2 TXT or not 2 TXT: College students' reports of when text messaging is social breach

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that those who engage in text messaging, particularly young individuals, tend to text in what many people may deem socially inappropriate or odd situations, such as while speaking face-to-face with someone else, while at work, while in the shower, or even while having sex. The present study investigates whether young texters are creating a new etiquette where these are socially acceptable practices or whether they deem these practices to be social breaches, but do it anyway. The data support the latter; college students report texting in many situations they did not deem socially acceptable. The importance of texting to this generation and future research directions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Cellular phones have become so popular that of the world's approximately 7 billion people, 6 billion have access, compared with the 4.5 billion who have access to operational toilets (United Nations News Centre, 2013). As of January 2014, 90% of adults in the United States had a cell phone, with nearly a third believing they could not live without them (Pew Research Center, 2014). Of course, mobile technology most often comes with the ability to send and receive text messages (Pew Research Center, 2011). Text messaging or texting has become a major part of daily communication, with many people reporting that they send and receive hundreds of texts in a single day (Harrison & Gilmore, 2012; Jin & Peña, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2012) and thousands per month (Crosswhite, Rice, & Asay, 2014).

Evidence from around the globe suggests this computer-mediated communication has permeated society, as many people greatly prefer text messaging versus cellular phone or land line calls as a method of communicating with others (Faulkner & Culwin, 2005; Harrison & Gilmore, 2012; Ishii, 2006; Skierkowski & Wood, 2012). Certainly, texting offers inexpensive immediacy and convenience of communication, but one wonders if this mode is changing the etiquette of social interactions. As an example, some individuals use text messaging to communicate with others in seemingly inopportune situations such as while attending religious services, having sex, or even to break up with romantic partners (Harrison & Gilmore, 2012). The present study investigates college students' use of text messaging in various social situations to determine whether they consider such actions socially appropriate or think such actions are indeed social breaches.

2. Background

There are many beneficial reasons why text messaging has become an extremely popular means of communication, particularly to young people. Chen and Katz (2009) report that college students believe mobile phones, including texting, are necessary for keeping in contact with family

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members in order to ensure role fulfillment and to receive emotional and social support; students even teach their parents how to text so they can stay in touch. Crosswhite et al. (2014) also document that young adults text with family members to make plans or simply to converse. Similarly, Harrison and Gilmore (2012) show that college students feel text messaging is important for feeling socially connected, such as communicating with friends, significant others, and family members, and Drouin and Landgraff (2012) stress that texting and sexting are common and important to college students in their romantic relationships. Indeed, Reid and Reid (2004, 2007) posit that even those who are lonely or socially anxious can create productive interpersonal relationships via text messaging.

In addition to interpersonal use, text messaging can be a useful systemic and administrative tool. It is used effectively for behavioral change and disease management, with many therapists and health-related agencies using text messages to support clients. Notably, this success is observed across age, ethnicity, and nationality (Cole-Lewis & Kershaw, 2010). Furthermore, through various cellular carriers, the US government offers Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA), which are text messages conveying natural or human-made disasters or amber alerts (CTIA-The Wireless Association, 2013). Many college campuses also offer emergency alerts via text messages among other safety warning technologies (Choney, 2010). These examples illustrate the positive aspects of texting; nonetheless, as with any technology, with texting use likely comes the potential for misuse.

Evidence suggests there is a downside to text messaging. For instance, the behavior of many texters can become a compulsion or addiction (Igarashi & Yoshida, 2003; Lu, Katoh, Chen, Nagata, & Kitamura, 2014; Sultan, 2014). Pew Research Center, 2014 finds that nearly half of cell phone owners sleep with their phones next to them because they are afraid they might miss text messages or calls, and two-thirds of cell owners report frequently checking their phones for messages, even in the absence of message notification (rings, vibrations). Additionally, Sultan (2014) documents that the majority of users of certain texting applications (apps) admit they are or have concerns they are addicted to the technology.

For many, texting is so important that the dangers of participating in text messaging in some situations go unrealized or ignored. Although numerous studies have shown the dangers of distraction by text messaging while driving (Hosking, Young, & Regan, 2009), the behavior persists. Harrison (2011) shows that even though college students agree that texting and driving is dangerous and should be illegal, 91.2% admit to texting while driving anyway. Similarly, Atchley, Atwood, and Boulton (2011) report that 92% of their sample had read a text, 81% had replied to, and 70% had sent a text while driving, even though they acknowledge these behaviors are very dangerous.

In addition to the physical danger described above, evidence suggests that text messaging can place one in social danger. Texting is associated with social negativity, such as ostracism, bullying, fighting, distracting or harassing others, and even infidelity (Harrison & Gilmore, 2012; Smith & Williams, 2004; Short & McMurray, 2009;

Thomee, Eklof, Gustafson, Nilsson, & Hagberg, 2007). Notably, Mahatanankoon and O'Sullivan (2008) suggest that texting facilitates self-esteem and an internal locus of control, positively reinforcing texting behavior, likely making it more acceptable to engage in during various situations—even negative ones.

Younger people tend to be more immersed in and tolerant of texting behaviors (Pew Research Center, 2014), possibly because they were reared with mobile communication as part of their culture (Campbell, 2006). News reports indicate that the first text message was sent/received in 1992 (ABC News, 2012), and text messaging has increased in popularity exponentially since then, which means those in college as of this writing would likely not remember a social life absent of texting. To wit, Thurlow (2003) labels these individuals as generation text.

Ling (2010) speculates that age may dictate the social acceptability of texting and that texting may be socially expected in younger cohorts, even in seemingly odd situations. Harrison and Gilmore (2012) address this point by documenting self-reports of the texting habits of colleges students, focusing on the social contexts of text message use. They show that college students, mean age 22.7 (SD = 5.7), use text messaging in benign situations and circumstances, such as for romance and staying socially connected. However, many people also use texting in situations and circumstances that people may consider a breach of social etiquette. For example, 30% say they have texted while in the shower, 33% say they have texted during a religious service, and 13% say they have texted while they were having sex. Further, 85% report texting while they were going to the bathroom. With respect to interpersonal situations, 93% say they have texted someone while they were having an in-person conversation with someone else; 46% say they texted someone they were romantically interested in while they were on a date with someone else, and 19% say they have used texting as a tool for infidelity. Additionally, some used texting for maleficence, with 73% report using texts for fights, and 53% report using texts to insult someone. Further, participants did engage in sexting, with 65% admitting to sending salacious texts. Although Harrison and Gilmore note text use in these situations, they do not ascertain whether or not participants thought messaging in these situations was or was not socially acceptable.

Nonetheless, it appears young people use texting in situations that breach what many may label proper social etiquette. But what if traditional culture has changed? Cohen (2009) suggests that the behaviors associated with mobile communication and texting could be considered a new culture. So, is texting while in the shower, or during sex, or while going to the bathroom the new normal? Whereas the landscape of our social correctness may have changed, it is also possible that it has not, and that young people are going to text in various, seemingly odd social scenarios, knowing it is a social breach. . .but are doing it anyway. The present study investigates this phenomenon.

3. Method

All procedures were approved by the local Institutional Review Board. Participants were 154 college students from