

How Text Messages Create Connectedness

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Intro: Ruth Rettie is an ex Unilever Brand Manager who is currently a senior lecturer at Kingston University in London. At the University's Business School she lectures on internet marketing, E- and M-commerce and has a strong research interest in communication theory. She is currently completing her PhD in sociology at the University of Surrey, which focuses on mobile phone communication. In her receiver contribution, Rettie explains how co-presence and connectedness in mobile communication are the premier drivers for device usage.

Connectedness is a feeling of closeness or togetherness, a feeling of being connected to the other person, which may arise during communication. This feeling of connectedness, and the fact that the communication takes place, may be much more important than what is said.

Connectedness occurs in face-to-face communication, but it is taken for granted because the other person is physically there. Similarly, it occurs in mobile phone calls, where the participants perceive themselves to be together or copresent. In phone calls this may be related to the voice, because it carries the non-verbal communication that creates an impression of the other person and their current emotional state. Communication may be oriented towards the achievement of social connectedness rather than the transfer of information. This is most apparent in newer less rich communication media, where lack of content changes the focus from content to contact. Research shows that instant messenger users experience feelings of connectedness towards contacts they know are online, even if they do not exchange messages. Several connectedness orientated communication devices have been developed to create feelings of connectedness without **any** explicit communication. Prototypes include a teddy bear /photo-frame device, where a baby's picture animates when the bear is hugged by the child, necklaces for adults which convey feelings through heat and even beds which generate heat to replicate the position of a partner at a distant location.

Text messages seem to create much more connectedness than one would expect from their minimal, text only format. This article explains how the technical characteristics of text messages promote connectedness, and discusses the implications of this for relationships. Although I trace connections between the technical characteristics of text messages and their usage, I am not suggesting that practice is *determined* by the technology; there are many other relevant factors such as social, cultural, economic, etc.

My research was conducted in the UK and included extended interviews with 32 adults, communication diaries, and text message analysis. Examination of the 300 text messages collected, revealed two different text message formats, text messages that resembled mini-letters, and those that were described as 'one-liners'. Mini letters are often a full text page in length, frequently include several different topics and are more likely to have a recognisable opening and closing. The style of mini-letters tends to be slightly more formal and less conversational. One-liners

are very short messages, often with no salutation and/or sign off. One-liner text messages were often what respondents called 'thinking of you' messages. An example is shown below:

Looking forward to
seeing you!

In these messages the content is secondary, the text shows the recipient that the sender is thinking of them. These messages are used specifically to create a feeling of connectedness between the participants, and this can have significant effects in relationships.

Asynchronous media, such as text messages, are particularly useful for creating connectedness, because they are so unintrusive. In contrast, phone calls are very demanding in terms of attention, because there is a need to show evidence of presence throughout the call, and because the transience of speech means that listening has to occur concurrently and continuously.

People in close relationships think about each other, from time to time, throughout their separate working days. Before SMS they were not able to let the other person know without disturbing them. Text messages have several characteristics that make them ideal for low-key intermittent contact. Although financial cost is relevant, their major advantage is that they require minimal effort; the inconvenience or 'opportunity' cost of sending or receiving a text message is very low. For frequent texters, sending a text involves minimal effort, despite the awkwardness of the small keyboard. This is due in part to repeated practice, but also because predictive text, which was used by nearly all my respondents, has made texting much quicker and easier. Many users can text while doing other things, so that texting does not interrupt any concurrent activities of the sender. A lack of normative expectations also reduces the effort or 'cost' of sending a text message. Unlike letters or phone calls, text message etiquette is minimal. Senders are not expected to engage in any small talk, and can get straight to the point. They do not have to include any opening salutation or closing signature. Consequently, 'one-liners' are perfectly acceptable, although a one line letter, or one sentence phone call, would be seen as rude.

It is tempting to trace text message practices to the technical features of the medium. When text messages were introduced, they were limited to 160 characters, there was no predictive text and new texters will have been unfamiliar with the condensed keyboard. These factors will have reduced expectations of content. My respondents said that when they wrote letters, or even emails, they felt compelled to fill the page, because leaving blank space suggested that they have nothing more to say to that person. Screens on early phones were very small, so that it was difficult to read large messages, and there was little 'blank space' that had to be filled in to avoid seeming rude. New phones have much larger screens and many texters now find it very easy to text, but text message expectations

seem to have been shaped by the earlier technology. Similarly, signatures may have been left out because the technology means that a message is automatically tagged with the sender's name if it is listed in the recipient's phone book.



Old phone circa 1998

Modern phone

Text message etiquette has, I believe, been slow to develop because text messages are often used within limited text circles. This limits the circulation of messages between groups and inhibits the establishment of a definitive text message format. It is not unusual for texters to adopt different styles for different groups of friends. In my research I found that texters had no idea whether the style they adopted was standard practice. For example, only about a third of the messages I collected used any abbreviations at all, but many of my respondents, possibly misled by the media, regarded themselves as extremely unusual because they did not abbreviate.

There are few constraints on the style and content of text messages, and this makes them easy to send. Similarly, receiving a message imposes few obligations on the recipient. They do not have to reply immediately or, unless asked a direct question, to reply at all. If they reply they do not have to include any particular content, and can be very direct. One word answers, such as 'yes', 'OK' or even 'k' are quite common. Delays in response are acceptable, and explained in terms of the recipient's conflicting activities.

These features make text messages an ideal way of letting someone know that one is thinking about them, without disrupting ones' own activities and without interrupting the recipient or any one else in the vicinity. Text messages are nearly always opened immediately, and their arrival is greeted with enthusiasm, perhaps because they impose few obligations on the recipient. Privacy is also relevant; text messages go directly to the recipient and are personal. Others may know that a message has arrived but, unlike a phone call, they cannot eavesdrop. This allows for shared secret intimacy; messages may be brief but they can be very romantic, and may be saved as a symbol of the relationship. Many of my respondents thought that men, in particular, were far more romantic in text messages than they were when face-to-face or on the phone. My respondents explained this in terms of embarrassment; it was much less embarrassing to say something in a text than in person. In addition, there

is no space, and therefore no temptation, to lapse into mundane conversation; consequently senders try to encapsulate their feelings in a few words. In text messages reduced social cues and non-verbal expressions may be compensated by deliberate self disclosure and emotional expression and this in turn, facilitates connectedness.

Text messages are near-synchronous; this means that the recipient knows the other party is thinking of them at *that* particular time, creating a feeling of a shared present. If they reply immediately, both may experience a brief, but intense feeling of connectedness, despite the distance between them. Near-synchronicity also encourages text message conversations; this in turn promotes a casual conversational tone and reduces formality.

'Thinking of you' text messages have created new communication rituals. The most common is the goodnight text – the exchange shows each is thinking of the other as they go to bed. The near synchronicity of text enables the sender to time the arrival of a message fairly accurately. Unlike a phone call, the message doesn't disturb the recipient if he is asleep. Good luck messages are also timed precisely, for instance, to arrive just before the recipient takes a test or has an interview, whereas a phone call would interrupt and be inconsiderate. In contrast, good luck text messages are undemanding and show that one is thinking about the other at this specific time, reflecting a sense of caring and providing emotional support. The ability to time text messages is also exploited on New Year's Eve but, ironically, their popularity at this time undermines their near-synchronicity, as the air-waves become clogged and messages take several hours to reach their destination.

huggie hugs

huge hugs

nnite nite baby
missing u

me 2, nite nite
going to bed

What is the effect of increased connectedness on relationships? My research suggested that text messages are regarded as an important source of emotional support and intimacy in relationships, not only between romantic partners, but also between close friends, and within families, between parents and children, and between siblings. In very close relationships some people maintain a state of 'connected presence' – a term coined by Christian Licoppe – where several communication channels such as text messages, emails and phone calls are used to maintain a stream of contact throughout the day. This sustains a feeling of connectedness; the other person is 'there', available and part of one's life, even though they are physically absent. Although most of the people to whom I spoke to were positive about this, and felt it sustained the relationship, there can be disadvantages. Some respondents said that when they were actually together they had little to talk about, having

already shared the details of their lives. In some cases, the perpetual contact of 'connected presence' was experienced as control. Most, however, were enthusiastic about text messages and their potential for connection without intrusion.

In technological terms, text messages are a rather limited form of communication, but it is these limitations that have shaped the medium, enabling a one line message that, whatever it says, implies 'I am thinking of you'.

Connectedness is relevant to other forms of mediated communication, and may help to explain user attitudes to different media, for example instant messaging. The concept also helps to explain the importance of synchronicity and near-synchronicity; real time communication creates an experience of being together, at that time. Near-synchronous media are particularly useful, because they combine connectness without demanding continuous attention. Connectedness is a neglected dimension of Computer Mediated Interaction which helps to explain media choice and presents major new opportunities for technological development.

Links:

<http://www.kingston.ac.uk/~ku03468/> - Ruth Rettie's site

<http://www.envplan.com/epd/abstracts/d22/d323t.html> - Licoppe, abstract 'Connected Presence article

<http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/pages/view.asp?page=10508> - Reid+Reid, joy of text/talk

This article was written exclusively for *receiver*

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