

When fingers do the talking: a study of text messaging

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Abstract

SMS or text messaging is an area of growth in the communications field. The studies described below consisted of a questionnaire and a diary study. The questionnaire was designed to examine texting activities in 565 users of the mobile phone. The diary study was carried out by 24 subjects over a period of 2 weeks. The findings suggest that text messaging is being used by a wide range of people for all kinds of activities and that for some people it is the preferred means of communication. These studies should prove interesting for those examining the use and impact of SMS.

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1. Introduction

One of the largest growth areas in communication is the Short Message Service (SMS) or text messaging as it is more popularly known. SMS grew out of what was initially a by product of the mobile phone industry. It was never expected to take-off in the way that it has and was taken seriously at first by the telecommunications companies (Agar, 2003). It was always seen as a very marginal means of communication; one set aside for the mobile phone companies to communicate with their customers. Since it was not the purpose for which mobile phones were developed, its rise has caught technologists, sociologists and others very much unawares. Some commentators argue that the rise in text messaging

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owes its popularity to the growth of cheap prepaid phones. Others suggest it is due to the flat rate for text messages which makes the messages cheaper under some circumstances. According to the Mobile Data Association (MDA) the total number of chargeable person-to-person text messages sent across the four UK GSM networks in 2002 totalled 16.8 billion (MDA, 2003a). In releasing the figures for 1st January 2003, Mike Short, Chairman of the MDA, said: “The large amount of text messages sent at New Year confirms that most people see text messaging as a warm, personal and cost-effective way to greet their friends and loved ones on special occasions. The use of text is also expanding into picture messaging as people explore the range of mobile messaging services that is becoming available.” (MDA, 2003b). The total figures for text messages sent in the UK in 2003 was 20.5 billion (Ananova, 2004).

In the face of such large and rapidly growing figures it is important to see these numbers in context. At present there is a 44% penetration of the 5–24 years age range. This rate is expected to grow (Wireless World Forum, 2004). Using the available figures and trends as a guideline for future development, it is estimated that SMS users aged between 5 and 24 years of age will increase their current 11.9 billion Euros spent on SMS to 17.2 billion by 2006 (Wireless World Forum, 2004). In other words, it could be that this is simply the tip of the iceberg and that SMS has much more profound growth to occur in the future as it discovers its full potential and its full market. In Finland, for example, text messaging came to the attention of the youth culture in 1998 and it is now very common for Finnish youth to pay more for text messages than for voice phone calls (Kasesniemi and Rautiainen, 2002). A similar story is emerging in the UK.

A study of the Instant Messaging, SMS, and Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) markets estimated that the market for SMS will continue to grow over the next 4-years as SMS finds a place for itself in revenue-generating applications—at the moment it is mostly used for interpersonal communications (Sillence and Baber, 2004). In 2003, the Mobile Data Association estimated that about 14% of mobile phone users sent business text messages (Kotadia, 2003). In December 2003, the MDA also released results from a telephone interview survey they had carried out on over 300 businesses. This showed that the majority of text messages were sent internally within the organisation and by over 35-year-olds (MDA, 2003c).

Norman argues that when a new product is developed, it does not fit immediately and naturally into people’s lives. He says that products have to be introduced gradually as people find a place for them (Norman, 1998). He adds that in the early phases of adoption, if the product can carry out a task that cannot be done any other way, then it will be used, no matter how difficult it is for users to operate it (Norman, 1998). It certainly needs to be said that at present, SMS is not a particularly easy technology to use. The mobile phone was designed with the preconceived ideas of the older technology of the landline. The first mobile phones resembled the roving equipment used in the home; they were large and bulky and greedy on power. The first mobiles were also unstable and mobile users’ most frequent words consisted of ‘Are you still there?’ Re-dialling was often necessary. In contrast, SMS being asynchronous proved much more reliable. It can be sent and received in the user’s own time and when the network is stable. A phone call is much more problematic in the sense that it requires two parts of the system to be operating perfectly and simultaneously, and for both recipient and caller to be available and free to talk at

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