

Analysis of a medium of communication: Twitter

1. ABSTRACT

Technological advances have brought upon a lot of changes in our daily lives, including its influences on the way we speak, and we write. Different mediums of communication have thus drastically shaped the way we speak and write. In this paper, I examine the features of Twitter and its effect on communication. A brief introduction and literature review on relevant articles on Twitter is provided to aid in the analysis of the properties of Twitter and its effect on communication, linguistically and non-linguistically along with its adherence to Gricean's principle. Finally, a comparison of Twitter to the seven characteristics of speech and text as mediums of communication mentioned in Crystal(2006) paper is also included followed by a conclusion.

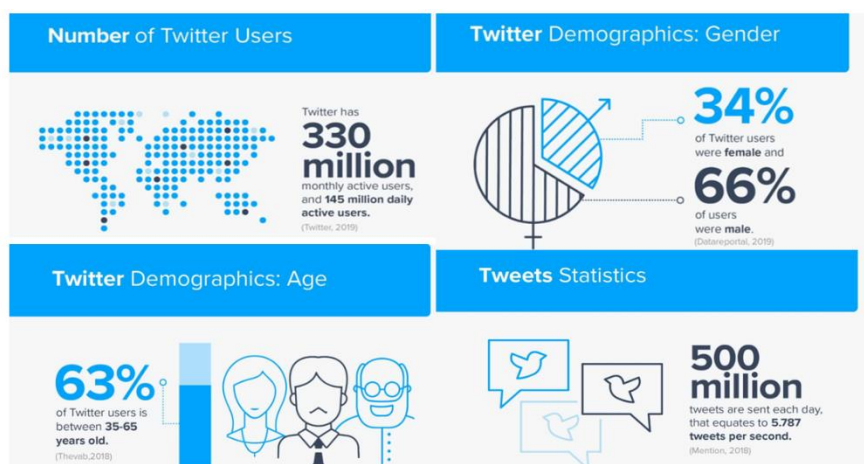
2. INTRODUCTION

Started in 2006, Twitter is an online microblogging service that allows users to post short messages, 280 characters text known as 'tweets' among groups of recipients. It is a form of instant messaging technology that enables its network of users to communicate in real-time. Users on Twitter are able to follow other users and see their updates on your home page, along with user's selected topics of interest such as music or gaming (Zeevi, 2013).

Twitter has thus allowed users to customize the type of information and users they interact with on the service platform. Unlike point-to-point messaging systems like e-mail, Twitter has provided a one-to-many platform for rapid content and search -justifying the reason for Twitter's popularity as news outlet for breaking news.

As of 2019, Twitter has 145 million daily active users and a rough estimation of 500 million tweets sent out each day. Every six out of ten Twitter users worldwide are between 35 and 65 years old with the ratio of males to females at two to one.

Figure 1: Twitter Statistics. Adapted from <https://sg.oberlo.com/blog/twitter-statistics>



3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In an educational setting, Hattem (2012) paper investigates the effect of Twitter on language specifically on student's grammar where students showed an increased awareness to grammar constructions when conditioned under task structure, presence of an audience and providing learning feedback through the retweet and favourite functions. Due to the 'publicness' of the feedback, students were found to be more conscious of their writing and mistakes - responding to corrections with high frequency. This suggests the positive effect of Twitter on language where the presence of an audience/publicness of the platform serves as a check on one's language use. The paper also suggests that microblogging gives students more 'processing time and rewritability than traditional CMC tools'.

Borau and others (2009) paper suggest that Twitter affects communication in terms of community interaction. In their study, Twitter seemed to lean towards the function of users providing real-time updates - backed with the Twitter's prompt question to encourage users to tweet: "*What's happening?*". However, it was suggested that people actively engage in conversations on Twitter, marking social coherence and community forming as users were found to spend longer time s reading updates about others on their homepage rather than updating their status.

4. PROPERTIES OF TWITTER AND THEIR EFFECTS ON COMMUNICATION

With the wide usage of Twitter across the world, it has brought upon many influences on how language is used in communication. This portion of the paper will identify the features of Twitter and discuss the the effect it has on language and non-language areas.

4.1. ON LANGUAGE

A. Encourages creative use such as abbreviation

Twitter initially only allowed 140 characters per tweet but later changed to 280 characters in 2018. The limitation of characters has subconsciously pressurised users to share their current state through creative ways, adhering to the maxim of quantity by making information as informative as required while coping with a characters limit. As there is no fixed topic on the 'tweets' posted on Twitter - it all depends on the user's current opinion; Tweets has since taken on a casual speech discourse-like in terms of expression, rather similar to how texting/SMS. Conversational abbreviations such as SMH = *Shaking my head*, IDK = *I don't know* and IRL = *In real life* are also often used in Twitter, showing the creative use of abbreviations (Carlson, 2012). The table shows some of the technical Twitter abbreviations that were created.

Technical Twitter Abbreviations	Meaning
Oomf	one of my followers
RT	Retweet - The tweet you're looking at was forwarded to you by another user.
Detweet	Slang term used to describe a tweet you made, then deleted.
DM (direct message)	A message only you and the person who sent it can read.

Table 1: technical Twitter abbreviations (Carlson, 2012)

B. Deeper context with text representation and multimedia expression

Unlike speech, text is unable to express prosody of emotions. However, due to the association of emphasis and attention to capitalization of letters - the combination of capitalized letters and non-capitalized letters produces this imagined weird intonation in the human mind. Twitter users have hence cleverly used this weird mix of text presentation to express sarcasm or mocking as seen in Figure 2 below.

Twitter also enables users to embed images, gifs and videos in their tweet as well, adding context to the tweet in addition to the text as captions.

Figure 2 is an example of the combination of text presentation and images to generate a meme tweet. Memes are funny reactions images used to express a certain emotion/concept to a topic and it encourages witty replies with captions for the picture or use of other memes.



Figure 2: Text representation and images as meme

The term was first coined by Richard Dawkins in describing the spread of cultural information. Memes is hence now used widely as the internet's inside joke, hinting at an in-group of internet users that shares the same cultural knowledge (Attias, 2017). In this case, the maxim of relation is followed where the additional features of capitalization and image adds more context to the text caption.

C. Thread

Microblogging belongs to an asynchronous form of computer-mediated communication where the communication motive of ‘tweets’ is fulfilled once they are tweeted out. They may or may not demand or even generate a response. Even if a response is expected, it will require some time and a number of exchanges within users (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009).

This allows the flow of the topic of the original tweet to continue on and this can be seen in Twitter’s threads. Threads are created when the author wants to tell a story but is limited by the number of characters in a single tweet. Users can continue to reply to his/her own tweets, forming a thread regardless of other user’s replies. The author’s tweet to the thread is prioritized and organised in the thread, allowing the completion of the topic without being interrupted by other user’s replies. With the restriction of characters per tweet, users would have to adhere to the maxim of quantity and relation. While presenting the entire thread, the maxim of manner is needed to ensure clear understanding of the flow of the topic.

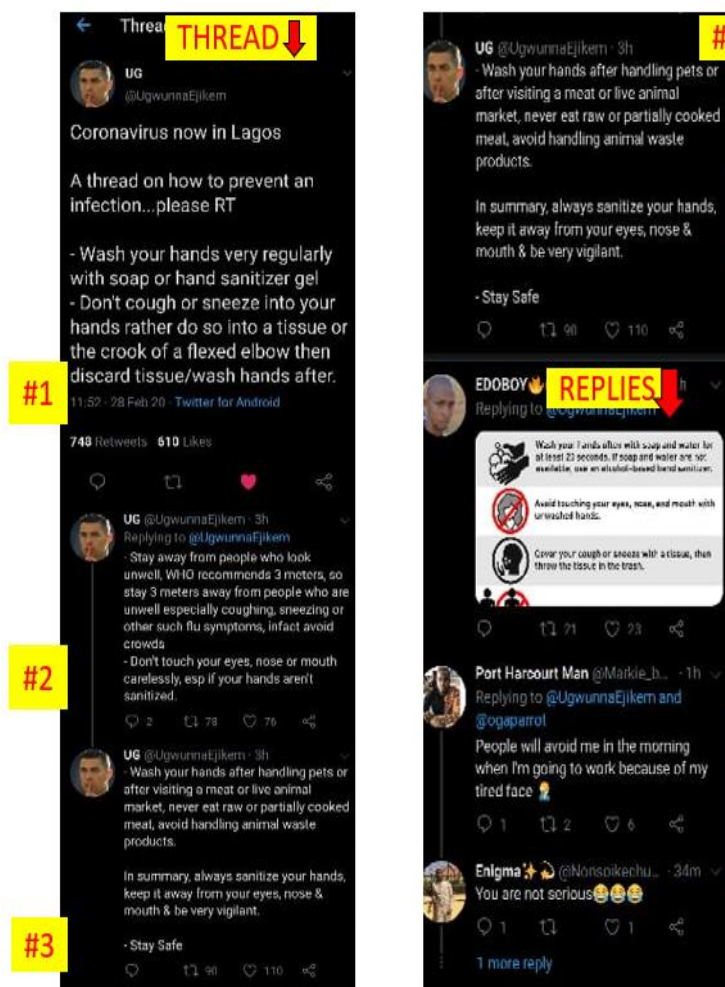


Figure 3: Screenshot showing a Twitter thread.

Adapted from: <https://twitter.com/UgwunnaEjikem/status/1233238423613427712>

4.2. NON-LINGUISTIC IMPACT

Trends



Figure 5: Twitter trend during Australia bushfire

A. Worldwide trends as current affairs

Twitter has a special feature that shows trends on what is the most discussed according to geographical locations. Most of the trends consists of hashtag where the # symbol is used to tag keywords or topics in a tweet to make it easily identifiable for search purposes. It is a good indicator of current affairs as it is often the most discussed topic by people at that moment.

In fact, more than a quarter of verified accounts on Twitter are made up of journalists and news agencies. The nature of Twitter as an one-to-many platform made it an ideal platform for rapid content and search portal for breaking news. The character limit of each tweet also ensures information of the news is presented in bite-sized making it easy and quick consumption by readers, adhering to the maxim of quantity.



Figure 4: Customer engagement by Wendy's

B. Brands' marketing reach and customer service

67% of all B2B businesses use Twitter as a digital marketing tool (Statistica, 2018) due to the easy access to an international market so long they are on Twitter. Platforms like Twitter have made personal engagement with customers regardless of geographical differences possible. This meant that brand conveying of image is no longer coming single-handedly from brands only, consumers are now able to act as brand image ambassadors through interactions on social media platforms.

It is thus critical for brands to be responsive to customer feedback and engaging to generate online conversations about the brand. 77% of Twitter users expressed a better impression of a brand when they receive a response from the tweet and 6 out of 10 users expect a brand to respond to any customer

service requests within one hour (Statista, 2018). American fast food chain Wendy's plays customer's engagement extremely well, generating a lot of online conversations with its responsive tweets to customer feedback and snarky replies to internet trolls as seen in Figure 4 above.

C. Cancel culture

Call out culture is the act of calling out public figures on social media for any alleged wrongdoings such as old inappropriate tweets, and demanding that they lose their influence on public platforms (Ohlheiser & Izadi, 2019). This calling out culture or otherwise known as the '#cancelled' hashtag is seen on Twitter and has sparked international movement such as '#MeToo' where definitive accusations of sexual misconduct were made against powerful figures in various industries.

The Internet as a medium of communication has made the public's feedback and opinions more tangible than ever - American comedian Shane Grills was removed from popular program 'Saturday Night Live' due to clips of him using racist language circulating on Twitter. Through Twitter, the public is now able to draw attention to an event effectively and express their opinions almost instantly. The use of Twitter as a medium of communication has allowed *'traditionally underrepresented and oppressed groups harness the Internet and social media to hold powerful people accountable when institutions won't'* (Ohlheiser & Izadi, 2019).

At the Obama Foundation Summit in Chicago in 2019, former American president Barack Obama spoke about Twitter's cancellation/calling out culture and how the social media platform has mistaken public shaming as activism. He also mentioned the larger social issue brought by the Internet - the ambiguity of content enabled misinterpretations or unnecessary enlargement of issues (Chiu, 2019).

4.3. COMPARED TO OTHER SIMILAR PLATFORMS

Twitter as a microblogging platform belongs to an asynchronous form of computer-mediated communication, making it time-lagged and overlapping. Similar to Facebook, conversation are broken down into several, allowing disconnected simultaneous conversations where multiple participants all can be read. However, with the function of threads where author's tweets are prioritised - users are still able to convey their content through a series of tweets with no interruptions. Twitter also allows the function of hidden replies to hide away tweets by other users that is directed to the thread.

As compared to speech, Facebook and Twitter requires a slower text input than speech - encouraging speed and immediateness of understanding as users type as they speak in a way.

4.4. COMPARING TO SEVEN FEATURES

Speech	Twitter	Text
Time bound	Space bound <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Permanent tweet unless deleted - Similar to a book, unknown audience if account is public 	Space bound
Spontaneous	Contrived <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lag of time between a tweet is posted and when the audience reads it - Compact expression due to character limit per tweet 	Contrived
Face-to-face	Visually decontextualized <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Different extralinguistic possibilities in fonts, colour and pictures - Similar to text, there is no immediate feedback after a tweet. No matter how instant a reply is, it still won't be as fast as face-to-face conversation 	Visually decontextualized
Loosely structured	Loosely structured <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - casual speech discourse-like in terms of expression 	Elaborately structured
Socially interactive	<p style="text-align: center;">Both</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>used to express user's thoughts and opinions at that moment</p> </div> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>Used to convey an idea and information</p> </div> </div>	Factually communicative
Immediately revisable	Repeatedly reversible <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tweet can only be edited if deleted - normally followed by a second tweet to correct 	Repeatedly revisable
Prosodically rich	Graphically rich <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interpreted through reading of text - Allows the representation of information through spatial organisation 	Graphically rich

5. CONCLUSION

As technology advances further, modern communication would eventually consist both features of prototypical text and speech. This also meant that usage norms would continue to remain as not fixed due to the fast adaptation of technologies, with a new usage or interpretation made possible every day. This is maybe why large-scale discourse analysis on Twitter is still not done yet due to the complexity of many influences and the rapid changes.

However, it is critical to note that the impact of Twitter on language and non-language impact may act as a double-edge sword. Twitter has indeed brought a lot of convenience in expressing oneself such as the abbreviations and new ways of expressions. The use of keywords as hashtag in captured the essence of content words and has influenced the awareness on current affairs significantly; But due to the ambiguity of language in a spatial constraint medium of communication - possibilities of issues being easily misinterpreted or overblown may result in issues in the near future.

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