Why *Everyone* Loves to Text Message: Social Management with SMS

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ABSTRACT

This poster presents a study of SMS use among young adults and how they manage their social lives by SMS. It focuses on three features: overcoming shyness, facilitating 'appropriate behavior' and how users exploit the conciseness of messages. In conclusion we discuss the surprising value of this modest medium in people's everyday lives.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.3 [**Organizational Impact**]: Computer-Supported Collaborative Work

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

Mobile phones, SMS, qualitative studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

In addition to making voice communication mobile, the mobile phone brought to light a new form of communication: SMS (short message service) or text messaging. Some researchers even argue that it is SMS – rather than voice calls - that has been the major force in the adoption of mobile phones [5]. Early research on SMS use suggested that SMS's popularity, especially among teenagers, was due to the controlled cost that SMS provides [2], but later research has pointed away from this, emphasizing the efficiency of its asynchronous communication model [5]. Moving beyond asking why SMS has become popular, we here focus on *how* text messages fits into users' everyday lives, supports existing and creates new social practices. Instead of wondering why users use 'tedious' texting rather than 'swift' phone calls, which previous research has attempted to uncover [2, 7], we approach the medium with the view that mobile phones are now being bought and used as much for SMSing as for voice calls, especially in the Nordic Countries where our study took place. We explore how users manage their mundane activities by way of SMS and gain insight into how this seemingly simple communication medium is powerful enough to add new structures to the users' lives, however without dominating their daily life.

Although most previous research has been part of broader studies into mobile phone use with SMS considered as an alternative to voice communication, several recent studies have looked specifically at the use of 'text-messaging', such as [2, 7]. Both of these studies emphasize the 'leisure and fun' aspects of the medium amongst their teenage user groups, although [6] emphasizes how (virtually) all age groups use text messages for 'micro-coordination' and organizational practicalities. Another recent exploration of research of SMS as a separate

communication medium is found in [3], which focuses solely on SMS communication. However, many of the chapters still focus on comparing texting to voice calls.

A common finding from previous research is that text messaging increases 'ad-hoc' coordination [1, 5, 6], and to a lesser degree that it is a tool for social up-keeping and control of relationships [4, 6]. In our study, social expectations from others manifest themselves from other parts of their social life and create new social behavior, a finding that has rarely been pointed out before. We find that indirect social regulations such as social relationship principles also affects the use of SMS.

2. METHOD

The study took place in Denmark, where mobile phones were used by over 85 percent of the population around the time of the study [8]. It was carried out over two weeks; 21 participants filled in a journal each evening describing their received and sent messages from that day. Participants described their messages in terms of their location when messages were sent/received and what the motivation for initiating SMSing had been. After the two weeks we conducted more in-depth interviews with seven of the participants, elaborating on specifics of their SMS habits.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participants	Diary study	Interviews
Number	21	7
Males (females)	9 (12)	3 (4)
Age range (av. age)	21-36 (25.8)	21-32 (25.7)

3. SOCIAL PRACTICES OF SMS

Generally, our participants used their SMSes for coordination of their social life, with some use of SMSes for work coordination. The more SMSes they wrote per day, the more different relationships were facilitated by SMS. The bar-graph in figure 1 draws out the average number of messages they sent and received each day according to relationship.

SMS was, for our participants, valuable because it supported subtlety and spontaneity and thereby fostering new social practices. We found three distinct social facilitations that SMS contributed to: the assistance in overcoming shyness, the facilitation of appropriate social behavior and the control of communication because of SMS' conciseness.

3.1 Overcoming Shyness

Many of our participants commented that they sent an SMS rather than calling to avoid talking in public. In crowded public spaces a voice call were considered to be intruding on the surrounding

people. Five of our interview participants confessed to be shy about talking on the phone in public and used SMS as one way of overcoming this. SMS thus offers advantages in how it can support communication without bring attention to an individual.
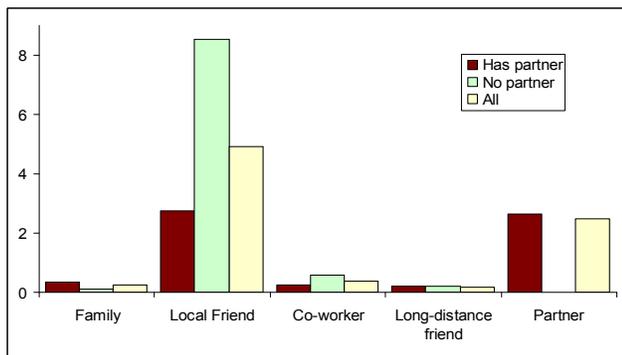

Figure 1. Mean number of sent and received messages per day

Another aspect of shyness concerned the social relationship between sender and recipient – in a number of cases participants would not have called as readily as they SMSed them. One male participant, aged 21 explains:

> "This girl, Linda, I would never call her, but we often SMS about where we are meeting, say, Saturday night, with the others. Sometime we also just chat, like, during the course of the day. But I don't think I would call her"

SMS enabled this participant to contact a friend where it would have been awkward to call her. SMS supports communication without the commitment and immediate reply required in a telephone call. One can send a one line message without having to commit to a spoken conversation. SMS did not just help users who were shy, it also allowed users to carefully manage their interactions turn by turn. This way, new interaction became possible through careful consideration from the sender's part.

3.2 Appropriate Social Behavior
A key use of SMS was how it supported 'appropriate social behavior'- 23 percent of the messages in the diary were characterized as 'social up-keeping', messages that had no planning or information aim but merely an aim to keep up socially. Ling describes these messages as a form of social grooming [6]. We take the concept a step further though and point to the fact that very few of these messages would have been delivered if SMS had not been available. This was underlined by our participants as a feature of the effort-less medium.

One example is a male interview participant who sent a message asking how his friend's exam went. He explained that was not something he would have called his friend about, but because he knew the friend had just had an important exam, he sent the SMS as part of 'proper social behavior'. Other messages included 'goodnight' messages and people wishing friends a good holiday.

3.3 Conciseness of Messages
Motivations for using SMS might seem straight forward: participants themselves underlined the simplicity, discreteness and time-shifting aspects of using SMS. However, looking closer at our interviews, the conciseness which the medium leans itself to, is utilized to the maximum in the creation of messages. Both the

actual phrasing and the situation that the sender knew (or supposed) the receiver found him/herself in was considered during message sending. One female participant, for example, describes a message in her diary:

> [The message was regarding] where exactly we had arranged to meet. We were actually standing at two different entrances [to the theater]. I SMSed because I didn't want to call in case she was just a bit late. … It was just to say where she could find me, without seeming too impatient.

This participant sent a message that from her point of view was a question to where the other person was, but in the form of a message about where she herself was. This allowed her to avoid appearing impatient. This conciseness often made SMS preferred for situations in which it was important messages need to get across. While SMS are used for fun and non-essential information, such as indicated by other research [2, 6], they are also incredibly valuable in supporting this subtlety of communication and respect for social relations.

4. CONCLUSION
We have described how SMS is used on an everyday basis by a group of young adults; how it is used to their social advantage and how it assists in facilitating their social identity. SMS is an integrated part of our participants' lives, used to manage their social lives by allowing them to for example control self-representation and overcome shyness. Its advantages are in the conciseness of the communication (limited size and asynchronicity), which users use to create powerful messages. SMS provides the flexibility young adults require in their social communications. Where many researchers have highlighted SMS as a medium weighed by information exchange and messages of coordination matter, we have showed how relationships are built, maintained and sometimes directly facilitated by this seemingly simple communication medium.

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