

# Adolescent Text Messaging

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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a transitional developmental period marked by puberty, identity formation (Erikson, 1950) and negotiation of parent-child relationships (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). This developmental phase typically begins with puberty and often extends into the early to mid-twenties (Bynner, 2007). As the developmental tasks of preparing for adulthood have remained the same, contemporary views on adolescence includes the teenage years and extends at least until the age of 25. An important feature of contemporary adolescence is the accessibility and use of technology. Adolescents age 11 to 18 years spend seven-and-a-half hours a day with different media and when media-multitasking (using more than one technology source at once) is taken into account the number climbs to nearly 11 hours per day (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

Adolescents are early adopters of new technologies (Xenos & Foot, 2008), and the cell phone has become a major defining technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Campbell & Park, 2008). According to the Pew Research Institute cell phone ownership among U.S. adults has grown from 65% in 2004 (Smith, 2011) to 91% in 2012 (Duggan, 2013). During the same period of time, U.S. adolescent cell phone ownership has more than doubled from 33% in 2004 (Lenhart, Ling, & Campbell, 2010) to 78% in 2012 (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013).

People around the world rely on cell phones for a variety of communication features. Cell phones not only provide voice features, but they

also include capabilities for text messaging (also referred to as texting or Short Message Service (SMS); Faulkner & Culwin, 2005). Adolescents around the globe indicate a particular affinity for text messaging compared to other age demographics (see Ling, 2005; Madden et al., 2013; Mandell & Muncer, 2004; Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004; Walsh, White, & Young, 2008). As text messaging has become an important part of adolescent lives, research on the influence of text messaging on adolescents has begun to emerge.

## OVERVIEW

Evaluating the use of text messaging trends on an international level has occurred for some time, primarily because cell phone technology was adopted by European and Asian countries nearly ten years before appearing in the United States. Investigations of text messaging trends in the U.S. are just beginning (Drouin, 2011). Dr. Richard Ling (Ling, 2001) of the IT University of Copenhagen and Dr. Virpi Oksman (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004) of the University of Tampere, Finland were among the first scholars to study text messaging among adolescents. Since the early 2000s additional research has begun to emerge on text messaging in adolescence. Scholars at The Pew Research Institute have provided large contributions to the current knowledge about adolescent text messaging behaviors (see Lenhart et al., 2010). Additionally, Dr. Sarah Tulane (Tulane, 2012) of Utah State University and Dr. Bethany Blair (Blair, Fletcher, & Gaskin, 2013)

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of the Florida State University have recently made valuable contributions to the current literature on text messaging in adolescence.

Adolescents are the most frequent users of text messaging (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004) and appear to have adopted text messaging as a normal component of daily living (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011). Parents are supportive of adolescent cell phone ownership and text messaging because of the increased parent-adolescent contact when geographical restrictions prevent face-to-face contact (Lenhart et al., 2010). However, adolescents report that cell phones provide a means to increase their autonomy from parents in addition to the ability to maintain contact with their social network at all times. Although the reasons for text messaging and voice calls appear to be similar among adolescents (Lenhart et al., 2010), adolescents report that the private nature and convenience of text messaging make it the more frequent communication medium of choice (Blair et al., 2013). As text messaging has become a 'necessary' component of adolescents' daily life, it appears that a youth culture has also developed around the practice and adults are seemingly unaware of this culture (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004; Tulane, 2012). Text messaging is likely influential in friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships (Cupples & Thompson, 2010). Because text messaging has become a regular phenomenon much of the existing research has centered on the potentially negative consequences of text messaging for adolescents (Thurlow & Bell, 2009). Adults are concerned about negative behaviors that can be facilitated through text messaging, such as sexting (sending or receiving sexual images), cyberbullying, and texting while driving. Some parents have attempted to monitor adolescent text messaging, hoping to decrease these potential risks (Vaterlaus, Beckert, Tulane, & Bird, 2014). This article summarizes research on adolescent text messaging in terms of frequency, motivations, youth culture, relationships, and concerns.

## **CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN ADOLESCENT TEXT MESSAGING**

### **Frequency**

Rideout and colleagues (2010) reported that the time adolescents (8-18 years old) spend with their cell phones increases as they age. When comparing adolescent social communication through text messaging, talking face-to-face, voice calls on cell phones, voice calls on landlines, instant messaging, email, and social networking—text messaging is the most frequently used form of social communication among U.S. adolescents (Lenhart et al., 2010). Lenhart (2012) reported that the number of text messages sent by adolescents (12-17 years old) on a typical day has increased by 10 text messages per day during the years of 2009 and 2011. When adolescents enter colleges it appears they continue to spend a copious amount of time with text messaging. One survey focused on time spent with different forms of communication, and found that college students ( $N = 294$ ) reported approximately 34 hours a week communicating with people face-to-face (Hanson, Drumheller, Mallard, McKee, & Schlegel, 2011). Text messaging was the second most frequent mode of communication, with college students spending over 14 hours a week sending and receiving text messages. Duggan (2013) indicated in a Pew Research Study that 97% of 18-29 year olds send and receive text messages.

However, high school students appear to send and receive text messages more frequently than college students. Tulane and Beckert (2013) compared the frequency of text messaging between U.S. high school and college students. Nearly all of the college students (99%) and high school participants owned a cell phone. College students reported an average of 1,960 text messages sent per month and the high school students reported an average of 3,778 text messages sent monthly. This study only included female students and

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