

Texting: Its Uses, Misuses, and Effects

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INTRODUCTION

Text messaging or texting is defined as a form of communication that involves sending and receiving written or text-based messages through a mobile device. Texting developed from the short message service (SMS) technology pioneered in the 1980s by a team of engineers from the European Telecommunication Standards Institute's (ETSI) Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) group. This group was tasked with developing the European standard for the second-generation (2G) digital cellular networks (Taylor & Vincent, 2005; Trosby, 2004; Hillebrand, 2010). Eventually, SMS was developed into a commercial service, allowing mobile phone users to send and receive text messages up to 160 characters in length. Though initially offered free of charge, SMS quickly became a paid service while remaining relatively inexpensive when compared to mobile voice calls.

This article aims to synthesize the abundance of research aimed at understanding the uses and effects of texting on human behavior, with a particular emphasis on seven areas in which the use of texting has become controversial—education and learning, health, language and literacy, privacy and security, social relationships, text-bullying, and traffic safety. Here, texting is used to refer exclusively to text-based communication via SMS; it excludes multi-media messaging service (MMS), which is considered “an extension” of SMS (Le Bodic, 2005) and “the next generation of asynchronous mobile messaging” (Ling, Julsrud, & Yttri, 2005). In addition, the term “misuse of the technology” (or technology misuse) refers to the use of technology, in this case texting, that is excessive or problematic and to the detriment of

the user, the recipient, those around them and/or third parties that are not involved in the communication exchange but who may be affected by it (e.g., SMS used to spread rumors about a person as an example of text-bullying).

OVERVIEW

The effects of texting on human communication are many and varied. Mobile phones afford us the ability to stay connected, to be reached and to reach others from anywhere at any time. The ease, accessibility, and brevity of texting compared to other forms of communication make it ideal for quick exchanges, especially when expediency and efficiency are valued most. However, those same qualities paired with the ubiquity of mobile phones make users prone to misuse the technology (Bianchi & Phillips, 2005). In addition, the pressure of being “always on” (Baron, 2008) has led to its share of negative effects at both the individual and societal level (Baron, 2008; Harper, 2010; Ling, 2004, 2008, 2012; Rosen, 2012; Turkle, 2011). In recent years, public communication campaigns emphasizing the dangers of texting while driving have dominated the media conversation and triggered public opinion and policy debates regarding the use of the technology. Texting while driving has been classified as “a risk to public safety” and a “misuse of the technology” (Pascual-Ferrá, Liu, & Beatty, 2012) and has become one of the issues requiring immediate policy attention in countries around the world (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011; Sloane, 2014; World Health Organization, 2011). As a result, there is growing attention towards the effects of the misuse of texting by pedestrians and cyclists as well. The

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impact of the misuse of texting on traffic safety, however, is just one of several areas of concern for communication researchers and scholars in other disciplines. Other areas of concern include but are not limited to the effects of the misuse of texting on education and academic achievement, student and adult literacy, health and wellness, privacy and security, workplace productivity, and family and social life, among others. Notwithstanding these concerns, some of which are valid, there are a myriad of novel and positive uses of SMS in the areas of education, health, marketing, political communication, and increased access for people with disabilities and the elderly, among others, that practitioners and researchers have just started to tap into and that counterbalance the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of texting in the media (D.E. Baron, 2009; Crystal, 2008; Tagg, 2012; Wood, Kemp, & Plester, 2014). Rather than presenting a threat to society, these new uses of SMS have opened the door to further research regarding its potential as a medium for social change.

CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

While there are many scholars who are internationally recognized for their research and expertise in mobile communication, a smaller portion have made texting a consistent part of their research agenda. Some of the pioneering scholars include Dr. Crispin Thurlow (2003) at the University of Bern in Switzerland, Dr. Richard S. Ling (2004) at the IT University of Copenhagen and Telenor's research institute in Norway, Dr. James E. Katz (2006, 2008) at Boston University, Dr. Naomi S. Baron (2008) at American University in Washington, DC, Dr. Gerard Goggin (Goggin, 2006, 2013) at the University of Sydney in Australia, and Dr. David Crystal (2004, 2008) at the University of Wales in Bangor. Currently, Dr. Clare Wood (Wood, Kemp, & Plester, 2014) at Coventry University in the United Kingdom, Dr. Michelle Drouin (2011) at Indiana University in the United States, Dr. Scott Campbell (Ling & Campbell,

2009, 2011) at the University of Michigan, Dr. Caroline Tagg (2012) at the University of Birmingham, UK, Dr. Richard Harper (2010) at Microsoft Research in Cambridge, UK, and Amanda Lenhart (2012) at the Pew Research Center in the U.S. are some of the leading scholars in this area, to name a few. This section provides a review of their work and that of others who have contributed to the literature on texting, with particular emphasis on the uses that have proven controversial. This review is not meant to be exhaustive; rather, the idea is to provide a launch pad for readers interested in pursuing these topics further.

Education and Learning

Teens have been the primary focus of texting research since the early 2000s (Grinter & Eldridge, 2001, 2003; Porath, 2011). The potential effect of texting on education and learning among this age group has been one of the most thoroughly researched topics. The literature on the impact of texting on education is mostly context-based, with texting in the classroom seen by many as a source of distraction and cheating. Texting during class has been shown to affect students' ability to focus during class, retain information from a lecture, and perform well in a test (Chaklader & Bohlander, 2009; Rosen, Lim, Carrier, & Cheever, 2011). Studies have shown that students who text during class are a distraction for other students who are not texting (Rosen et al., 2011; Tindell & Bohlander, 2011). Students have admitted to sending and receiving text messages during exams without the professor's knowledge (Tindell & Bohlander, 2011). While many students considered it relatively easy to text during class without attracting the professor's attention, they also noted that the frequency of texting and mobile phone interruptions during class would decrease if the professor had a clear policy regarding the use of personal technology in the classroom (for additional studies confirming these results see Burns & Lohentry, 2013; Campbell, 2006; Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013; Rosen, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013; Rosen

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