much on reactions to clarify a certain emotional intent rather than delivering subtle messages. Generational differences also emerged with respect to the way reactions were used to reduce or dilute negative comments. Gen Z and Millennials were more likely to use reactions to soften the tone of critical or imposing remarks, using emojis to keep the tone positive and social interaction alive. Baby Boomers and Gen X were less likely to engage in such subtleties, suggesting a more direct style of communication in digital spaces.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the researchers concentrated on Region XI, which affects the sample size and may not fully represent the differences in interpretation between generations in the country. Second, this study relied primarily on Facebook platform, which may not represent the full range of emoji usage across platforms. Finally, future researchers should focus on cultural issues that may influence the emoji utilized. This will provide a better understanding of generational disparities. Furthermore, future research should explore a broader sample size of respondents. Researchers can include those who are not engaged on social media to see how they see the responses from their own perspective. This is also to observe how people understand the various reactions and to compare generations who utilize social media reactions to those who do not.

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