



Texting among United States young adults: An exploratory study on texting and its use within families



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ABSTRACT

The current study examines general text messaging tendencies, patterns of and reasons for texting family members, and the impact of texting on familial relationships among a young U.S. adult sample. Participants were recruited through Facebook; they then completed an online questionnaire. Data from 127 young adults (men: 38; women: 87; unidentified: 2) are analyzed and compared by gender. Findings suggest that young adults text at high rates per month. Participants generally report a prompt response to texts and their ability to honestly express feelings within these messages. Results also suggest participants text family members for a variety of reasons, such as to convey information, plan activities, and engage in general conversation. Distinct gender differences, however, are evident regarding who men and women text as well as texting's effects on familial relationships. Overall, these findings expand researchers' understanding of texting in general and its impact within the family.

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1. Introduction

Text messaging has increased in popularity across the world (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). In 2011, 2.304 trillion texts were sent or received in the U.S. alone, indicating a 12% increase in texting since 2010 (CTIA: The Wireless Association, 2012). Texting to family and friends outpaced traditional voice calling in 2008 with individuals texting more than twice as often as voice calling (CellSigns, 2008). University students ages 18–24 are one of the largest cohorts of texters, second only to teenagers (Axelsson, 2010; Faulkner & Culwin, 2005; Ishii, 2006; Lenhart, 2010;

Lenhart et al., 2010; Ling, 2010; Ling & Yttri, 2006), and across cultures, young adult women text more often than men (Faulkner & Culwin, 2005; Ishii, 2006; Ling & Yttri, 2006).

While international data regarding texting is available, this study limits its range to data obtained from U.S. young adults. General texting tendencies, reasons for texting family members, and the impact of texting on relationships between young adults and family members lend themselves to inquiry. Much of the existing data regarding texting among U.S. young adults is obtained from university students, suggesting a possible lack of generalizability to young adults outside this academic setting. The purpose of this exploratory study, therefore, is to address the limitations among a broad sample of U.S. young adults. Given the differences in texting tendencies between men and women outside the U.S., this study also examines gender patterns among respondents.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Research across cultures

Young adults across many cultures text with friends and family for several reasons. Young adults in Australia, Canada, Sweden, and the U.K., for example, text to convey or obtain information, coordinate or plan activities, greet one another, convey intimacy, deepen or maintain relationships, send jokes, send and receive pictures, maintain contact, fill unoccupied time, convey the sender's thoughts of the recipient, apologize, provide emotional support, ask questions, issue reminders, reach out when feeling bored, and share exciting events (Axelsson, 2010; Faulkner & Culwin, 2005; Harley, Winn, Pemberton, & Wilcox, 2007; Horstmanshof & Power, 2005; Quan-Haase, 2007; Rettie, 2009; Thurlow, 2003). Igarashi, Takai, and Yoshida (2005) find that texting increases intimacy and connectivity among Japanese young adults and their friends; furthermore, texting frequency and intimacy increase over time, particularly among women. Australian young adults view texting as a way to maintain and enhance intimate relationships and other connections among friends and significant others (Horstmanshof & Power, 2005). Evidence across cultures therefore suggests that texting increases connectivity and helps to maintain relationships among friends and significant others. Other research conducted across cultures, however, yields mixed evidence regarding the role of texting in maintaining relationships among young adults. Reid and Reid (2007) dispute the notion of texting as an intimate form of communication, claiming that lonely young U.K. and U.S. young adults text as a last resort because they do not believe texting increases intimacy.

2.2. Research specific to the U.S.

Research regarding the impact of texting on relationships among U.S. young adults also offers mixed results. Pettigrew (2009) finds texting enhances interpersonal connections between individuals, regardless of age or gender. Specifically, romantically involved couples feel texting enlivens and enriches their relationships, facilitating the expression of romantic emotions. Non-romantic pairs see texting as a way to share experiences, just say "hi," or otherwise maintain connections with each other. More recently, Harrison and Gilmore (2012) find that college students claim texting their family, significant others and their social circle helps them remain connected. The authors do, however, find no association between texting and feelings of love among college students. Similarly, Jin and Pena (2010) find no association between texting and the level of love or attachment among U.S. young adults in romantic relationships.

2.3. The Circumplex Model

The Circumplex Model provides a theoretical rationale for the impact of texting on family relationships. The model indicates that communication is crucial to familial cohesion and flexibility (Olson, 1993), cohesion defined as "the

emotional bonding that family members have toward one another" and flexibility as the "amount of change in its leadership, role relationships, and relationship rules" (Olson, 1993, pp. 105–107). Healthy families have balanced levels of cohesion and flexibility, maintaining and bolstering their relationships through communication. Past research demonstrates that modern forms of communication such as email and cell phones enhance family ties in combination with face-to-face interactions (Stern & Messer, 2009). The impact texting exerts on family relationships is, unfortunately, not assessed, although Stern and Messer (2009) recognize the need to do so and recommend that future research examine how texting impacts the family.

3. The current study

Variables among previous research studies limit the generalizability of previous findings among a general U.S. young adult sample. First, the research conducted by Smith (2010) and Pettigrew (2009) includes adults ages 24 and over, so these finding may not generalize to younger adults. Second, past research on young adults relies upon data obtained from university students in university settings (Harrison & Gilmore, 2012). Third, the majority of research that explores the role of texting in increasing or maintaining relationships examines only patterns among friends and significant others rather than family members (Horstmanshof & Power, 2005; Igarashi et al., 2005; Jin & Pena, 2010). Pettigrew (2009) is the only study that includes familial pairs such as parent–child and sibling relationships, but the results do not include a discussion of specific family relationships. Similarly, Harrison and Gilmore (2012) ask a few questions regarding the importance of texting to stay connected with family, yet neither the family nor the impact of texting on family relationships is the focus of the study. Fourth, unlike research conducted across cultures, few U.S. studies have examined reasons for texting.

Due to the limited research on texting within the U.S., much remains unknown about young U.S. adults' texting patterns and their generalizability across populations. For example, little is known about U.S. young adults' general texting behaviors, including patterns of and reasons for texting family members. Only limited information discloses whether texting has any impact on the connectivity level between U.S. young adults and their families or whether texting fortifies family relationships. In light of these gaps in the literature, the current study considers four questions among a U.S. young adult sample outside the university setting: (1) What are the general texting tendencies among young adults? (2) What are the familial texting patterns and reasons young adults text family members? (3) What impact does texting have on young adults' familial relationships? And finally, because evidence across cultures suggests differences by gender (Aponte, 2009; Lee, Meszaros, & Colvin, 2009). (4) What role does gender play in the responses?

4. Methods

To avoid the constrictions of collecting data exclusively from university students, we recruited young adult

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