1-1-2005

Mobile phones, SMS, and relationships

Louise Horstmanshof  
*Bond University*

Mary R. Power  
*Bond University, Mary_Power@bond.edu.au*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://epublications.bond.edu.au/hss_pubs](http://epublications.bond.edu.au/hss_pubs)

Part of the [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](http://epublications.bond.edu.au/hss_pubs)

**Recommended Citation**

Louise Horstmanshof and Mary R. Power. (2005) "Mobile phones, SMS, and relationships".

Mobile phones, SMS, and relationships
Issues of access, control, and privacy
Louise Horstmanshof and Mary R. Power

ABSTRACT: Text messaging, or SMS (Short-Message Service), allows users to send and receive short messages from handheld digital mobile phones or from a computer to a mobile phone, giving almost instant access to others so connected. The privacy and immediacy of SMS and its widespread use have implications for human behaviour and social intercourse. The focus-group research with SMS users reported in this paper provides rich details and nuances of how text messaging affects young adults’ patterns of communication and social behaviour. The paper goes beyond documenting commonly held beliefs about young adults’ use of SMS—that it is prevalent and used for coordination—to probe issues of privacy, control of access, the dilemma of availability, and gender differences in use. The paper examines the way SMS messages are used not only for the content of the messages per se, but for the sense of being in social (phatic) contact with others.

The mobile phone is now ubiquitous, and ‘texting’—using mobile-phone technology to access the Short-Message Service (SMS), whereby messages of fewer than 160 characters are exchanged directly—has become a common way for users to communicate. Transcripts of focus groups of young people who use SMS on mobile phones reveal that they are using messages primarily for making connections and affirming relationships. The frequently used text message ‘YYSSW’ (‘yeah, yeah, sure, sure, whatever’) epitomises much of

Louise Horstmanshof and Mary R. Power, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bond University, Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia.
the communication between young text-messagers. This utterance contains an affirmation of support ('yeah, yeah') and agreement ('sure, sure') and a tolerance of differences ('whatever'). Young people in this study use SMS to sustain their relationships with a close group of friends by maintaining contact, even when overseas or in different time zones. Users do not reject other forms of communication, moving from SMS to another technology or to face-to-face communication when messages become either too long or too complex.

Depending on the user, the receiver, and the type of message, SMS is used in conjunction with other methods of communication such as voice telephony, e-mails, MSN (Microsoft Network) Instant Messaging, and (rarely) letters. SMS connects people in different physical locations with an immediacy that creates a close and integrated culture of people who remain in contact and aware of each other's movements, however separated they are physically. It is a means of breaking down the barriers of time and space. Gergen (2003) asserts that this connection provides a constant reminder of others, a means of being absent physically but present at another level.

Texting is communication by writing made possible by technology for the spoken word, the mobile phone (Calcutt, 2001), in simple text that can be read immediately, repeatedly, or even at leisure (Goggin, 2004). Moreover, messages can be sent quietly and hence privately between communicators who may even be engaged in other activities such as travelling on public transport, watching television, attending meetings, classes, or lectures.

The young have embraced SMS communication because it is 'quick, efficient, cheap and convenient' (Stewart, 2003). The 160-character limit of each SMS message encourages abbreviation and the development of a code between those who text regularly. SMS has made it possible for deaf people to be connected to one another as well as to hearing people without an intermediary, such as a telephone relay service, while away from their computers (Power & Power, 2004).

The success and widespread popularity of SMS is a demonstration of 'bottom-up' use of technology, with users going beyond what developers envisaged. Indeed, Agar (2003) suggests that the use of mobile phones for textual communication was happenstance, not planned action. The focus for manufacturers and mobile companies had been to replicate fixed-line telephone capabilities on the mobile-phone platform. The burgeoning acceptance of the Internet in the
1990s led mobile-phone designers to examine ways of imitating the Internet and its online data capabilities. The Short-Message Service was an insignificant addition made to the European Global System for Mobile (GSM) standard that provided the capacity to spell out short messages cheaply. It was originally intended to make the most of a spare channel in the mobile-phone broadcast system in order to notify mobile-phone users that they had received voicemail messages or to provide account information without disturbing users (Fordham, 2003). This additional capacity was so underestimated by telecommunications manufacturers that several of them failed to provide the facilities necessary to distribute such short messages and SMS only became available in Australia in 1995 (Harper & Clark, 2002).

SMS was made possible and practical in Australia through compatible technology and an agreement by service providers to exchange text messages among their networks in April 2000, following the introduction of intercarrier SMS in the UK in October 1999 (‘Carriers Have Finally Got the SMS Message’, 2000). At least in Australia, mobile phones had become affordable to young people by the mid-1990s, and texting is the cheapest way to use the system (Calcutt, 2001). However, without this interconnectivity between carriers, there was no comparable uptake of SMS usage in the US (Power & Power, 2004).

The use of mobile phones and text messaging has grown exponentially since April 2000. One of the largest groups of users is young people. In Australia, Telstra (the major telecommunications carrier) estimates that the text-messaging market is driven to a large extent by the 16-24 age group, with more than 250 million text messages sent per month in Australia (Wallace, 2003), a country with a total population of 19.7 million in June 2002 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Australian PC Authority (2005) writers reported that, in 2005, ‘More than 6.8 million SMS messages and 18.5 million emails were exchanged this Valentine’s Day, according to Telstra. This is an increase from the 6.3 million SMS and 13 million emails sent last year’.

SMS, with its compressed format and limited number of characters, encourages texters to reduce redundancy in communication to fit their messages into 160 characters. To do this, they rely on a mutual agreement about abbreviations, acronyms, and acceptable tone in their messages. To communicate successfully, therefore, texters require a homogeneity of experience and information networks—similar to those found in high-context cultures (Hall & Hall, 1990), where meaning does not need to be made explicit because it is carried in
the unwritten rules and traditions of communicative behaviour within that society or group. Researchers have found that text messaging happens mainly among peers (Grinter & Eldridge, 2001). The current research aims to investigate the ways in which technology is affecting social behaviour and relationships among young adult users, as well as the rules that are developing around its use relating to language, communication, and connection with others.

With SMS, young people conduct their work, education, leisure, and social activities in dispersed spaces, creating communities that are separated physically but connected electronically, thereby changing their patterns of communication, social behaviour, and language use.

In-depth academic research on the effect of technology on relationships is sparse. Research has mainly focused on the use of information-systems technology in workplace and organisational settings (Carroll, Howard, Vetere, Peck, & Murphy, 2002).

Because use of SMS is still emergent, it is important to track new behaviours, as the usage patterns of early adopters may predict how the technology eventually becomes adopted in the mainstream. This study shows that new norms and expectations for establishing and being available for contact are being developed.

**Method**

In using focus groups to collect data about the role of SMS text messaging in young people’s lives, this study emulates the bottom-up method development of the use of the technology itself. Focus groups allow participants to reveal their own perceptions and to provide a rich understanding of their appropriation of the technology and their relationship to it.

Focus groups are ‘ideal for uncovering the fluid and dialogic aspects of opinion formation’ (Fern, 2001, p. 146) and because they ‘guard against researcher bias and short-sightedness by allowing open-ended responses and unanticipated and inconsistent views to emerge’ (p. 146). The data from focus groups is a result of sharing ideas and pushing concepts further when stimulated by what others have said. Accordingly, the themes that emerge from the discussion represent group rather than individual ideas. The output from these focus-
group interviews is a collation of individual responses that are in part influenced by what others in the group have said, thus providing understanding of the group's shared meanings.

The focus-group questions in this study allowed the group to elaborate their single perceptions and create shared understandings. In general, the areas covered emerged either from the prepared questions (see Appendix) or from participants moving on to a topic during their discussion of prior questions. Discussion was encouraged about whom they communicated with; lists of numbers they held; how numbers were grouped; rules about responses, concepts of time, language usage, and effect on written language; reactions to group messages, costs, and expenditures; desired changes; frustrations with the system; and imagined futures.

Focus groups providing qualitative data of a small number of respondents may not be representative of the population at large. However, given that we used five focus groups from a population of young adult users of SMS in a country where uptake of mobile-phone technology is relatively high, and where costs of SMS are lower than voice mobile-phone calls, Australia provides a useful case study of how young people are using text messaging.

Fern (2001) suggests that the optimal number of focus groups to be run on a particular topic ranges from two to eight, with most writers on the topic (Krueger, 1994; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) suggesting that 'fewer than five groups is probably adequate' (Fern, 2001, p. 162). At a point when 'diminishing returns set in' (p. 162), when most of what is said has been said several times and little new material is aired, writers on the topic consider that there is no great benefit to be gained in adding to the number of focus groups, especially if the groups are fairly homogeneous.

Group size was considered. Fern (2001) summarises: 'it is generally acknowledged that focus groups should be composed of 8 people, give or take 2' (p. 161), although some studies report using 'as few as 2 group members' (p. 161). Homogeneous groups share common expectations in a shorter period than larger groups and move on to more unique information, so the focus-group sizes in this study (four, five, three, four, and four) ensured that general ideas were aired but also that more unique perspectives had a chance to be expressed.
Additionally, non-verbal responses provided evidence of broad general agreement about most of the issues and facets of SMS usage raised by the group.

A major benefit of focus groups is that they can uncover ‘the existence of some set of responses (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, opinions, etc.)’ (Fern, 2001, p. 125) while not defining the incidence or generalisability of such responses. From October 2003 to March 2004, five focus groups were conducted, each lasting about 60 minutes, with a total of 20 people. One disadvantage was that only three respondents were male, but, even with that number, gender differences were evident, as some male inputs were not echoed by any female respondents.

The participants comprised two groups of undergraduate students from Bond University, which has an international student base; a group of music graduates and their friends; a group of young working people; and a group of postgraduate and professional young people. The 20 participants were recruited from within their own ranks, with an organiser, in each case, being known to the researchers. The organisers reported using SMS to recruit participants from their social networks. In the majority of cases, focus-group participants were known to each other and had a shared history of sending and receiving text messages from each other and also from other users known to the group.

Results and discussion
Participants in the focus groups mostly sent text messages to close friends. Analysis of comments about address lists shows that these represent different groups of contacts: intimates, close friends, family, work contacts, corporations, and others not so frequently contacted. Contact with these groups differs in language use and patterns of communication, which are influenced by factors such as cost of communication, desire for control of communication flow, and protection of personal privacy.

These three factors emerged as important in analysis of the transcripts of the focus groups. SMS was seen as a cheap, effective, and convenient way of communicating one to one, as a way of maintaining social connections both locally and interstate or overseas. This enhanced and supported intimate relationships and social networks, and was a way of storing memories. SMS use is an example of adapting and appropriating technology intended for other purposes to social ends. Themes discerned were desire for control of communication, protection
of personal privacy, and objections to infringement on this privacy by businesses seeking customers or maintaining links with customers and employees. Abbreviations and the use of condensed language were possible within close-knit groups of communicators who shared substantial experience of communicating and interacting.

The primary use by all respondents was one-to-one communication. Texters were impatient with their peers who sent group messages, unless they concerned arrangement of a meeting of a group of close friends. Generally, they disliked the growing commercial use by nightclubs and product vendors to advertise to them. Although recognising that employers and others might find it useful to use text messaging, younger respondents saw this as somewhat of an invasion of their privacy and their culture. However, young professionals in our sample who are not always at a home base wanted more extensive use of text messaging by banks and other billing agents to advise them of overdue accounts and similar matters.

Even reluctant users admitted that they could not stay 'in the loop' without a mobile phone. SMS thrives in an environment where mobile phones are ubiquitous and where the cost of sending messages is cheap relative to other methods of contact with people on the move and where receiving text messages does not incur a cost. An American study-abroad student in one focus group explained that her phone plan in the US was cheap for voice messages and relatively expensive for text messages, so she and her friends would either phone one another or use Instant Messaging when they had access to a computer. A study of worldwide reports of SMS use found that usage was not widespread in the US (Power & Power, 2004).

Although its relative cheapness was one of the reasons mentioned for taking up SMS, once adopted, users seemed to accept bills of about AUD60 per month. At an average of around 25 cents per text message, depending on the service plan, sending a text message is an inexpensive way of staying in contact with friends, both local and overseas. While some respondents were content to use text messaging for little messages like 'Where are you?' or 'Are you free for coffee, now?', others felt the need to make the most of the characters permitted per message and were strategic in their use.

I sort of don't have a lot of money because I am a student, so I tend to make the most of how I use it, so, instead of just saying are you free for coffee, I'm, like, you know, are you free for coffee,

Mobile phones, SMS, and relationships

39
so we’ll meet here at this time, and if you can’t do that just send me a message …. I kinda make the most of it.

Focus-group participants were highly conscious of the financial costs of using the technology. Some explained that they made use of mobile-phone service packages or ‘plans’ that allowed them to get the best value for their investment. This might mean switching to another, cheaper method of communication at a later time of day, such as voice phone after 8 p.m., when the plan allowed cheaper or even free calls for an unlimited period of time. Some admitted trying to limit the number of text messages they sent per day, as the cost could add up, ‘because it’s so easy, you lose track of how many you have sent’.

Indeed, although none of the young people attending the focus groups admitted to experiencing any financial trouble as a result of mobile-phone and SMS usage, one participant stated that people from this age group were experiencing problems. ‘Lots of people, like from our age group, have got banned from all the different companies and they have just got debt like up to …’

One young male respondent lamented the influence on patterns of communication in his social sphere because of both the technology and the cost of the service.

People aren’t chatting as much. Making things short and sharp because it is expensive. Even if you get a prepaid card for $20, in a week that’s gone, and then you get another and before you know it you have spent $80 for the week.

Remaining in control of who they would allow to contact them was an important factor for our respondents. SMS messages can be replied to instantly any time of the day or night or can be ignored completely. Because people carry their mobile phones with them at all times, SMS messaging is instant and more immediate than the Instant Messaging related to Internet computer use. Rules of communication that might be acceptable with e-mails, where instant replies are not expected, are not acceptable to SMS users. Despite this ‘rule’ and the immediacy of the medium, participants acknowledged that they exercised choice when it came to responding to messages, especially late-night messages. The face-saving claim that the mobile phone’s battery had run down allowed them to avoid admitting breaking the rules.

Australian Journal of Communication • Vol 32 (1) 2005

40
Rules that an SMS message should be answered as soon as conveniently possible seem to be general, so that users constantly check their messages—on the one hand to find out who is contacting them, and on the other to meet expectations that an SMS message will be answered promptly. Breaking these expectations is thought to be unacceptable. ‘I have one friend who is really rude; he doesn’t answer SMS messages for three or five days.’

If the mobile phone was left on to be used as an alarm clock, calls very late at night were impossible to escape. However, a text message does leave control in the hands of the receiver.

*If it’s a phone call and if you are tired and don’t want to talk and you have to. Because you are on the phone, then that’s a bit more annoying. But if it’s a [text] message you can quickly read it and if you are still half asleep go back to sleep if you want to, or go ‘Hey, call me’. You sit up and keep going.*

Participants liked having control over the types of communication media used because of cost and time constraints. One-hour SMS-message exchanges were rare. Routinely, after two or three messages, the communicators either switch to Internet chat or voice telephone. However, one informant who had used SMS for business reported that message sequences of 40 to 50 responses were conducted over a period of two hours when solving a problem with a person overseas with no ready access to a landline.

Focus-group responses indicated that whether or not a message was instantly answered depended on the sender (i.e., the relationship), the context (where the receiver was at the time), and, in some cases, the time of day. Two participants, one male and one female, reported that they had given up using mobile phones after the loss of their phones. Escalating cost had influenced the female respondent’s decision. The male was concerned about losing control over his time and his own agenda.

*So if I am surfing or going to the beach and someone rings me and says [name deleted] come and do whatever it is, they can’t. Because I am at the beach and I am going to have my surf, and when I come back they ring me that night and say can you come and help and I’ll say yeah. Instead of changing my whole plan of what I want to do when I get a call or a text message and get shuffled into someone else’s day. They change the order of your life. And it’s like you are inviting the whole world into your space.*
Altman (1977) conceptualises privacy as 'the selective control of access to the self' (p. 67). He describes it as a form of boundary regulation, a process in which people optimise their accessibility on a continuum ranging from 'openness' at one extreme to 'closedness' at the other. Palen and Dourish (2003) argue that privacy is about the management of boundaries in changing contexts and that information technology such as mobile phones and SMS messaging disrupts and destabilises the regulation of these boundaries. In this way, we are able to understand how one message can be seen as intimate and personal, and another as impersonal and inappropriate.

Being in control of who was given one's mobile-phone number was important. The ability to screen incoming messages and make decisions about answering or not answering the call was important. What emerged from the groups was that home, fixed-line phone numbers were reserved for very close friends, with mobile-phone users preferring to keep most traffic on their mobile phones. This was for two reasons: first, because the mobile phone was always with them; and second, that, after the instant immediacy of text messaging, users grew impatient with the open-ended time possibilities of friendly phone calls. One respondent said that, although she would answer her mobile phone, she primarily used it for text messaging rather than voice calls and rarely initiated calls from a landline. Because she considered herself 'time poor', she preferred the time-efficient SMS rather than more extended communication necessary for using a voice phone.

Respondents generally disliked business use of SMS. For example, 'a top accounting firm' contacting one of them about a job interview by SMS was regarded as 'very unprofessional'. SMS in such circumstances was judged 'too casual for that kind of thing', 'too impersonal', 'not always reliable'. They also felt that the use of a casual kind of communication medium by an employer led to uncertainties about the kinds of behaviour expected. It 'makes you think, well, when I go for an interview am I supposed to be casual or do I still have to be the professional?'.

However, it seems that, once a relationship is established, even a recruiting officer could use SMS: 'Like if you talk to say one of the recruiting officers and then you talk to one another on the phone and she messages you back, it's probably not so bad'. Protocol about who made the connection was also significant in the job search:
'What was annoying me was—like, they were recruiting, but then I had to phone them. I thought if they are recruiting and if they want me, they should maybe be calling me'.

Belonging to a group connected by SMS activity involves learning rules for appropriate behaviour. Similar rules and customs about the use of text messages between members of groups have simultaneously evolved among text messagers in Australia and in Britain, as revealed in transcripts from the focus-group study conducted with young Australians and an ethnographic study of mobile-phone (also known as cell phones in some countries) users in England (Taylor & Harper, 2002). Rules relating to such imperatives as the need to respond immediately if one is able and the need to text one's dearly beloved to say goodnight were mentioned by individuals and confirmed by members of focus groups.

Taylor and Harper (2003) recorded eight interviews with six students from a sixth-form (Grade 12) college located in an English suburban town. Only one male is quoted, and perhaps significantly. ‘Mark’, like the surfer in our study who has given up using his mobile phone, resents the constant demands that a mobile (and maybe these rules of behaviour) makes upon him. Mark speaks about the contact he has with his girlfriend: ‘Of course I have to text her, you know, when I go to bed ... [sounds of acknowledgement from others]’. The interviewer asks why, and a girl informs him: ‘It’s the rules’. Mark agrees: ‘Yeah, you need to say “good night”, you need to say “good morning” ...’ He eventually ends the conversation by picking up his mobile and saying, ‘Really, this has made my life hell!’ (Taylor & Harper, 2003, p. 274). The three males in our study admitted not following all the rules. The surfer had abandoned his mobile, another male admitted that he didn’t text back immediately and rarely used the mobile for phatic or ‘grooming’ activities, and the third said that he was careful when using his mobile as he was short of money. Differences between male and female use of SMS in these ways could be investigated in future research.

Most respondents reported that their text messages contribute to friendship maintenance in that they fulfil phatic and social-relational functions. This accords with the findings of Thurlow (2002) and Reid and Reid (2003). An example is each evening’s ‘goodnight’ message exchanged between boyfriend and girlfriend, or ‘love you, call me when you can’ to a busy sister who works interstate. Such patterns of interaction create an expectation of reciprocation. Taylor and Harper (2003) trace this expectation of reciprocation back through all kinds
of relationships observed since anthropologist Malinowski (1921) recognised the phenomenon among the Trobrianders. Taylor and Harper (2003) quote Gouldner (1973), who recognised a 'moral norm of reciprocity' (p. 279), which was 'a concrete and special mechanism involved in the maintenance of any stable social system' (Gouldner, 1973, p. 240), and applied this idea to the obligation created in one who has received a personal SMS message. Respondents in three out of our five focus groups emphasised the ability to share and remain close to friends overseas through brief messages through which travellers shared their experiences. Late night or very early morning text messages from the UK expressed the excitement of seeing snow for the first time—'SNOW!'—or at having found Tim Tams (a favourite brand of Australian chocolate biscuits) on a supermarket shelf. Yet another message came to one respondent from the Louvre in France, sharing seeing the painting of the Mona Lisa for the first time.

This constant sharing of impressions with one's current friends establishes a portable world separate from viewed reality. Gergen (2002) claimed that a conversation on a mobile phone 'establishes an “inside space” of the conversational partners versus an “outside space” constituted by those within earshot but prevented from participation' (p. 238). Gergen's example is of the outside view: 'On an hour's rail journey from New York to Philadelphia the man in the seat behind me called his “Maria” no less than four times to share the fruits of his ruminations' (p. 238).

Similarly, in almost all public spaces, and even in university lectures, SMS users can be observed either reading or sending messages to those in their 'inside space', which geographically may be far away. In the past, a journey, particularly a journey to the other side of the world, would be seen as an opportunity to take another perspective, and to be influenced by new contacts and to make new friends. However, if, via the mobile phone and inexpensively through SMS, people are able to remain in constant contact with friends already known, travel may not be so broadening. Such texters and habitués of Internet cafes may be so preoccupied with accommodating what they see to the frames of reference of their old friends in constantly reporting their impressions of their travels that they may not have time to absorb the views of new friends. Excitement at seeing snow might seem an inane comment to a Londoner who also shares the sight but perceives snow as a prelude to slush. However, to a friend sweating it out in the heat of summer in subtropical Brisbane, this single word establishes a connection in an ‘inside space’ related more to Brisbane than to London or Paris.
where the traveller might actually be. This example shows that the reciprocities of constant contact required of friendship relationships cannot be escaped when, through SMS messages, one is always contactable wherever one goes on the globe. Gergen (2002) aptly names this a new ‘kind of parochialism’, which ‘stands as a wedge against the kind of polyvocal participation required in an increasingly multi-cultural world’ (p. 240).

Mobile phones and text messages enable people to share experiences, even when both parties are separated in time and space. However, they have dangers, too: there are reports of mobile phones being used to gather groups to ‘crash’ parties (Garreau, 2002) and even one of youths being summoned to a gang-rape scene (‘Sentencing of Bilal Skaf’, 2002).

Special messages, which can be shown to other people, or which come from intimate friends, are often stored for review. Later generations of mobile phones have increased storage capacity for SMS messages. One respondent lamented the loss of her mobile phone because she had lost her addresses and stored special messages from past relationships.

\[\text{I kept all of mine [messages] from my old boyfriends, then I lost my phone and I was, like, dire, because that was our relationship, it just went ... that was the record of our relationship because people don’t write love letters anymore, they write love SMSs.}\]

Of the improvements desired, both in technology and in some cases of the user’s level of skill, the ability to download important messages and phone numbers to the computer was most common, emphasising the interconnectedness of technology. Even though later model mobile phones provide more storage, it is important to be able create a link back to the computer for storage and data-management purposes. In an ethnographic study done in England, one teenager suggested that ‘mobile phones should have “memory cards” that can be “plugged” into the phone and that these cards might be assigned to different people’ (Taylor & Harper, 2003, p. 288) in order to store these special SMS messages.

Prior to having a mobile phone, friends could remain unnumbered. However, the act of storing numbers in one’s mobile phone focused attention on comparisons with one’s peers regarding the number of friends’ addresses held. Those who had the problem of lack of storage capacity were more confident; others remained silent on this issue.
In other ways, the technology was useful in managing anxiety. SMS is the preferred way of connection when initiators are unsure of the response they may receive, perhaps because a relationship is in its early stages. SMS is also used by those who feel like making contact but don't want to become engaged in a long conversation. At other times, they may use SMS to announce their feelings of depression, boredom, or loneliness to a select group of potentially supportive friends in the hope that one of the recipients will respond appropriately. They feel that the SMS served as a warning of the sort of conversation that would ensue.

Most of the respondents recalled that they had received their first mobile phones to use in cases of emergency. Although they now use their mobile phones for many other more personal types of communication, their use as a means to contact help in an emergency remains a vital and reassuring factor. Many keep the mobile phone close at all times, even sleeping with it. Mobile phones are more than a means of communication for young people; they function as an alarm clock and an address book as well. At another level, it is an extension of self, embedded within their society and a part of the youth culture (Hulme & Peters, 2001). As one of our respondents mused:

We don't need them as human beings; I mean we are capable of making arrangements and things without them, but I think now that 90% of your friends do. If you don't have one, it does make life hard.

Those aged around 20 grew up with computers, and are accustomed to interacting with several electronic devices at once. They believe they can handle distractions because they grew up multitasking (Kornblum, 2003). Nevertheless, differences in levels of comfort with technology and sophistication of use were uncovered during the focus-group discussions. Several respondents confessed their inability to execute some of the functions. Not all were able to send mass messages due either to a lack of skill or technology, but most thought them a poor way to communicate. There was consensus that such messages were too impersonal, and that even seasonal-greetings messages should be personalised: ‘Yeah, the messages weren’t personalised, didn’t even have your name on it, but at least they had punched in your number, but it would have been nicer if they had phoned me’.

Australian Journal of Communication • Vol 32 (1) 2005

46
Many of the respondents used additional functions on the devices, including the calendar and alarm clock functions and the vibration function to replace the ring tone when silence was necessary. One of the more highly rated facilities of text messaging was the fact that such messages were less disruptive to others than phone calls and that contact could be established even when one was unable to hear the phone ring. One respondent said she left her phone on the bed and was often awakened by its vibrating next to her. Another spoke of the reassuring ability of being able to contact people if one got lost in a crowd at a concert.

It's good also when, say, you are at a concert or something big, because you are not going to hear the phone ringing and you can feel it vibrate, so you can say 'Where are you? Meet me here'. That's always good.

Others related how they were able to stay in touch while performing another task important to them.

I call people and I want to talk to them, but they're watching their favourite TV show, but they'll text you and still watch their favourite programme.

I mean, I think it's an age where we all seem to multitask. Like, I know that I'll be in the car with a cigarette trying to text somebody ... Doing a whole bunch of things all at once to organise your life, yeah, yeah, at the same time.

Despite an acceptance of multitasking, respondents agreed that text messages should be personal: 'It's human to be special—it's a human thing not a technology thing'.

Conclusion
Text messaging is a serendipitous phenomenon because it was not designed for the functions to which users now put it. However, mobile-phone technology does not stand alone; it is culturally linked to patterns of personal and social behaviour, income, and availability of other media.

Through text messaging, young people maintain relationships, organise social gatherings and events, and share exciting and new experiences, especially with friends at a distance, thus retaining the closeness of the friendships. Lacohée, Wakeford, and Pearson (2003, p. 206) describe
SMS messages as ‘low in information’ but high in ‘social grooming, i.e. letting someone know that you are thinking about them’. Young people are able to find help with boredom and anxiety by reaching out to their friends via a text message in the confident anticipation that at least one of the friends sent such a message will respond almost instantly with words of comfort or advice in a phone call or a text message. In the main, the young people in the focus groups felt that having SMS text messaging had made them more social as people. While not having a mobile phone, and so not being able to send text messages, did not necessarily mean being left out of the social arena, it meant that extra effort needed to be expended in keeping up with the rest of the group and for the group to include the person without the mobile phone.

Increasingly, young people want to store and retain information on their mobile phones. This is both for convenience, as in the case of the storing of phone numbers and direction details, but also to store messages that are precious or important, sometimes sharing such messages with others. This practice of sharing and storing is another example of the disrupting and destabilising of accepted boundaries. Messages, including potentially damaging gossip intended only for the receiver, can be shared with others.

Young people in the focus groups saw a future for the use of text messaging and had suggestions for improvements that ranged from less expensive services, to interconnections with other technology, to voice activation for input. Although two young people out of the total of 20 who participated in focus groups had voluntarily given up using mobile phones and text messaging, one because she could not afford it, and the other because he resented being constantly ‘on call’ and wanted to resume control of his day, all acknowledged the usefulness of the technology and were able to recall instances where they had enjoyed and benefited from such technology.

References

Australian Journal of Communication • Vol 32 (1) 2005
48


Mobile phones, SMS, and relationships

49


Appendix

Focus-group questions
We are interested in how people communicate using SMS. Can you tell us how you use it?

1. What’s the best thing about having SMS?

2. So, who do you communicate mostly with?

3. What are some of the abbreviations that you have come across?

Australian Journal of Communication • Vol 32 (1) 2005

50
4. What about yourselves: how useful do you find abbreviations?

5. Do some people find it hard to understand your SMS messages?

6. Do you have special abbreviations for different people/groups?

7. How do you learn about abbreviations? Do you make them up? Do they change often?

8. How long would you wait to answer an SMS message?

9. Would you say you generally have a conversation by SMS, or would you mostly use it for short exchanges?

10. How long is the longest you have been on an SMS backwards-and-forwards conversation? How many calls would that be?

11. What differences are there in how you communicate with different people from before when you did not have one?

12. Has using SMS changed the group you are in regular contact with? If someone isn’t on SMS do you communicate with them less?

13. Has having SMS increased the number of regular telephone calls you make or reduced them?

14. What kinds of groups of phone numbers have your stored in your address book? Have you got several groups of these? Family? Soccer Friends, etc.?

15. How often would you send a message to everyone in your address book? To everyone in your family? To everyone in different groups you might have?

16. How do you feel about getting group messages?

17. Has having an SMS phone made it easier or harder to communicate in writing, such as in class work, or speech, such as in conversation?

18. Does having an SMS message extend the way you communicate with people by being just one of the ways, or do you cut off other ways to stay with SMS?

19. Do you find it easier to talk about difficult topics on SMS?
20. Could you tell us more about that?

21. How much do you think people spend on SMS messages in a month?

22. What changes to you think need to be made to the whole system to make for better communication? Why?

23. What can you imagine the future of SMS being?

24. What is the most frustrating thing about SMS messaging?