

Emojis and Communicative Competence: A Comparative Study of Generation Z and Generation Alpha Digital Discourse

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Abstract

Emojis have proven to be a defining characteristic of digital communication, but their place in communicative competence is still underexplained given the ubiquity of the emoji. This study explores the use of emojis in the daily communication of Generation Z (1997–2012) and Generation Alpha (2010–2024), using a model of communicative competence in language, developed by Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010), which divides the communicative competence aspects into organizational, pragmatic and strategic. The study employed a comparative mixed method design, with the WhatsApp chat excerpts analyzed, and the questionnaire self-reported responses analyzed from the members of both generations. The results suggest that emojis can be seen as semiotic resources with structure and context sensitivity, not as a decorative ornament; they facilitate the cohesion of the text, convey emotional and attitudinal attitude, and contribute to coping with interpersonal relationships without being face-to-face. Generation Z participants exhibited greater organizational control, using emojis intentionally with text and modifying their use to fit audience and context. The emojis were used with greater color or intensity of expression, and in more concentrated groups, and were sometimes used as the main vehicle of meaning, suggesting an emergent rather than a fully systematized competence in the use of emojis. The generational differences indicate that e-sociability and emoji literacy are gradually acquired during the course of life development; this has implications for applied linguistics, digital literacy instruction, and the theory of multimodal communicative competence.

Keywords: communicative competence, emojis, Generation Z, Generation Alpha, multimodality, computer-mediated communication, Bachman and Palmer

1. Introduction

The widespread growth of mobile messaging applications and social media platforms has transformed contemporary communication by integrating visual supports into what was traditionally considered a primarily textual paradigm. On platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok, users construct meaning through the combined use of written

language, emojis, and other visual indicators. Among these multimodal resources, emojis have emerged as one of the most pervasive forms of digital expression. They function as graphical representations that compensate for the absence of facial expressions, gestures, and vocal tone in computer-mediated communication. Rather than serving merely as decorative elements, emojis have acquired significant interactional value by shaping message interpretation, expressing emotions, and facilitating the negotiation of interpersonal relationships in online environments.

This transformation has important implications for the conceptualization of communicative competence. Traditional perspectives on communicative competence, particularly those introduced by Hymes (1972), emphasize not only grammatical accuracy but also the social and contextual appropriateness of language use. In contemporary digital communication, this notion of competence extends beyond linguistic choices to include visual and multimodal resources. Effective communication in online contexts requires users to understand not only what linguistic expressions to employ but also which emojis are appropriate, when they should be used, and how their meanings may vary according to contextual situations. This development is particularly significant among younger generations, whose communicative experiences are increasingly mediated through digital platforms rather than being limited to face-to-face interactions.

Generation Z and Generation Alpha represent two distinct stages within this continuum of digital socialization. Generation Z is widely considered the first generation to experience widespread access to smartphones and social media platforms during their formative years. Consequently, they have developed familiarity with emoji-based communication as part of their evolving digital literacy practices. In contrast, Generation Alpha has been raised in an environment where digital technologies, including emojis, voice assistants, and touchscreen interfaces, are not merely supplementary tools but integral components of communication and learning experiences. This generational distinction provides an opportunity to investigate similarities and differences in the development and application of emoji-based communicative competence.

The present study investigates this generational comparison by applying the model of communicative language ability proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010) to emoji-mediated digital communication. The study aims to achieve two primary objectives. First, it seeks to establish emojis as legitimate objects of linguistic inquiry rather than informal or peripheral features of communication. Second, it examines similarities and differences between Generation Z and Generation Alpha in terms of organizational, pragmatic, and strategic dimensions involved in emoji use. By integrating perspectives from multimodal communication research and communicative competence

theory, this study provides a theoretically informed understanding of how visual-symbolic literacy is acquired, developed, and applied by digitally native generations.

1.1 Research Questions

The present study addresses the following research questions:

1. What role do emojis play within Bachman and Palmer's model of communicative language ability, and how can this model be operationalized for the analysis of emoji use?
2. How do Generation Z and Generation Alpha differ in the organizational, pragmatic, and strategic dimensions of emoji-based communicative competence?
3. What communicative functions do emojis serve in the everyday digital messaging practices of each generation, and what do these functions reveal about the development of multimodal literacy?

2. Literature Review

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is characterized by the absence of many paralinguistic cues that regulate meaning-making in face-to-face interactions. Digital communication eliminates a significant portion of the contextual information available in direct interpersonal communication; consequently, written messages may become vulnerable to ambiguity and misunderstanding (Crystal, 2006). One of the major resources developed to compensate for this limitation is the emoji, which provides visual representations of facial expressions, gestures, and prosodic features within digital environments. Building on this perspective, Danesi (2017) conceptualizes emojis as a form of visual language that does not merely decorate written text but actively contributes to meaning construction alongside linguistic expressions. This perspective highlights that emojis are not simply additional or ornamental features of digital communication; rather, they constitute meaningful semiotic resources that require systematic linguistic investigation.

The interpretation of emojis remains complex because they do not possess fixed meanings independent of context. Instead, emoji meanings are highly dependent on interlocutors, communicative situations, cultural expectations, and platform-specific conventions. Emojis often convey the pragmatic dimensions of an utterance, including humor, irony, politeness, and emotional expression (Dresner & Herring, 2010). Consequently, the illocutionary force of a particular emoji may vary depending on the relationship between participants, the communicative environment, and the social norms governing digital interaction. Therefore, effective emoji use requires pragmatic evaluation rather than merely the recognition of symbolic meanings. Users must interpret

how a specific visual symbol functions within a particular interaction and for a particular communicative purpose.

The social semiotic perspective on multimodality proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) provides a valuable framework for understanding emojis as meaning-making resources. According to this perspective, language, images, and visual arrangements function together as interconnected semiotic systems for constructing meaning. Within digital messaging contexts, competent communicators do not simply insert emojis into completed sentences; rather, they use emojis strategically to emphasize meanings, organize message flow, and express evaluative attitudes toward the content being communicated. Thus, emoji use represents an important dimension of multimodal communication competence.

2.1 Communicative Competence and Emoji Use

The concept of communicative competence has evolved from a focus on grammatical knowledge toward a broader understanding of socially appropriate language use. Hymes (1972) reconceptualized linguistic competence as social competence, emphasizing that successful communication involves knowledge of how language should be used appropriately within particular communities and contexts rather than merely the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences. This perspective was further developed by Canale and Swain (1980), who proposed a model consisting of four components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. This model provided the foundation for subsequent theories of communicative ability.

Extending these perspectives, Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010) developed a comprehensive model of communicative language ability consisting of organizational knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, and strategic competence. Organizational knowledge includes grammatical and textual organization, whereas pragmatic knowledge involves functional language use and sociolinguistically appropriate communication. Strategic competence refers to the metacognitive processes through which individuals plan, monitor, and repair communication to achieve specific goals.

Bachman and Palmer's (1996, 2010) framework is particularly relevant for analyzing emoji-based communication because it accommodates the multimodal nature of contemporary digital interaction. Within this framework, organizational knowledge can be associated with the appropriate placement and structural integration of emojis within messages. Pragmatic knowledge involves the socially appropriate selection of emojis according to audience, context, and communicative intention. Strategic competence relates to the flexible and goal-oriented use of emojis to clarify meaning, manage

misunderstandings, or compensate for limitations in textual expression. Therefore, the framework provides a theoretically grounded approach for examining emoji competence as an extension of communicative ability in digital contexts.

2.2 Generational Differences in Digital Communication and Emoji Literacy

Prensky's (2001) distinction between digital natives and digital immigrants provides a useful, although broad, framework for understanding generational differences in technology-mediated communication. While the classification has been debated, it remains relevant as a conceptual tool for examining how individuals with different experiences of digital technologies develop distinct communication practices. Tagg (2015) provides a more nuanced understanding of digital discourse by highlighting that younger users often employ digital features, including emojis, strategically according to communicative purposes, platforms, and audiences.

Generation Z represents one of the earliest generations to experience smartphones and social media as significant components of everyday life. As a result, emoji-based communication has become integrated into their digital literacy practices. Generation Alpha represents a further stage in digital development, as this generation has grown up in an environment where emojis, voice assistants, touchscreen interfaces, and other digital technologies are embedded within everyday communication and learning experiences. Unlike earlier generations, Generation Alpha may perceive emojis not merely as supplementary elements but as essential components of communication.

This generational difference raises important questions regarding the nature of emoji competence. While increased exposure may contribute to greater expressive ability, it remains necessary to examine whether younger users demonstrate systematic control over emoji conventions or whether their usage primarily represents expressive experimentation. The present study addresses this issue by investigating whether Generation Z and Generation Alpha demonstrate differences in the organizational, pragmatic, and strategic dimensions of emoji-based communicative competence.

2.3 Digital Abbreviations, Emojis, and Communicative Competence

Digital abbreviations represent another important feature of contemporary online communication. Arslan and Shakir (2019) investigated frequently used digital communication terms and highlighted that many users, particularly those with limited exposure to digital discourse conventions, lack sufficient understanding and communicative competence regarding these expressions. Such differences are closely related to generational variation in digital literacy and familiarity with online communication practices.

Similar to digital abbreviations, emoji use requires knowledge of emerging conventions and contextual meanings. Individuals who possess greater familiarity with digital communication environments may demonstrate greater competence in interpreting and employing emojis effectively. Therefore, generational differences in emoji use may reflect broader differences in digital communicative competence.

2.4 Emojis, Politeness, and Relationship Management

Beyond conveying emotions and meanings, emojis perform important interpersonal functions in digital communication. Several researchers have extended Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory by demonstrating that emojis, particularly facial expressions and hand symbols, can reduce the intensity of face-threatening acts. They can soften requests, disagreements, criticism, and other potentially threatening messages that may appear direct or impolite when expressed solely through written language.

Danesi (2017) further argues that emojis contribute to the construction of online identities and social relationships by signaling friendliness, intimacy, affiliation, and group membership in the absence of physical interaction. This relational function is particularly significant for younger generations whose social interactions increasingly occur through digital platforms. Therefore, emoji competence should not be viewed solely as a linguistic ability but also as an aspect of broader social and multimodal literacy.

2.5 Emojis and Developing Linguistic Competence

The role of emojis can also be examined within the broader context of language development. Children and early adolescents who are still developing lexical and syntactic resources may use emojis as alternative communicative resources to achieve interactional goals. This process corresponds with Bachman and Palmer's (1996) concept of strategic competence, in which communicators employ available resources to overcome communicative limitations and achieve intended meanings.

Emojis may function as scaffolding tools that assist younger users in interpreting and expressing meanings while more complex linguistic abilities are developing. For Generation Alpha, increased exposure to digital communication may contribute to more systematic control over emoji organization and pragmatic functions. Over time, these practices may become internalized alongside developing linguistic skills, resulting in more sophisticated multimodal communication competence.

2.6 Research Gap

Although interdisciplinary research on emojis has increased considerably, much of the existing literature has primarily focused on describing emoji frequency, usage patterns, and general communicative functions. However, relatively limited attention has been given to examining emoji use through the lens of established communicative competence models. Furthermore, comparative studies investigating generational differences, particularly between Generation Z and Generation Alpha, remain limited despite the fact that these generations have experienced digital communication technologies at different stages of development and within different social environments.

The present study addresses these gaps by applying Bachman and Palmer's (1996, 2010) model of communicative language ability to emoji-based communication and by comparing two generations with distinct digital histories. Through this theoretically informed comparison, the study aims to provide a systematic understanding of how emoji-based communicative competence develops and differs across digitally native generations.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study adopts Bachman and Palmer's (1996, 2010) model of communicative language ability as the primary analytical framework for examining emoji-based communicative competence. Although originally developed to explain language ability in traditional linguistic contexts, the framework is particularly suitable for analyzing contemporary digital communication because it incorporates knowledge of organization, contextual appropriateness, and strategic meaning-making. In this study, the model is operationalized through three dimensions—organizational knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, and strategic competence—to investigate how emojis function as multimodal resources in digital messaging.

3.1 Organizational Knowledge

Organizational knowledge refers to the way emojis are integrated into the structural organization of a digital message. This dimension examines how emojis are positioned and arranged within communication, including their placement at the beginning or end of messages, their occurrence as independent communicative units, and their sequencing patterns. It also considers the repetition of emojis and their relationship with the overall linguistic structure and meaning of the message. Through this dimension, the study explores how users organize emojis as part of message construction and how such organizational patterns may vary across generations.

3.2 Pragmatic Knowledge

Pragmatic knowledge focuses on the functional and sociolinguistic appropriateness of emoji selection and use. This dimension examines how users choose emojis according to communicative purposes, interpersonal relationships, audience expectations, and contextual requirements. Specifically, it investigates the role of emojis in expressing emotions, attitudes, humor, irony, politeness, and other pragmatic meanings. By analyzing pragmatic knowledge, the study explores how Generation Z and Generation Alpha adapt emoji usage to achieve socially appropriate and context-sensitive communication.

3.3 Strategic Competence

Strategic competence refers to the intentional and goal-oriented use of emojis to facilitate, manage, and repair communication. In digital interactions, emojis may be employed strategically to compensate for the absence of nonverbal cues, clarify intended meanings, enhance emotional expression, or reduce possible misunderstandings. This dimension includes the use of emojis for replacing missing words, emphasizing meanings, resolving ambiguity, and adapting messages according to anticipated interpretations by recipients. Through strategic competence, the study examines how users consciously employ emojis as communicative resources rather than merely decorative symbols.

3.4 Application of the Framework

The three dimensions of Bachman and Palmer's (1996, 2010) model are treated as analytically distinct categories; however, they operate together within actual digital communication practices. A single message may simultaneously demonstrate organizational, pragmatic, and strategic aspects of emoji use. Therefore, the framework enables the study to investigate specific areas of generational similarity and difference rather than treating "emoji competence" as a single unified ability. By applying this multidimensional framework, the study provides a systematic analysis of how Generation Z and Generation Alpha construct meaning through emojis and develop competence within multimodal digital communication environments.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A comparative-mixed methods design was employed in the study, using a quantitative (frequency) measure and qualitative (context sensitive) approach. This combination was

selected because, in addition to a measurable aspect of use (frequency, positional patterning), emoji competence also has a dimension of interpretation which demands fine-grained analysis of individual exchanges in order to determine pragmatic and strategic function. Comparing the two generations - comparing data within the same generational analytical categories - was essential to the purpose of the study: to analyze the data for the two generations under study in a systematic and consistent manner, identifying patterns through generation.

4.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants came from two generations of individuals. Generation Z participants were young adults (18 to 25 years), and Generation Alpha participants were children and early adolescents (10 to 13 years). To ensure an unbiased sampling of emoji users, the researchers employed a purposive sampling method to identify people who grasped and regularly used the digital messaging platforms. To prevent sampling bias, this study used a purposive sampling method that targeted people who understood and routinely used the digital messaging technology. All adult participants as well as parents or guardians of the minor participants gave their written consent and conventional ethical research protocols regarding children were followed.

4.3 Data Collection

There were two data sources. First, anonymous samples of WhatsApp chat excerpts were gathered from the participants and chosen for them as they went about their daily conversations, with a focus on emojis. For this, WhatsApp was selected as the main channel of communication, and excerpts of conversations done in this application were collected from the participants and selected as naturalistic uses of emojis in everyday conversations. Secondly, the data was collected by an online questionnaire to provide self-reported information of the participants' emoji preferences, usage frequency, and communicative functions of particular emojis. The use of naturalistic chat data together with self-report data ensured that observed actions were triangulated against the self-report data, which in turn, added to the validity of the analysis.

4.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The emojis found in the data set were coded with the three aspects of the theoretical framework described above. Organizational knowledge was evaluated by using the positional and sequencing analysis, namely the position of emojis in relation to text, the repetition of emojis to emphasize the text and the role of emojis in the coherence of the messages. Pragmatic knowledge was evaluated by analyzing the emotional, attitudinal and relational functions of emojis in the context of their conversation. To evaluate strategic competence, the researcher identified instances in which emojis were used to fill

a lexical gap, disambiguate a potentially unclear message or remedy a previous misunderstanding. For this, quantitative analysis involved tabulation of the type and use frequency of emojis used by each generation; qualitative analysis was based on interpretation of their communicative function in the context of the conversation. The two layers of analysis were then combined to create a full cross-checked analysis of the two generational cohorts.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

All CHAT data was anonymized before analyzing and content identification details and information were removed from the CHAT data and any additional metadata. The inclusion of minors in the Generation Alpha sample was achieved through consent process and guardian consent (and/or assent was obtained where appropriate). Data were treated securely and were only used for the purposes of this research.

5. Findings and Analysis

Table 1 presents a representative taxonomy of the emoji types identified in the dataset, organized by communicative function, typical organizational pattern, and associated pragmatic meaning. This taxonomy formed the coding basis for the comparative analysis that follows.

Table 1

Representative Emoji Taxonomy

Representative Emoji Taxonomy

Representative Emoji	Communicative Function	Organizational Pattern
	Greeting / happiness	Sentence-final position
	Politeness / playfulness	Sentence-final position
	Laughter	Repeated / clustered
	Sadness / disappointment	Standalone or final
	Admiration / affection	Standalone or final
	Sarcasm / annoyance	Standalone or final
	Thinking	Standalone

5.1 Organizational Knowledge

The difference between the two generations was most apparent in their usage of the emoji structurally in the message. For instance, Generation Z participants would consistently use emojis at the end of a clause or an entire sentence for punctuation or emphasis, such as a message followed by a single celebratory emoji ("That was amazing!"). The intention was to pair text with image, in which the image supported and enhanced, rather than replaced, the language. This trend is similar to the comparatively developed organization competence where the emoji is used as an integral part of the sentence structure rather than a detachment one.

Participants who were members of the "Generation Alpha" generation, on the other hand, often sent entire strings of three or four or more emojis with few or no words. In these cases the emoji string itself was the main means of communication, its meaning being spread throughout the string and not constrained by a written proposition. This pattern is typical of fluency with the visual-symbolic register, but also indicates that a less

systematized understanding of textual cohesion is being acquired: the organization "grammar" of the emoji sequence is not as tightly anchored, the syntax is less conventional, and more idiosyncratic, consistent with an ongoing process of learning or consolidation rather than with mastery.

5.2 Pragmatic Knowledge

A similar age disparity emerged on pragmatic competence. Generation Z participants used a mixture of emoji and words to capture exact shades of emotion, humor or irony while also paying attention to the appropriateness of the choice and being aware of what is appropriate to the audience. Interpersonal emojis were often used to soften requests or to mask potentially face threatening statements, indicating politeness function as noted by Brown and Levison (1987) and conveying a level of sociopragmatic awareness in the lines of a more advanced communicative competence.

Generation Alpha participants also used emoji clusters to signal a feeling or an interpersonal attitude, but not so clearly or with as many distinct registers: one cluster may represent affection, amusement and distress, in a single emotional gesture in a flash. This indicates that while Gen Alpha might be creatively expressive, they are still grappling with the more nuanced sensitivity towards audiences needed for the nuanced, fine-grained use of emoji for the precise communicative situation and recipient.

5.3 Strategic Competence

Strategic competence as deliberate use of emojis for strategic communication or repair of communication was seen across both generations but in different ways. Generation Z participants used emojis judiciously to enhance or clarify a verbal message, such as placing a single emoji at the end to indicate light sarcasm or perhaps mild embarrassment, with a view to avoiding misinterpretation without taking away from the verbal message. Emoji strings were used more often than in any other pattern that was an alternative to using the emoji, to form a self-contained message for a reader to interpret as a means of expressing complex emotions, which was a creative and expressive means of communicating but also pushed the reader more to make meaning from the message given less clearly by the emoji. This is consistent with an emerging, developing strategic competence: that is, participants are actively exploring the use of emojis as an expressive gesture, but haven't yet acquired the ability to anticipate how such experimentation will be understood by a particular audience.

5.4 Discourse, Identity, and Relational Functions

Other than the three dimensions of core competences, emojis were found to serve some regular discourse level functions both across generations. These were used as turn-management devices, to show a continuation or closure of a conversational exchange; evaluative markers, expressing group approval/disapproval or feelings toward a topic; and identity resources, conveying a group, personal style or emotional openness. For these identity-related uses, Generation Z participants were more likely to use subtle, muted emoji chains, and Generation Alpha participants were more likely to use longer, denser and more expressive emoji chains that showed an energetic, high-expression self-presentation. Both patterns are able to function, but represent alternate developmental phases within the process of learning to share visual-symbolic social literacy.

5.5 Comparative Summary

Table 2

Comparative Competence Profile: Generation Z and Generation Alpha

Competence Dimension	Generation Z	Generation Alpha
Organizational knowledge	High control of emoji placement and sequencing; emojis typically anchor or close a clause and integrate with syntax to preserve textual cohesion.	Emojis frequently stand alone or appear in dense clusters, sometimes replacing text entirely; cohesion is emerging rather than fully systematized.
Pragmatic knowledge	Selective, audience-sensitive use; emojis are calibrated to soften face-threatening acts, mark irony, and match the interlocutor's level of formality.	A broad emotional range is condensed into single emoji strings; affective intensity is prioritized over precise contextual calibration.
Strategic competence	Emojis are deployed deliberately to repair ambiguity, clarify tone, or compensate for specific lexical gaps.	Emojis are used expressively and experimentally as a primary meaning-making channel, reflecting an emergent rather than fully deliberate strategic repertoire.
Relational/Identity function	Subtle emoji combinations signal nuanced group belonging and self-presentation.	Longer, more expressive emoji sequences signal energetic and highly visible identity performance.

6. Discussion

Overall, the results add to the central idea. that emojis are more than just a form of informal or arbitrary embellishment: They are a structured, competence-based way to communicate digitally. Emoji use manifests the same three-part structure suggested by Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010) for language generally: a structure organizational level, a functional pragmatic level and a strategic, goal-directed level. This alignment increases the theoretical value of the research on communicative competence covering resources that are visual-symbolic as well as verbal in nature and subsequently expands the concept of communicative competence research to digital, multimodal discourse.

The generational comparison indicates a probable developmental path for emoji-based competence. Generation Z's less voluble and more pragmatic use of emoji fits with a generation that learned to use them as an addition to their already-developing verbal repertoire and used them to augment the understanding of the audience. Generation Alpha uses the emoji more densely and expressively, yet less systemically, which mirrors the fact that they are still at a stage of learning that pragmatic and organizational ability has not yet reached the levels of other generations and emojis still play an important and relevant communicative role for them. Itconcorde with earlier studies of younger and less advanced communicators using more visual, or as Bachman and Palmer label it "strategic competence" resources to compensate for weaknesses in their linguistic competence and indicates that the use of emoji by Generation Alpha may be even more "strategically" calibrated as their linguistic and social competences develop.

The findings also serve to introduce a more complex notion that any increase in amount or timing of exposure to a communicative resource leads directly to the development of competence in the application of that resource. The high usage of emoji in their communication has led to high fluency and creative flexibility among members of Generation Alpha, but has not, at least in this sample, resulted in the same audience-driven precision that is seen among members of Generation Z. This indicates that like in the case of verbal competence, one also needs to develop a sociopragmatic judgment to become competent with emoji, even though it does not seem that this type of judgment advanced as fast as raw expressive fluency in younger students.

6.1 Implications

The results help applied linguistics to broaden the notion of communicative competence to make explicit reference to resources other than the verbal, such as multimodal and visual-symbolic ones. With digital literacy lessons, the results imply that guidance for younger users could be more useful in promoting lessons of the practical and organizational judgment required to use this digital vocabulary appropriately to various

audiences and in various contexts, rather than on emoji vocabulary itself, which they already have a host of in their repertoire. The results serve as a reminder that the emoji-mediated communication style is not developmentally homogeneous: interfaces and safety features designed for younger users should consider that their expressive language capabilities with emojis are developing faster than their ability to reliably predict how that new language will be understood by other people.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are some caveats to these conclusions. The sample was not representative, and the small, platform-specific dataset (mostly WhatsApp) means that the conclusions drawn may not be transferable to other platforms, cultures or languages, where emoji conventions can be very different. The cross-sectional design also does not allow one to ascertain whether the organizational and pragmatic differences between generations are a result of a developmental path, stable generational difference or age and life stage effects; a longitudinal design, in which generation alpha participants are followed over the years, would be required for this. Self-report of emoji preferences could also be prone to the same problems inherent to self-report questionnaires, such as social desirability bias. One would expect larger and demographically more diverse samples, and cross-platform and cross-cultural comparison as well as following individual users' emoji competence over time would be desirable, as would a closer focus on the variability of emoji interpretation among the various community/cultural and language groups.

8. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the presence of emoji in communicative competence and contrast the use of emojis between Generation Z and Generation Alpha from the perspective of the communicative competence model by Bachman and Palmer. The results suggest that emojis are not just ornamental or filler elements of text but are, indeed, semiotics with pragmatic significance and a semi-strategic role in text organization, meaning making, and closing the communicative task. Generation Z participants were more deliberate and organized, as well as more pragmatic in using emojis and text, incorporating them in messages that are "calibrated" to the recipient and situation, while Generation Alpha participants exhibited more of an expressive, creative, but less systematized competence, more focused on emojis as a text-independent vehicle of meaning. The generational shifts indicate a developmental path which involves communicative competence with emoji growing with the overall language and social competence, not being determined by exposure early or extensively. The development of an emoji analysis that builds on an existing competence framework and a comparison of the two generations, generations with different digital histories, provide a theoretically informed account of multimodal literacy that extends existing communicative

competence models into the digital domain and are relevant for applied linguistics, digital literacy education, and future research on the relationship between language and visual-symbolic communication.

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