

Why is Everyone So Emojinal?

Bridget Langdon

Bridget Langdon was born in a strange time during the transition into the technological era. During this transition, a new genre of emoji speak emerged and integrated itself into a modern form of text communication. Through cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), Langdon researches Generation X and millennials to try to understand emoji speak as a genre and how it functions within an activity system.

I was born in 1983. This time period, give or take a few years, was when generation labeling became unclear. Recently, I have deemed the period between 1975 and 1995 as “Generation Cusp.” Until around the year 2000, I was told that I was part of Generation X. Perhaps I’m not privy to change, or I was comfortable in my sociologically assigned generation, but I was unwilling to be part of this new technology era. I didn’t feel as though I knew enough about it to succeed. I was eleven when the Internet became a public commodity. There were horror/suspense movies written about what this kind of technology would do to the human race. There were cautionary tales. Everyone prepared for the Y2K computer apocalypse. And, most of all, there was complete and utter awe.

I was seventeen years old when 9/11 happened, which seemed to have changed the world forever. My childhood was pretty much over by then, so the entire life that I knew was already behind me. I had grown up outside of the Internet. The extent of our technological belongings was an old computer (pre-Windows), a printer that made a lot of noise and took a very long time to print, a couple of gaming systems with top-quality, heavily pixelated graphics, a

couple of tiny TVs (one that was attached to a clock and was only in black and white), a VCR, and a LaserDisc player. (Sidenote: The LaserDisc player was very advanced for its time; the LaserDiscs were record-sized DVDs that came out before DVDs. You had to flip the disk over in the middle of the movie. It was fun.) We also had a video camera that was a workout in its own right (it fit full-size VHS tapes). And, alas, communication was much more difficult.

During my childhood, I lived in Germany for two-and-a-half years. We typed our letters on our computer and then mailed them. We knew it would take around two to three weeks before it was received in the States. Our families would save up money to make that very rare, international, long-distance phone call from a landline (calls like that were outrageously expensive at the time). This is the time that I remember. This is a time when the Internet wasn't at our fingertips. This is what I feel separates those around my age from the millennials.

That being said, I can also identify with the millennials. When I think Gen X, I picture people who are still pissed off about the Vietnam War. I'm still not even sure what the Vietnam War was about. I think about John Hughes movies and the Brat Pack. Those kids seemed so old to me, a generation away from me. My high school experiences were never like their high school experiences (granted my high school experience was at the post-grunge apex of goth). But if there is anything that connects me to millennials, it was the birth of texting, e-mailing, and instant messaging. I was elated to find out that I could communicate through well-thought-out words (I'm super socially awkward IRL). And text-based communication that arrived immediately completely shaped the way I interacted with others. I learned the abbreviated texts (though I still rebel against LOL), I learned the emoticons (the text-based version of emojis), but then the emojis came. I was OK with the smiley faces, but then all kinds of new little pictures came, and I had no idea what to do with them.

So at thirty-one years of age, I felt distanced from both generations that I was previously and currently associated with. This distinction prompted me to look closely at a new genre of emoji speak within an **activity system**. An activity system is actually part of the larger concept of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) that is used to study and understand new genres such as emoji speak. The activity system is the way that people engage in the genres and the types of tools, rules, and texts that are produced in the process.

New Genre

Through my research, I found the following quote, and it resonated with me on a deep level: "Some people are very adept at writing certain genres

because they have participated a great deal in the activity system that uses them, whereas they may be much less adept (or even incompetent, from the point of view of an adept) at writing a genre from an activity system in which they have not participated” (Russell). This is me. I am adept at writing many genres, but emoji speak is not one of them.

As I said, I do not relate to millennials because I remember a time before the Internet, or at least before the Internet became widely used. I remember computers before Microsoft Windows, writing letters to pen pals, writing notes in class, writing postcards, phoning a friend, or finding the correct letter of the encyclopedia to find information. I remember landlines, pay phones, long-distance calls, and 1-800-COLLECT.

However, I also remember transitioning to electronic communication such as e-mail, instant messenger (ICQ), and chatrooms. Those who lived within this transitional period are who I categorize as Generation Cusp because, during these few years, we fell right between pre-digital and digital eras. My generation created social media. We were not born into it. Although people who were born prior to the beginning of the '80s do use social media and rely on the Internet as much as the younger generations, they lived at least twenty years before the wide use of the Internet. So naturally, as new modes of communication (both medium and in text) began to emerge, I experienced this unprecedented learning curve that has been both successful and unsuccessful in various ways. For social media, I did learn to use Facebook, Twitter (kind of), and Reddit. All of these act as platforms in which I can communicate with others. Facebook and Twitter consist of posting and responding, generally. I experienced almost all of the Facebook changes over the years, and I complained about every one of them like elders complain about “kids these days.” I shook my fist and everything. Reddit is a little different because submissions can be anonymous. This allows for uncensored, unfiltered correspondence. On the other hand, there are Tumblr, Snapchat, Pinterest, and other social media sites that I haven't even tried to dabble in, lest I become too overwhelmed or reveal my ineptitude and ignorance.

As for the text, for years I had used the text-based emoticons to express emotion. I remember seeing these images in mid-90s magazines when they began to popularize, though Wikipedia says that they've been around since 1986. Emoticons were not pictures of smiley faces. Emoticons were made by using punctuation like the colon and the end parenthesis. The coolest thing you could do with those was make the Marge Simpson: 88888:-) These I could understand. Oftentimes my humor is not successfully understood through my writing. Sometimes I come off as crass or mean when I'm only trying to make a joke. Emoticons opened up a whole new world for my textual humor, especially in e-mail or on social media sites.

However, emojis have progressed into images that not only convey emotions, but are also used to carry on full conversations. When the pictures were just various forms of smiley faces, I could completely understand and use smiley faces to convey emotion in my posts. It was fun and innovative, and I was young enough to fit right in with my peers who were using the same mode, this new genre, to communicate. Then, sometime when I apparently wasn't looking, one hundred-million (not really) new pictures surfaced, and I realized that I had no idea what they meant. The digital natives (the younger generation who was born after the explosion of the Internet) had created this entirely new pidgin language to communicate, and I had found myself lost in translation. I saw posts like, "This is my day today - 😊❤️❄️🍷🐱🍷" Without fail, the post would receive several "likes" and comments like, "I know, right?!" while I'm over here trying to figure out this puzzle, "smileheartsnowhatcatdrink . . . that's not a word." And for the very first time in my life, in my early 30s, I was one of those "old people" who just didn't understand. Others of my generation, and prior generations, have been able to hold conversations using emojis, whether it was just to display emotion or to use emojis as replacement for words. However, because of this revelation, I decided to do whatever I had to do to conquer the rules of the emoji genre so that I could communicate too.

Attempting to Fit in

At first, I tried to engage in conversations with friends to see if I was the only person who was having trouble understanding this newfound encoded text. As it turns out, I was not alone in this. My significant other asked how I planned on going about my research. I said, "Well, first I'm going to go to one of those sites that has a list of emojis and their definitions." He immediately replied, "No! You can't do that! That's what they want you to do. It's all part of the conspiracy, you see. *They* create those charts to throw us off so that we never figure out their language." He was joking, but, upon thinking about it, I realized that many of us feel that way. We are so far removed from the new digital language that it almost does feel like a conspiracy. It's important to learn the language in order to feel comfortable within an environment. My younger sister, who is still within the Generation Cusp asked, "What is it you don't understand?" As an example, I said, "Like the 100. I see it everywhere, but I don't *know* what it *means*." She pondered on this for a moment and said, "I don't know. I always thought of it as a percent. Like 100%. Like if you think about the highest score you can get, it would be 100. Like percent. I don't know, I just keep wanting to make it percent. I guess I don't really know." According to emojibase.com, it actually does mean 100 points, as in a score or percent. She ventured a guess, but she wasn't actually able to

articulate it because she is not entirely familiar with the genre either, though she is close enough to guess correctly. Subsequently, a slang term of “Keep it 100” surfaced, which is another way of saying “keep it real.” I guess by getting a score of 100, one is able to take pride in themselves or their work, which is a way to be real. Generally, emojis are pictures based on words, but as emoji speak as a genre becomes increasingly popular, we can see how emoji meanings work themselves into new slang and non-text conversations as seen with the 100. This is another indication of emoji speak as an activity system because of more tools and rules that have come out of this genre.

So my significant other and I tried to start communicating via emojis. This did not go well. Figures 1 and 2 exemplify our failed attempts:

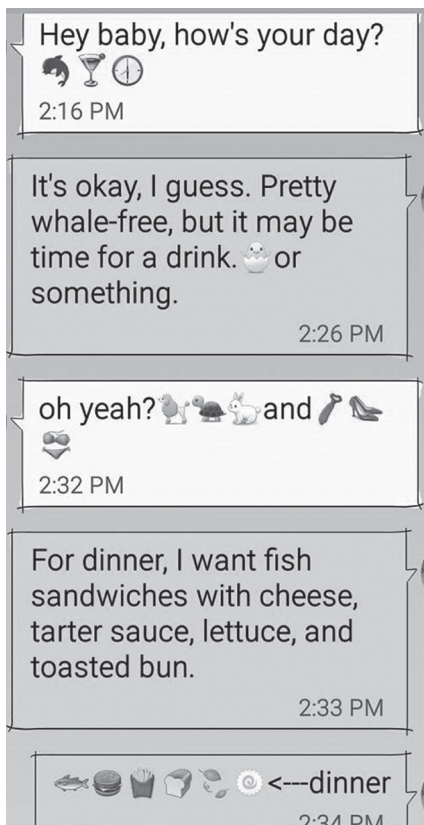


Figure 1: Number one Attempt to have a Conversation with Emojis.

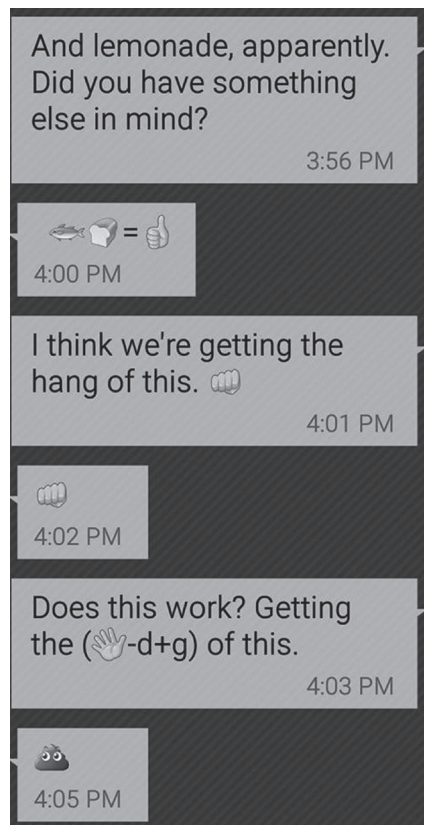


Figure 2: Failed Attempt at Emoji Speak.

As you can see, we tried several different things that apparently made no sense at all. I tried to apply logic that I was taught in school when we’d get those worksheets full of picture-based brain teasers (see Figure 3 for an example). The brain teasers were pictures that could be put together to figure out a word or popular phrase.



Figure 3: Brain Teaser Example of “Big Man on Campus”

So I tried to use hand-d+g=hang . Apparently this idea was poop, so I began to research the Internet for anything I could find that would help me to understand the genre of emoji speak.

The Dreaded Internet Research

First, I tried to just look on some informational websites, like I originally said I would do. I found a *Time* magazine article (“Here Are Rules of Using Emoji You Didn’t Know You Were Following”), where the author, Katy Steinmetz, discusses the work of computational linguist Tyler Schnoebelen (who wrote his dissertation on emoji conversations), and how his research explains many of the emoji conversation rules. Interestingly, in his research, Schnoebelen found that older generations tend to still use emoticons with noses, while people of the younger generation use emojis to describe feelings. Though it’s not specifically stated, I feel that emoticons with noses were specific to the older generation because without it, the smiley face just looks kind of weird. :) Obviously the older generation mimicked the emoticons that were already in existence, but it’s noteworthy to say that emojis do not generally have noses. Perhaps it’s an idea that was not thought of by the creators; therefore, it was not transferred into the current genre. As aforementioned, emojis are attributed more to feelings than emoticons. When emoticons started to popularize in the mid-’90s, it seemed to be more experimental and fun (like Marge Simpson). It was maybe ten years later when I started to use text-based smiley faces to indicate that I was kidding. With the smiley face emojis now, it’s easy to convey laughter, anger, sadness, confusion, indifference, etc. It’s like an extension to a sentence that doesn’t spell out the emotion someone is trying to emanate.

Anyways, in the article Steinmetz shares how Schnoebelen explains that in conversations or posts that contain more than one emoji, the order of the emoji completely dictates the story that is told. For instance, this:



Is different than this:



Snoebelen explains that “The face comes first. Consider ‘stance’ the attitude or emotion you have about something, represented by a happy, sad, or flirty yellow face” (Steinmetz). So by putting the sad faces before the broken heart, the emotion is more apparent and/or stronger. To help clarify the overall purpose of emojis, he points out that “one of the main problems with text communication is that it’s just different from how we’ve talked to each other for most of the existence of language” and notes that in text communication we are “dry in terms of the cues we get to use to signal exactly what we mean, to give nuance to the meaning.” Basically, he says that “emoticons and emoji provide this nice shorthand” to fill in those missing cues (Steinmetz).

OK, this makes complete sense to me. However, when conversations are written almost exclusively with emoji, that’s when things get complicated. For example, Katy Perry released some lyrics to her song that were written in near complete emoji (Figure 4):

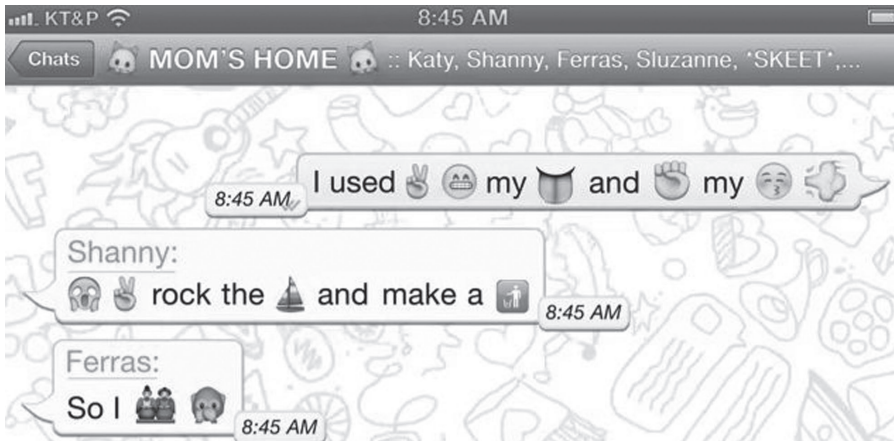


Figure 4: Katy Perry’s Emoji Song

Apparently this translates to “I used to bite my tongue and hold my breath/ Scared to rock the boat and make a mess/ So I sit quietly” (Moss). I would have never gotten this message. However, as I researched further, I realized that perhaps technology has created a generation where it is just easier to use pictures instead of words. Perhaps the younger generation is so exposed to encoded text that they possess some sort of **antecedent knowledge** (basically all of the things that a person already knows about a genre of writing, though they may not be aware that they use it without consciously thinking about it) that I don’t (another reason I consider myself on the Cusp).

Upon further research, I found it noteworthy that sometime in the '90s and on into the popularization of text messages, people began to use a more shorthand version of words to communicate more quickly. LOL, which stands for Laugh Out Loud, replaced such phrases as “I found that very humorous.” People started using letters to represent words such as “u,” “r,” “k,” “c,” etc. Typing text, which has become the most popular form of communications, can’t happen as quickly as talking face-to-face. In order to carry on conversations with the quickest means possible, people have been finding shortcuts. Emojis have only aided in producing the most time-efficient mode of conversation. Entire sentence fragments can be depicted in one picture. Again, all of this made sense to me, but there was still no way that I could write in this new genre. At least not without making a fool out of myself, as I’ve already illustrated.

Maybe it *is* a Conspiracy

To carry on my research—because I still wasn’t satisfied—I decided to visit a huge website/forum where I was sure most of the digital natives hung out. I went to Reddit (that place where one can post anonymously in order to not look stupid for being way behind the times). Reddit is known for its population of teenagers (though people of all ages visit the site regularly). I tried posting questions like: “Why are emojis popular?,” “What do emojis mean?,” and “What’s the draw of emojis for teens and young adults?” At first I got very vague answers. Some people would just answer in a series of emojis. One of them said, “I’m just trying to get laid.” (OK, that’s less than helpful.) One tried to give a reasonable explanation, “In lieu of body language or gestures. And tone of voice. Basically, there are too many nonverbal cues for small amounts of text to be sufficient to convey a person’s entire meaning all of the time. Thus, emojis and emoticons.” *But what about the other pictures, man? What about the others?!* Of course, I received no further explanation. I wondered to myself why I couldn’t get a straight answer. I am now theorizing that perhaps neither generation can exactly pinpoint it. For older generations, it just kind of happened, and they went along with it like I’m trying to do. For the younger generations, it’s just always been that way. It doesn’t seem that anyone knows exactly why. Or so I thought.

But then something weird happened. I had posted questions in five different subreddits, and shortly after posting and conversing, I was notified that my posts were removed. *All* of them. I was given various reasons, but none of them seemed to apply. One of them said that I “apparently don’t understand how to use Reddit.” *What? Why not?* I firmly wanted to believe that this was some large conspiracy against me and my generation. They were

pushing us out. They were laughing at us, I was sure of it. But in the end, I think I've just failed to keep up with the writing genres of the next generation.

Generation Gap

It's no secret that the older generations have a difficult time picking up on the new technologies as they present themselves (Figure 5). Apparently I have reached an age where I am no longer keen on the new writing genres of the young kids (are whipper-snappers still a thing?).



Figure 5: User Issues by an Older Generation.

This is where I am now. I have peaked in my technological life span. After extensive research, and trial and error, I have found that this is simply a genre where I will never be adept. But I've also learned that I'm OK with that.

My Failed Attempt at Emoji Speak

Despite my best efforts, I never did completely grasp the genre of emoji speak. I tried research, discussions, and experimentation. The fact of the matter is, this activity system is completely outside of my basic understanding of writing. Perhaps I'm too old. Perhaps I was too late to the game. It seems as though people younger than me had no problem using emojis as a writing genre. It's that antecedent knowledge that is so basic to them, they aren't even able to articulate it, like my sister for example.

I went into this project with the intent to come out of it with this new understanding of emojis. That didn't happen at all. If anything, I came out a little more confused. But I did come out of it with something much more

important. I learned more about the culture I live within. I was able to find my place within it (that does not involve emojis beyond the faces). I am Generation Cusp. I live within the generation that made millennials who they are, and even if I can't completely conform, I at least understand it a little better.

I found the rules for the activity system, but even with many forms of research and the various attempts to use them, I was never able to implement them quite right. For the first time, I interacted with a genre that I ultimately failed to understand, which I consider to be a very important lesson when trying to explore new genres of writing.

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Bridget Langdon is currently working towards her Master's in Creative Writing-Creative Nonfiction. She is also employed by the Admissions Office at ISU which means she needs to understand both professional and creative forms of writing. Bridget also recently downloaded Snapchat and is starting to understand a little more about the younger generation.

