

Telegram: Effects of Stickers in Communication

1. Introduction

Telegram is a free instant messaging platform that allow users to send text messages, photos, videos, files and stickers. Telegram was first launched in 2013 by Nikolai and Pavel Durov. It was reported that there were 200 million Telegram monthly users, as of March 2018 (Durov, 2018). Telegram consistently update their software and provides messages whenever a new update occurs via the Telegram support group, with the latest update on February 16 (Figure 1). One example of their numerous update is where Telegram users are able to customise and create their own sticker sets via the Telegram stickers bot in 2015 (The Telegram Team, 2015) and animated stickers are launched in 2019 (The Telegram Team, 2019).

Telegram has enabled a new form of communication through stickers (both animated and stationary), which can be seen as an upgraded form of emojis and emoticons. This paper will be focused on the use of stickers and the role it plays in texting.

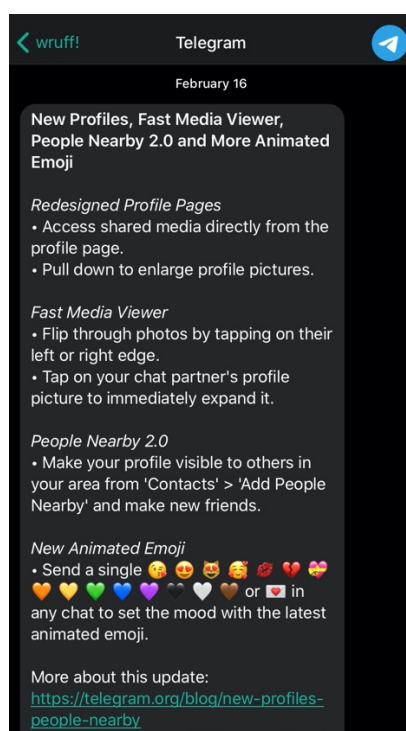


Figure 1: Example of Telegram updates

2. Literature Review

A study was conducted to investigate the role of emojis in communications. Tauch and Kanjo (2016) mentioned users' preference to include "visual representation" such as emojis to express their emotions, so as to prevent any possible misinterpretations of tones. The use of emojis provide a more expressive portrayal of facial expressions, resulting in readers' better ability to understand the message. Ghobadi and Taki (2018) noted on the use of Telegram stickers in communication without any text required, proving the importance of the role of stickers in communication through Telegram.

In a report by the Emogi Team (2015), 92% of the online population are using emojis. The report claimed that digital communications have shrunk in length as emoji has replaced internet slang in social media. The report also compiled three main reasons why people are using emojis. The addition of emojis allow users to communicate more clearly and be understood; create a personal connection with the other person; and the ease of using emojis rather than texts. In a survey conducted in 2019, the researchers seek to investigate the motivations behind Iranians' usage of Telegram (Vaziripour, et al., 2018). It is found that 13.5% of 392 participants use Telegram for the stickers function available.

3. Telegram and its' multifaceted functions

3.1 Groups and channels

Telegram has enabled multiple forms of communication, and it is not merely limited to “user-user messaging” (Nobari, Reshadatmand, & Neshati, 2017), such as through channels and groups.

Telegram groups are able to hold up to an impressive amount of 200,000 members, and these can be open to public, using share links to join the groups (Figure 2). The large amount of capacity of Telegram groups suit the needs for organisations with huge amount of people such as CCAs, companies chat groups and possibly, parents-teachers chat groups as well.

An infinite number of users are able to join channels, which is a feature used to transmit messages to a large number of users (The Telegram Team, n.d.). Channels are used to transmit public messages to large audiences and can have an unlimited number of subscribers.

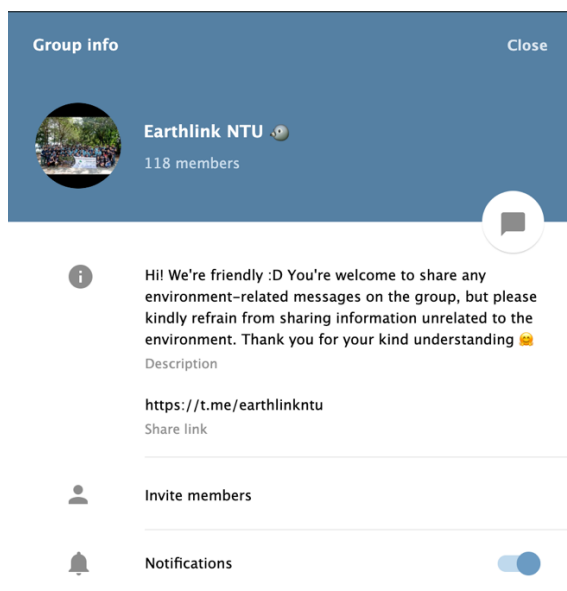


Figure 2: Example of a public Telegram group

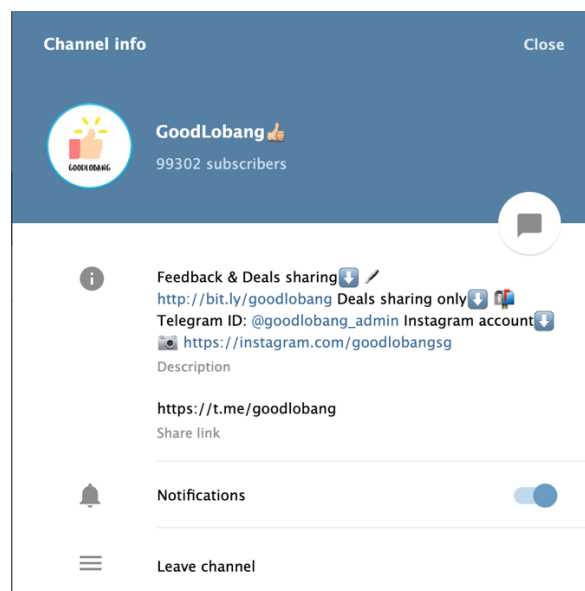


Figure 3: Example of Telegram channel

3.2 Video-voice messaging, secret chats, deleting and editing messages

Video message was introduced in 2017 (The Telegram Team, 2017), a function that is a combination of both video and voice messaging. Secret chats offer better security, with self-destruction options for any messages, photos, videos and files sent (Figures 4 and 5). Editing messages allow for correction of spelling errors, and prevent any possible misunderstandings. In the survey conducted by Vaziripour, et al. (2018), 66.1% of the participants reported that they use this function to edit messages they sent. Users are also able to delete messages (Figure 6), either on their own devices or for both users. The latter would mean that the other party will not realise the user sent any messages to him/her in the first place if it is unread.

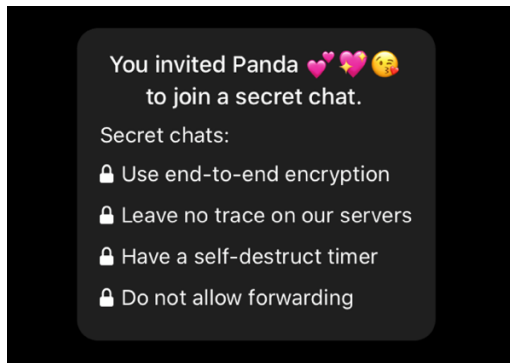


Figure 4: Inviting another user to a secret chat

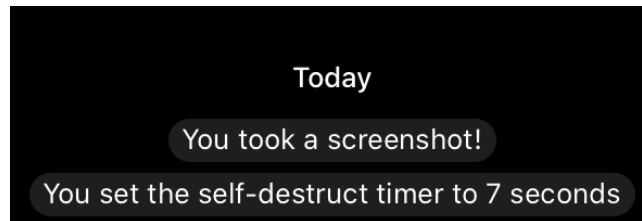


Figure 5: Warning user of screenshot taken in secret chat and self-destruction option

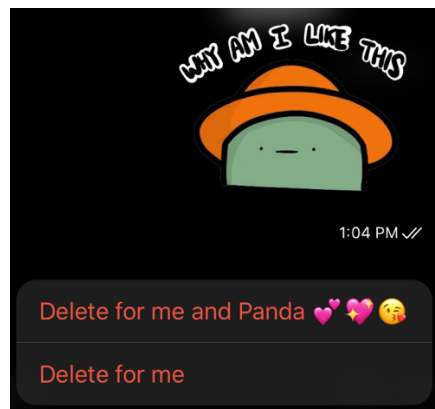


Figure 6: Deleting messages

4. Effects of Telegram stickers on language and society

4.1 Stickers in communication

The role of stickers are more prominent in digital communication in recent times. Texting are often seen as cold and emotionless as we are unable to discern the tone of which the other user is using. Telegram stickers offer a more interactive and engaging form of texting. Telegram offers a huge variety of stickers, both animated and stationary. Users are able to select and send any relevant stickers - either through using emoji as a guide or selecting from the sticker set (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Telegram sticker set

Stickers are an upgraded version of emojis, which included actions for the animated stickers. This allowed us to replace text communication with stickers, as it is able to aptly convey the users’ responses with graphical representations instead. Hence, with the void of emotions in texting, the usage of Telegram stickers add another dimension to written communications, as users are now better able to fill in that void. One personal example is using the animated sticker in Figure 8 to express exasperation at oneself while hoping for the best and also being speechless at the other person’s lack of good judgement and hoping for the best for the other party, and also Figure 9, where user is able to replace text with stickers.



Figure 8: Example of a sticker (animation not depicted)

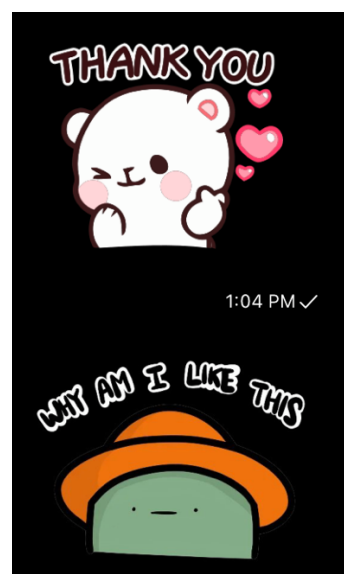


Figure 9: Replacing text with stickers

Stickers perform the same functions as facial expressions in face-to-face communication, which enabled the removal of the need for face-to-face communication.

Ekman (1997) noted that when only facial expression is seen, it does disclose certain information in a social context, but not as much when the expression is accompanied by speech, body movements and the events leading to that particular expression.

Poggi and Pelachaud (2000) highlighted the importance of nonverbal signals in face-to-face communication. They elaborated on the role of facial expression in this situation, which serve multiple functions in communication, such as syntactic markers, prompting turn-taking in communications and even social status. Both verbal and nonverbal signals are important in communicative act and some nonverbal signals such as facial expression are better indicators when expressing emotions.

Hence, with stickers, users no longer need to see the nonverbal cues in order to understand the context. This resulted in digital communication becoming just as effective as face-to-face interaction, instead of the cold and emotionless texting we had before.

4.2 Role of Telegram in education

Telegram has been used as a tool for learning. In a study conducted by Tabrizi and Onvani (2017), they examined the use of Telegram for Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) beginners to learn vocabulary and concluded learning vocabulary through Telegram was more effective than the traditional, monotonous classroom approach. This is further supported by another study conducted by Ghobadi and Taki (2018), in which, they specifically explored the use of Telegram stickers on EFL vocabulary learning and the results were promising. Ghobadi and Taki denoted that social media aid language educators in pushing social learning beyond the classroom, establishing a state where students are able to learn and aid with each other.

Both studies indicated the effectiveness of using Telegram as a mode of learning English vocabulary due to the ease of accessing Telegram (Faramarzi, Tabrizi, & Chalak, 2019). In the case of using Telegram stickers, their engaging forms and ease of linking the meaning of the words with the animation allow learners to improve acquisition of English vocabulary.

5. Seven features introduced by Crystal (2006, Ch 3-6)

Overall, Telegram stickers appear to have a mixture of characteristics from both speech like and text like (Table 1). It is used in online texting and yet, have certain properties that allow it to act like speech.

Speech like	Text like	Telegram stickers
Time-bound	Space-bound	Space-bound
Spontaneous	Contrived	Contrived
Face-to-face	Visually decontextualized	Both
Loosely structured	Elaborately structured	Loosely structured
Socially interactive	Factually communicative	Socially interactive
Immediately revisable	Repeatedly revisable	Both
Prosodically rich	Graphically rich	Graphically rich

Table 1: Features of Telegram stickers

5.1 Space-bound

Telegram stickers appears to have characteristics of both speech-like and text-like but it can be argued to be more space-bound, acting more like writing, as it is relatively permanent unless the person deleted the message before the other person read it, rendering the message as an error, or after the other person read it, to erase the evidence of the conversation happening. The user is also able to look back to the conversation and stickers anytime he/she desires, resulting in more speech-like characteristics.

5.2 Contrived

Telegram stickers behave more text-like in the aspect of spontaneity (Crystal, 2006). This is due to users being able to reread and analyse the stickers sent to identify the context and meaning of the replies. However, Telegram stickers also seem to be contrived, but only when both users are online, resulting in no lag between production and reception (Crystal, 2006), where both parties are able to reply and send stickers at the same time.

5.3 Both face-to-face and visually decontextualized

It can be argued that Telegram stickers hold both speech-like and text-like characteristics. Telegram stickers provides extralinguistic components, with the different text in stickers, colours and pictures (Crystal, 2006), fulfilling the text-like characteristic of visually decontextualized. Telegram stickers act as facial expressions in text communications, creating extralinguistic cues that fulfils the speech-like property of face-to-face. Hence, Telegram stickers appears to be both face-to-face and visually decontextualized.

5.4 Loosely structured

Telegram stickers can be argued to be more loosely structure due to contractions being common, along with informal vocabulary such as the slang “yas” appearing in Figure 10. Obscenities are also common in Telegram stickers.

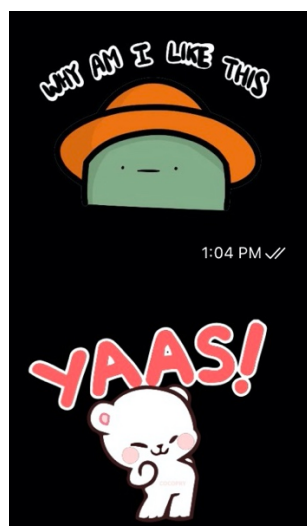


Figure 10: Texts on stickers (proper VS slang)

5.5 Socially interactive

Telegram stickers appear to be more socially interactive, with the use non-verbal cues as one's emotions can be depicted in the stickers. In addition, Telegram stickers aid in maintaining social relationships through serving as a form of communication and expressing attitudes and opinions, as can be seen from Figure 8 in section 4.1 (Crystal, 2006). However, user is also able to read and identify the stickers at one's own time, and also act like recorded facts and communicating ideas, holding some text-like characteristic as well.

5.6 Both immediately and repeatedly revisable

Telegram stickers have both speech-like and text-like properties. It is speech-like in the way that it is immediately revisable, as the stickers can be removed without the other user ever seeing them, as can be seen from Figure 6 in section 3.2, even after the stickers had been sent. It is also common for interruptions and overlap to occur, unless both users have similar thoughts and sticker sets.

5.7 Graphically rich

Telegram stickers are also graphically rich. In stickers, spatial organisations, fonts and varying styles are very common. In part, this helps to relay messages with more emotions and emphasis comparable to facial expressions in face-to-face communications. However, Telegram stickers behave more speech-like as sounds can be imitated through the writing of text more towards the way it is pronounced than spelt.

6. Conclusion

Overall, Telegram stickers, as a medium of communication, are informal, which allow users to flexibly use them in almost any situations. Stickers can be created and modified to suit the users' needs and preferences, including the message they wish to convey. While Telegram stickers find themselves very similar to written texts, they provide an extra dimension only found in face-to-face speech to written communication. Given the social context of today, it is probable we shall see Telegram stickers becoming a more independent form of communication even without the need of supporting text.

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