EMOTICONS UNPLUGGED: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF EMOTICONS ON ONLINE MESSAGE COMPREHENSION

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Abstract

With the advent of apps like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter etc, messaging online has become very rampant. A very significant challenge of this is the comprehension effectiveness of these messages. The deciphering and comprehending of the messages sent on the above platforms are difficult since body language is removed from the context. Over the years, there has been an increase in the use of emoticons in messages. Emoticons and emoji have revolutionized digital communication by providing a way to convey emotions and add context to text-based messages. They have become an integral part of modern online conversations, enabling users to express themselves in creative and visual ways. These visual representations help in removing the ambiguity to an extent from the messages. In this paper, an attempt is made to study the usage of emoticons in WhatsApp messages and their role in comprehending them. Responses from 2571 respondents were collected and a multiple regression along with a path analysis was done to study the predictability of the type of emoticon and the usage frequency of emoticon on the message comprehension.

Keywords: Emoticons, Emoji's, Online Messaging, Message Comprehension

INTRODUCTION

There has been a radical change in the way we communicate in the digital era. Online messaging platforms and apps have become a part and parcel of our daily life. Mobile messaging especially through apps like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp etc. have become very rampant. Over three billion people have used online messaging apps in 2021, making them one of the most popular app types.

Messaging app annual users 2016 to 2021 (bn)

Sources: Business Insider, eMarketer, Kommandotech
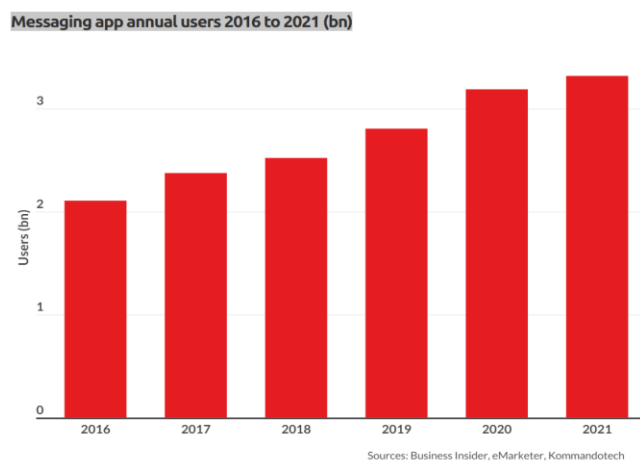
As the graph depicts, the usage of online messaging apps have been on a consistent increase. The ease and convenience of using these messaging apps have been instrumental to this surge .There are various applications for the same of which the two

most popular apps are Facebook and WhatsApp. Collectively, over 2.5 billion people use one of these two platforms. In some markets the two apps hold over 90 percent market share. (www.businessofapps.com)
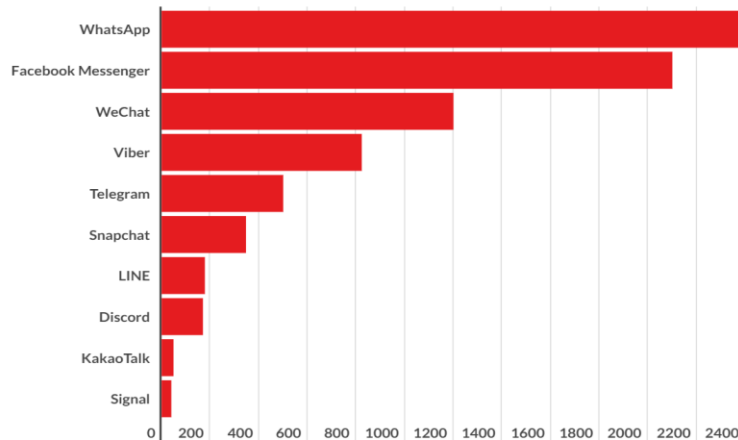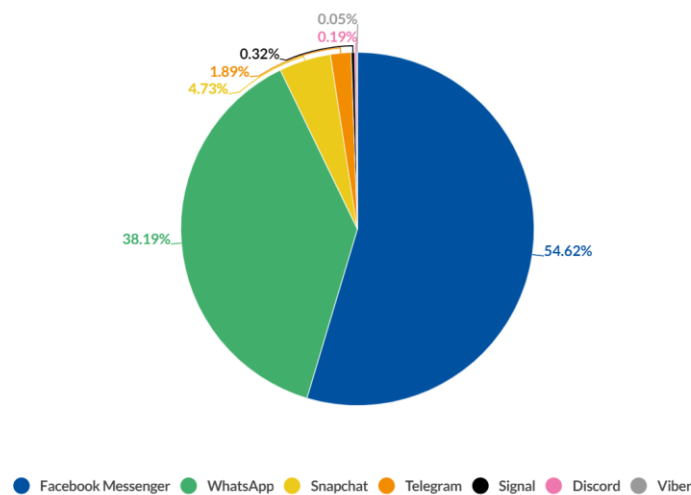

The scenario in India is no different. WhatsApp and Facebook are the two major players in India with over 92% of the market share. Apps like Telegram AND Signal saw a sudden surge in users at the time of WhatsApp privacy update but wasn't able to retain the trend. (www.businessofapps.com)

Emoticons and mobile messaging

The term emoticon is a portmanteau of the terms "emotion" and 'icon". The first documented use of emoticons to represent emotions in digital communication was by Mr.Scott Fahlman, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University. It was initially used to express jokes or light-heartedness, seriousness or sadness. These symbols quickly gained popularity and spread throughout the online messaging community. Of

late these emoticons have become a very essential part of messaging. (**Godin ,1993**) in his paper opined that "until the advent of the smiley, otherwise known as an emoticon, individuals using electronic communication had no way to indicate the subtle mood changes.

Visual representations have always been more effective in communication as against written representations and emoticons to a large extent aid in this. In most of the cases it acts as an amplifier of the messages and in some occasions as a modifier of the message. It was further seen that messages devoid of any visual representations are less likely to convey the intent of the messages. **(Byron & Baldridge, 2007; Lo, 2008**).The wide range of availability of emoticons ranging from laughter to sadness to anger have exponentially triggered the use of emoticons in messages. These emoticons help in overcoming language barriers as well. (**Witmer and Katzman ,1997)** found that women used these symbols approximately twice as frequently as men did Studies have proved that while positive emoticons have a general intonation, negative emojis are perceived more personally. The use of visual cues along with text has also been shown to produce a more positive attitude than text alone **(A. A. Mitchell, 1986)**.The usage of emoticons to convey meanings to a large extent depends on the type and spacing of the emoticons **(Tauch & Kanjo, 2016).**

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the ease and convenience of instant online messages, there is always an impending challenge with it in terms of misinterpretation of tone and context. The absence of voice, gestures, body language etc can lead to ambiguity and vagueness in the comprehension of these messages. The use of emoticons to an extent reduces this ambiguity since it increases the visual dimensions of these test messages especially in content incapable of being expressed through text alone. This prompted the researcher to study the role of emoticons on the message comprehension effectiveness.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Millennials, being born in the digital era have grabbed the unbound opportunities of online messaging. They have adopted it as the primary means of communication. The role of millennials in promoting and popularising the use of emoticons and emoji's are noteworthy. Thus the study is conducted among the of millennials on the role of emoticons in message comprehension .The study is restricted to the area of urban Bengaluru.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1) To study the role of type and frequency of usage of emoticons on message comprehension among millennials

METHODOLOGY

A structured Questionnaire was administered to around 2571 respondents. Data analysis was done using SPSS 29 and AMOS 26.A multiple regression along with a path analysis was done to prove the extent of predictability of the independent variables like type of emoticon and the(frequency of) usage of emoticons on the message comprehension

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the sphere of online messaging, emoticons have become an indispensable part. They have become a pervasive form of expression. (**Thompson and Foulger, 1996)** referred to them as "pictographs" and described their use in Computer mediated communication "to express emotion or as surrogates for nonverbal communication. According to (**Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2007),** emoticons resemble facial nonverbal behaviour and may serve at least some of the same functions as nonverbal behaviour in face-to-face (F2F) communication. They also factor in the time element since typing a single emoticon as against long sentences helps in reducing time to a great extent. Emoticons were basically invented to enhance humour and likewise to alleviate undesirable connotation in text messages **(Wolf, 2000)**

Emoticons help to accentuate emotional expressions and facilitate efficient and effective communication. (**McKenna & Bargh, 2000**) opined that there is a lack of visual cues in CMC, which implies that not all information is fully transferred and the use of emoticons to a large extent helps in this. This was further emphasized by (**Rezabek & Cochenour, 1998)** where they pointed out that emoticons are used to augment the meaning of a message. According to **(Thompson & Foulger, 1996**), emoticons may enhance the exchange of emotional information by providing additional social cues beyond those found in the message text. Hence, emoticons have turned out to be socioemotional suppliers in messages context, as well as the most important way of conveying emotions in CMC **(Riva, 2002). (Walther & D'addario, 2001),** on the other hand observed that emoticons can serve the function of complementing verbal messages at best but not contradicting them. This research study was conducted to fill the gap in the area of examining the role of emoticons, the type of emoticons and the usage frequency of emoticons on the message comprehension of millennials in Urban Bengaluru India.

ANALYSIS

Multiple regression analysis is a statistical technique to predict the variance in the dependent variable by regressing it with the independent variables, besides assessing the degree and character of the relationship between the independent variables with the dependent variable (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). A multiple regression was performed to predict the extent of message comprehension from the type of emoticon used and the frequency of usage of emoticons. The Value of the multiple correlation coefficient R was 0.656 which indicated a good level of correlation. The coefficient of determination R^2 was obtained at 0.431.The significance level of the test was also less than 0.05 emphasizing on the statistical significance of the test.

Table 1

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.656[a]	.431	.430	.569

a. Predictors: (Constant), usage, type

Table 2

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	628.707	2	314.354	971.708	.000[b]
	Residual	830.764	2568	.324		
	Total	1459.471	2570			

a. Dependent Variable: comprehension

b. Predictors: (Constant), usage, type

The equation to predict message comprehension was derived as

Message comprehension = 0.733+0.622 (type of emoticon) + 0.050 (usage frequency),

Table 3

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	.733	.058		12.634	<.001	.619	.847
	type	.622	.014	.650	43.535	<.001	.594	.650
	usage	.050	.014	.052	3.462	<.001	.022	.078

a. Dependent Variable: comprehension

To further substantiate the above, a path analysis was done using AMOS (Figure 1) which revealed that the R2 value was more than 0.5 indicating that the predictability is strong. The RMR and the GFI also supported the analysis with acceptable values.
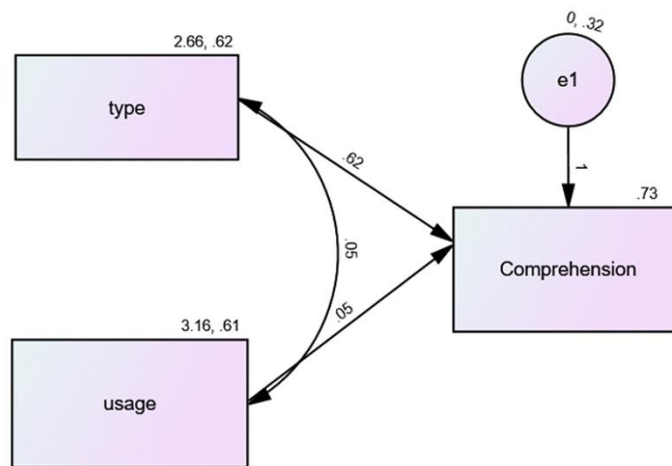
Figure 1: Path Analysis

Table 4: RMR, GFI

Model	RMR	GFI	AGFI	PGFI
Default model	.000	1.000		
Saturated model	.000	1.000		
Independence model	.162	.771	.542	.386

DISCUSSION

Expressing motions through verbal texts are challenging and the use of emoticons to an extent have helped in this. While emoji's and emoticons are interchangeable used, it is important to know that emoticons are icons to convey emotions as compared to emoji's which can be inanimate objects as well. The study was conducted to understand the role of emoticons in the message comprehension. There are a plethora of emoticons available on mobile messages apps ranging from happy, sad, shy, anxious, wink, surprised, angry, disgust etc. While some of the emoticons have a positive intonation, others have a negative intonation. The study made an attempt to understand the role of the type of emoticons and the usage frequency of emoticons on the message comprehension. A multiple regression and a path analysis with type and frequency as the independent variables and message comprehension as the independent variable was done to substantiate this. From the above tests it was proved that the predictability of the message comprehension from type of emoticons and usage frequency of emotions is statistically significant. Thus the study highlighted the fact that the type of emoticons used in online messages and also the frequency of the use of emoticons played a significant role in the level of message comprehension among millennials.

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