



This or That? Perception of Filipino Generation Z and Generation Alpha in Using Common Emojis: Semantics and Typology

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Abstract

Emojis have become integral to digital communication, functioning as visual cues that convey emotion, intent, and social meaning beyond literal text. Guided by Semiotic Theory, this research investigates generational differences in how Filipino Generation Z and Generation Alpha perceive and classify common emojis in terms of semantics and typology. A convergent parallel mixed methods design was employed, involving surveys and structured interviews with 16 students equally distributed between the two generations. Quantitative results from the Chi-Square Test of Independence indicated a statistically significant generational difference in emoji usage ($\chi^2 = 26.74$, $p < 0.05$). Qualitative thematic analysis revealed that Gen Z frequently interprets emojis symbolically or sarcastically utilizing them to signal passive-aggression, express exaggerated humor, or convey disapproval. In contrast, Gen Alpha tends to assign more literal and emotionally transparent meanings to the same icons. Despite the limited sample size restricting broad generalizability, the findings demonstrate distinct generational patterns in digital expression. These differences suggest potential sources of miscommunication in online and educational environments. The study recommends the development of a digital literacy toolkit to foster generational awareness and promote clearer, more empathetic emoji-mediated communication.

Keywords: This or that emoji, generation z and alpha, semantics, typology, digital communication.

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Introduction

The rise of technology has transformed traditional face-to-face communication into digital interaction. This sparks the usage of emojis, a small image or icon used to convey emotions, ideas,

and nuances that words alone often fail to express. Emojis are perceived as replacements for nonverbal cues in digital interactions (Boutet et al., 2021). With this in mind, these are often used as substitutions for individuals to better express themselves with little to no words required. It is evident that communication is vital and is part of our integral lives; it involves the process of exchanging information through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior (Kelmaganbetova et al., 2023). In Germany, (Erle et al., 2022) found that the usage of emojis has resulted in a better understanding of the topic being discussed. Thereafter, in South Korea, (Sun et al., 2023) underscored the importance of social identity in understanding and interpreting emojis. Having to explore the role of common emojis in digital communication may provide an insightful account of how different generations perceive and use common emojis. In the Philippine context, (Aranas et al., 2024) highlighted the popularity of emojis in enhancing communication, particularly among college students, emphasizing that the communicative intent and semantic usage may vary depending on the context. Moreover, (Marzona, 2025) noted that the conveyance of meaning may vary depending on factors such as age, grade level, social media usage, and sex. In addition to this, (Mahyoob & Algaraady, 2021) showed that emojis may be used in learning institutions, especially towards learners experiencing challenges or problems in English writing skills. These studies may serve as a baseline to further uncover the semiotics of emojis. Thus, this study emphasized the importance of understanding the perceptions of different generations towards common emojis, particularly Generation Z and Generation Alpha (Gen Z and Gen Alpha). This may also become useful in educational contexts, whereas educators, especially those who are not that tech-savvy, may use this as a reference to better understand how to deal with learners from different generations.

According to (Roy et al., 2025), Gen Z is generally defined as individuals who are born between 1997 to 2009. The time during which this subset of people has lived is considered to be the time when information and technology played a vital role in the lives of many, mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, individuals born from 2010 to 2024 are considered Gen Alpha. This generation is the most materially endowed and technologically literate; they are known as digital natives (Jayatissa, 2023). The study of Agsalud et al. (2022) showed the perception of Filipino Millennials and Gen Z in using common emojis. It was highlighted that Millennials use emojis for conventional meaning. Gen Z uses emojis more creatively to enhance communication. The fascinating shift in how symbols are used in this digital age urges the need to investigate a specific subset of respondents, especially Gen Z (Helvira et al., 2024). This illustrates how emojis have transcended casual expression to form a universal language of digital empathy and emotion. The reason lies in the expression of emoji, rather than establishing tone. This can further the basis for the need to investigate online communication among generations.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to investigate the role of common emojis in digital communication by analyzing their semantics (meaning) and typology (classification), focusing on how Filipino Gen Z and Gen Alpha interpret and use them, particularly within the context of St. Anne Academy, Olongapo City, Philippines.

Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions:

1. How do Filipino Generation Z and Generation Alpha perceive and use common emojis in terms of:
 - 1.1. Meaning; and
 - 1.2. Classification?
2. How do the semantics of common emojis differ between Filipino Generation Z and Generation Alpha in terms of
 - 2.1. Emotional expression; and

- 2.2. Communicative intent?
3. How does the typology of emojis influence their communication in terms of
 - 3.1. Understanding; and
 - 3.2. Miscommunication?
4. Is there a significant difference between how Filipino Generation Z and Generation Alpha perceive and use common emojis?
5. What output can this study contribute to enhancing digital communication and engagement in educational settings?

Null Hypothesis (H_0)

There is no significant difference between how Generation Z and Generation Alpha perceive and use common emojis in terms of semantics (meaning) and typology (classification).

Semiotic Theory

The study employed Semiotic Theory, grounded in the works of Saussure and Peirce. Saussure conceptualized meaning as the relationship between the signifier and the signified, while Peirce emphasized the interpretive process through which individuals make sense of signs in relation to their experiences and social environment (Surya, 2025). Thus, Semiotic Theory explains how meaning is created, interpreted, and communicated through signs and symbols within specific social and cultural contexts. Contextualized in this study, it provides the analytical lens for investigating emojis as communicative signs in digital interaction. It guides the analysis of emoji semantics (meaning) and typology (classification) by treating emojis as icons, indexes, or symbols whose meanings depend on generational context. By applying this theory, the study aimed to explain how Generation Z and Generation Alpha interpret digital symbols as substitutes for nonverbal cues in online communication, particularly within educational settings.

Methodology

Research Design

The researcher utilized a convergent parallel research design, which combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods. According to the Dovetail Editorial Team (2023), this design involves simultaneous data collection and analysis of both types of data, with each being analyzed separately.

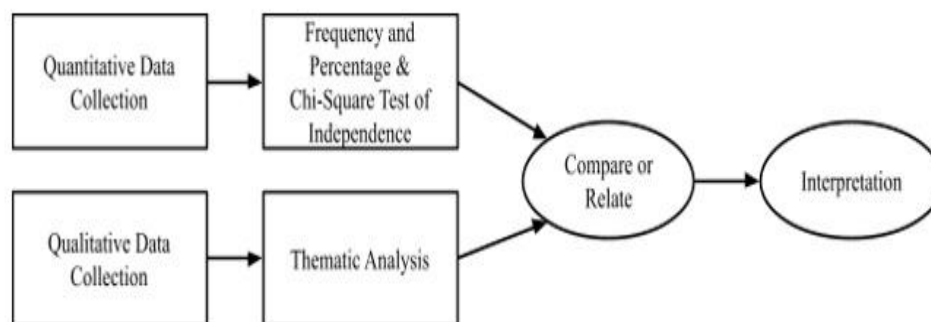


Figure 1. Methodology flowchart (convergent parallel research design Creswell and Zhou 2012)

In this study, data will be gathered from both generations at the same time, after which the researcher will compare, relate, and interpret the results to draw conclusions. The researcher has

chosen this design to ensure that both sets of data are gathered and treated accordingly to establish a holistic view of the perception of Filipino Gen Z and Gen Alpha regarding their usage of emojis. The figure below follows the framework of (Zhou & Creswell, 2012).

Sampling Technique

The researcher utilized the purposive sampling technique to ensure that the appropriate participants were selected in the research study. According to (vonHedemann, 2025), the purposive sampling technique is used to choose a certain subset of participants for analysis. It focuses on selecting participants possessing characteristics associated with the research study (Beck, 2024); it is also referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling. Since the researcher aimed to select Gen Z and Gen Alpha, this will be an appropriate sampling to use in effectively gathering the needed data. The selection of the participants is based on three criteria. First, they must belong to either Gen Z (born 1997–2009) or Gen Alpha (born 2010–2024) to align with the study's focus. Second, they should be active users of digital communication platforms like social media, messaging apps, mainly Messenger or Instagram, to ensure familiarity with emojis. Lastly, they must be students from St. Anne Academy, Olongapo City, to maintain the study's relevance within the academic setting.

Participants

The participants are the Gen Z and Gen Alpha of St. Anne Academy, from grade 7 to grade 12, enrolled during the academic year 2024-2025. Table 1 summarizes the participants according to the generation that they belong with a total number of 16.

Table 1. Profile of the Participants

Generations	Frequency	Percentage
Gen Z	8	50%
Gen Alpha	8	50%
Total	16	100%

Research Instrument

The researcher has adapted a research instrument from the study of Agsalud et al. (2022), titled “This or That: Perception of Filipino Millennials and Gen Z in Using Common Emojis”, and it also used the guide of (Brijesh, 2023) titled “A Systematic Review of Emoji: Current Research and Future Perspectives.” The research instrument is divided into 3 parts, as follows: Part I - 'Profile of the Participants. This section is focused on collecting which generation the participants belong to. Part II - This or That?. A survey questionnaire containing 16 items of emojis, collecting the perception of the generations on how they use and perceive common emojis. Part III - Perception of Generation Z and Generation Alpha. This part tackles the perception of the participants by answering a set of structured interview questions.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher had made a systematic plan for collecting the needed data. The following were done in collecting the data: Firstly, a letter of request was drafted and sent to the principal of

St. Anne Academy, asking permission to distribute the survey questionnaire and facilitate interviews. Secondly, after the letter was approved, the researcher distributed the questionnaires to the selected participants, and afterward, an adequate time was given for them to answer the questionnaire then the interview process began. In addition to this, the researcher has explained the study's goal to the participants before distributing the questionnaire, and each participant has received a guarantee of confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity. Lastly, after all the survey questionnaires and interview sessions were done and collected, a suitable treatment tool was used to organize and analyze the collected data.

Data Analysis

The researcher used Excel to treat numerical data and used the following tools:

1. Frequency and Percentage

This type of data analysis tool is used to analyze quantitative data. The researcher used this to calculate the number and percentage of Gen Z and Gen Alpha. The formula includes frequency divided by the total number of frequencies multiplied by 100.

2. Thematic Analysis

A qualitative method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within textual data (Brooks et al., 2018). This study followed Braun and Clarke's six-step process, which was applied manually to code participant responses and generate meaningful themes. These steps helped organize and interpret the data to answer the research questions on emoji perceptions.

3. Chi-Square Test of Independence (χ^2)

It is a statistical tool used to determine if there is a significant relationship between two categorical variables. This test was conducted using spreadsheet software to organize data and perform calculations efficiently. In this study, it was applied to analyze whether Filipino Gen Z and Gen Alpha differ significantly in their emoji usage preferences.

Results and Discussion

Survey Questionnaire: This or That?

The survey questionnaire contained the subject "This or That?", was hypothesized in this study to moderate the perceived view of the participants towards common emojis. The 16-item emojis are then put in Excel, and their frequencies are counted to determine preference patterns. Below is the contingency table of the survey questionnaire result:

Table 2. Contingency Table with Chi-Square Test Calculations

Group	Gen Alpha		Gen Z		Total
	This	That	This	That	
Observe (O)	76	52	35	93	256
Expected (E)	55.5	72.5	55.5	72.5	256

(O-E) ² /E	7.57	5.80	7.57	5.80
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After calculating the contingency test calculations about the observed, expected, and chi-square contribution table. The values are then analyzed, tabulated, and interpreted below:

Table 3. Chi-Square Test Summary

Chi-Square (χ^2)	df	p-value	α	Interpretation
26.74	1	0	0.05	Significant

Table 3 presents the results of the Chi-Square Test of Independence (χ^2), which was used to determine whether a significant relationship exists between generational groups and their preferences for common emojis (categorized as “This” or “That”). The test yielded a Chi-Square value of 26.74 with 1 degree of freedom and a p-value of 0.000, which is well below the alpha level of 0.05. These results indicate a statistically significant difference between the two generations in terms of emoji preference. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0), which stated that there is no significant difference in emoji usage between Gen Z and Gen Alpha, is rejected. This supports the hypothesis that generational groups do influence emoji perception and usage. The findings align with prior studies such as (Azad et al., 2023), which suggest that communication styles, including emoji usage, vary significantly across generational lines due to differences in cultural exposure, digital fluency, and online behavior. In this case, the observed variation between the generations reinforces the idea that emoji interpretation is not universal, but instead shaped by generational digital habits and evolving linguistic conventions in online communication.

Perceptions of Generation Z and Alpha

The following tables are the thematic analysis and frequency count of the interview question numbers one (1) to five (5). This part will comprehensively discuss and interpret the emerging themes.

Table 4. Thematic Analysis and Frequency Count of Question #1
Question 1. What is your interpretation of the emoji shown on the right?

Generation	Generated Themes
Gen Z	Hidden Emotion
	Surface-Level
	Positivity
	Mild to Negative Emotion
Gen Alpha	Mild to Negative Emotion

The data reveal that both Gen Z and Gen Alpha perceive emojis with nuanced meanings that can shift depending on context. For instance, when shown the 😊 (slightly-happy face), Gen Z showed varied interpretations: some saw it as “surface-level positivity” or genuine happiness, while others detected “hidden emotions” or mild negativity like disappointment. Meanwhile, Gen Alpha mostly interpreted the emoji through a lens of subtle negativity, describing it as “disappointed,” “pissed,” or expressing discontent. This suggests that younger users may increasingly associate emojis not only with their traditional meanings but also with layered emotional or sarcastic undertones, implying a form of semantic shift in digital language. Emojis, once considered

straightforward, now carry dual meanings, reflective of the evolving communication styles across generations. This observation aligns with (Akpan & Shogeyinbo, 2024) work, which emphasizes how emoji meanings are culturally and contextually constructed rather than fixed.

Table 5. Thematic Analysis and Frequency Count of Question #2
Question 2. How do emojis help you to convey your message effectively?

Generation	Generated Themes
Gen Z	Facilitates Emotional Expression
	Enhances Message Clarity
Gen Alpha	Facilitates Emotional Expression

Both generations generally agree that emojis help facilitate emotional expression, but subtle differences exist in their communicative intent. Gen Z responses emphasized how emojis allow them to express emotions that words might fail to convey. Phrases like “mas madali makita ang emotions” or “express what you feel” show a focus on self-expression. Gen Alpha shares this sentiment, but with additional emphasis on how emojis enhance message clarity, especially in digital conversations. Some Alpha participants even noted that emojis substitute for face-to-face cues, saying they help others “see your expression personally, but through online.” While both groups use emojis to express feelings, Gen Alpha seems more aware of the communicative function of emojis in replacing non-verbal cues online. This supports findings by (Chiang & Gomez-Zara, 2024), which argue that emojis are evolving into rich multimodal communication tools, not just emotional indicators.

Table 6. Thematic analysis and frequency count of question #3
Question 3. In a situation where you are against a post, how will you express your disagreement using emojis?

Generation	Emojis Used	Generated Themes
Gen Z [5]		Negative Reaction/ Disapproval
Gen Z [2]		
Gen Z [2]		
Gen Alpha [2]		
Gen Z [1]		
Gen Z [2]		
Gen Z [1]		
Gen Z [1]		
Gen Alpha [1]		

Gen Z [2]		
Gen Alpha [4]	🤨	
Gen Alpha [3]	🤡	Sarcasm/ Humorous Disapproval
Gen Alpha [3]	💀	
Gen Alpha [1]	😬	

Emoji choices in disagreement scenarios highlight the potential for miscommunication rooted in their typology. Gen Z participants chose a broader mix of emojis such as 🤨, 🤡, 😬, 😡, 😏, and 😬, each carrying different emotional tones from sarcasm to disapproval to anger. Gen Alpha, however, leaned toward exaggerated or hyperbolic emojis like 🤡, 💀, or 🤨 to express disagreement, sometimes with ironic or mocking undertones. These findings indicate that Gen Alpha may use emojis more performatively, amplifying emotional tones through dramatic or metaphorical choices. The fluidity of interpretation here can lead to misunderstandings, particularly across age groups or among users unfamiliar with evolving digital slang. Studies such as those by (Udoudom et al., 2024) show that emoji interpretation heavily depends on cultural and generational context, making their typology a key factor in both clarity and confusion.

Table 7. Thematic Analysis and Frequency Count of Question #4

Question 4. What emojis do you usually use whenever you share funny memes?		
Generation	Emojis Used	Generated Theme
Gen Z [7]		
Gen Alpha [4]	😭	
Gen Z [2]		
Gen Alpha [3]	💀	
Gen Z [5]		Expression of Laughter/ Humor
Gen Alpha [4]	😬	
Gen Alpha [1]	😹	
Gen Z [1]	😬	
Gen Z [1]	😄	
Gen Alpha [2]	🙌	

While both generations use emojis for humor and affection, their preferences highlight subtle but notable generational differences. For funny content, Gen Z mainly relies on 😭 (loudly crying face) and 💀 (skull), suggesting a blend of traditional and ironic humor. Gen Alpha, meanwhile, also favors 😬 and 🤨 but includes emojis like 😹 (laughing cat) and 🙌 (clapping hands), hinting at more visual diversity and meme-influenced usage.

Table 8. Thematic Analysis and Frequency Count of Question #5

Question 5. Imagine you are sending a Valentine’s Day message to your loved ones. What emojis will you use?		
Generation	Emojis Used	Generated Theme
Gen Z [8]		Expression of Love/Affection
Gen Alpha [6]	❤️	
Gen Alpha [1]	💕	
Gen Z [3]	😍	
Gen Z [4]		
Gen Alpha [1]	😘	
Gen Z [1]	🌸	
Gen Alpha [3]	💞	
Gen Z [1]	😄	
Gen Z [1]	😁	

In expressing affection, Generation Z consistently uses ❤️, 😘, and 😍, indicating a reliance on classic romantic symbols. Generation Alpha, while also using ❤️, shows a preference for newer shapes such as 💞 (heart hands), indicating their exposure to newer emoji trends and their emotional resonance. These intergenerational emoji usage patterns support findings by (George et al., 2023), who emphasize that emoji preferences evolve with exposure to digital platforms, peer culture, and emoji updates, making the differences between generations statistically and semantically significant. Based on the findings, an educational module or digital literacy toolkit could be developed to bridge the gap in emoji semantics and typology between generations. This toolkit can help students, teachers, and administrators understand how emojis are interpreted differently, preventing miscommunication and enhancing online engagement. For example, educators might assume emojis like 😊 or 👍 are always positive, while students could be using them sarcastically. Training on emoji usage can enhance classroom discussions, social media interactions, and student feedback systems. This is consistent with recommendations from scholarly work like (Cappello, 2022), which underscores the importance of incorporating visual language literacy into digital communication education, or (Viana, 2025), where memes are found to be a good resort for a positive learner-teacher interaction. Since the students found the utilization of emojis leaning towards a humorous interaction, emoji usage across generations should be addressed and defined.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that generational identity significantly influences how Filipino Gen Z and Gen Alpha perceive and use common emojis in terms of their meaning and classification. Gen Z often assigns layered and symbolic meanings to emojis, using them to convey sarcasm, humor, or hidden emotions, while Gen Alpha tends to interpret emojis more literally and emotionally, favoring dramatic and visually explicit symbols to ensure clear emotional expression and communicative intent. Typological differences further highlight Gen Z’s flexible and abstract use of emojis versus

Gen Alpha's preference for direct and exaggerated visual cues, leading to occasional miscommunication between groups. For instance, emojis such as 🦴 and 🤪 may function as humorous or ironic symbols for one generation but may be misunderstood or taken literally by the other due to differing interpretive conventions. Supporting these qualitative patterns, the Chi-Square Test of Independence ($\chi^2 = 26.74$, $p < 0.05$) indicates a statistically significant difference between the two generations' emoji usage, confirming that generational identity plays a decisive role in shaping emoji semantics and typology in digital communication. However, this result must be interpreted with caution due to the study's limited sample size ($N = 16$), which constrains statistical power and generalizability, hence, future researchers with the same sample size are suggested to use Fisher's Exact Test. Overall, the findings affirm that generational identity plays a critical role in shaping emoji semantics and typology in digital communication. Thus, the findings suggest a semiotics-based educational module or digital literacy toolkit proposed as a concrete output of the study to bridge the generational gap in emoji semantics and typology. This is consistent with recommendations from scholarly work like Dyak et al. (2022), which underscores the importance of incorporating visual language literacy into digital communication education, and Valenzuela et al. (2021), where memes are found to be a good resort for a positive learner-teacher interaction. Since the students found the utilization of emojis leaning towards a humorous interaction, emoji usage across generations should be addressed and defined. This toolkit is designed to explicitly address the symbolic, sarcastic, and literal variations in emoji interpretation between Gen Z and Gen Alpha, thereby supporting clearer digital communication in educational contexts. This toolkit can help students, teachers, and administrators understand how emojis are interpreted differently, preventing miscommunication and enhancing online engagement. For example, educators might assume emojis like 😊 or 👍 are always positive, while students could be using them sarcastically. Training on emoji usage can enhance classroom discussions, social media interactions, and student feedback systems.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Author Contributions

Lexus Dominic Espiritu Tamaño contributed to conceptualization, methodology, software, validation, visualization, writing original draft preparation, and writing review and editing. The authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing

The authors acknowledge the use of the generative AI tool Google translate-AI for grammar and language improvement. The authors are solely responsible for the content of the manuscript and have verified the accuracy, integrity, and originality of all AI-assisted outputs.

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