

Telegram, the emerging trend of instant messaging?

Abstract

Telegram, an instant messenger (IM), is a medium of communication that will be discussed in this paper. An introduction of Telegram and its features will be described, followed by the presentation of existing literature. Lastly, the seven features of conversation introduced by Crystal (2006) as well as the characteristics computer-mediated communication in IM will be used to analyse Telegram features and its effects on language and society.

Introduction

Previously known as a popular method for long distance communication (Spencer, 2015), Telegram is now the name of an instant messaging (IM) application. Like its initial purpose, the Telegram application facilitates communication using messages. However, it has extended the meaning of “telegram” to include nonverbal communication such as visual messages.

Launched in 2013, Telegram is named one of the most popular global mobile messenger applications with 200 million monthly active users (Clement, 2019).

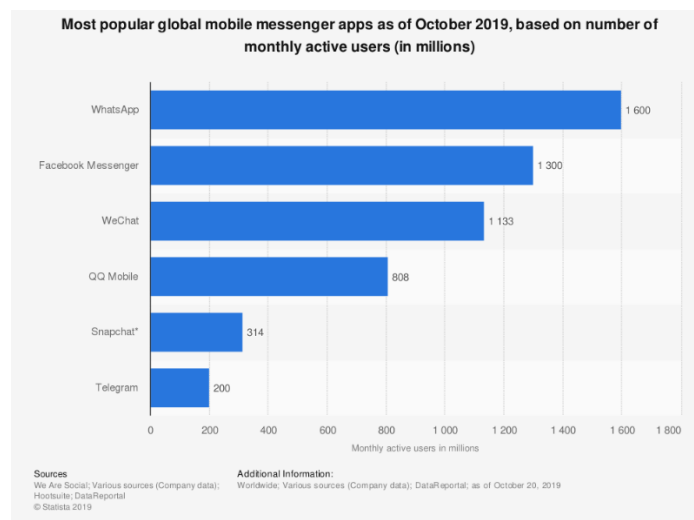


Figure 1

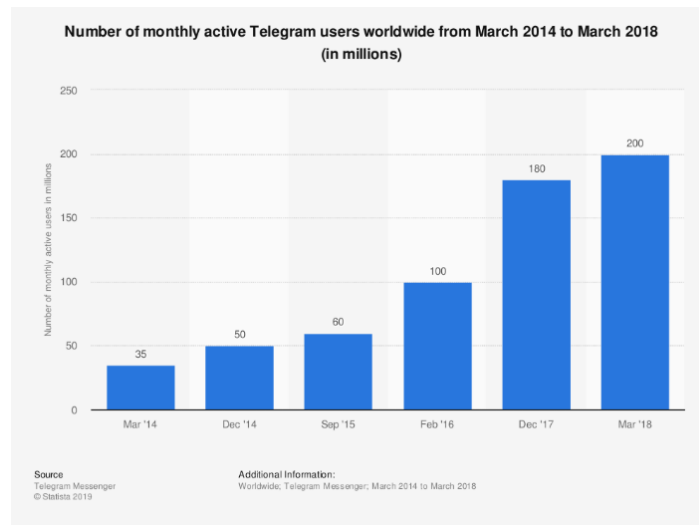


Figure 2

A closer analysis of its growth showed that the number of users has increased from 35 million in 2014 to 200 million in 2018, nearly a 6 fold increase in 4 years (Clement, 2019).

Similar to the features of instant messaging, users can send text, emoticons, images and files instantly. In addition, visual messages such as stickers, video, audio messages and calls can be sent to addressees. It also created features for group communication such as private groups and channels to disseminate information concurrently, to up to 20,000 users (*Telegram F.A.Q.*, n.d.).

Relevant literature about Telegram

Educational institutions are recognising the popularity and effects of instant messaging amongst millennials and have since, used it to facilitate learning. Faramarzi et al (2019)'s paper evaluated Telegram as a learning tool and validated its effectiveness for distant learning. Through Telegram's group and channel features, teachers can send teaching resources such as files and podcasts and students can download them easily for learning. Telegram's capacity to send various file formats supports the teaching method. Besides self-learning using the materials, students can also share their opinions or ask questions in the group chats, facilitating group discussions and peer teaching. On top of teaching, teachers can monitor students' progress through quiz bots. Teachers can create questions with the bots, allowing students to complete the quizzes anytime. Students' answers and time taken are recorded to track their improvements (*Telegram Blog*, 2020).

Besides sending files for online learning, language teaching using Telegram stickers has also been proved to be effective. In a study conducted by Ghobadi & Taki (2018), English language learners

who learned English vocabulary through Telegram stickers portrayed better results than those who learned using conventional classroom methods.

Aside from using Telegram as a teaching tool, institutions also used Telegram to disseminate information. In an Indonesian university, their informatics department experimented to use telegram bots to provide information to their students (Setiaji & Papatungan, 2018). Their aim was to broadcast information to students who do not check their school portals. By typing commands into the bots, students can obtain information of their requests anytime. Their experiment was successful as the bots were able to respond almost immediately, in less than 0.5 seconds.

Properties of Telegram and its effects on communication

In this section, Crystal's seven features of conversation will be used to discuss the effects on language and society by Telegram's functions.

Firstly, the discourse in informal conversations in Telegram are usually loosely structured. Like the properties of IM described in Crystal (2006), messages are usually filled with contracted forms and slangs, similar to informal speech. Punctuations such as full stops are also avoided. The length of these messages usually ranged from 1-46 words because messages are chunked. An example of chunking found in Baron (2010) is as shown:

Chunk 1: I was wondering
Chunk 2: whether you're coming|to dinner tonight
Chunk 3: or you need to work.

Baron (2010)'s paper explained IM users' tendency to break their utterance into chunks so as to "hold the conversation floor" and continue "speaking" in the conversation.

Another feature described in Crystal (2006) is socially interactive discourse in Telegram messages. These messages express personal opinions and attitudes resembling speech properties. On the other hand, messages that resemble formal writing are usually found in groups and channels where the members are strangers. These messages resemble writing that records and communicate ideas.

Thirdly, Telegram can be both time-bound and space-bound (Crystal 2006). Explained by Baron (2010)'s paper, instant messengers are designed for synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) whereby messages are usually delivered and read immediately when both parties are present. As such, synchronous conversations take place during ongoing conversations. However, the study conducted in Baron (2010) found that instant messengers are frequently used asynchronously. Often,

users only reply at their convenience as they were multitasking in other activities. As such, such conversations are space-bound.

The notification feature in Telegram can explain the phenomenon of asynchronous conversations. Users do not have to open Telegram to know when their conversation partner has replied. Instead, a notification will appear on the phone's locked screen, informing users of new messages. As seen below, users can choose the "reply" function to open the application or mute the conversation so that they can concentrate on their tasks.

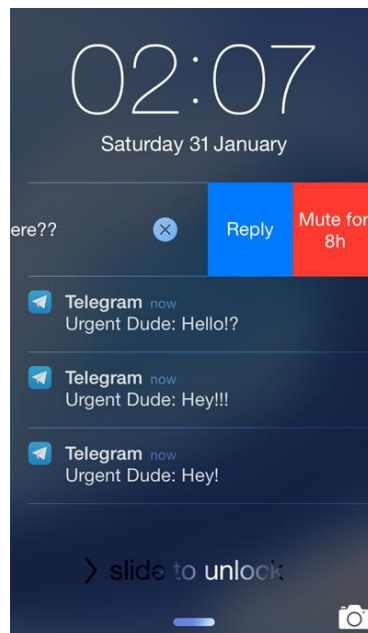


Figure 3

Fourth, telegram has a time lag between the production and reception of messages. Unlike speech, text-based messages are less spontaneous as users usually require time to generate their replies. Typing allows users to reread their messages and check for discourse errors.

As a result of the time-lag problem in CMC, users practice turn-taking in conversations by adapting face-to-face (FTF) conversation techniques (Anderson et al. 2010). The study discovered that CMC participants tend to pause to wait for replies or continue the conversation when they are unsure about the continuity of the conversation. This has resulted in the overlapping of messages in conversations.

To resolve these problems, users in Telegram can refer to the "typing" or "last seen" statuses of their conversation partners to confirm the continuity of conversations. Figure 4 showed that the "typing" status, indicating that the conversation partner is continuing the conversation while Figure 5 showed that the user is offline with the "last seen" status.

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Figure 4

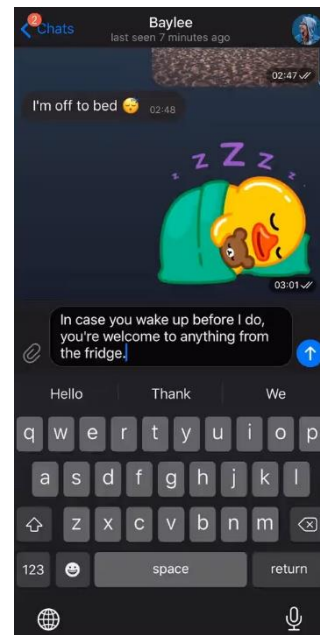


Figure 5

The fifth feature described in Crystal (2006) is the ability to correct errors. As an IM, messages resemble speech and cannot be withdrawn since they have been sent instantly. However, with the “edit” feature in Telegram (Refer to Figure 6), messages are repeatedly revisable such that senders can edit their text to correct text errors or delete messages. Additionally, users can also use the “reply” function (Figure 7) to minimise conversational errors when conversation topics overlapped. These features differentiate Telegram from its greatest competitor Whatsapp, another popular IM (Mugerwa, 2017; Sutikno et al., 2016).

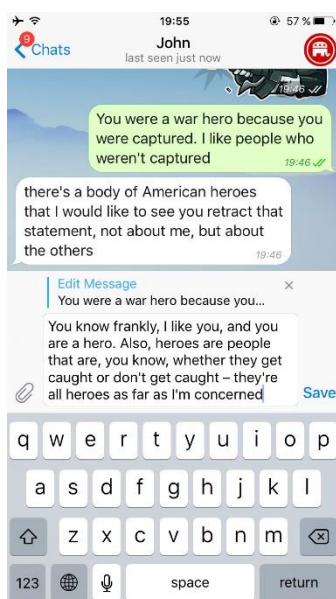


Figure 6

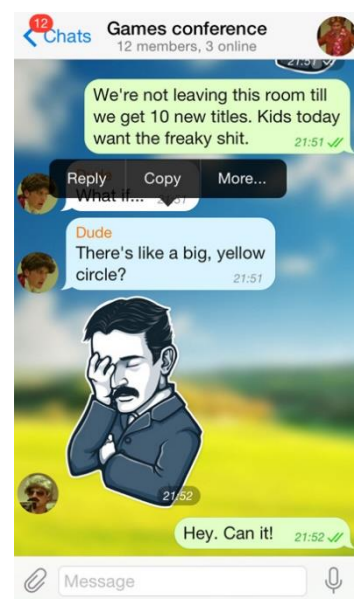


Figure 7

Lastly, Telegram's features to send video and audio message functions and stickers described the sixth and seventh feature of speech. Similar to FTF conversations, extralinguistic cues such as facial expressions can be transmitted through Telegram messages, to improve users' interpretations. According to Harris Poll, millennials reviewed that these stickers expressed their thoughts and feelings better than words. By sending prosody and graphically rich messages, visual contact of communication helps to overcome the vagueness of meaning that words have. Examples of stickers with different expressions commonly found in speech are shown in figure below.



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

Telegram users can also make use of the sticker bot to create their own free Telegram stickers. By having this feature, users can communicate more effectively, resembling their own speech (Telegram Blog, 2020)

Conclusion

In summary, compared to the properties of an instant messenger, the features in Telegram have overcome the limits of text communication. Telegram users can edit their text messages to reduce errors, send graphically and prosody rich messages that showed extralinguistic cues and even use the channels feature to disseminate information to large groups of audiences. These rapid improvements in Telegram within six years of its launch, have proved that Telegram has the ability to outshine Whatsapp and become next trend in instant messengers.

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