# Team Phoenix at WASSA 2021: Emotion Analysis on News Stories with Pre-Trained Language Models

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#### **Abstract**

Emotion is fundamental to humanity. ability to perceive, understand and respond to social interactions in a human-like manner is one of the most desired capabilities in artificial agents, particularly in social-media bots. Over the past few years, computational understanding and detection of emotional aspects in language have been vital in advancing human-computer interaction. The WASSA Shared Task 2021 released a dataset of newsstories across two tracks, Track-1 for Empathy and Distress Prediction and Track-2 for Multi-Dimension Emotion prediction at the essaylevel. We describe our system entry for the WASSA 2021 Shared Task (for both Track-1 and Track-2), where we leveraged the information from Pre-trained language models for Track specific Tasks. Our proposed models achieved an Average Pearson Score of 0.417, and a Macro-F1 Score of 0.502 in Track 1 and Track 2, respectively. In the Shared Task leaderboard, we secured 4th rank in Track 1 and 2<sup>nd</sup> rank in Track 2.

### 1 Introduction

Sentiment analysis over texts has been a widely researched area in NLP. The number of papers published in sentiment analysis related domains has increased from 37 papers in 2000 to 6996 in 2016 (Mäntylä et al., 2016). Sentiment analysis is a trending research topic, possibly due to its applications that automatically collect and analyze a large corpus of opinions with text mining tools. From the conventional task of predicting polarity as positive, negative or neutral, the researchers are now increasingly focused on sophisticated tasks such as emotion recognition, aspect level sentiment analysis, intensity prediction, etc.

Recently, the researchers started exploring more sophisticated models of human emotion on a larger

scale. Several datasets and corpora have been curated in this domain, such as (Mohammad et al., 2018), (Alm and Sproat, 2005), and larger datasets like (Demszky et al., 2020). (Buechel et al., 2018) presented an interesting computational work distinguishing between multiple forms of empathy, empathic concern, and personal distress. This data of empathic concern and personal distress along with Multi-dimension Emotions Labelling on newsstories across seven classes, namely: sadness, fear, neutral, anger, disgust, joy, surprise, has been released a Shared Task (Tafreshi et al., 2021) in WASSA-2021 Workshop as Two Tracks<sup>1</sup>.

In this paper, we describe our system entry for both the tracks of WASSA 2021 Shared Task. The primary contributions of the paper are as follows:

### Track 1:

- We demonstrate the efficacy of multi-tasking through parameter sharing which further strengthens the belief that empathic concern and personal distress are co-related.
- We amalgamate the information from sentence embeddings with normalized additional information to finally predict the empathic concern and personal distress using regression.

#### Track 2:

- We provide a comparative analysis of generation modelling against classification modelling for the task of Emotion Prediction.
- We illustrate the efficiency of Task Specific Incremental Fine-Tuning approach 4.2 on Pre-Trained Models for a small sized dataset.

#### 2 Related Works

Pre-trained language models have proved to be a breakthrough in analyzing a person's emotional state. We now describe briefly some of these highly influential works.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>refer Section 3 for more details

# 2.1 Pre-trained Language Models

Over the past few years, pre-trained language models have progressed greatly in learning contextualized representations. Transformer (Vaswani et al., 2017), first proposed for machine translation, has enabled faster learning of complex representations of text. GPT (Radford et al., 2018), BERT (Devlin et al., 2018), RoBERTa (Liu et al., 2019), XLNet (Yang et al., 2019) all leverage transformer architecture along with statistical tokenizers. ELECTRA (Clark et al., 2020) a recent generator-discriminator-based pre-training approach offers a competitive performance despite requiring lesser compute. Domain specific language models also leads to a significant performance gain (Vaidhya and Kaushal, 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Beltagy et al., 2019).

#### 2.2 Emotion Recognition

Emotion recognition through facial expressions and speech data has been the subject of extensive study in the past. (Tarnowski et al., 2017) presents an approach for recognition of seven emotional states based on facial expressions. (Yoon et al., 2018) utilizes a novel deep dual recurrent encoder model to obtain a better understanding of speech data using text data and audio signals simultaneously.

For text, various approaches have been proposed for emotion recognition. Deshmukh and Kirange (2012) proposed an SVM-based approach for predicting opinions on news headlines. Acheampong et al. (2020) paper analyses the efficacy of utilizing transformer encoders for detecting emotions. Kant et al. (2018) demonstrates the practical efficiency of large pre-trained language models for Multi-Emotion sentiment classification.

### 2.3 Computation of Empathy

Empathy and distress are core components of a person's emotional state, and there has been a growing interest in computational approaches to model them. Considering language variations across different regions, empathy and distress can also vary with demographics (Lin et al., 2018; Loveys et al., 2018), and recently (Guda et al., 2021) proposed a demographic-aware empathy modelling framework using BERT and demographics features.

Understanding empathy and distress are crucial for analyzing mental health and providing aid. Recently (Sharma et al., 2020) explored language models for identifying empathetic conversations in the mental health support system.

# 3 Task and Dataset Description

Our experiments' data consists of the emotionlabels to news stories released as part of the WASSA 2021 shared task. The dataset provided (Buechel et al., 2018) contained essays of 300-800 characters length, Batson empathetic concern, and personal distress scores along with other additional demographic and personality information.

The training corpus of WASSA-2021 shared task consists of 1860 training pairs containing seven emotion labels, namely: sadness, fear, neutral, anger, disgust, joy, surprise. The dataset also includes person-level demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity, income, education level) and personality information. We normalized these information before using in our model for Track 1. We excluded this information in Track 2 model.

Emotion	Train	Dev
sadness	647	96
anger	349	76
neutral	275	31
fear	194	25
surprise	164	14
disgust	149	14
joy	82	12
Total	1860	270

Table 1: Composition of Training and Development dataset

The objective of the Track-1 is to predict the Batson empathic concern and personal distress using the essay and any of the additional information to improve Pearson corelation between the predicted labels and gold standard labels. The task can formally be described as following:

Empathic concern and personal distress prediction: Given a paragraph t, additional information i, learn a model:

 $g(t, I) \rightarrow (x, y)$  where  $x \in R^+$  and  $y \in R^+$ .

The Track 2 is formulated as essay-level Multi-Dimension emotion prediction task. It is defined formally as:

**Emotion Prediction:** Given a paragraph t, the classification task aims to learn a model  $g(t) \rightarrow \{l_1, l_2, ..., l_k\}$  where  $l_i$  is a label  $\in \{sadness, anger, ...etc\}$ .

# 4 Approach

### 4.1 Empathy and Distress Prediction Model

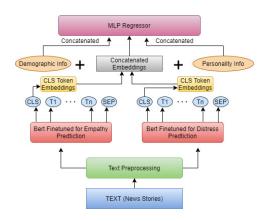


Figure 1

The system architecture for Empathy and Distress Prediction is shown in Figure 1. The approach is primarily based on fine-tuning pre-trained language models for down-stream tasks. We enforce the technique of hard-parameter sharing through concatenation of BERT-fine-tuned embeddings trained separately for Empathy and Distress Prediction. The final shared parameters are then concatenated with the scaled demographic and personality features given in the dataset. These separately fine-tuned BERT-embeddings for distress and empathy prediction are then concatenated with rest of the features before feeding them to the regression models. This parameter shared multi-task framework (Kaushal and Vaidhya, 2020) allows for the use of the same model, loss function, and hyperparameters for the task of empathy prediction as well as Distress Prediction.

$$MSE(y_{true}, y_{pred}) = \sqrt{\left(\frac{1}{n}\right) \sum_{i=1}^{n} (y_{true_i} - y_{pred_i})^2}$$

$$r = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} (y_{true_i} - y_{true}^{-})(y_{pred_i} - y_{pred}^{-})}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{n} (y_{true_i} - y_{true}^{-})^2} \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{n} (y_{pred_i} - y_{pred}^{-})^2}}$$

where  $y_{true}$  are the gold-standard and  $y_{pred}$  being the predicted scores for empathy and distress. The final Pearson correlation score used for final evaluation was:

$$r_{avg} = \frac{r_{empathy} + r_{distress}}{2}$$

#### 4.2 Emotion Label Generation Model

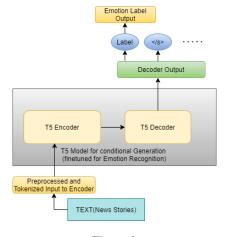


Figure 2

Our proposed approach for Emotion Prediction is shown in Figure 2. The approach is primarily based on T5 Model (Raffel et al., 2019) for conditional generation of emotion labels. Hence before feeding into the network, the emotion prediction task is cast as feeding the essay text as input and training it to generate target emotion labels as text. This allows for the use of the same model, loss function, and hyper-parameters for the task of emotion prediction as is done in other Text Generation tasks. More formally, the modeling of the task can be described as:

$$p(x|c) = \prod_{i=1}^{2} p(x_i|x_{< i}, c)$$

where c is the encoder input obtained after text tokenization and x is the target decoder output which is of length 2, with  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  as as  $label\_token$  and  $eos\_token$  respectively.

Here, the transformer network parameters  $\theta$  are trained with negative log-likelihood over a dataset  $D = \{(c^1, x^1), (c^2, x^2), ..., (c^D, x^D)\}$ :

$$\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{D}) = -\sum_{k=1}^{|\mathcal{D}|} log p_{\theta}(x_i^k | x_{\leq i}^k, c^k)$$

Task Specific Incremental Finetuning: Along with the architecture proposed, instead of the T5 base model, we propose to use the T5 model finetuned on emotion recognition dataset (Saravia et al., 2018) for Emotion Recognition downstream task (Romero). This is done to leverage the task-specific knowledge beyond the available dataset of 1860 samples and to analyze the effect of task specific-incremental finetuning.

# 5 Experiments

The experiments were conducted using Pytorch (Paszke et al., 2019) and Hugging Face's transformers (Wolf et al., 2019). The experiments were performed on the Google Colab Laboratory tool, which provides a Tesla T4 GPU and 16 GB RAM. Adam's Optimizer (Kingma and Ba, 2017) with a learning rate of 2e-5 was used for optimization. The training batch provided in the WASSA-2021 Shared task consisted of 1860 examples. An 80-20 split on the training set was performed for the trainvalid split. The development set consisted of 210 examples was used as a test set. As suggested in the WASSA-2021 Shared Task, the average value of the Pearson correlation score of distress and empathy was used for evaluation in Track 1 and Macro F1 score was used in Track 2. The code and trained models are available at https url<sup>2</sup>

Models used in Experiment for Track 1: For Empathy and Distress Prediction from the finally obtained parameter-rich concatenated vector, we experimented on a variety of Supervised Machine-Learning architectures along with our final system. Brief details on these architectures are given below:

- **SVR** is a Support vector machine that supports linear and non-linear regression. It tries to fit as many instances as possible between the lines while limiting the margin violations.
- Ada-Boost is a meta-estimator that begins by fitting a regressor on the original dataset and then fits additional copies of the regressor on the same dataset but where the weights of instances are adjusted according to the error of the current prediction.
- XG-Boost is an applied machine learning algorithm, decision-tree-based ensemble that uses a framework for gradient boosting. It is an implementation of gradient boosted decision trees designed for speed and performance.
- MLP is a class of feedforward artificial neural network (ANN). MLP utilizes a supervised learning technique called backpropagation for training.<sup>3</sup> Used the architecture described in the Section 4.1 for final prediction.

**Models used in Experiment for Track 2:** For Emotion Classification, we experimented on a variety of architectures along with our final system. Brief details on these architectures are given below:

- BERT-base (Devlin et al., 2018) and ALBERT-base-v2 (Lan et al., 2019) are the text classification models, in which pooled output, (i.e. output from the first token or [CLS] token of last layer of the model) is used as the contextualized embeddings for the text which was then fed into a single feed-forward linear layer for Binary Classification (Kamal et al., 2021), trained with Binary Cross-Entropy Loss.
- T5-base (Raffel et al., 2019) and T5-Finetuned (Romero)<sup>4</sup> models use the architecture described in the Section 4.2 for conditional generation, the only difference being the pre-trained versions of T5 model used.
- Pegasus-xsum (Zhang et al., 2019) model also uses the same approach as used in T5 model for conditional generation, and performs better in several downstream tasks.

Links to pre-trained models used for experiment can be found in the Supplemental Section A.

# 6 Result

This section discusses the results from different approaches and architectures used in our experiments. While the train and development dataset were already available, the gold standard annotations of the test are withheld in the Shared Task of WASSA-2021. The experiments were performed considering Development set as our test dataset. Performance of only the final submissions are provided on the held-out test dataset.

### 6.1 Results for Track 1

Table 2 shows the model performance discussed in the development dataset section (used as validation set) for Track 1. Our final approach, which is described in Section 4.1 outperforms other approaches by an appreciable margin on development set but it failed on empathy prediction on the latest test set submission in the Codalab. It was due to an erroneous submission from us. Though during the post-evaluation phase, the model performed better

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>https://github.com/yashbutala/WASSA

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Our final approach used for submission in WASSA-2021 Shared Task Track 1

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>Our final approach used for submission in WASSA-2021 Shared Task Track 2

Predictor	Distress	Empathy	Average
SVR	0.400	0.406	0.403
XG-Boost	0.431	0.394	0.413
Ada-Boost	0.418	0.374	0.396
MLP*	0.462	0.473	0.468

Table 2: Performance of our system on the development dataset of Track 1. Our final submission approach for Track 1 is marked with \*.

Predictor	Distress	Empathy	Average
MLP	0.476	0.358	0.417

Table 3: Performance of our final submission on the held-out Test dataset of Track 1. Our final submission secured **4**<sup>th</sup> rank on the Shared Task Leaderboard

on test set than the (Buechel et al., 2018). Table 3 shows the performance of our final submission for WASSA-2021 on the held-out test dataset

#### 6.2 Results for Track 2

Table 4 shows the performance of the models discussed in section on the Development dataset (used as validation set) for Track 2. While its clear that our final approach described in Section 4.2 outperforms other approaches by an appreciable margin, there are two other important aspects to note from the table. First, the performance of Conditional Generation models, i.e. Pegasus-xsum and T5 models over Pre-trained Contextual Embedding based Classification model used for BERT and ALBERT models. Second, the improvement obtained by using already finetuned model<sup>5</sup> over T5-base model. As can be seen in Table 4, our approach of generation of emotion labels performs way better than Contextual Embeddings-based classification. Furthermore, the improvement obtained by using taskspecific finetuned model over the base T5 model suggests that the model is able to exploit the benefit of task specific incremental finetuning and was able to extrapolate the knowledge features learned from previous finetuning on Emotion recognition onto the newly finetuned model. Table 5 shows the performance of our final submission for WASSA-2021 on the held-out test dataset.

#### 7 Conclusion and Future Work

In this paper, we presented an approach for predicting empathic concern and personal distress by fine-

Model	Macro-F1 score
BERT-base	0.38
ALBERT-base-v2	0.4739
Pegasus-xsum	0.502
T5-base	0.5259
T5-Finetuned*	0.572

Table 4: Macro F1 score for Emotion Prediction on Development set. Model descriptions are provided in Section 6. Our final submission approach for Track 2 is marked with \*.

Metric	Result
Macro F1 Score	0.502
Micro F1 Score	0.594
Accuracy	0.594
Macro Precision	0.550
Micro Precision	0.594
Macro Recall	0.483
Micro Recall	0.594

Table 5: Performance of our system on the held-out test dataset, for track 2. Our final submission secured **2**<sup>nd</sup> rank on the Shared Task Leaderboard

tuning a pre-trained language model using parameter sharing. As empathy and distress are correlated, we observe that parameter sharing improves the performance on this task. We amalgamated the sentence embeddings and other additional data, which further used the regression model for prediction. The ablation studies show that on the validation set, the MLP works best.

Also, opposite to most text classification approaches, which use embeddings from the final layer of pre-trained language models, we illustrated the efficiency of formulating finetuning of language models as a label generation task for emotion prediction. Our ablation studies demonstrated usefulness of using task-specific incremental finetuning.

In the future, we plan to extend our multi-tasking based model to incorporate soft parameter sharing. Inclusion of personality related traits provided in the dataset used in this paper, while predicting emotion labels might also be a promising direction to work on.

<sup>5</sup>https://huggingface.co/mrm8488/ t5-base-finetuned-emotion

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### **A** Supplemental Material

Links to the huggingface models used in the experiment:

- Bert-base: https://huggingface.co/ bert-base-uncased
- Albert-base-v2: https://huggingface.co/ albert-base-v2
- Pegasus-xsum: https://huggingface.co/ google/pegasus-xsum
- T5-base: https://huggingface.co/ t5-base
- T5-Finetuned: https://huggingface.co/ mrm8488/t5-base-finetuned-emotion