

## Age and Gender Variations in the Pragmatic Use of Emojis and Stickers within Uzbek Private Messaging

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### ABSTRACT

*Digital interpersonal communication relies heavily on visual cues to convey tone, emotion and social distance. Although digital discourse and multimodal units have been studied on a fairly broad scale in global linguistics, personal, namely the sociolinguistic aspects of dyadic communication, have not yet been sufficiently researched for Central Asian languages, including Uzbek. This article examines age and gender differences in the pragmatic use of emojis and stickers in private Telegram correspondence in Uzbek. The study offers new sociolinguistic insights into how visual modality interacts with traditional cultural values in a private digital space.*

**Keywords:** Pragmatics, Uzbek digital discourse, gender differences, age differences, emojis, stickers, private correspondence, sociolinguistics

### INTRODUCTION

The rapid development trends taking place in the world are being reflected significantly in linguistics, as in all other fields. The rapid development of instant messaging systems via social networks has fundamentally transformed everyday traditional communication. In virtual communication, the means of face-to-face interaction gestures, intonation and tone are being replaced by symbols such as emojis and stickers. Unlike public social media channels, private correspondence constitutes a distinct

personal communicative space, where social identity, hierarchy, age, and gender directly influence language choices.

In Uzbekistan's digital space, the Telegram platform is regarded as the primary means for both professional and personal daily communication. In our national culture, great importance is attached to interpersonal respect, communicative etiquette and social distance. In the transition from face-to-face to digital communication, speakers are compelled to adapt these social norms to the visual modality. Although digital cues are often considered universal emotional indicators, pragmalinguistic and lingvocultural studies show that their pragmatic interpretation varies significantly depending on the speaker's gender and age.

Based on observations on this topic and the opinions expressed by linguists to date, we can say that men and women, as well as different age groups, do not use visual signs in the same way or for the same communicative purposes. Each emoji or sticker should be interpreted not in isolation from its general context, but in conjunction with the overall text and the identity of the interlocutor. Sociolinguistic studies of computer-mediated communication have consistently shown that gender and age influence digital writing style. Research by Herring & Dainas has shown that women's online communication often features a high degree of politeness, high levels of politeness, and expressive punctuation, whereas male communication is noted for stylistic conciseness and a greater tendency towards emotional neutrality [4: 12]. We can also link this phenomenon to the inherent psychological and physiological differences between men and women. Women are naturally more susceptible to emotion, and this is directly reflected in their correspondence.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed an integrated methodology combining multimodal linguistics and pragmalinguistic analysis to identify gender and age-related features in the pragmatic use of emojis and stickers in private Uzbek-language Telegram conversations. The empirical basis of the study is based on a specially extracted subset of the Uzbek Multimodal Telegram (UMT) Corpus and data from a constructed validation questionnaire.

Data collection and processing for the study were carried out in the following sequence:

1. **Corpus construction and grouping of private chats:** The corpus material consists of 574 multimodal communicative samples extracted from 86 separate private (one-to-one) chat sources, collected between January and May 2026. To ensure the impartiality of the analysis and to comply with academic ethical guidelines, all texts and visual units were fully anonymised (names, telephone numbers, and personal information were removed). The corpus data was classified according to two main demographic indicators:
  - a. Gender: Correspondence from male and female users.
  - b. Age group: Younger generation (18–27 years) and older generation (28–50+ years).
2. **Conducting a social survey:** To examine the characteristics of interpretation of stickers and emojis obtained from the corpus, an online survey was conducted in 2026 via the raqamlitil.uz platform. A total of 221 respondents took part (79.6% female, 20.4% male; 79.2% Gen Z and Millennial). As part of the survey, data was collected on the respondents' demographic characteristics, their individual pragmatic interpretations of 10 frequently used emojis, 10 types of stickers, 5 GIFs, and 6 local memes.
3. **Pragmalinguistic and functional analysis:** Each visual-textual unit was analysed in accordance with the principles of semiotics and systemic functional linguistics, in conjunction with the surrounding textual context and the speaker's demographic profile. Each emoji and sticker was evaluated not as a simple sign, but as a pragmatic indicator of illocutionary force and personal relationships.
4. **Sociolinguistic and statistical interpretation:** The collected quantitative data and percentage indicators were subjected to comparative-statistical analysis across demographic groups. The results were sociolinguistically generalised within the framework of communication theories, taking into account

the communication values characteristic of Uzbek national mentality (such as respect, etiquette, and hospitality). The questionnaire included the respondents' demographic information, as well as ten frequently used emojis, and personal interpretations of ten types of popular stickers, which enabled a linguistic examination of the age and gender markers identified in the private chat corpus.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen have shown that visual signs have a specific systemic grammatical structure and that they participate in meaning-making on an equal footing with oral language, rather than simply serving as decoration [6: 201]. C. Jewitt, meanwhile, expanded this view, emphasising that multimodality should be regarded as an integrated communicative system [5: 306]. In this, the interpretation of any single semiotic resource (word, emoji, sticker) is dependent on the other resources surrounding it, as well as the context specific to the environment and situation in which the communication is taking place. Together, these two theoretical foundations indicate that the emojis and stickers in Uzbek personal correspondence should be viewed not as mere simple signs, but as pragmatically loaded units in conjunction with the text, the conversational partner, and the context.

In pragmatic theory, emojis and user-generated stickers serve as an indicator of illocutionary force. According to Francisco Yus, these visual elements serve to reinforce the speaker's intention, reduce communicative ambiguity and express mood, ironic stance or social closeness [8: 176]. In particular, In written correspondence, the same short text accompanied by a neutral or smiling emoji may be read by younger interlocutors as ironic or humorous, whereas an older recipient might understand the same combination in its literal sense. In other words, a visual sign does not always have a fixed meaning. It serves as a unit that imparts additional meaning to a particular context, and whether it is used or not is determined by the speaker's age and communicative experience. This is precisely why it is somewhat difficult to say

that emojis have a universal meaning. For the communicative intent of the sender and the recipient in the process of their use is determined solely by context.

The functional-linguistic model developed by Halliday and Matthiessen offers an additional way of systematising these observations [2: 381]. Within systemic linguistics, language simultaneously fulfils an interpersonal function (the establishment of social relationships) and a textual function. Applied to the use of visual units in personal correspondence, they possess subtle semantic dimensions that also determine how a message should be read in terms of content and tone.

Fairclough acknowledges that discourse can be seen as a form of social practice, meaning that linguistic choices also reflect social relations of power and hierarchy [1: 87]. Personal correspondence in Uzbek is not socially neutral either: correspondents write with a deep awareness of the age hierarchy and of respect towards elders. Table I presents statistics on the differentiation of social network users by age characteristics across visual units.

Table 1. *Distribution of social survey respondents by age (N = 221)*

| Age group (generation)                 | n   | %      |
|----------------------------------------|-----|--------|
| Baby Boomers (1946–1964)               | 4   | 1.8%   |
| Generation X (1965–1980)               | 34  | 15.4%  |
| Millennials / Generation Y (1981–1996) | 95  | 43.0%  |
| Generation Z (1997–2012)               | 80  | 36.2%  |
| Alpha Generation (born after 2013)     | 8   | 3.6%   |
| Total                                  | 221 | 100.0% |

In Uzbek linguistics, scholars such as B. Mengliyev have emphasised the necessity of studying digital language within its natural cultural environment: Today, social network correspondence is regarded as an important arena that shapes people's psychological and intellectual profile. Living in the digital language also transforms social thinking and cultural forms. Whereas language was previously a means of social communication, it now serves as a marker of digital identity. A

user's online profile, their messaging style, the frequency of their emoji use, and even their spelling habits express their "digital personality" [9: 26]. In Uzbek interpersonal discourse, politeness is not merely optional; it is a systemic necessity reflecting the age factor and social respect.

The observation directly related to demographics is taken from U. Mahmudova's comparative linguo-cultural study of digital media texts in English and Uzbek [10: 204]. Firstly, in comparing the online registers of the two languages, Mahmudova shows that in young Uzbek digital discourse the politeness strategy is distinguished far more sharply than in English: young Uzbek interlocutors are expected to show significantly heightened respect towards elders, whereas digital politeness in English is relatively evenly distributed across age groups. Secondly, specifically on the issue of gender, Mahmudova emoji use llation, consistent with previous international survey results, notes that in Uzbek digital media female users use emojis frequently, whereas male users are more inclined to use a wider variety of emojis rather than using them as often.

Table 2. *Distribution of social survey respondents by gender (N = 221)*

| Gender | n   | %      |
|--------|-----|--------|
| Female | 176 | 79.6%  |
| Male   | 45  | 20.4%  |
| Total  | 221 | 100.0% |

According to the survey results, female respondents were found to use significantly more emojis and stickers than men. Women's communication relies on visual cues for affective attunement and interpersonal connection, whereas men's communication uses visual cues for functional efficiency and conflict avoidance. Female participants exhibited a significantly higher density of visual markers in each message exchange. In private messaging, female users tend to use text in conjunction with the repeated use of face or heart emojis (e.g., 😊❤️💎) to express empathy, active listening, and social closeness.

**Example:** ‘Thanks so much, I’m really happy! ❤️🙏🌟’

**Analysis:** The cluster of visual cues serves as an emotional intensifier, reinforcing the speaker’s sincere gratitude and shortening the communicative distance.

Male interlocutors rely far less on emotive emojis, instead favouring functional stickers or a single reaction emoji (for example, 🙌, 🤝, 🙏). However, when addressing tense or awkward situations (e.g., apologising or asking for a small favour), male users often use humorous or pop culture stickers to lighten the conversation.

**Example:** The text ‘I’m running a bit late’ is sent alongside a sticker featuring a running film character.

**Analysis:** The sticker reduces the apology’s meaning without the need for emotional exaggeration and serves as a face-saving pragmatic device.

The analysis of survey and empirical data revealed that the use of emojis and stickers in Uzbek personal correspondence falls into four main pragmatic categories (Emotional intensity and support, politeness and respect, softening and de-escalation, irony and humorous distance) and their share across demographic groups was determined (Table 3).

Table 3. *Pragmatic functions of visual cues by demographic groups*

| Pragmatic function              | Women (%) | Men (%) | Younger generation (%) | Older generation (%) |
|---------------------------------|-----------|---------|------------------------|----------------------|
| Emotional intensity and support | 42.6%     | 18.5%   | 35.8%                  | 22.1%                |
| Politeness and respect          | 28.4%     | 31.2%   | 16.4%                  | 51.5%                |
| Softening and de-escalation     | 18.2%     | 38.6%   | 29.1%                  | 15.4%                |
| Irony and humorous distance     | 10.8%     | 11.7%   | 18.7%                  | 11.0%                |
| Total                           | 100.0%    | 100.0%  | 100.0%                 | 100.0%               |

The emotional intensity and support function is prioritised by female users (42.6%), whereas this figure is significantly lower among men (18.5%). This suggests that women make more active use of the visual modality in personal digital communication to enhance empathy, emotional support, and the expression of positive emotions. Across age groups, this function accounts for a higher proportion among younger people (35.8%) compared to adults (22.1%). The results confirm that young people use emojis and stickers as a primary expressive means in interpersonal communication to emotionally intensify the linguistic meaning and express emotional closeness.

The category of politeness and respect is clearly dominant in the correspondence of older generations (51.5%), whereas among young people this figure is a mere 16.4%. This sociolinguistic disparity indicates that older users strictly adhere to traditional Uzbek norms of communication and politeness, even in the digital sphere. In terms of gender, this function is almost evenly distributed between men (31.2%) and women (28.4%), with visual markers in the correspondence of both groups serving to maintain social distance and express respect.

The function of softening and reducing tension was significantly higher in male users' speech (38.6%), compared with 18.2% in female users. The softening of communicative conflicts or firm demands that may arise in private correspondence by men, men use humorous stickers and neutral emojis as a pragmatic device to soften potential points of conflict or firm demands in private messages, and to neutralise critical comments and situations that could lead to disagreement. In younger age groups, young people (29.1%) are more likely than adults (15.4%) to use this method to reduce formality and soften tension in communication.

The category of irony and humorous distance yielded the highest figure in the correspondence of the younger generation (18.7%, compared with 11.0% in the older generation). This finding indicates that in young people's digital communication, visual units serve not merely as indicators of emotion but as complex pragmatic operators shaping indirect meaning, hidden satire and stylistic irony. In the gender classification, the use of

ironic visual markers occurs at a nearly identical frequency in men (11.7%) and women (10.8%), serving to maintain a balance of informal banter in personal communication.

Included in the social survey as one of the most frequently used emojis, the 🍑 “thumbs up” emoji was interpreted by the majority of respondents as a pure affirmation (88.2%,  $n = 195$ ), while fewer than 1% of respondents reported never using it. This finding leaves little room for the ambiguity or emotional embellishments observed in the emoji sets specific to women discussed above.

Different generations perceive the same emoji in completely different ways. Young people in particular like to assign unique, often ironic, meanings to the simple emojis that have existed for a long time. Older generations (Millennials) use the simple smile emoji 😊 as a sign of a genuine smile and a good mood. For younger people (Gen-Z), however, this emoji often signifies “passive aggression”, meaning a forced smile while feeling angry on the inside.

- **In Millennial speak:** Bless you 😊
- **In Gen-Z speak:** Hmmmm, what are you on about 😊

In the speech of older generations, users aged 28 to over 50 primarily use visual cues to transfer traditional norms of respect into the digital environment. In this demographic group, stickers featuring various images and traditional greeting phrases are widely used to maintain a formal yet sincere tone of communication. Emojis such as the joined hands (🙏) or bouquet images are used not merely as decoration, but as expressions of respect that fulfil the sociolinguistic requirement of polite greeting and farewell rituals. This interpretation is also reflected in the survey data specifically for the joined hands emoji: the majority of respondents associated it not with literal prayer (3.6%), but with asking for help (57.0%) or expressing gratitude (18.1%), confirming that its primary function in everyday Uzbek digital communication is not solely religious but also includes meanings of request and gratitude.

Younger generations, including interlocutors aged 18–27, exhibit a much broader pragmatic range. Instead of using emojis to directly reflect written text, Young users often create a pragmatic contradiction by placing a neutral or smiling emoji alongside critical or weary text to express irony or self-deprecation. Young users see stickers and emojis as a secondary linguistic layer capable of altering, softening, or completely reframing the literal meaning of the text. Empirical data show that visual communication in Uzbek private chats is not uniform, being strongly shaped by gender and age dynamics. The older generation uses digital markers to maintain traditional social hierarchies and formal respect, whereas the younger generation uses visual modality to express peer-level intimacy, irony, and conversational freedom. Traditional Uzbek communicative values, such as respect, have successfully migrated to private digital correspondence. Emojis and stickers do not erode traditional politeness; rather, they provide new semiotic tools for effectively implementing cultural politeness strategies in a text-based environment.

The above-mentioned demographic differences, as well as the selection of multimodal units according to communicative purpose, once again confirm that they are crucial aspects of effective communication for both the sender and the recipient. Female users tend to use sequential sets of emojis for emotional-expressive functions, whereas male users are inclined to express social distance maintenance and softening primarily with a single emoji or stickers. Older generations recode Eastern rules of etiquette and politeness into culturally encoded visual cues, while younger generations reallocate ironic and indirect meaning to contrasting emoji-text pairings.

## CONCLUSION

In our research into the age and gender characteristics of emoji and sticker usage in personal messaging, we became convinced that, visual units are never introduced into digital communication simply to embellish text. Just as the formal or informal status of communication determines its direction, it also establishes the

norms for the use of emojis and stickers. When examining the common and distinct aspects of women's and men's use of these units, we can also observe differences in their frequency of use.

The results show that female users predominantly employ multimodal units with high emotional intensity, whereas male participants tend to use humorous stickers to economise communicatively and soften the meaning pragmatically. Furthermore, older users prioritise signs of politeness in the Eastern sense, whereas young people use visual units to express complex pragmatic functions such as indirectness and irony. Research on this topic, at the intersection of sociolinguistics, digital linguistics, and pragmalinguistics, will serve as a guide for new research directions in modern linguistics in the future.

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