



Social media, texting, and personality: A test of the shallowing hypothesis



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ABSTRACT

The “shallowing hypothesis” suggests that recent media technologies have led to a dramatic decline in ordinary daily reflective thought. According to this hypothesis, certain types of social media (e.g., texting and Facebook) promote rapid, shallow thought that can result in cognitive and moral “shallowness” if used too frequently. The purpose of this study was to test key claims made by the shallowing hypothesis, while simultaneously advancing our general knowledge regarding the effects of social media usage. The relationships between texting frequency, social media usage, the Big Five personality traits, reflectiveness, and moral shallowness were examined in undergraduate students at a Canadian university ($N = 149$). Participants completed an online questionnaire comprised of five measures that assessed their social media and texting behavior, use of reflective thought, life goals, personality dimensions, and demographic characteristics. Correlates of both texting frequency and social media usage were consistent with the shallowing hypothesis and previous literature; participants who frequently texted or used social media were less likely to engage in reflective thought and placed less importance on moral life goals.

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1. Introduction

In our modern society, cell phones are ubiquitous. While the Internet may be responsible for the advent of the Digital Age, cell phones have certainly ensured its prevalence. According to the 2012 Cell Phone Consumer Attitudes Study (Quorus Consulting Group Inc., 2012), about 79% of smartphone users who have downloaded apps use applications to link them to social networks, instant messaging (IM), or blogs. Not only has the usage of these apps increased significantly in recent years, it has also been observed that the popularity of these apps is negatively correlated with the age of smartphone users. Specifically, apps that link to social networks, IM, and blogs are used by about 97% of smartphone users between the ages of 18 to 24 (Quorus Consulting Group Inc., 2012). Due to the inherent mobile nature of these devices, men and women of all ages are able to communicate with one another and access social media anytime and anywhere; however, this ease and frequency of use may have deleterious consequences for society in the long run.

1.1. The shallowing hypothesis

Technology and culture critic Nicholas Carr has hypothesized one such consequence in his Pulitzer Prize nominated bestseller *The Shallows* (2010). According to Carr, recent media technologies featuring always-connected internet access, always-on portable entertainment

media, and always-in-touch electronic social media have led to a dramatic decline in ordinary daily reflective thought (i.e., the process of analyzing and making judgments about what has happened). In what has come to be known as the “shallowing hypothesis,” Carr proposes that the frequent use of ultra-brief social media (i.e., media allowing for social interaction and ultra-brief messages such as texts and tweets) promotes rapid and relatively shallow thought and is associated with cognitive and moral shallowness. In other words, frequent usage of this type of media will be associated with a decline in the use of reflective thought, a decrease in importance placed on life goals related to morality and aesthetics, and an increase in importance placed on life goals related to hedonism and image. Yet despite these potentially serious predictions and the current pervasiveness of cell phones and social media apps, very few studies have attempted to provide direct empirical evaluations of the claims made by the shallowing hypothesis.

A study conducted at the University of Winnipeg by Trapnell and Sinclair (2013) investigated two of the key claims of the shallowing hypothesis; namely, (1) that the frequent use of text-messaging and other ultra-brief forms of electronic communication was associated with lower typical levels of reflective thought, and (2) that tendencies to engage in reflective thought were in decline among the young. After administering a battery of online tests to 2314 psychology students across three annual mass testing samples, they found several correlations that were surprisingly consistent with the shallowing hypothesis; however, the strength of these correlations varied. They concluded that self-reported texting frequencies were consistently and weakly correlated with traits, goals, and attitudes that were characteristic of individuals with low interest and engagement in reflective thought. Furthermore, they discovered that the most significant negative correlates of texting frequency were

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trait reflectiveness, openness to experience, and the three moral life goals: *I want to be a moral human being*; *I want to live my life with genuine integrity*; and *I want to lead an ethical, principled life*. Finally, they presented evidence of a significant linear decline in mean levels of trait reflectiveness and openness to experience among first year introductory psychology students over the previous four years. Since openness to experience was the only Big Five domain to show a significant downward trend, they suggested that a relationship existed between it and trait reflectiveness but acknowledged that it may be unrelated to recent technological changes. The present study was designed to replicate Trapnell and Sinclair's findings, as well as to extend their research by investigating the claims made by the shallowing hypothesis with respect to social media usage.

1.2. Personality factors

In contrast to the relatively little attention given to reflective thought and moral shallowness, research on the effects of personality in relation to texting frequency and social media usage has been quite common. Ehrenberg, Jukes, White, and Walsh (2008) examined the role of personality and self-esteem in university students' use of communication technologies (e.g., making or receiving phone calls, sending or receiving text messages, and using instant messaging). Participants ($N = 200$) reported their average time spent utilizing communication technologies and then completed a 60-item personality inventory as well as a 25-item self-esteem inventory. Multiple regression analyses indicated that individuals who scored high in either extraversion or neuroticism were the most likely to text; the former due to their desire for social interaction and the latter because the medium granted them more time to review and edit their message content.

Correa, Hinsley, and Zúñiga (2010) also examined the relationship between personality traits and social media usage. Participants ($N = 959$) were asked to complete an online survey assessing personality traits, life satisfaction, and socio-demographic characteristics. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis suggested that individuals were more likely to use social media if they self-reported to be anxious and worrisome, innovative and creative, or extraverted; however, these findings differed by age and gender. Extraversion was a stronger predictor of social media use among younger participants and while extraverted men and women were both more likely to use social media, men were more likely to be regular users if they had a greater degree of emotional stability. This relationship between social media usage and emotional stability was not present among the female participants.

Ross et al. (2009) examined the influence of personality variables on certain aspects of Facebook use. Their undergraduate student participants ($N = 97$) were asked to complete a number of online questionnaires assessing computer mediated communication (CMC) competence, personality traits, and three items concerned with (1) basic use of Facebook, (2) attitudes associated with Facebook, and (3) the posting of personally-identifying information on Facebook. They found that individuals who scored high on extraversion belonged to more Facebook groups but did not have a significantly larger number of friends. They concluded that extraverts utilized Facebook as a social tool but not as an alternative to offline social activities or other forms of CMC (e.g., texting) that granted them the ability for instant communication and feedback.

1.3. The current study

Based on the results of these previous studies, the present study was designed to test one assertion of the shallowing hypothesis, that extensive use of ultra-brief social media is associated with declines in reflective thought and increases in moral shallowness. Relationships among texting frequency, personality traits, social media usage, reflective thinking, and moral shallowness were examined in the context of the

shallowing hypothesis and compared with the findings of previous studies. The present study sought to explore the following hypotheses:

H1. Texting frequency will be positively associated with extraversion and neuroticism and negatively associated with reflective thought.

H2. Texting frequency will be negatively associated with life goals in the morality domain.

H3. Life goals reflecting shallowness will significantly predict unique variance in texting frequency, beyond what is explained by the personality variables.

H4. Social media usage will be positively associated with both extraversion and openness to experience but will be negatively associated with neuroticism and reflective thought.

H5. Social media usage will be negatively associated with life goals in the morality domain.

H6. Life goals reflecting shallowness will significantly predict unique variance in social media usage, beyond what is explained by the personality variables.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 149 undergraduate students (129 females, 19 males, and 1 transgender) who were registered in the Psychology participant pool of a medium-sized Canadian university and owned a cell phone with texting capabilities. Participants were compensated for their time by receiving .5 bonus points towards an eligible course. All participants were treated according to the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association and the Canadian Psychological Association.

2.2. Measures

Participants who accessed the online survey were presented with the following five measures, in the order listed below. Please see supplementary tables available online for descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for each of the scale measures.

2.2.1. Texting and social media use

Average text frequency (i.e., the average number of text messages they send and receive each week) and peak text frequency (i.e., the number of text messages they send or receive on their highest use day of the month) were assessed. Social media usage was determined using participants' frequency (i.e., the number of times that they visit the website) and duration (i.e., the amount of time they spend on the website during a typical visit) of use of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram sites. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were the only frequently used forms of social media where the majority of participants spent less than ten minutes on the website during each visit.

2.2.2. Big Five Inventory (BFI)

The 44-item BFI (John & Srivastava, 1999) assessed the levels of five different personality dimensions: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Each item presented participants with a short trait-descriptive phrase to be rated on a 5-point scale ranging from disagree strongly (1) to agree strongly (5). BFI subscales showed alphas of .61 to .81.

2.2.3. Life goals inventory

This measure was a modified version of the one used by Trapnell and Sinclair (2013); it contained 58 items assessing various life goals across

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