

Discourse Analysis of Emoji Use in Digital Communication by the Millennials & Gen Z: A Comparative Endeavor

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Abstract

This research examines the generational differences in emoji usage and the meanings attributed to them between the Millennials and Gen Z, using Speech Act Theory as developed by Austin and Searle in 1979. Traditionally seen as pictorial aids for emotion, emojis have evolved into semiotic tools that perform complex communicative functions. This research aims to probe how emojis function figuratively as speech acts and in what way their meanings differ across generations. The objectives include identifying patterns in emoji interpretation and usage among Millennials and Gen Z, and examining the role of cultural knowledge in shaping these meanings. This research employs Speech Act Theory as its primary methodological framework to analyze how each generation assigns meaning to emojis in digital conversations. The findings reveal that the Millennials often use emojis to clarify, soften, or support the tone of their messages, thus reflecting more straightforward locutionary and illocutionary acts. They use emojis according to their conventional or dictionary meanings. Gen Z, on the other hand, tends to employ them to convey much more complex and often ironic meanings. Such layered meanings are thus created with their shared cultural knowledge and in-group references. The research findings also suggest that emojis have an important performative role

in digital communication. The significance of this study lies in highlighting how emojis serve not only emotional expression but also help to understand communication gaps across age groups and identity formation and generational belonging. They are useful resources for representing emotions and generational belonging, beyond simple decorative pictorial representations, and describes how differences in emoji interpretation can create miscommunication between generations. Overall, this research illustrates the dynamic and negotiated ways meaning merges in digital discourse by the use of emojis across two different generations.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Digital Discourse, Emojis, Speech Act Theory, Speech Acts, Millennials and Gen Z

Introduction

The 21st century has seen a massive shift in digital communication through the development of technology and social media. Communication, the art of written or spoken language, was once the mainstay of communication, but these classic methods do not suffice any longer. A different narrative is now brought about by the rapid transformation in social media and instant messaging systems that rely a lot upon signs and textual shorthand expressions and carry meanings in distinct and often very subtle ways.

It has been observed that Millennials (generally born between 1981 and 1996) and Gen Z (typically born between 1997 and 2012) are among the highest users of these platforms. They use them on daily basis to express identity, tone, and emotions in day-to-day interactions. Gen Z which is often characterized by a creative and experimental approach, frequently uses emojis that have hidden meanings and employs them in versatile ways, sometimes using them as substitutes for words or entire phrases. Conversely, the Millennials use a more direct and conventional style and use emojis to convey the basic emotions. This research aims to explore the expressive power of emojis and abbreviations used in digital discourse, with a particular focus on Instagram, among the two generational groups.

This research is structured on the framework of John Searle's Speech Act Theory. According to this theory, actions performed by the speakers through language are called speech acts. The theory focuses on aspects of the speaker's intention that are an illocutionary force within an utterance and the outcome or results that affect the listener are perlocutionary acts. Using Searle's (1976) classification system, the five primary types of illocutionary acts are: assertions (restate a belief), directives (to persuade the listener to do something), expressive (about the speaker's psychological state), commissive (commits the speaker to a future action) and declarative (utterances that bring about a state of affairs). This framework allows going

beyond analyzing the emotional attachments associated with emojis to explore the distinct performative acts they achieve in the discourse of the Millennials and Gen Z.

Significance of the Study

This research significantly presents a vivid example of how the two generations of the Millennials and Gen Z use emojis to perform actions (such as to apologize, to request, and so forth) almost implicitly, thus suggesting dynamic digital pragmatics and communication norms. It further serves to illuminate how changing language and communicational style might be affected by other digital domains.

Research Objectives:

This research has the following objectives:

1. To examine how the Millennials use emojis as expressive speech acts to reflect social attitude and psychological state in digital communication.
2. To analyze how Gen Z uses emojis as expressive and assertive speech acts in digital communication.
3. To compare and contrast the expressive functions of emojis use by the Millennials and Gen Z, and explore generational differences in frequency and speech acts categories as defined by Searle.

Research Questions

This research covers the following research questions:

1. How do the Millennials use emojis as expressive speech acts to reflect social attitude and psychological state in their digital communication?
2. How does Gen Z use emojis as expressive and assertive speech acts in their digital communication?

3. What are the differences in the expressive functions, frequency, and speech act categories of emoji usage by the Millennials and Gen Z, according to Searle's Speech Act Theory?

Literature Review

Non-verbal components such as the use of emojis and abbreviations have increasingly altered the patterns of digital communication today. They have transformed the essence of online communication, allowing users to actually direct emotions, tone, and social identity in visual forms. A considerable number of researchers have examined them in the context of communication with a special focus on age groups.

Zhukova and Herring (2022), in their research entitled "Benign or Toxic? Differences in Emoji Interpretation by Gender, Generation, and Emoji Type," provide valuable insights into generational differences in emoji perception. The researchers state that Gen Z users interpret emojis more creatively and freely, often assigning meanings that are somewhat ironic or layered. On the other hand, emojis for Millennials tend to be read in either a literal or convention-based way. The generational-contextual impact on the meaning and usage of emojis is reflected here, as older users may see emojis like thumbs-up and smiley as neutral or positive, while the younger generation interprets them as passive-aggressive or sarcastic. This substantiates the argument that emoji use is not strictly generational but rather a contextually specific feature of the changing norms of digital communications. Zhukova and Herring's (2022) research supports our interpretation by validating that Gen Z understands emojis more creatively, ironically, and with many more layers of meanings than Millennials' more literal know. This helps to clarify why younger users may view emojis like the "thumbs up" (👍) as passive-aggressive, which directly reinforces current research's findings on its dismissive usage in examples. Their results confirm the generationally influenced and very contextual nature of emoji meaning, thereby strengthening our interpretation of Gen Z's digital

communication standards. While Zhukova and Herring looked at the generational differences that might affect emoji interpretation, this research moves a step beyond that and applies Speech Act Theory to define the communicative act of these emojis.

Adam (2017) in her similar research looked at members of an online learning community and how they used emojis in their social relationships to express feelings of empathy or otherwise negotiate their relationships. It is shown that emojis acquire meanings for distinct communities and are not context-free. Emojis are a kind of condition of sociality, enabling the regulation of group processes that can be similar to those functioning in face-to-face communication, such as facial expressions and gestures. This is particularly salient to platforms like Instagram, which offers short yet highly social interaction. It reinforces the opinion that emoji usage corresponds to deeper communication strategies, not merely emotion. Adam's research compliments this research by illustrating that the meanings of emojis are not inherent symbols that can be used in precisely the same way. Instead, they are socialized with groups, and they can socialize with us in social relations in the same way as gestures in face-to-face communication. In addition, Adam's research was designed to center on the role of emojis in a particular community of practice around relationship negotiation. Although she discusses the broader cultural meaning, her research does not consciously focus on the generational axis that serves as an important determinant for emoji interpretations. In current research, however, the distinct emoji views have been directly identified as an important factor in their distinctive Digital Communication methods.

Implication

This research reveals that emojis and abbreviations are not mere trivial mediums of communicating; in fact, they serve as an avenue of communication richer than any other. They are influenced by age, culture, platform, and social role. The Millennials and Gen Z employ them differently—not in quantity but in intent, tone, and significance. While Millennials may

use emojis to clarify meaning or soften statements, Gen Z often uses them ironically or aesthetically, adding social undertext to their messages.

Research Methodology:

Searle's Speech Act Theory (1976) is the analytical framework on which data analysis has been anchored to analyze the use of emojis in digital discourse. Speech Act Theory considers how we do not merely rely on information through language but also access it in practice. According to Searle, a speech act exhibits three main phenomena, which are:

1. Locutionary act: the literal meaning of the utterance
2. Illocutionary act: the speaker's intention (e.g., requesting, apologizing, asserting)
3. Perlocutionary act: the effect the utterance has on the listener

This framework indeed carries a particular relevance for the study of emojis, which often serve as vernacular supplements to speech acts in digital communication. It can be noticed that even the precursors of emojis, which are emoticons, are influential in changing the illocutionary force of textual utterances in an online environment. The emojis themselves can act as illocutionary force-indicating devices by signaling the speaker's communicative intent in similar ways to those used by the linguistic cues. Different emojis like a laughing face with tears of joy (😂) or fire emoji (🔥) have transcended literal meanings in Instagram discourse. They are illocutionary vehicles for expressing emotions, reactions, evaluations, or social signals. In this research, purposive sampling is employed. Only Instagram chat and public posts were selected as data depending on the relevance of emoji use and concrete indicators of the user's generational identity.

Considering the use of an emoji can be an intentional act of communication, in which the speaker conveys a meaning and attempts to prompt a certain reaction from the recipient. The acknowledgment of emojis as possible vehicles for speech acts broadens the possible applicability of Speech Act Theory and also acknowledges that communication contexts

change in the digital age. In this age, most messages are increasingly expected to encode their meanings through visual symbols. The building of an interdisciplinary approach that draws on theory in linguistics and studies in visual communication is fundamental to understanding how the little emoticons are used to attain communicative goals in online interaction.

Data Collection and Sample Size

This research employs both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data was collected from a social media platform, Instagram, specifically focusing on naturally occurring interactions. The emojis that were chosen for the analysis were:

1. Laughing with Tears of Joy 😂
2. Fire Emoji 🔥
3. Thumbs up 👍
4. Nail Polish Application 💅
5. Eyes Emoji 👁️

A total of ten Instagram posts were selected, including posts, comments and private chats, with five posts representing the millennial users and five representing Gen Z users. It was kept into consideration while data collection, that the responses or comments of the users were in the form of the selected emojis. These samples were selected to provide a rich, context-dependent insights into how emojis function in real-time communication. These samples were analyzed for their pragmatic functions, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how emojis function as performative tools in digital communication through the lens of Searle's Speech Act Theory.

Data Analysis

The analysis presented in this section examines and interprets the illocutionary communicative functions intended by the use of emojis in Instagram discourse. Using the framework of Searle's Speech Act Theory, this research scrutinizes how Millennials and Generation Z use these elements digitally to perform different speech acts.

Analysis of the Data received from the Millennials:

This section entails the analysis of the data received from the Millennials, in the form of comments and chats collected from Instagram. These comments and chats illustrate how the Millennials tend to use emojis more literally than metaphorically, favoring their semantic meanings over ironic ones.

The Millennials Instagram Post # 1:

Figure 1

Use of 😊 Emoji



Note. By memefueled. (2024, April 29). *when he says “fix your attitude” me:* [Photograph].

Instagram. From <https://www.instagram.com/p/DJBtpBztILE/>

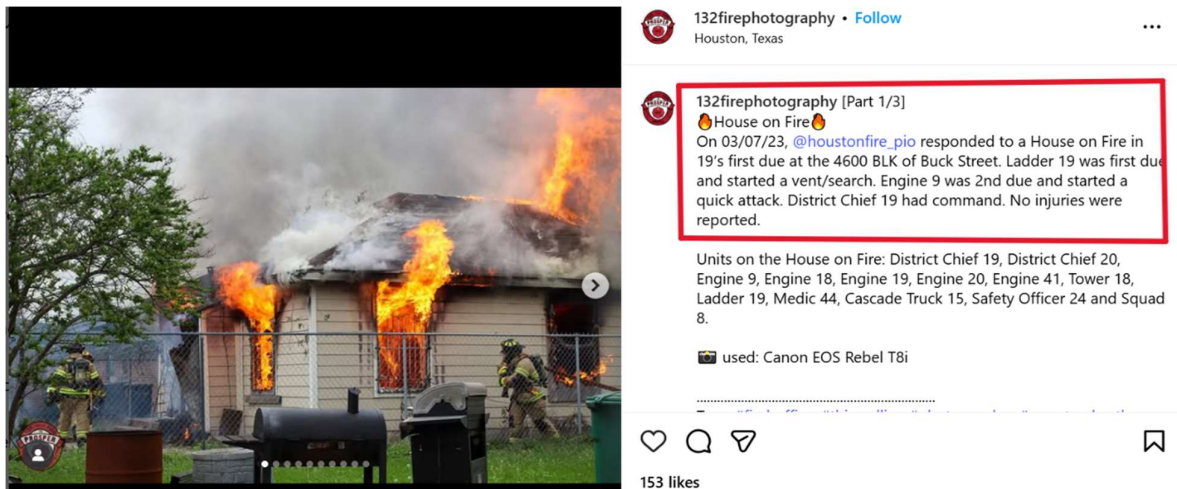
Analysis in the light of Speech Act Theory:

This post, humorously exhibits a child making silly faces in defiance after being told to "fix your attitude," with viewers reacting through emojis with **“Face with tears of joy”** (😂). This emoji visually represents intense laughter. In linguistic terms, it functions as a non – verbal expressive marker. The Millennials often use it in literal sense when they find something extremely funny. In the context of Searle's Speech Act Theory, the laughing emoji with tears of joy (😂) functions as **Expressive** illocutionary speech act, conveying beliefs, assertions or amusement without needing verbal explanation. In the above post, the use of this emoji in the highlighted comments from the Millennial users expresses laughter which is equivalent to saying "this is hilarious" or " I am laughing". These emojis are effective instruments in the contemporary digital speech economy because they satisfy the psychological representation of the user's inner state and are contextually recognized by others as expressing humor or shared delight. As a result, they qualify as successful speech acts.

The Millennials Instagram Post # 2:

Figure 2

Use of 🍑 Emoji



Note. 132firephotography. (2023, March 7). *House on Fire 🔥 on 03/07/23, @houstonfire_pio responded to a House on Fire in 19's first due at the 4600 BLK of Buck Street...* [Photograph]. Instagram. From https://www.instagram.com/p/CqBid-FOUdb/?img_index=1

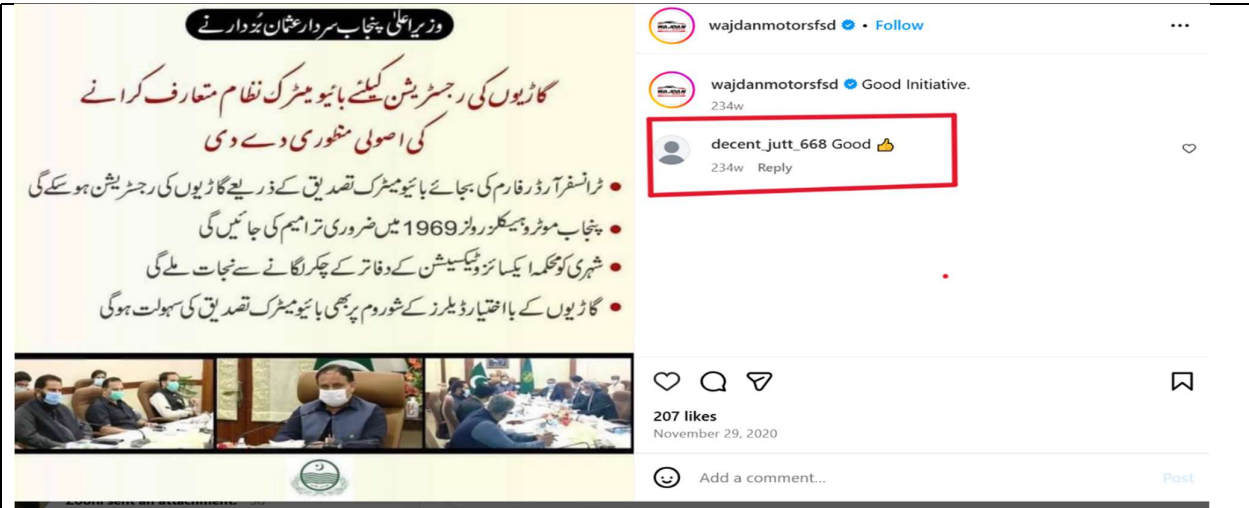
Analysis in the light of Speech Act Theory:

This post, from a Millennial user, shows a house on fire being actively responded to by firefighters, with no injuries reported. **Fire Emoji (🔥)** literally means “fire”- a combustion phenomenon that produces heat and light. In the framework of Searle’s Speech Act Theory, the fire emoji (🔥) functions as an assertive illocutionary speech act, as it asserts a statement about the world. In the above post the fact is that the house is on fire. The emoji and the caption accompanying a home on fire is a literal, not metaphorical usage, since it directly refers to the apparent flames destroying the home, is consistent with its original semantic meaning. Instead of embellishing or exaggerating reality, the Millennials use emojis to accurately portray it in a concise visual way.

The Millennials Instagram Post # 3:

Figure 3

Use of 👍 Emoji



وزیر اعلیٰ پنجاب سردار عثمان بھٹو دار نے

گاڑیوں کی رجسٹریشن کیلئے بائیومیٹرک نظام متعارف کرانے کی اصولی منظوری دے دی

- ٹرانسفر آرڈر فارم کی بجائے بائیومیٹرک تصدیق کے ذریعے گاڑیوں کی رجسٹریشن ہو سکے گی
- پنجاب موٹر ویکلز روٹرز 1969 میں ضروری ترامیم کی جائیں گی
- شہری کو محکمہ ایکسائز ویکسیشن کے دفاتر کے چکر لگانے سے نجات ملے گی
- گاڑیوں کے با اختیار ڈیلرز کے شوروم پر بھی بائیومیٹرک تصدیق کی سہولت ہوگی

Translation of the Urdu Text:

Chief Minister of Punjab, Usman Buzdar has approved in principle to introduce biometric system for vehicle registration

- Vehicle registration will be done through biometric verification instead of transfer order form.
- Necessary amendments will be made in the Punjab Motor Vehicles Rules, 1969.
- Citizens will be relieved from visiting the offices of Excise Taxation Department.
- Biometric authentication facility will also be available at the show rooms of authorized vehicle dealers.

Note. wajdanmotorsfsd. (2020, November 29). *Good Initiative*. [Photograph]. Instagram.

From <https://www.instagram.com/p/CILc2XuBN-2/>

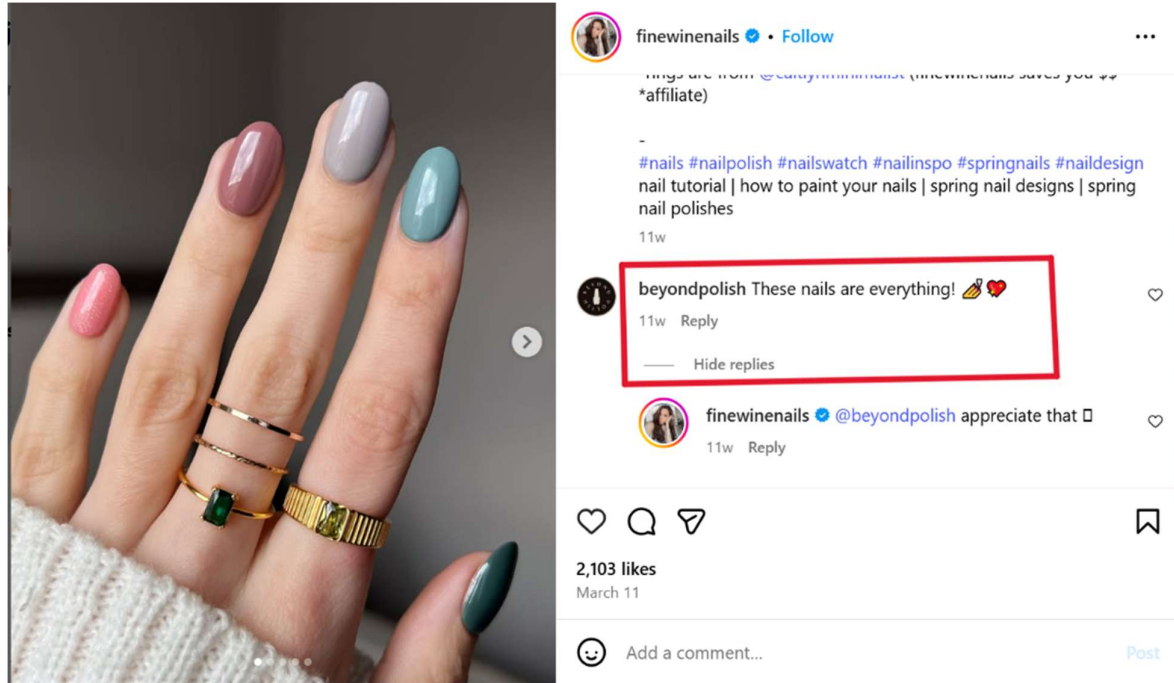
Analysis in the light of Speech Act Theory:

This post, shows Chief Minister's approval to regulate car dealers and ensure proper documentation, labeled as a good initiative, with a Thumbs up (👍) emoji. This emoji literally means "approval" or "agreement." It is universally used as a symbol for "yes," "okay," "Good job," or "I agree." In the context of Searle's Speech Act Theory, the thumbs up emoji (👍) can either be commissive (if it conveys a commitment or promise) or expressive (if it is used for approval or satisfaction), depending on the context. In the above post, the user, who is a Millennial, commented "Good👍." Here the thumbs up emoji functions as Expressive illocutionary speech act as it is conveying message of approval or satisfaction regarding the news of the biometric system for vehicle registration. Hence, the thumbs up emoji used by the Millennial visually conveys the positive attitude by using the word "Good".

The Millennial's Instagram Post # 4:

Figure 4

Use of 🪄 Emoji



Note. finewinenails. (2025, March 11). *Manicured hand with pastel nail polish and rings* [Instagram post]. Instagram. From https://www.instagram.com/p/DHD8R_WgB7X/

Analysis in the light of Speech Act Theory:

This Instagram post showcasing a hand with nails painted in different pastel nail polish colors, generating an enthusiastic compliment from a Millennial user and a grateful response from the poster. The nail polish application emoji (🪄) visually represents “applying nail polish,” which symbolizes self-care, grooming, or beauty. In the above post, the comment “These nails are everything 🪄💖” from a user who is likely to be a Millennial, as the emoji is used in its literal meaning to signify a sense of being “polished,” “flawless,” or “on point.” Hence, according to Searle’s Speech Act Theory, the nail

polish application emoji (👉) functions as an expressive speech act, as it conveys strong admiration for the nails shown in the post.

The Millennials Instagram Post # 5:

Figure 5

Use of 👁️ Emoji in chat



Note. M.Abbasi, Personal Instagram chat, May 28, 2025.

Analysis in the light of Speech Act Theory:

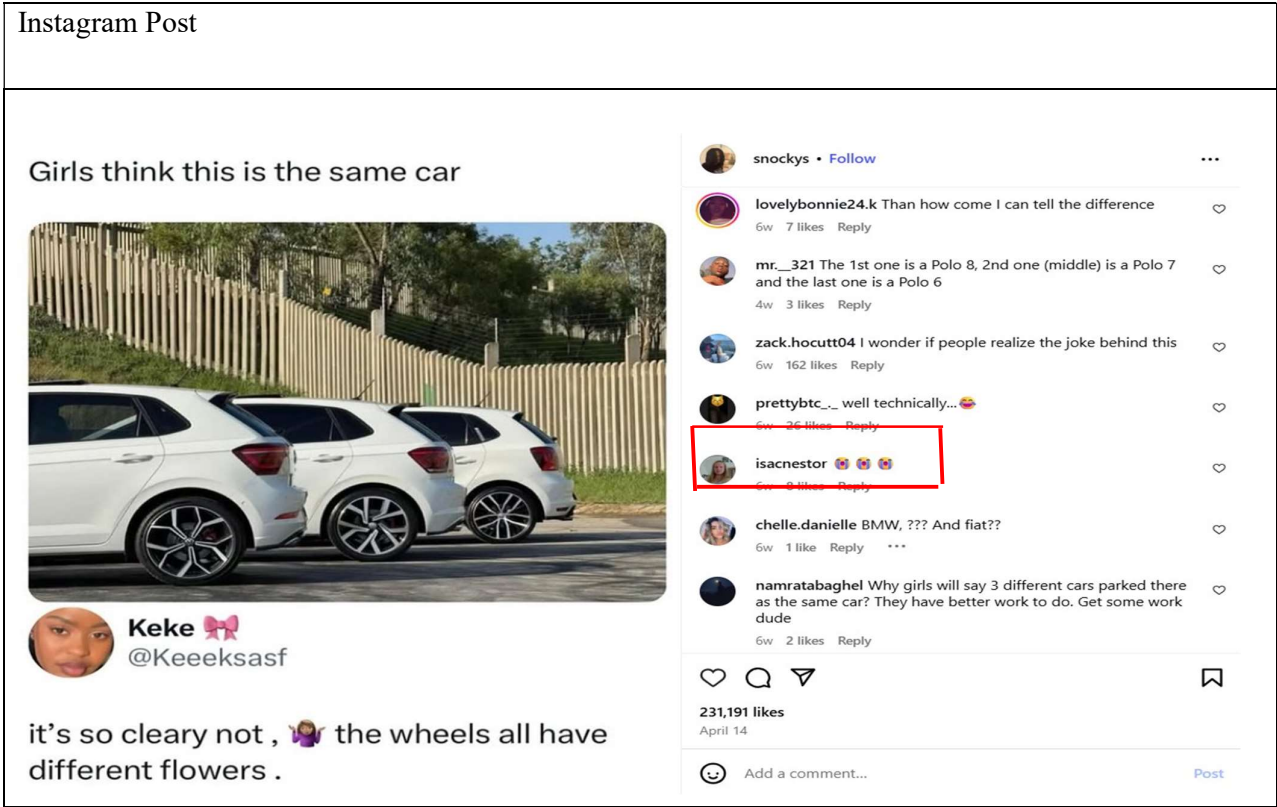
This Instagram post features an image of a human skull and bones, with a headline stating "Camera Footage Shows Dead Bodies Keep Moving for a Year after Death." The comment in the form of eyes emoji (👁️) represents a pair of eyes looking straight ahead or slightly to the side. In the above Instagram chat between two millennial friends, the repeated use of eyes emoji “👁️ 👁️ 👁️” in response to the post conveys a sense of astonishment, concern or demands close observation or processing. In the framework of Searle’s Speech Act Theory, this eyes emoji (👁️) functions as an expressive speech act, as it is used to convey a strong psychological state of shock, disbelief, or intense surprise.

Analysis of the Data received from Gen Z

This section focuses on analyzing the data received from Gen Z participants, in the form of comments and chats collected from Instagram. These comments and chats demonstrate how Gen Z users are communicating with emojis in day-to-day digital interactions and highlight the types of irony and overlapping meanings and social codes that, in some cases, do not follow the common usages of emojis. The analysis shows how the emoji use demonstrates different speech acts, in particular, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

Gen Z’s Instagram Post # 1:

Figure 6
Use of 🤔Emoji



Note. snockys. (2025, April 14). *Girls think this is the same car* (Instagram post). Instagram, from <https://www.instagram.com/p/DIZelwsPMQY/>

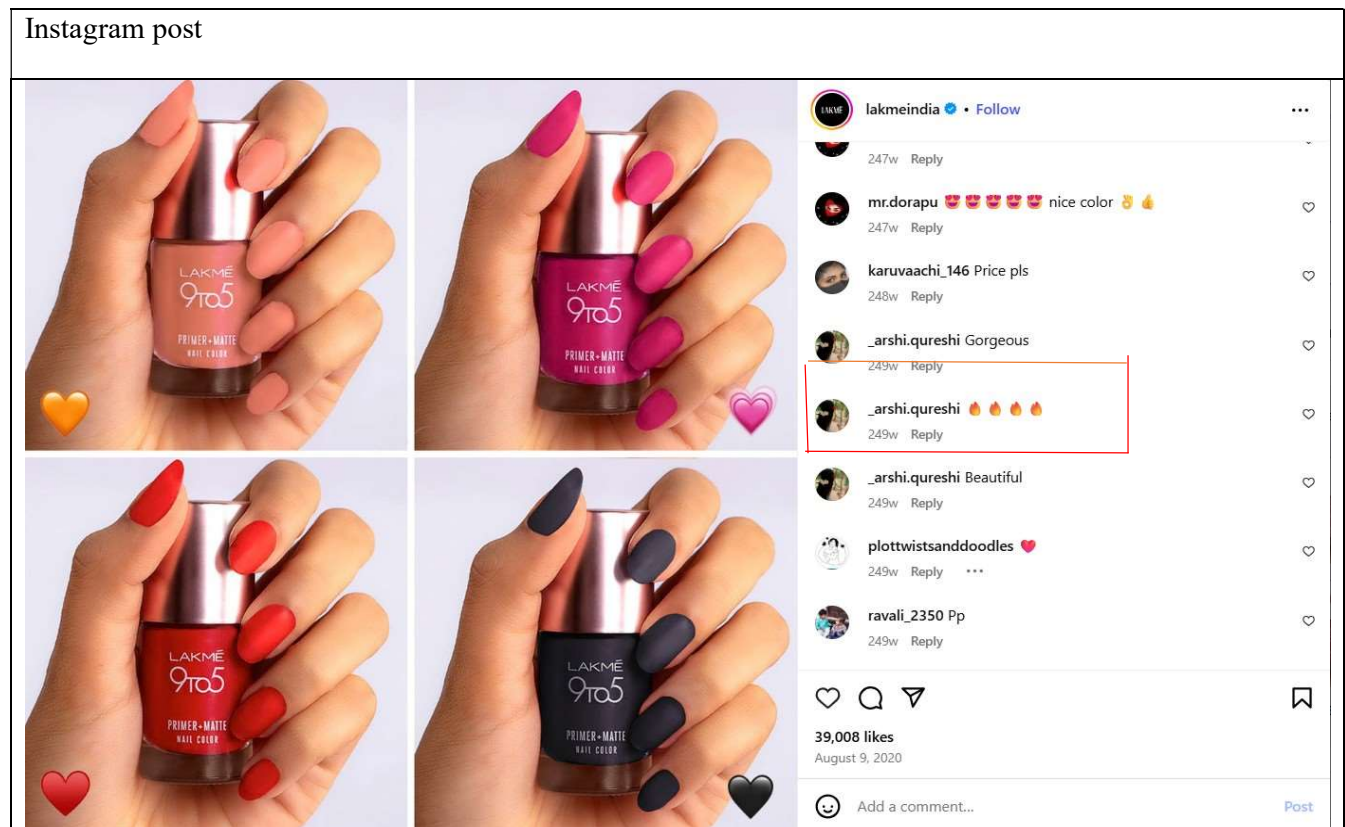
Analysis in the light of Speech Act Theory

This comment is of a user that belongs to Gen Z, the loudly crying face emoji (😭) emoji used here doesn't mean crying. In the context of conversational thread, it is used to express that the post is hilariously funny or cringe worthy. For Gen Z, the loudly crying face emoji (😭) might function as an assertive expression of humor or disbelief. In the context of Searle's Speech Act Theory, this loudly crying face emoji (😭) functions as **assertive** (or representative), conveying beliefs, assertions, and opinions. Loudly crying face emoji (😭) might function as an assertive expression of humor or disbelief. Though Gen Z might perceive this as outdated, preferring the loudly crying face emoji (😭) for a similar assertive function.

Gen Z's Instagram Post # 2:

Figure 7

Use of 🔥 Emoji



Note. Lakmeindia. (2020, August 9). (Instagram Post). Instagram, From <https://www.instagram.com/lakmeindia/>.

Analysis in the light of Speech Act Theory

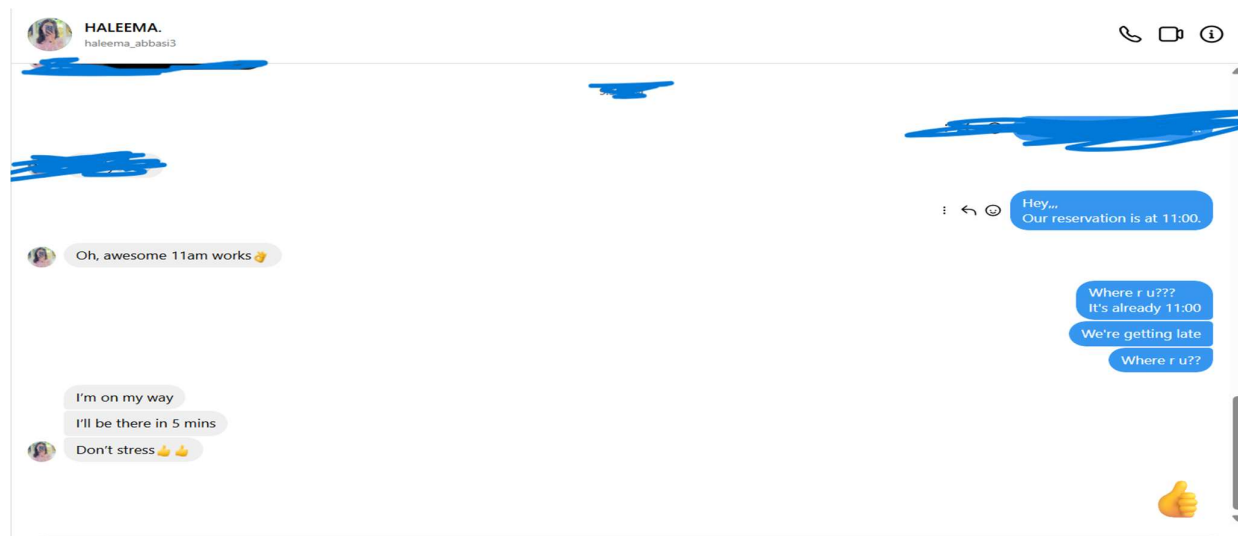
A post shared on Instagram shows the four bright shades, all painted on a beautiful hand, and complement colors of heart emoji. The caption "🔥GAME TIME🔥" promotes a playful and useful tone of voice, and invites viewers to react. A comment on the post of a user, that belongs to Gen Z, which has only the fire emoji (🔥) in it-the simplest, most expressive yet minimal way of communicating for Gen Z. The fire emoji (🔥) literally represents fire. Based on Speech Act Theory, it categorizes such a comment as an expressive act, as it shows that the user is providing a personal reaction to say appreciation and admiration to the visual aesthetics of the product. The fire emoji used generally among Gen Z to mean "lit", "stylish", or "attractive", indicates that a positive emotional stance is taken. This comment has no verbal content, but fulfills the expressive function-emotionally engaging the post and expressing approval, completing the illocutionary force of praise.

Gen Z's Instagram Post # 3:

Figure 8

Use of 🍑 Emoji

Instagram conversation thread



Note. H.abbasi. Personal Instagram chat, May 29, 2025.

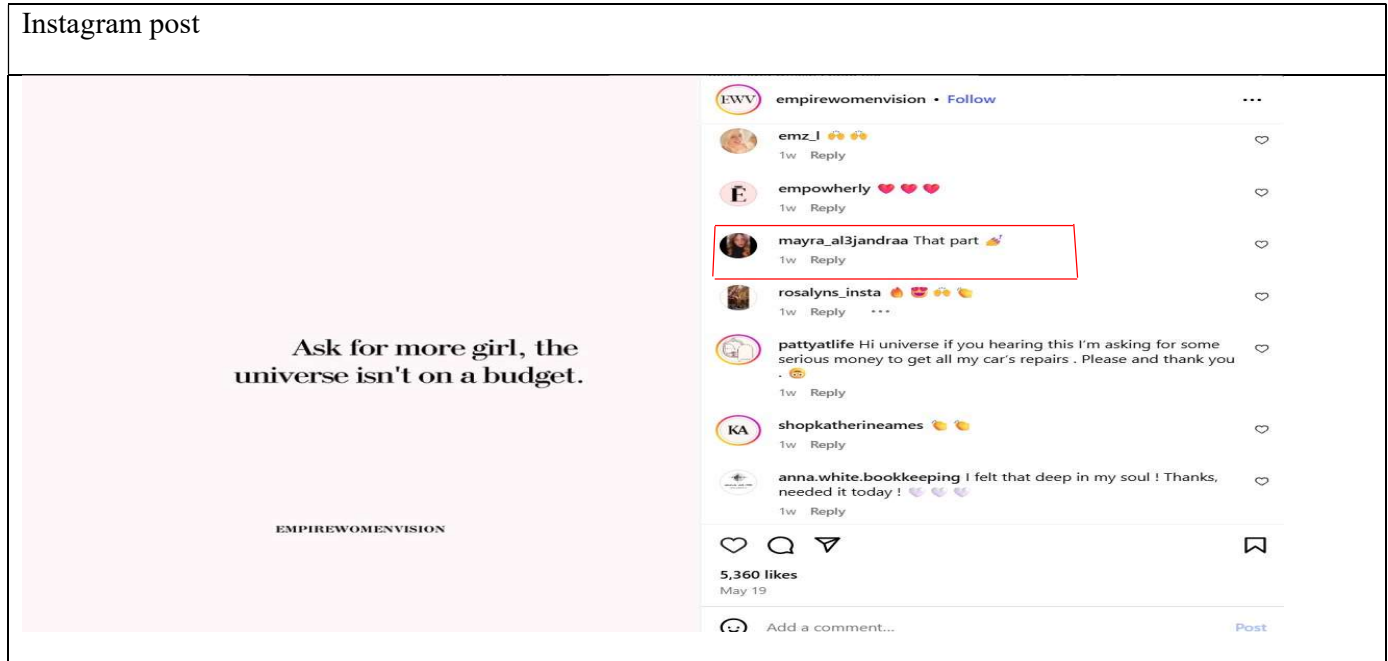
Analysis in the light of Speech Act Theory

The provided chat belongs to Gen Z users; one person was worried about the other arriving late to an 11 am. reservation. The latecomer replies, "Don't stress 🍌." The thumbs-up emoji (🍌) literally means, "I agree," "Sounds good," "I acknowledge your message," etc. But here, for Gen Z, a thumbs-up could be used passive-aggressive or dismissive. In short, that "I don't care about your stress " or "Quit bothering me with this." It basically means "Leave it alone" or "This conversation is annoying." Based on the framework of Searle's Speech Act Theory, "Don't stress 🍌" emphasis Saying "Don't stress" and giving a thumbs up, the late-comer is subtly committing not to stress out or at least to reassures the other person that there is no need to stress since they are taking charge of being late. Emphasizing reassurance of the other person that everything will be okay helps them to commit to a good result for their presence.

Gen Z's Instagram Post # 4:

Figure 9

Use of 🍌 Emoji



Note. Empire Women Vision. (2025, May 19). *Ask for more girl, the universe isn't on a budget* [Instagram post]. Instagram. From <https://www.instagram.com/p/DJ1asorsZKN/>

Analysis in the light of Speech Act Theory

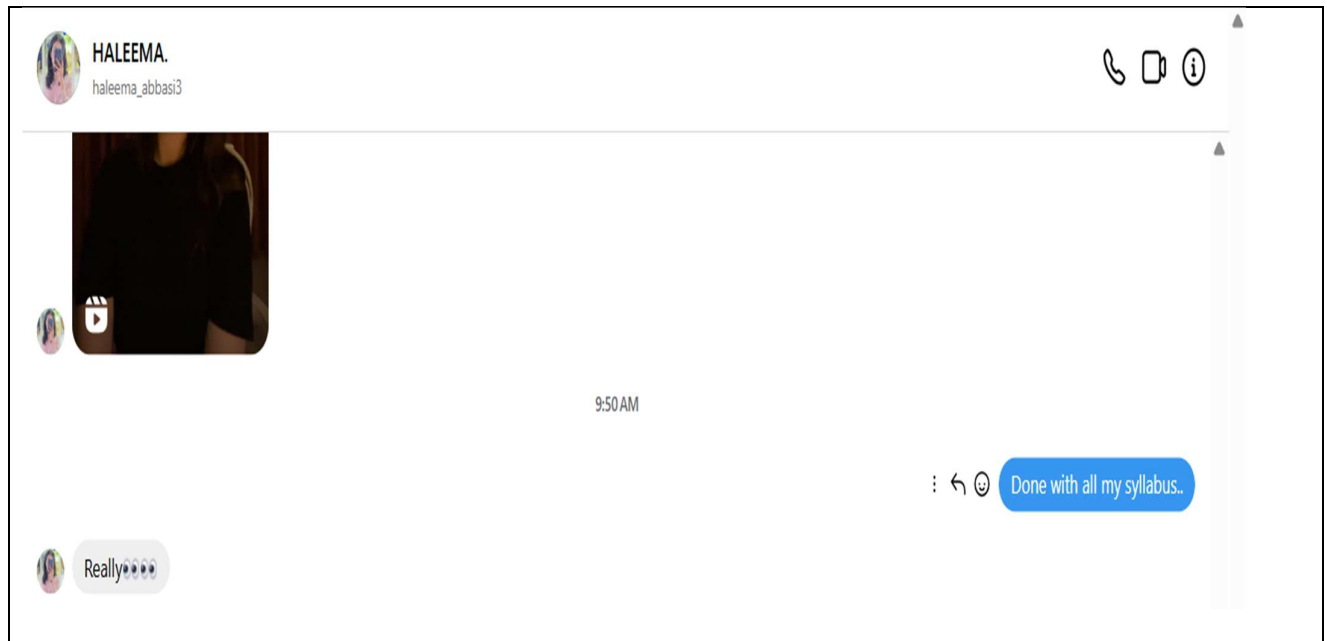
The Instagram post "Ask for more, girl, the universe isn't on a budget" is followed by comment by a Gen Z user with the nail polish emoji. The nail paint application emoji (💅) means beauty or self-care. In addition, Gen Z uses it to mean sass, confidence or a dismissive attitude, like "That part 💅," which means strong, confident agreement. In the context of Searle's Speech Act Theory, this is an Expressive act, where the speaker is communicating their internal state or attitude rather than making a prediction.

Gen Z's Instagram Post # 5:

Figure 10

Use of 💅 Emoji

Instagram conversation thread



Note. H.abbasi, Personal Instagram chat, May 29, 2025.

Analysis in the light of Speech Act Theory

The chat shows one person says, “Done with my all syllabus 😊” and the other replies, “Really 👁👁??” The eye emoji (👁👁) literally means to “look or observe”. But among Gen Z the double eye emoji suggests interest and attentiveness (it symbolically means tell me more). In context of Searle’s Speech Act Theory, “Really 👁👁??” is a Directive act. While it expresses surprise, the “Really” combined with the scrutinizing eyes is implicitly directing the other person to confirm, elaborate, or perhaps provide evidence for their claim. It’s not just an expression of feeling but an implicit request for more information or a reaffirmation.

Comparative Analysis of the Millennials and Gen Z’ s Usage of Emojis:

This section of the research compares the use of emojis by the Millennials and Gen Z users, based on Speech Act Theory. It highlights generational differences in tone, communication style and meaning in digital conversations.

Laughing with Tears of Joy Emoji (😂):

This “Laughing with Tears of Joy Emoji”, (😂) literally means intense laughter or amusement. In the Millennials usage (Post1 from Millennial’s data), the emoji is used in its literal sense to convey user’s psychological state of hilarity. For example, when Millennial comments using this emoji, it is equivalent to saying, “this is hilarious” or “I am laughing.” Therefore, according to the Millennials use, this emoji functions as Expressive illocutionary speech act.

On the other hand, Gen Z does not use this emoji (😂) in the analyzed comments (Post 1 from Gen Z data) which reflects a generational shift. Gen Z often finds it outdated or overused, instead, they prefer using emojis like a crying face (😭) or a skull (💀) to assert humor in a more ironic or exaggerated tone. Here, the function of laughing emoji shifts from expressive to assertive speech act.

Fire Emoji (🔥):

This fire emoji (🔥) visually represents fire or flame. The use of this emoji represents a generational gap metaphorically and literally. In Millennial’s usage (Post 2 from Millennial’s data), the fire emoji functions as assertive illocutionary speech act as it directly refers to an actual house on fire which represents reality rather than psychological state.

In contrast, Gen Z uses this emoji metaphorically to express aesthetic approval or admiration, such as a single 🔥 emoji (Post 2 from Gen Z data) in response to a nail paint post without any verbal comment conveys a message that “this is stylish” or “this is lit.” Here, in this context the fire emoji functions as expressive speech act as it conveys emotion or personal reaction.

Thumbs up Emoji (👍):

This emoji is another case where interpretation diverges across both generations. Among the Millennials, thumbs up emoji (👍) is used for approval or satisfaction. Hence, in the context of Millennials usage, this emoji functions as an expressive speech act. When a user comments (Post 4 from Millennial's data) "Good 👍", in response to government's initiative about vehicles registration, it reflects genuine approval.

However, Gen Z's usage of thumbs up emoji diverges from the Millennials, they interpret it as a more passive-aggressive reply. When someone replies (Post 3 from Gen Z's data) "Don't stress 👍) in chat, the emoji can be read as passive-aggressive or dismissive which implies that "leave it" or "I don't care." In this case, the emoji functions as commissive speech act.

Nail Paint Application Emoji (💅):

Another generational difference between the Millennials and Gen Z reflects in their interpretation of the nail paint application emoji. This emoji visually represents "applying nail paint on fingers." It literally means "self-care," "grooming," or "beauty." The millennials use this emoji literally to signify beauty or personal grooming. When a user comments on the post showing nail art (Post 4 from Millennial's data) "These nails are everything 💅 ❤️", conveys admiration or appreciation for the nail art. So, here it functions as an expressive speech act as it supports verbal expression and enhances the tone of the praise.

On the contrary, Gen Z gives this emoji a more attitudinal twist and use it to express sass, confidence, or playful arrogance without any literal reference to nail polish. Comment

like “That part 🍷” (Sample 4 from Gen Z data) signifies strong agreement, often with an undertone of empowerment or indifference. Here too, this emoji performs an expressive speech act.

Eyes Emoji (👁️):











Lastly, the eyes emoji (👁️) is another example of generational differences prevalent in the Millennials and Gen Z’s communication style. Among the Millennials (Post 5 from Millennial’s data), repeated use of eyes emojis in response to a sensational headline conveys a feeling of shock, or disbelief. So, in this context, this emoji functions as an expressive speech act reflecting an emotional state triggered by unexpected information.

On the other hand, Gen Z uses this eyes emoji in a more active conversational role. When one friend replies “Really 👁️,” in response to another friend’s text “Done with my all syllabus” the emoji functions as a directive speech act, which not only expresses surprise but implicitly calls on the other person justify or prove their statement. This reflects Gen Z’s preference for interactive and layered emoji use.

The following table 1 shows a comparative analysis of the emoji use by the Millennials and Gen Z. It is based on the above analysis in section 4.1 and 4.2, which is analyzed through Speech Act Theory:


Table 1

Comparing emoji usage among Millennials and Gen Z

Emoji	Millennials (Speech act type and usage)	Gen Z (Speech act type and usage)
 Laughing with Tears of Joy	<i>Expressive</i> - Used it literally to express intense laughter and amusement. (Post 1- Millennials)	Do not use this emoji and often consider it as outdated. Gen Z prefers  or  for humor. (Post-1 - Gen Z)
 Fire	<i>Assertive</i> - Used it literally to represent an actual fire. (Post 2- Millennials)	<i>Expressive</i> - used to express admiration, style or aesthetic appeal. (Post 2- Gen Z)
 Thumbs Up	<i>Expressive</i> - Used it for approval or satisfaction e.g., “Good  ” (Post 3- Millennials)	<i>Commissive + Expressive</i> -Used it ironically or dismissively to show as passive- aggressiveness e.g., “Don’t Stress  .” (Post 3-Gen Z)
 Nail Polish Application	<i>Expressive</i> - Used it literally for beauty or grooming. (Post 4- Millennials)	<i>Expressive</i> - used to convey sass, confidence, or empowerment. (Post 4- Gen Z)
 Eyes	<i>Expressive</i> - Used it to show shock or emotional response to surprising content (Post 5- Millennials)	<i>Directive</i> - Used to prompt a request or request clarification e.g, “Really  .” (Post 5- Gen Z)

Note. The data in this table is derived from the authors’ personal observations and informal analysis of digital discourse trends among Millennials and Gen Z users.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the research highlights a fascinating shift in how visual symbols are used expressively in this digital age, all through the analytical lens of the theory of the speech act of Searle. Emojis, especially for millennials, are all about sharing thoughts and feelings in a quick and uplifting manner. They convey humor or agreement, sticking closely to their original meanings. For instance, the millennials use the laughing with tears of joy emoji () to simply say, "This is hilarious." This shows that the millennials tend to view emojis as practical tools

rather than just decorative elements, and they can even reflect a person's mental well-being. In another example, thumbs up emoji (👍) marked agreement and was also in the spirit of expressive speech acts. Emojis do aid in communication and the way they are used reflects an increasing desire to be emotionally transparent and direct.

In the ever-evolving interactional style of Gen Z, we see some fascinating changes, like a rise in irony, deeper layers of intention, and a burst of symbolic creativity. Take emojis, for example—the meanings of some have really shifted from what they originally stood for. Just look at 😭, 🧠, and 🖊️. In Sample 4, the 🖊️ emoji now screams sass and confidence instead of just signifying a fresh manicure, while in Sample 1, 😭 is all about laughter rather than sadness. This shared understanding is strengthened by the trends of the digital world, whereby these visual cues are reformulated into the shorthand of these cultures. The emojis stand for one's attitude, identity, and sometimes dispassionate critique. Instead, meaning becomes fluid, and communication becomes altogether dynamic and replete with hidden meanings.

Both the generational groups are enthusiastic emoji users, but Gen Z users tend to incorporate them more frequently and in a wider variety of styles, often taking on ironic or non-literary meanings, influenced by online trends and evolving cultural contexts. On the contrary, the millennials also love to use emojis, but usually stick to the more traditional meanings, mainly to convey emotions. By applying Searle's theory of speech rules, we gain valuable insight into the intentions behind the use of emoji, classifying their roles as affirmative, direct, expressive, and less commissive and declarations. However, the visual, contextual and constantly evolving nature of Emojis highlights some theoretical limitations and suggests that we need to explore deeper and consider additional theoretical frameworks.

The insights obtained from this research are extremely important to understand how we communicate in today's digital environment, especially for different generations. How we

interpret emojis can cause misunderstandings in our workplaces, schools, and even personal interactions. To improve communication and to make it clearer in a fast-moving digital world, we must recognize these generational differences. In addition, it can be revealed that comparisons of how these age groups use emojis in different cultures give rise to some intriguing insights. Also, to better understand its constantly evolving nature, emojis should be investigated in specific online communities and subcultures, especially in Gen Z. Finally, the study of emoji communication provides an interesting perspective on the landscape of human interaction evolving in the digital age, and continuing research in this field is essential to a comprehensive understanding of its complexity and impact.

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