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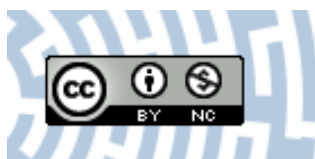
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Text-messaging and its Effect on Youth's Relationships

Abstract

The cell phone has evolved from a luxury for businesspeople into an important facilitator of many users' social relationships. For those with poor social connections, the cell phone offers a unique advantage: it confers instant membership in a community. Wireless technology expands telephone applications by empowering people on the move to use it anywhere and anytime.

Mobile phones have steadily become technology that fewer people want to do without. This may be especially true for the younger set. They are texting at school, at the cinema or at home. This paper explores what role the cell phone plays in their lives and what its impact on teens' social relationships is.

Key words: *cell phone, text-messaging, SMS, gratifications of cell phone use, loneliness, social connectedness*

Introduction

In the 20th century new information technology is part of the new social and human environment. The growing availability of mobile telephones, personal computers, and the Internet, as well as the expansion in the range of services they offer, could lead to changes in the lives of average citizens, especially teenagers, who often tend towards conformist attitudes.

In the age of new information and communication people spend more time at home compared to earlier generations – isolated from other people and deprived of opportunities for civic dialogue. The potential impact of these new technologies, as they enter youth's daily lives, to change the range of activities they pursue, the way they perform old activities, their relationships with peers, and their personal welfare, is a principal social problem. These technologies are being used in a wide

variety of ways to make everyday activities more efficient, more convenient, or just more fun.

Today's teens have embraced the wireless world. This is a generation strongly attached to its mobile phones, which are changing youth culture and social interaction. The mobile phone serves adults as a communication tool, whereas for young people it has become a new means of expression and identity. For teens the cell phone is like clothes that they wear and it has become a complete reflection of who they are and what they are all about. Mobile phone producers are regularly introducing cell phones designed especially for kids with decorative face plates, phones with which you can take pictures, and cell phones that glow in the dark, record audio and video, play games, e-mail and text-message your friends, and make it possible to listen to your favourite music via mp3.

The mobile phone is now ubiquitous, and mobile-phone technology to access the Short-Message Service (SMS), also known as text-messaging or texting, has become a common way for young users to communicate. SMS is an ideal way for initiating contact with the other sex because it offers intimacy and distance at the same time. The sender of a text message does not risk to lose face if their expressions of sympathy are not reciprocated by the receiver – not as this is the case in a face-to-face encounter (Goban-Klas, 2005, pp. 248–249). According to Kunz Heim (2003, pp. 77–106) the SMS has become "billet doux" of the 21st century.

The increasingly widespread use of text-messaging has led to the questioning of the social effects of this novel communication medium. So far there has been small number of qualitative studies of teenagers' use of text-messaging, so little is known about the impact of texting on social interaction amongst regular users, nor on the long-term consequences of text-massaging on the development and maintenance of these relationships.

The telephone invented in 1876 at the turn of the 20th century was reducing the isolation of farm families and helping extended families keep in touch (Fischer, 1992). Today wireless technology, miniaturization and new pricing plans are changing the telephone's capabilities, how it is used, and the types of people who use it. A major consequence is that the telephone has become a more personal device, even a fashion accessory, rather than a household appliance used in common by a family.

Current research on the popularity of the cell phone worldwide includes studies on its function and uses, as well as the symbolic aspect of the cell phone in various countries. A study about cell phones use in Japan (Ito *et al*, 2005), for example, reports that teens use these devices to carve out a sphere of privacy in a country where family relationships, architectural styles, and living arrangements otherwise constrict it. Young people have very few places in which they can have private

conversations with peers and lovers, thus the mobile phone has become a device for teens to construct a "place" for private communication that is not monitored by adults.

One of the central questions animating much social science research on the social impact of new technology is the specific impact it has on social relationships. Some authors believe that online communication hinders adolescents' well-being because it displaces valuable time that could be spent with existing friends (e.g., Kraut *et al.*, 1998; Nie, 2001; Nie *at al.*, 2002).

Adherents of this displacement hypothesis assume that the Internet motivates adolescents to form online contacts with strangers rather than to maintain friendships with their offline peers. Because online contacts are seen as superficial weak-tie relationships that lack feelings of affection and commitment, the Internet is believed to reduce the quality of adolescents' existing relationships. Some studies investigate direct linear relationships between Internet use and one or more dependent variables, such as social involvement, depression, or loneliness (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2001).

Conversely, other authors suggest that online communication may enhance the quality of adolescents' existing friendships. Adherents of this stimulation hypothesis argue that more recent online communication technologies, such as IM, encourage communication with existing friends. McKenna & Bargh (1998), for example, found that regular use of electronic mail and participating in user groups had improved the lives of some users, particularly those who experienced difficulties with face-to-face communication (e.g. those who are socially anxious or lonely). Also Wellman and Guila (1999) argue, that interpersonal ties can be maintained by mediated connections via communication technologies such as the telephone.

Taking it into account a similar pattern may be evident among cell phone users, but a recent online survey revealed that cell phone owners declaring a generalized preference for texting on their cell phones were both lonelier and more anxious than those who preferred talking (Reid & Reid, 2005). The texting interface presents the user with an asynchronous medium similar to email, allowing time for composition and reflection, and the opportunity to manage the way users construct and present themselves in their messages.

Reid & Reid (2005) suspect that it is the combination of these two features – the sociability of the chat room coupled with the psychological distance of electronic mail – that lends texting a special, but paradoxical, appeal to a significant number of users.

In Thurlow's (2003) recent study of text messages, only about one-third of messages accomplished functional or practical goals – the remainder fulfilled a combination of friendship maintenance, romantic, and social functions associated with

highly intimate and relational concerns. Text messaging therefore seems to provide an opportunity for intimate personal contact, at the same time offering the detachment necessary to manage self presentation and involvement. There is a clear but untested assumption emerging that young people are slaves of a growing text messaging culture.

Material and method

The research was done at the end of 2006 on 153 pupils aged 13-16 from one of the high-junior schools in Dąbrowa Górnicza. The respondents filled in an anonymous questionnaire composed of 12 semi-opened items with the possibility of completing them with a free commentary. The questionnaire examined patterns of SMS use among teens, mainly motives for using it. Based on the literature review (Leung, 2001; Leung, Wei, 2000), a list of 22 gratification items was created. Next questions concerned how frequently they communicate via SMS, people they sent messages to, mobile phone ownership and other background information on mobile use such as text/talk preferences, mobile phone etiquette, phonebook contacts, language usage in text messaging, experiences with texting problems, and the use of texting in relationship development and maintenance.

The examination of the level of social skills was realized by ̋The Sense of Alienation Scale" (Kmiecik-Baran, 1993), based on the Seeman's theory of alienation (Seeman, 1959; Seeman, 1975), which encompassed the following aspects of the sense of alienation:

1. the normlessness/social structure (N) – a sense of lack of identification with existing social norms/a sense of identification with existing social norms;
2. the meaninglessness/a feeling of meaning (M) – lack of belief in the existence of clear and coherent values/the conviction that there exist clear and coherent values;
3. the powerlessness/resourcefulness (P) – a conviction that what happens to us is not dependent upon our behavior/ a conviction that it is dependent upon our behavior;
4. the self-estrangement/autonomy (S–E) – a sense of separation from one's own convictions and ideals/a sense of integration with one's own convictions and ideals;
5. the loneliness/integration (L) – a sense of separation from significant others/a sense of relation with others,
6.   the global level of alienation feeling (LAF) – an aggregate score, obtained by summing up of individual components.

In this scale, the respondents reported on the quality of their interpersonal relationships by agreement with positively and negatively worded statements on a four-point scale from '1'= strongly agree to '4' = strongly disagree. ANOVA statistical model, independence test Chi-square (X^2) and coefficient of contingency (C) were used in the data analysis.

Results

Of the sample, 76 (49.7%) were males and 77 (50.3%) were females. Out of all the respondents, 92.8 % had their own cell phones. They had owned cell phones for periods ranging from one month to four years. Most of the respondents recalled that they had received their first mobile phones to use in case of emergency. Although they now use their mobile phones for many other more personal types of communication. Many kept a mobile phone close at all times, even sleeping with it. Mobile phones were more than a means of communication for young people – they functioned as an alarm clock and an address book as well. Teenagers sent and received a high amount of text messages. Among the owners of cell phones 39.9% were heavy SMS users, and admitted to sending above 200 text messages monthly, while only 2.6% were non-users.

Sense of alienation

A major focus of the survey was to explore what the effect of text-messaging on the user's relationship maintenance was. Related to this issue, the first hypothesis is posed as follows:

> *H_i: There is a difference in the mean of global level of alienation feeling and in the means of all its aspects between those who send over 200 text messages per month and those who send 200 and less text messages per month.*

The first step in the analysis of the obtained material was a comparison of the means within each of the categories of alienation feeling with the use of the variance analysis (ANOVA) to look for differences between these two groups of users. As shown in Table 1 the heavy users had a significantly higher level of normlessness. This result suggests that those respondents who preferred texting as a means of communication tend to ignore existing social norms. The variance analysis also revealed significant differences between the level of meaninglessness and texting frequency, which indicates that heavy SMS users are unconvinced of existing values which are worth living or acting for.

Table 1 Differences between users on account of texting frequency

	< 200 text messages		201 text messages <		F	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		
N	5.014	1.752	5.873	2.070	9.50	.002**
M	5.014	1.752	5.648	2.008	6.658	.010*
P	5.648	1.965	5.296	1.831	1.159	.283
S–E	5.732	2.000	5.634	2.037	.005	.943
L	5.296	1.908	5.394	2.265	.067	.796
LAF	5.380	1.915	5.746	1.969	1.88	.172

*p<0.05;   **p<0.01

From what the respondents replied, it turns out that teens send text messages to their friends and they also respond in text, and the only people who call them are their parents. Texters also reported feeling more comfortable saying some things through text, so they often used mobile phones to transmit messages that otherwise may cause embarrassment if they are delivered face-to-face. Thus texting seems to afford them an opportunity for uncontrolled social contact. The results have shown that excessive usage of text-communication can cause a generation of crisis of norms and values.

However, there were no significant differences between the other components and frequency of using SMS as well as with the global level of alienation.

Gratifications of SMS use

The next issue of the research was to establish the specific motivational driving forces underlying texting usage, as well as the general commitment to mobile technology as a constitutive component of personal life. Based on the results of the component factor analysis of text messages motive statements, three highly reliable gratification indices were created.

Social utility consisted of four items that reflected the motives of using text-messages to relieve boredom (41.8%), to gossip or chat (58.8%), to express affection (45.8%) and keep in touch with friends (45.8%). Young people in this study used SMS to exchange moment-by-moment experiences in their daily lives with special partners, and thus to have a more continuous sense of connection with friends and lovers. For teens, a friend is still mostly defined by spending time and doing things together, but friends also provide emotional support – opportunities to discuss problems. Text messages also could be seen as a way of killing time – a teenager can expend hours sending and receiving messages during a boring evening or during a trip.

Fashion and status consisted of three items. It marked the use of the cell phone to look fashionable (48.4%), cool (54.9%) and stylish (33.3%). For teenagers ownership of a "correct" type of mobile telephone is a subject of relevance. Nevertheless, having an appropriate device is not enough, because it should be personalized to express the personal style and way of life and create an individual phone by combining downloadable ring tones, logos, pictures, and games, as well as different external elements.

Mobility and immediate access included three items: being always available regardless of location (38.6%), providing immediate access to others anywhere anytime (46.4%) and discretion (50.3%) which allowed teens to avoid parents' control. Youth communication is regulated by peers or adults depending on the place and the time of day, and access to mobile media takes a central role in managing and inflecting that control. Short messages let them communicate during homework, dinner, television shows without the embarrassment of revealing a possible romantic liaison, or at hours of a day when other family members are likely to be asleep. Moreover, text messages can be returned discreetly during class, on public transportation, or in restaurants, all contexts where voice communication would be inappropriate.

Based on the above review, the second hypothesis explores the relationship between major gratifications of cellular phone and a sense of alienation.

> **H$_2$: The global level of sense of alienation and the levels of its components depend on motives for using text messages.**

While there was some worry that excessive mobile usage would increase social isolation, the results showed that it is quite otherwise. As Table 2 shows social utility, such as expressing affection and keeping in touch, were very significantly correlated with all the components of alienation. Teens used SMS as a means of social interaction revealed a lower level of a sense of alienation in all its aspects whereas users who sent text-messages for gossiping or reliving boredom had higher levels of two components of alienation – the normlessness and the meaninglessness as well as the global level of alienation feeling.

Otherwise teens who were less socially connected treated the cell phone as a fashion accessory to look fashionable, cool or stylish and extract social compensation from the cell phone – they can strap a cell phone around their neck to become a member of a community instantly, whether they actually use the phone or not. Moreover, teens who do not use SMS may feel excluded by peers.

By focusing on the positive aspects of SMS use the most popular reason for doing it was convenience. Mobility and immediate access allow teens to be con

Table 2. Relationship between gratifications of using SMS and all aspects of sense of alienation

		N	M	P	S–E	L	LAF
relieving boredom	χ^2	6.486*	38.136***	2.237	0.200	4.157	6.770*
	C	.264	.584	.157	.047	.213	.269
gossiping or chating	χ^2	8.136*	3.476	1.124	7.056*	2.004	2.951
	C	.294	.195	.112	.274	.149	.180
expressing affection	χ^2	9.628**	22.910***	21.152***	9.873**	28.395***	27.188***
	C	.318	0.472	.456	.322	.517	.508
keeping in touch	χ^2	6.810*	7.749*	19.633***	19.302***	46.271***	39.278***
	C	.270	.287	.441	.438	.630	.591
looking fashionable	χ^2	1.552	4.386	2.312	17.728***	2.314	10.850**
	C	.131	.218	.159	.421	.160	.336
looking cool	χ^2	1.409	9.747**	1.999	16.250***	0.630	2.293
	C	.125	.320	.148	.405	.084	.159
looking stylish	χ^2	2.411	2.126	1.127	8.113*	15.668***	0.720
	C	.163	.153	.112	.293	.398	.089
availability	χ^2	1.406	1.873	3.824	5.774	15.334***	19.381***
	C	.125	.144	.204	.249	.395	.438
immediate access	χ^2	3.455	2.922	9.550**	26.989***	26.416***	38.360***
	C	.194	.179	.317	.506	.502	.585
discretion	χ^2	11.379**	50.205***	12.632**	7.724*	12.960**	34.043***
	C	.344	.650	.361	.287	.365	.558

*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.

stantly available and thus keep in touch with friends. This gratification significantly correlated with those components which were associated with social skills.

Surprisingly, the teens who sought for discretion in using text-messages had a higher alienation level in all its aspects and these dependences were statistically significant. Apparently, a need for discretion arises from a lack of intimate contact in direct communication, so a text message might ameliorate the experience of loneliness.

The content of messages

Thanks to SMS, youth have created their own, private language to communicate through short text messages of 160 characters. This limit of each text message encouraged abbreviation and the development of a code between those who text regularly.

The content of the messages ranged from in-depth chat about significant issues (43.4%) and school events (32.7%), to lightweight notification of their current activities and thoughts (49%), gossip (27.5%) or simply chat (58.2%). For couples messaging it became a means for expressing feelings giving a sense of private contact with a loved one.

Many of the messages exchanged between this close peer group or between couples included messages that informants described as "insignificant" or "not urgent." Some examples of messages in this category are communications such as "I'm tired," "I guess I'll take a bath now", "Hello, I've just arrived. Are you coming?".

Text-messages often bore more resemblance to a code than to a standard language. A text filled with code language expressions was not necessarily accessible to an outsider.

Significant numbers of youth have used instant messages for serious kinds of communication such as telling their friends unpleasant things or starting and ending relationships.

Conclusions

These results support all the hypotheses. The heavy SMS users were different from other group of users in two components of alienation feeling. The results also point out the relation between the gratifications of mobile messaging and a sense of alienation. There have been revealed some significant dependences. Firstly, the research has shown that using text-messages to maintain contact affects individual social skills. Otherwise, the respondents who sent text messages because of the trend and desire to be fashionable tended towards a higher level of the alienation feeling.

But there is no doubt that a text message was seen as a cheap, effective, and convenient way of communicating, as a way of maintaining socially. Mobile phones create new kinds of bounded places that merge the infrastructures of geography and technology, as well as techno-social practices that merge technical standards and social norms.

Teens text constantly because doing so allows them to connect to friends in a way no other communication technology does at present: they can have a private one-to-one real-time conversation with a friend and, at the same time, 'hang out' with many friends and feel part of a group. Thus, text-messaging satisfies two major needs in adolescent identity formation—maintaining individual friendships and belonging to peer groups. Therefore, SMS fulfils social important functions that make it popular – first, connects young people to peers and extends their opportunities to communicate and second, helps teens define their social identities.

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