

Impacts of Short Message Service Texting on University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

Short Message Service (SMS) texting is widely used in this technological era, which has led to the questioning of the social and psychological effects of this communication medium. The objective of this study is to investigate the social and psychological influence on using SMS texts among university students in Malaysia. A sample of 971 respondents completed the online questionnaire. The findings indicated that there was a clear distinction between 'Texters' and 'Talkers' in the way they use their mobile phones and their underlying incentives. The key finding in the analysis was that Texters tend to form close 'text circles' with their own social ecology, interlinking with a close group of friends. Compared to Talkers, Texters were found to be more lonely and socially anxious, and likely to unveil their 'real-self' through text than voice communication. To conclude, people use their phones differently because they have different personalities and needs.

Keywords: Verbal and non-verbal communication, Mobile phones, SMS texting

1. Introduction

The objective of this study is to investigate the social and psychological impacts of mobile phone to Malaysian university students. 'Mobile message becomes popular and is one of the modern ways to communicate since it is fast, location independent, and personal. This is why the mobile phone generation favours messaging, making this one of the fastest-growing segments of the mobile communication industry' (Nokia, 2002).

According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission's Hand Phone Users Survey (2005), as of 31 May 2005 there were 16.2 million hand phone subscriptions on the five digital networks operating in Malaysia. In the first quarter of 2006, the number had increased to 20.5 million, a 5.3 percent growth rate and 77.7 per cent penetration rate nationwide (Ibid, 2006). This shows that there has been an increase in the usage of Malaysian mobile technologies, especially, hand phones. More than two million hand phone users in Malaysia in 2005 were 19 years old or younger. Adults between 20 and 49 years of age make up 12.7 million or 78 per cent of users, but this group has shrunk by 0.6 percent since 2004, while the number of senior users (aged 50 and above) also dropped 0.3 percent to 1.4 million (Lee, 2006). This shows that teenagers and adults dominate the Malaysian mobile technology market.

Haig (2002) declared that this teen market has dominated text-messaging, with 90% of them declared to text more than they talk on their phones. Despite a small number of qualitative studies of teenagers' use of text messaging (e.g. Kasesniemi & Rautiainen, 2002; Ling & Yuri, 2002), little is known about the psychological influence of texting on social communication among regular users, nor on the long-term outcomes of texting on the development and maintenance of these relationships.

According to McKenna et al (2002), those who are lonely and socially anxious were better able to interpret themselves and develop intimate friendships on the internet than in the 'real world'. They may turn to it as a safe arena in which to form close and meaningful relationships 'to make a reality out of their virtual lives' (Ibid, p.30). Ling & Yttri (2002) argued that for a significant number of users, transmitting a message may be more crucial for creating and sustaining social relationships than for organizing practical arrangements.

In Thurlow's (2003) study of undergraduate text messages, about one-third of messages achieved functional or practical goals—the rest executed a combination of phatic, friendship maintenance, romantic, and social

functions affiliated with highly intimate and relational worries. Thus, text messaging supplies an opportunity for intimate personal contact and simultaneously offer the detachment to cope with self presentation and engagement.

The present study attempts to address McKenna et al's (2002) model by assessing social anxiety and loneliness and some measures of the 'real me' to scrutinize the effects of texting upon relationships. Further, the researcher would examine other mediating factors other than the 'real me', for instance, to investigate how people who prefer using their phones for texting (=texters) differ from those who use their phones for voice calls (=talkers).

2. Methodology

2.1 Instrument

A survey questionnaire was designed for the purpose of this study and it was piloted on a group of university students to check its validity and reliability. After piloting the questionnaire, an online questionnaire containing multiple-choice, scalar and open-field questions was developed to collect the data on mobile phone ownership and usage, and aspects of relationship development.

2.2 Respondents

The questionnaire was advertised on several university homepages, chat forums, and a range of servers. Moreover, it was advertised through a distribution list to students at the Universiti Malaysia Pahang.

2.3 Experimental Design and Procedure

The respondents were informed of what the study was about and how to complete the questionnaire. It has 140 questions concerning demographic data, mobile phone ownership, the use of mobile, text/talk preferences, language usage in text messaging, message collection, personal problems/experience with texting, and the use of texting in relationship development and maintenance.

To turn to the topic of real-self expression, items were revised to refer to text messaging, which is opposed to the internet from McKenna's 'real-me' questionnaire to include a) how far to which respondents' families 'would be surprised if they were to read his/her text messages (3-point scale of 'very surprised' to 'not at all surprised'); b) if respondents 'felt more comfortable saying things in text messages than face-to-face ('yes' or 'no'); and c) in which medium (text messages, phone calls, or face-to face) respondents 'felt better able to express their true feelings'. In order to evaluate depth and breadth of text relationships, 15 questions from Parks & Floyd's (1996) Levels of Development in Online Relationships scale were used and all respondents have to answer these questions in relation to the person they text the most.

3. Results

3.1 The Sample

The sample had completed the online questionnaire between 5 February 2011 and 22 March 2011, with a total of 971 respondents to any one question. Incomplete cases (N=30) and those who do not possess a mobile phone (N=41) were not counted in the modelling stage. There were a total of 452 males and 519 females, with the age ranged from 19 to 25, with a mean of 22 years. Those who responded to the question (N=971), 70% (N=680) were of Malay nationality, 20% (N=194) were Malay Chinese, 8% (N=78) were Malay Indians and the remaining 2% came from other countries.

The preference for texting over talking was close. Of 971 respondents reporting a preference, 513 preferred talking—a group we called as 'talkers'; 458 respondents preferred texting—a group we termed as 'texters'. It is on this dichotomy that this paper will centre on.

3.2 How Texters and Talkers Use Their Mobiles

The difference between texters and talkers is theoretically interesting. The data revealed the distinction of these 2 groups in terms of formats of communication, what they got out of texting and their underlying incentives, and various outcome measures. It was reported that they are significant at the $p < .05$ level.

In terms of personality traits, texters were significantly more solitary and significantly more queasy than talkers. Significant differences were found between texters and talkers in the way they reported using their phones. Texters' phone bills were significantly less than talkers. They spent more money on texts but made less than half the number of voice calls. Texters claimed that they text too much; spend more time on editing and rewriting their text messages; make full use of the character limit; report that their texts were likely to be most of the limit when compared to talkers. They also delete texts frequently. No significant difference was found in the amount

of time texters and talkers have owned a mobile. This suggested that the preference for text or talk on the phone is not reconciled by length of ownership but by notable communication medium in their own right.

Thus, what stimulates texters and talkers use their phones in these ways? Two areas on the questionnaire, that is, a) the effect on relationships, and b) the real-self expression questions may solve this mystery. Texters reported that they had created a deeper relationship with the person they texted most, yet, there was no significant difference in their breadth of relationships between texters and talkers. Texters stated that texting had impacted their relationships with friends and family. They also declared that texting helped them create new relationships, brought a bonus to their existing relationships and influenced their social life more than talkers.

Regarding real-self expression, both texters and talkers favoured face-to-face (FTF) communication to convey themselves. Yet, over 25% of texters preferred texting, which was the fourfold of talkers who preferred texting. Moreover, talkers favoured voice calls. Texters claimed that their family members would be astonished to read their texts, proposing that texting creates a self-image which is different from the one familiar to family members and others who know them well. Texters declared that they feel more comfortable saying something via text than they did face-to-face. Hence texting gives texters a chance for more cozy social contact than it does for talkers.

No significant differences were found between the 2 groups in terms of the size of the phonebook or the number of people they text regularly. Texters sent more texts than talkers, with an average of around 7 texts in a text discourse compared to average of 5 texts for talkers.

3.3 The Social Ecology of Texting—Textmates and Text Circles

Texting can help texters create a special type of ‘text world’ with its own social ecology and pattern. It seems that texters can set up and sustain social interconnection with a group of textmates, creating ‘text circles’, regularly and continuously exchange messages. They frequently occupy themselves in prolonged ‘text conversations’, sending messages as many as possible in conversations than talkers. Texters were highly likely to text a special group and most of the time engaged themselves in simultaneous text conversations. The findings depicted that texters share interconnectivity within an intimate group of friends.

The questionnaire requested data relating to ‘textmate’. The findings showed that texters acquired a deeper relationship with the person they text most, despite the length of time, nor the time they had been texting this person, or saw this person FTF. However, the researcher is not sure of whether the talkers mirror this relationship with the person they talk most, nor can we feel comfortable of the causal direction of this relationship not until the data is fully scrutinized. Overall speaking, these findings propose that texting provides texters with an exceptional communicative relationship which cannot be replaced by calls.

4. Conclusion & Recommendation

The outcome of the data analysis indicated that there was an approximate equal split between texters and talkers. Texters used their phones differently compare to talkers in terms of underlying incentives and aspects of their personality. The majority of texters were females but this is because this sample contains a large number of females.

Those who prefer texting claim that they get something out of it that they cannot get from talking, that is, texting can help them develop existing and new relationships with the people they are texting. Therefore they are willing to spend more time on message composition, writing longer messages and edit them meticulously, and expressing their feelings in the messages that they may not say to their friends FTF.

One interesting notion pops out from the data—the ‘text circles’. Texters create a contiguous set of ‘textmates’ which they engross in regular, or even long-lasting contact. This echoes Thurlow’s (2003) study that the majority of text messages seem to have a social-relational or phatic function, as opposed to informative or practical functions. McKenna (2002) had similar findings. She declared that the lonely and socially anxious people use text to convey their real-self and use it to build up human relationships. It is because this personality trait prevents them from building up relationships in the ‘real’ world, thus, they use text to express and satisfy their needs.

To differentiate texters and talkers, texters tend to use texts to locate their real-self in the text messages and trust that texts can create an impact on human relationships. Texters are likely to have a smaller social network compared to those who do not, as one may expect if these people have problems in conventional FTF communication.

McKenna et al (2002) proposed that people shift from the internet to texting to create and sustain relationships in a comparatively safe environment. Texting allows visual anonymity and its asynchronous nature permits editing

and self-reflection. Texters feel more comfortable to express their 'real-self' through a text message avoiding the confrontation that may take place in a FTF or telephone conversation. Texting allows texters to have more control over their reactions with others by supplying them with visual anonymity and asynchronous communication. Hence, mobile becomes an identity, rather than a simple communication tool. Further research is needed to put forward these ideas.

Texting, to some people, instils a feeling of ever-lasting contact than voice calls. People can receive a text at any time and at any place and they can reply instantly. Texters, by texting messages, can create better interpersonal relationships and make people feel better linked and supported by their friends and family (Crabtree, Nathan, & Roberts, 2003). Tyler (2002) argued that with computer mediated communication (CMC), people feel that someone is always there, which is a big draw of texting to texters.

There are avenues by which the present study can move forward. For instance, instead of marketing mobiles as a 'one-size fits all' device, a better approach is to consider the distinctive groups of users and determine what each group would benefit in the mobile device. Second, a sociable interface can be designed to support the intercommunication between texters. The interface may be identical to Instant Messaging (IM) on the internet so that one can see clearly his 'textmates', who is available for texting, who is busy, and who is texting who. To conclude, a substantial number of people own a mobile phone but they are using their phones differently (Crabtree et al, 2003, p.1). The present study signalled that there are at least 2 types of users, that is, 'texters' and 'talkers', who are different in terms of personality and needs and in the manner they use their phones.

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