

Chapter 6

Why We Would Rather Text than Talk: Personality, Identity, and Anonymity in Modern Virtual Environments

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ABSTRACT

Whether they are checking out at the grocery store, watching a sporting event or eating out in a restaurant; people are texting. Text messaging has become very popular form of contact. Texting is increasingly a part of the overall communications strategy not only for teens but for everyone. Privacy is the number one reason for sending and receiving text messages. The ability to communicate anytime and anywhere but to do so with privacy makes texting attractive and popular. Although some research has been done on the impact of personality, identity and anonymity on texting messaging, very little definitive conclusions have been established either for usage or preferences. Some research indicates that introverts act more like extroverts and extroverts act more like introvert when they communicate using text messages. More research needs to be done to establish the influence of personality and identity on texting and texting on personality and identity.

INTRODUCTION

Online personality and identity can be seen as a continuation of a person's everyday life. A sense of identity is defined by innate characteristics and the environment a people are operating in at the time. Personality and a sense of self or an identity, with boundaries, limits and norms, creates an online persona that then interacts with others. What people do and talk about when texting is very close to what they do and discuss in a face to face environment. The concept of identity that comes into play with virtual environments is linked to one important construct, anonymity. Anonymity plays out through interacting with others online. Texting is done either in a one on one environment or one on many environment like on social media sites. Aspects of our personalities when we are texting are either the same or different

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than when we communicate face to face. Identity online is concerned with the ability to gain attention, create social engagement, explore boundaries and develop a following. Texting environments offer a place for the instantaneous and free exchanges of ideas, thoughts and information. Text has become a strategic communication tool based on the rapid exchange of messages and the viral aspects of the media. Text gives us the freedom to express our personalities like we really want to, not constrained by the expectations in strong environments but free to act more like who we really are. Texting environments are two dimensional environments and are missing very important nonverbal cues. This makes the environment weaker and this has advantages and disadvantages that influence how people express themselves, through personalities and identities.

Our identity, our sense of who we are, comes from social and cultural context. Identity and the self are intricately connected. Identity, personality and behaviors are integrated into relationships with others and eventually this helps us to define our sense of “self”. The self today, is acknowledged by some of the characteristics that are found in modern virtual environments (Hansson, 2012). In modern online virtual environments, it is common for a person to have more than one profile or identity, on more than one social media site. Discovering multiple profiles for the same individual is not uncommon. This allows researchers and data analysts to merge profiles or identities based on IP addresses, common attributes, usage profiles and social linkages. Social relationships then define not only who people say they are online but who they really are online (Bartunov, Korshunov, Park, Ryu & Lee, 2012).

BACKGROUND

Since the beginning the Internet has been about communications, connections and alternatives. Before the Internet became a reality only a few decade ago, the last big communications innovation was the telephone. Social media sites and text messaging proved to be evidence that humans will embrace new ways of communicating almost overnight. These new technologies allowed us to interact easily and instantly. There is a growing concern that since technologies are used to communicate, communications skills are being lost. Even though people can stay connected 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, the quality of our connections is changing. There are more devices to stay connected with; including laptops, mobile phones, tablets and more social networks and social media sites to deliver that connectivity. What was once used primarily for business and education, is now an integral party of a global social structure. The global village is connected and regulated by the connections to mobile devices. This is transforming communication patterns. Verbal and written communications skills are an important part of life. If text messaging is here to stay, and it certainly looks like it is, what impact will this have on personalities, a sense of identity and interactions in virtual environments.

Communications skills in some ways define who we are and the position in society. Voice communications was often about breaking down hurtles. Properly addressing people, speaking clearly, using appropriate body language, listening and a firm handshake are all missing from text based communication. Voice communication involves dealing with hurtles as they arise, where text communications is created to sidestep and pre-empt those hurtles in the first place (Stokoe, 2014). Whether this new and preferred method of communicating is actually superior depends on how a person embraces anonymity than on the affordances of the technologies. Text based communications is a distant relative to more traditional face to face communicating. Being connected by texting may require disconnection from community life and ourselves.

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