Mobile Phone Use Enhances Social Connectedness

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the literature on social connectedness and mobile phone messaging, including regular SMS texting. SMS stands for short message service, the international term for texting. As texting (a common American term for SMS) and cross-platform mobile instant messaging have gained a prominent place in the social and communication spheres, professionals from many disciplines have drawn their attention to it by implementing or investigating the use of mobile messaging in their fields (Chayko, 2007; Katz, 2008; Ling, 2004; Matsuda, 2005; Schroeder, 2005). The findings of these studies collates around a connectedness to people, nurturing and/or maintaining a sense of belonging, as well as the ability to now convert one's physical network into a mobile portable community. These findings are still applicable and transferable to cross-platform mobile messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Kakao, Line, WeChat and Kik. The findings are also relevant for any migration of use from personal messaging to institutional and wide scale macro related mobile messaging like recent crowdsourcing and revolutionary moments in northern Africa during the Spring of 2011 (Potts, 2011).

Although the mobile phone is still most often used for personal communication, it is also powerful in creating and facilitating social connectedness that can lead to change, as we learned from the macro level impact of mobile messaging during the Egyptian revolution and a number of other Arab Spring movements. Social connectedness is a concept used by social theorists and psychologists to explain the occurrence, value, quantity, and regularity of exchanges we have with people in our social network of family, friends, and acquaintances. These connections can be fostered in the physical realm of life as well as in virtual spaces. The notion of social connectedness has often been used to characterize degrees of interpersonal trust, attachment security, social competency, and a sense of belonging (Lee & Robbins, 1995). While we know that the mobile phone is a social device, it also offers video and photography on-the-go so that the mobile phone can now, as we so often see, be re-purposed for digital activism, human agency and mobile journalism in the palm of one's hand. The mobile phone does not just connect people to individuals they know; it connects them to a cause. Lessons abound from the south to the north of Africa, Asia, the United States of America (USA), and the rest of the world.

The literature examined in this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section looks at the relationship between everyday mobile messaging from SMS/texting (these terms will be used interchangeably) and social connectedness as well as studies in which people use texting as a means of cultivating and maintaining social relations. This part of the chapter will delve into the relevance of social connectedness for person-to-person texting, levels of familiarity and the need for reciprocity or acknowledgement of message receipt. The second section includes a review of research studies and their methodologies on organizational texting as well as organizational projects that have utilized texting for a variety of service purposes. These projects are housed within non-profits, universities, and other public sector institutions across the domains of health,

education, and media. The re-purposing focus will probe why or how organizational texting is similar or different from person-to-person texting and how those similarities or differences might influence the texting communication. The third section speaks to the macro level connectedness as fostered by mobile phone messaging as a lead up to and as a part of people connecting to a cause.

The relevance of this chapter is set amidst a socio-political spectrum which has created policies that seek to regulate mobile texting, but has also cultivated research pioneers in the field and champions with divergent thinking to operate creatively within the system (Nielsen & Webb, 2011). For various reasons, text messaging has been banned for all drivers in twenty states and in the District of Columbia (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2010; McEvoy et al., 2005). Additionally, some teachers in school districts across the US are concerned that texting disrupts classes and could potentially have detrimental effects on learner grades and grammar skills (Evans, 2009; Ring, 2008; Dansieh, 2011; Omar & Miah, 2013). At the same time, other schools are embracing the idea of using SMS/texting as a teaching and learning tool (Albers, 2009; Nielsen, 2011; Kolb, 2009). Among the earliest researchers examining the topic of social connectedness via mobile communication were Leysia Palen in 2002 at University of Colorado Boulder, USA, Prof. Ruth Rettie in 2003 from Kingston University in the UK, Profs. Wei and Lo in 2003 of University of South Carolina, USA and National Chengchi University Tapei, respectively. Leading experts in this relatively young area of study are Field Professor James E. Katz (2008, 2014) previously from Rutgers University and now at Boston University, Prof. Rich Ling (2007) University of Copenhagen, Denmark and Mimi Ito, Professor in Residence at the University of California, Irvine, USA. Other researchers of note in this burgeoning discipline are Daisuke Okabe from Japan's Keio University and Misa Matsuda an Assistant Professor at Chuo University in Tokyo, Japan. The current leading

scholars in this area are Prof. Mary Chayko (2000) at Rutgers University, Dr. Dominic Mentor (2011) from Teachers College, Columbia University and Dr. Heather Horst, Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Digital Ethnography Research Centre in the School of Media and Communication at (2000) at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

These researchers have documented the various ways mobile texting has revolutionized how people operate within their social networks and how this electronic communication method offers social connectedness while on-the-go by means of the mobile phone. This chapter specifically focuses on the broad domains of practice, in terms of everyday mobile messaging and SMS texting that foster social connectedness, as well as how formal organizations and educational institutions have leveraged mobile messaging.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND CURRENT KNOWLEDGE

Mobile messaging has exploded and fragmented from simple device SMS texting to a plethora of wireless access protocol (WAP) mobile messaging services, many of which are device agnostic, meaning they can be installed and used on many different types of mobile phone operating systems. While fragmented in service provider offerings with different emoticons and features ranging from voice notes to time set message deletion, the ability to communicate with others in this format still serves powerful senses of connectedness. Ling (2004, 2008) states that the mobile phone offers Norwegian teen users accessibility and connectedness to others within their friendship network. All around and unrestricted to just youth, people are opting to send mobile birthday, valentines, Gregorian and/or Chinese New Year messages. Although Eid and Christmas show a peak in mobile messaging at particular times of the

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