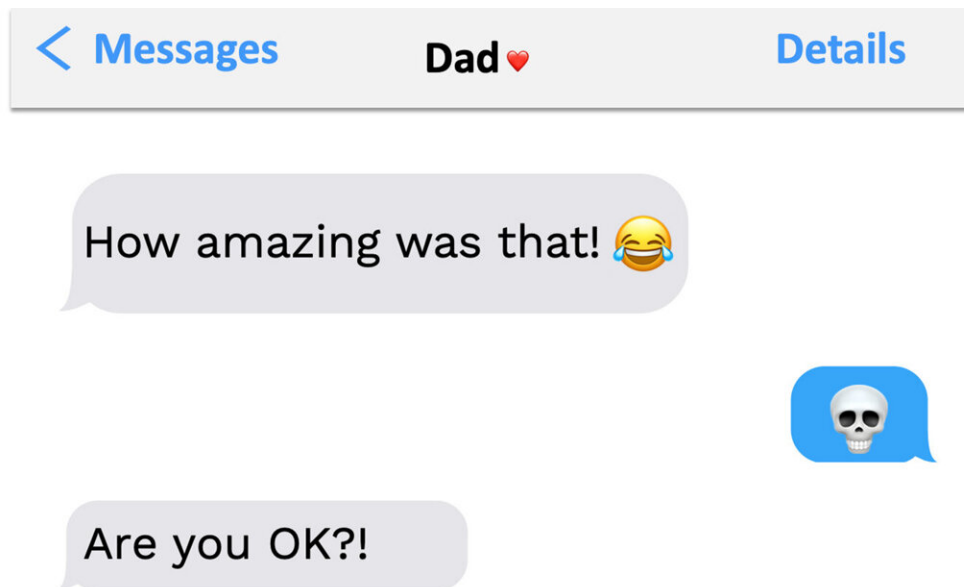


Older adults want to express themselves with emojis, they just don't understand how to

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A new study from the University of Ottawa is providing insight into how different generations are interpreting the use of emojis in their communications, with older adults unsure of how to use them as frequently as younger adults despite understanding their meaning. Credit: Bonnie Findley, University of Ottawa

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communications, with older adults unsure of how to use them as frequently as younger adults despite understanding their meaning.

The paper is [published](#) in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*.

The stereotype of older adults being unable or unwilling to adapt to new forms of lingo like emojis may not be accurate, according to research from the University of Ottawa (uOttawa), which suggests older adults understand their meanings but lack the confidence to incorporate them in their technology-mediated interactions.

"We found that older users are less likely to use emojis, use fewer emojis, and feel less comfortable in their ability to interpret emojis," says the study's lead author Isabelle Boutet, an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology (Faculty of Social Sciences) at uOttawa. "Our results, together with those of other studies, suggest that reduced accuracy in emoji interpretation does not drive these age-related effects."

Measuring emoji adaptation

This first comprehensive investigation into inter-generational emoji use including adults over 60 allowed the capture of age and generation-related differences in emoji use. Researchers measured emoji adoption (frequency, diversity, ease of interpretation, and interpretation accuracy) to understand how age influences emoji use.

The emoji representing surprise—the graphic featuring the small yellow face looking speechless with its eyes wide open and eyebrows raised—proved to be the most difficult emoji to interpret for older adults. Happiness was the next most difficult to interpret.

The use of emojis by increasing age revealed how users perceive emojis as difficult to use, have less confidence in their ability to use them, and are less likely to use technology where emojis are pervasive.

"This pattern of results leads us to conclude that older users have the motivation and ability to utilize emojis, but they lack the confidence and general technology expertise needed to adapt to this mode of communication," says Boutet.

Helping older users

Boutet believes it is important to promote the use of emojis for [older adults](#) because of their communicative function and ability to facilitate intergenerational interactions, reduce loneliness, and help users of all ages fulfill their social and emotional goals.

"Software developers could consider modifying existing [emoji](#) menus to facilitate their use across generations by--for example--making unambiguous emojis which older users are able to interpret more easily accessible. Training interventions should also be incorporated to existing community-based programs to help older users to incorporate emojis in their online interactions," adds Boutet.

More information: Isabelle Boutet et al, Are older adults adapting to new forms of communication? A study on emoji adoption across the adult lifespan, *Computers in Human Behavior Reports* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chbr.2024.100379](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2024.100379)

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