



The Analysis of Emoji's Usage from Japanese Generation Perspectives

Hendy R C Dharma^{1*}, GG F P Desak², Abdul A T Kariko³

¹Japanese Department, Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta

²Information Systems Department, Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta,

³English Department, Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta

Corresponding Author: Hendy R C Dharma hdharma@binus.edu

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ABSTRACT

Japanese people sometimes use emoji in their daily activities, especially in non-verbal communications such as text messages or posting on their social media. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to find out what kind of emojis that Japanese people of generation X, Y, and Z tend to use in their communication. This research uses library and qualitative method. Authors also conduct a survey on 90 random Japanese people. It is hoped that this research allows us to know the representation of emoji that is used between different generations in Japan. The research shows that emoji used in communication may serve as a medium to maintain harmony between generations to communicate in this digital era. Plenty of Japanese people, especially within families and friends use emoji to emphasize expressions in a sentence as well as making them more friendly. Moreover, another result of why Japanese people use emoji in smartphones is because of its practicality.

INTRODUCTION

There are plenty of ways that people communicate with text. One may use “...” that refers to low intonation, “!” to emphasize a message, “?” is used to as a question, and one may also use a bold text to mark importance. As time went by, emoji was born as a feature to help in written communication (Kubota, 2010). As one of non-verbal communicational tools, symbols change into many different forms whether they turn into handwritten symbols, as well as programmed – text-based interaction (Giannoulis;2020). These symbols are useful to fill in the emptiness due to the nonexistence of non-verbal and non-text communications signs. Emoji is not limited to blogs, websites, or social media, but they are also used frequently in chat applications such as LINE, Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, etc. Therefore, the authors would like to know the representation of emoji for Japanese people from generation to generation (from generation X, Y, to Z).

Emoji or emoticon was developed by Shigetaka Kurita during his employment in NTT DoCoMo. The word emoji itself does not derive from emotion and letter, the root of its words consist of Kanji e (picture) and moji (word) (Blaster, 2017). Therefore, emoji itself means a text that produces pictures. Emoji then becomes emoticon, that derives from the emoji and icon; which then becomes kaemoji/emoticon that tends to be an image of expression (happy, shocked, sad, etc). Besides kaemoji, emoji also evolves – due to the advancement of technology – as stickers/stamps. After that, it again evolves to GIF, which is currently popular in digital communication.

The development of emoji rapidly increased since the invention of smartphones (Blagdon, 2013). Back then during the era of feature phones, emoji is not used that often because it is not compatible if it is used on phones with different brands. Emoji was yet to be popular when iPhone first came to Japan in 2008. The Japanese people did not prefer iPhone back then due to its inavailability in using emoji until iPhone created the emoji keyboard feature. Despite the update, the Japanese felt that emoji in iPhone was not cute/kawaii enough for them. They felt that emoji in iPhone was more similar to iconography and warning labels compared to mascots and kyaras.

The Japanese people are different compared to the US that they prefer designs of emoji that look like kyaras such as Pikachu, Hello Kitty, etc. This preference was then taken as an opportunity with the creation of LINE application. LINE is a popular communication tool in Japan that provides stickers as a feature of chat decoration. With LINE stickers, different shapes of emoji in different gadgets are then blended into one image even if it is used in different gadgets. Beside stickers/stamps, LINE features also provide emoticons that show more expressions such as happy, sad, disappointed, etc. This idea is in contrast with Nishimura’s research (2015) in that it shows the gender and age segmentation. The research reveals that younger women tend to use emoji more frequently due to the kawaii culture in the young people of Japan (especially Japanese young women). This research focuses more on the generation of emoji users.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to find out what kind of *emojis* that Japanese people of generation X, Y, and Z tend to use in their communication. This research uses library and qualitative method. Authors also conduct a survey on 85 random Japanese people. It is hoped that this research allows us to know the representation of *emoji* that is used between different generations in Japan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Emoji's Usage in Japan

In 2013, as much as 74% of Americans used stickers or *emoji* in messaging applications. Compared to the US, *emoji* that popular in Japan is

✌️(°▽°)!! (pronounced *kitaaa*, meaning “all right!” or “here we go!” - commonly used in Twitter and chat rooms. According to Wong (2015), different culture uses different *emoji*. Americans tend to use *emoji* in order to direct a topic in a conversation while Japanese people tend to use *emoji* merely as a decoration. In web blogs in Japan, plenty of *emoji* are used by both a blogger and people in the comment section. It serves as a tool to play around with language, culture, *kawaii*/cuteness, as well as to be polite. Japanese people feel that it is polite when using *emoji* during texting/chatting. The reason for this is to prevent miscommunication during chatting/texting. Therefore, *emoji* also serves as a representation of face to face communication between a writer and his/her reader. In a study in North America and East Asia, people in East Asia tend to use more *emoji* than people in the North America.

Generation X in Japan (1965-1980)

There is classification of people in five categories of generations based on their birth year, such as Baby Boomer Generation (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Generation Y or Millennial Generation (1981-1994), Generation Z (1995-2010), and Alpha Generation (2011-2025) (Wong, 2016). All of the five generations have their own characteristics based on their birth year, environment, etc. Even the Japanese people are also categorized based on the birth year. Generation X in Japan tends to live in the era of bubble economy. They like to create idols, anime, and manga that tasted glory in 1961-1970. This generation also consists of people whose lives were filled with things such as TV, video game, cassettes, phone, making them aware of the development of electronics. The Generation X in Japan also tends to understand the importance of competition and competitive elements. Due to their highly competitive nature, this also becomes the reason to a high number of suicides in Japan.

Generation Y in Japan (1981-1994)

Similar to the Generation X, the Generation Y is still closely connected to the habit of the people before them. The people of Generation Y know their technology thanks to their parents, making them familiar with phones and even cellphones. Moreover, the Generation Y is known to massively use technology such as phones and cellphones. However, since this generation is usually the offsprings of the Generation X that experienced bubble economy in Japan, then

the Generation Y learned to be careful with their money, less consumptive and less ambitious. Nonetheless, the Generation Y easily adapts and experiences education that improves their talent and creativity.

Generation Z in Japan (1995-2010)

Japan and other countries also have the same characteristics for this generation. Generation Z is the generation of future inventors with all the dreams and technology (Nakazawa:2013). The needs of Generation Z are more than just food, shelter, and clothing. This generation is the generation that requires internet. Generation Z is easy in accessing high speed internet using their smartphones. They can access anything anywhere. Though it is easy for them to access internet, they are not that interested or challenged with the use of apps or games. Other characteristics of Generation Z is that they are highly ambitious, confident, as well as having the desire to be acknowledged by others and the fondness of instant success. The people of Generation Y (Millennial Generation) believe that people in Generation Z need to improve their soft skill as well as technical skills and special expertise - to show their expectation on how the future will be shaped, due to the tendency of Generation Z in underestimating everything.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a survey via Google Form given randomly to 90 Japanese people. After gaining the result of the survey, the data is then divided to three generations (Gen X, Y, and Z). There are three expected results from the survey. First, to find out what kind of environment is an emoji is used, as well as to find out who sends and receives emoji. Second, the frequency of using the emoji. Third, the reason on why an emoji is used. After knowing the three results, there will be a clear picture of the use of emoji and the reason of why emoji is used by every generation.

RESEARCH RESULT

The result of the survey to 90 random Japanese people shows that:

Table 1. *Emoji Environment in Generation X, Y, and Z*
(Survey conducted in July 2022)

Generation	School and Campus%	Work Environm ent%	Others (families , etc.) %	Public place (friends, shops, etc.) %	Grand Total (%)
Generation X	0,0	27,3	90,9	9,1	100,0
Generation Y	15,4	7,7	69,2	15,4	100,0
Generation Z	67,2	4,9	24,6	19,7	100,0
Average total %	27,5	13,3	61,6	14,7	100,0

The survey shows that people in Gen X are consisting of age 39 to 54, tend to have their own families, do not use *emoji* at campus and school.

Although they are professional workers, they do not use *emoji* in work environment and public places. Instead, they use *emoji* mostly in informal situation such as when interacting with their families and friends (90.9).

Similar to Gen X, people in Gen Y that are currently aged 25 to 38 years old in which the majority have professional occupation are not different than Gen X. They tend to use *emoji* in informal situation, especially with their families and friends (69.2%). The difference is quite clear that Gen Y uses *emoji* with a bit more flexibility compared to Gen X. Gen Y rarely uses *emoji* in school and public places while it is also almost never used in work environment.

For people in Gen Z, that are currently aged 9 to 25 years old that have just started to enter work environment, with many of them still at school tend to use *emoji* at campus and school. What is interesting is that compared to Gen X and Y, this generation rarely uses *emoji* with their families. The similarity between Gen X, Y, and Z, *emoji* is that *emoji* is still rarely used in work environment. While the above result shows the environment of using an *emoji*, the next graph shows who sends and receives *emoji*.

Table 2. Top 20 *Emoji* Ranking Environment in Japanese
 (Survey conducted in July 2022)

Rank	<i>emoji</i>	Count of <i>emoji</i>
1	😂	14
2	😊	13
3	👍	11
4	👉	9
5	😄	9
6	😁	8
7	😃	7
8	👊	6
9	😎	6
10	👉	6
11	🙏	6
12	😄	5
13	😁	4
14	😂	4
15	😄	4
16	😃	4
17	👉	4
18	😄	4
19	👉	4
20	👉	3

The results above show that there are similarities in the laughter category *emoji*. Starting from laughing while crying, laughing while grinning, etc. The

top 3 ranks are emoji 「😂」, 「😄」, 「😏」. The similarities in these three emojis is that they all have tears in them. Although there are tears in the laughter, this emoji tends to evoke ambiguous meanings. According to Bai, Dan, et al (2019), this emoji signifies something that is funny and fun. Also, it is added that this emoji often misinterpreted as crying loudly. Out of the twenty rankings there are emojis that depict facial expressions compared to emojis that depict gestures from bodily movements such as hand or thumb movements, etc. Emojis that do not appear in the ranking is emojis such as buildings, food and drinks, flags, vehicles, etc.

DISCUSSION

The surveys of *emoji* users show a pattern that the three generations tend to use *emoji* with their friends, and more hesitant in using *emoji* to their subordinates/superiors (work environment) and teacher/student (school/campus). Japanese people are known of having a unique formal and informal style of communication. The formal style is marked with the use of *~masu* 「~ます」 atau *~desu* 「~です」 at the end of a sentence. Formal style of *~masu/~desu* is used by superiors-subordinates, teacher-student, as well as among new acquaintances. Based on the graphic above, *emoji* is still considered as an informal style of language so it is rarely used in formal situation. Remarkably, although using *emoji* is considered as an informal style of communication, Japanese people start to use it when they converse with new acquaintances while at the same time trying to be polite. In other words, it is a combination of formal and informal style of communication that is signified with the use of *emoji*. In relation to different generations, generation X, Y, and Z tend to think that it is common and friendly (survey tells 68.2%) to use *emoji*. For that reason, researchers conclude that *emoji* may be used when communicating with new acquaintances, as long as it is not in the context of student-teacher and work-related, such as. For example, using *emoji* while meeting/chatting with new acquaintances happens in a friendly context such as social media, interest clubs, Youtube comments, blogs, etc.

Another result shows the reason of using *emoji* based on the survey:

1. to emphasize of the emotion and expression (77%).
2. to be more friendly (68 %).
3. to prevent miss-communication or misunderstanding in written communication (24%).
4. to be polite (16%).

The results shown above proves to be different with the researchers' early hypothesis. At first, the researchers thought that emojis tend to avoid miscommunications especially among the users. Instead, the survey revealed that the emojis are used mostly to emphasize emotions and expressions. Um (2015) stated that harmony (in Japanese it is referred with the term *Wa*) is something that is safely guarded by Japanese people. With its rigid system, the Japanese people always try to maintain the harmony among themselves. Also, the Japanese people also have hierarchies in communications. Therefore, emoji

users also have to pay attention to who they are talking to. If they are talking to their superiors or to elders, Gen X in average are less likely to use emoji to their superiors in order to avoid offending them. Meanwhile, the Gen Zs tend to be more flexible in using emojis in that they think the use of emojis may help to avoid miscommunication between the users themselves.

Nakatani (2019) mentioned that the aging population in Japan has grown in a rapid pace. Elderlies aged 65 years old was in the 27.7% among the total population of Japan in 2017. This number may increase to 38.4% in 2065. Therefore, the use of emojis to elderlies might affect the level of politeness among emoji users in the Japanese society. There are two possibilities that might happen with this prediction. The first possibility is that if the elderlies in Japan still feel that using emojis to older people are still considered impolite, then the number of emoji users might not increase significantly. The second possibility is that if the Japanese elderlies accept the use of emoji (or considered polite) as well as having a function as a medium to convey emotions and expressions in communication by Japanese elderlies then the number of emoji users may increase in the next generation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of the use of *emoji* and how it relates in between generation X, Y, and Z shows a different result compared to the researchers' early hypothesis. At first, researchers thought that there would be differences between generation X, Y, and Z in using *emoji*. After conducting a survey and analyzing it, it is found that generation X and Y still use the same pattern, which is in a friendly context. However, compared to generation X and Y, generation Z tends to use *emoji* in campus and school environment. Currently generation Z is still aged around 9 to 25 years old. If the use of *emoji* already becomes a habit at school, then it is possible that generation Z will start to use *emoji* at work as soon as they enter work environment. For that reason, the researchers believe that further research is necessary about generation Z's pattern in using *emoji* when they start to enter work environment. Also, it is possible that with the development of *emoji* and how it already becomes a medium of communication in generation Alpha, further research might give valuable data. For further researches, we suggest that a comparison between generation X, Y, Z, and Alpha especially regarding its patterns in using *emoji* starting from 2019 for the next five years will be important. It is possible that generation X and Y which at first are hesitant to use *emoji* at work may be more open and flexible in using it as soon as they feel become aware of more and more people are using *emoji* as a feature to express themselves while maintaining a degree of politeness. With the use of *emoji* as one of the ways to create harmony in the society, patterns of communications will also change with the growth of technology.

FURTHER RESEARCH

This research is still lack of comparison with Indonesian behavior of using emoji. Therefore, in further research for representation of emoji's usage

between Indonesian and Japanese we could see comparative for variation result of emojis.

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