



## Research Report

Can texting be used to improve romantic relationships?—The effects of sending positive text messages on relationship satisfaction <sup>☆</sup>Shanhong Luo <sup>\*</sup>, Shelley Tuney

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## ABSTRACT

Texting has become a highly popular communication tool in college students. The current studies were designed to use texting to promote positive communication between romantic partners with the hope to enhance relationship satisfaction. In two studies, the authors experimentally manipulated the content of the first messages that participants sent out to their romantic partner everyday for two weeks. Participants' satisfaction was assessed at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the study. The partners, who were unaware of their partner's involvement in the study, were contacted at the end of the study and reported their satisfaction. The experimental conditions in Study 1 did not show statistically significant differences in their relationship happiness trajectory over the two weeks from the control condition, possibly due to the fact that participants sent out scripted texts provided by the researchers. In Study 2 the experimental groups wrote their own texts following instructions provided by the researchers. All experimental conditions showed a significantly different satisfaction trajectory compared to the control condition. However, partner satisfaction did not respond to the texting manipulation in either study.

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## 1. Introduction

Communication is critical to maintaining a close relationship. Good communication is one of the five key characteristics shared by happy couples (e.g., Olson & DeFraim, 2000). Communication difficulty is also among the top reasons that people report have caused their divorce (e.g., Amato & Booth, 2001). How to promote positive and constructive communications and avoid dysfunctional communications in relationships has drawn a lot of research attention in the last few decades. The current studies took a positive psychology approach and aimed to design an efficient method to engage college student couples in positive relationship communication by taking advantage of the fact that texting has become a mainstream channel of communication among college students (e.g., Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, & Krause, 2008). It was

our hope that increasing positive (texting) communication would improve (or at least help maintain) the quality of the relationship.

## 1.1. Positive psychology and romantic relationships

In recent years the theories and research of positive psychology began to have a strong impact on the way relationship researchers conceptualize and study romantic relationships (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2010; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Segrin, 2006). Relationship researchers begin to examine what personal characteristics and relationship processes lead to more happy, satisfying, and fulfilling relationships in addition to looking for remedies for a failing relationship. For example, recent positive relationship research has shown that mindfulness has a reliable positive correlation with relationship satisfaction, possibly through its strong association with several relationship-maintenance processes such as self-control and accommodation—the ability to constructively address relationship issues with less dramatic emotional responses (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007). Gratitude has been identified as another important positive trait as well as a positive process. Both reported self gratitude (i.e., the extent to which one was grateful towards the partner) and perceived partner gratitude (how grateful one felt one's partner was) are associated with higher relationship satisfaction, whereas indebtedness, an

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obligated feeling to repay someone due to a prior benefit from him or her, is not associated with relationship satisfaction (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010). Moreover, a recent study comparing felt and expressed gratitude indicated that while individuals' felt and expressed gratitude both significantly related to their own marital satisfaction, only their felt gratitude predicted the spouse's satisfaction and their expressed gratitude did not (Gordon, Arnette, & Smith, 2011).

More generally, positive emotion expression and communication, which usually involve mindfulness and gratitude, have been found to be strongly associated with better relationship functioning. For example, John Gottman and colleagues' longitudinal research on newlywed couples indicated that for couples who were less affectionate and interested in their partners, and displayed more negative affect in their interactions, such as anger, complaint, criticism, and defensiveness, they reported lower marital satisfaction, were more likely to have either considered separation/divorce or had actually separated/divorced, and even reported poorer physical health years later, compared to couples who displayed more positive affect including agreement and humor in their interactions (e.g., Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Other studies have shown that positive emotion expression is an important element of relationship intimacy (Mirgain & Cordova, 2007) and a robust predictor of relationship satisfaction (e.g., Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000) and relationship stability (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006).

### 1.2. Texting and romantic relationships

With the expansion of communication technologies over the years, non-face-to-face communication has become increasingly popular and important. For instance, text messaging, or texting, the act of typing and sending a brief, electronic message between two or more mobile phones or fixed or portable devices over a phone network, is apparently a mainstream method of communication. According to the results of a nationally representative sample reported in *Pew Internet and American Life Project (2011)*, approximately 83% of American adults own cell phones and three-quarters of them (73%) send and receive text messages. Moreover, 31% of text message users prefer texting to voice calls. Young adults are by far the most avid texters: cell owners between the ages of 18 and 24 exchange an average of 109.5 messages on any given day. With this recent texting epidemic, it is reasonable to suspect that texting as a major way of communication should have a significant impact on romantic relationships.

However, so far the studies examining effects of texting on relationships have provided somewhat ambiguous results. For example, whereas there is evidence that texting, particularly over-reliance on texting in couple communication, can be detrimental to romantic relationships (e.g., Luo, 2014), other studies have found that texting had no strong association with relationship outcomes (e.g., Jin & Peña, 2010). Furthermore, findings of some studies indicate that texting seems to have differential effects on relationships depending on the group of users. For example, a study focusing on adolescents reported that using texting and instant messaging did not necessarily create more ties for these young people, nor did it weaken the connections they already had, but rather they used texting to create a distinct social world and there was little overlap between technology-facilitated and offline social networks (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006). Yet another study of a college sample showed that increased mobile phone use had contradictory consequences for their friendships: using mobile phones to call and text their friends increased college students' expectations of relationship maintenance through mobile phones, which positively predicted both dependence (which increased

satisfaction) and overdependence on the relationship (which decreased satisfaction) (Hall & Baym, 2012).

Finally, there has been encouraging evidence suggesting that texting may complement traditional face-to-face communication and benefit the relationship. For example, when interviewed about their feelings of connectedness via texting, most people had something positive to report about texting, such as texting allowed them to stay connected to their partner and yet also maintain autonomy at the same time, texting was more private and perpetual than talking on the phone, and in general, texting made the relationship more enjoyable and closer (Pettigrew, 2009). Other self-report studies further confirmed that texting particularly benefits young, single, and socially anxious mobile phone users, enabling them to enrich their personal relationships in ways that might otherwise be denied to them (Reid & Reid, 2010). Overall, these studies have shown promise that texting can bring about positive outcomes in close relationships.

### 1.3. The current studies: Texting as a positive communication tool in romantic relationships

In light of the recent exciting findings in positive relationship research, particularly the ones on positive expressions and communication, and the realization that texting is a major part of young adults' social lives, we believe that texting can be used as a positive tool to promote better relationship outcomes if we give a mindful, positive tuning to the content of the text. College relationships are notoriously known for being ephemeral (e.g., Arriaga, 2001). If our manipulation was successful, this could help our young adults learn to communicate and develop their relationship in a healthy way, and potentially have a more profound, long-lasting effect on future relationships. This research is not only important for practical reasons, but also for theoretical reasons: previous texting studies have examined effects of texting by focusing on the frequency of texting, and little research has examined the content of texting. To our knowledge, no study has attempted to manipulate the text content in the context of romantic relationships. The current studies were the first to experimentally test effects of text content on relationships. Although there has not been prior research on this specific topic, we hypothesize that including positive content in text messages to the partner would bring about positive outcomes in the relationship primarily based on the encouraging effects of positive communication in relationships (e.g., Mirgain & Cordova, 2007). To accomplish this, we conducted two studies that in which we manipulated the content of text messages that participants sent to their romantic partner and followed them up over the course of two weeks. Study 2 was designed to overcome a few major limitations we identified in Study 1.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Introduction

We designed a three-condition experiment in Study 1: the relationship-specific positive texting (RSPT) condition, the general positive texting (GPT) condition, and the control condition. For RSPT and GPT conditions, we manipulated the content of the first text that participants sent to their partner each day over the course of two weeks by having them to send a scripted text we provided for them. The control group was simply asked to keep track of the number of texts that were exchanged between the couple. We then compared participants' relationship satisfaction across the three conditions at the initial session, week 1, and week 2. Partners, who were unaware of the true purpose of this study, were invited

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