



The impacts of text messaging on interpersonal communication skills among university students in Malaysia

Liew Khai Wei, University Malaya-Wales

Muhammad Shawal Abdul Rashid, Department of Communication, Sunway University

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Abstract

With the widespread use of texting as a dominant communication tool, concerns have arisen about its potential consequences towards an individual's interpersonal communication skills, particularly among university students. It has made it possible for university students to communicate without having to engage in face-to-face interactions. This research aims to examine the potential impact of text messaging on interpersonal communication skills among university students and mitigate its negative effects on the ability to social connection through face-to-face interactions. This chapter will cover the background of the problem, problem statement, research objectives, research questions and significance of the study. Besides, it will be examined in a quantitative research method. Data can be measured on the variables in the study and collected by applying self-data collection technique.

1.0 Background

The research is conducted among students from several universities in Malaysia. The main driver of this setting was particularly chosen because text messaging has become an essential topic to investigate due to it becoming a common communication tool for students. Indeed, the prevalence of text messaging among students in social and academic settings emphasizes how important it is to understand their patterns during their interpersonal communications. As text messaging is so prevalent among university students, this topic becomes relevant in this context. Texting affects how people communicate and interact with their university peers, organising group projects or maintaining social connections. As a



result, it is essential to investigate its impact on interpersonal skills among university students which are essential for both academic growth and personal growth.

Additionally, the research's focus on strengthening communication abilities and skills in face-to-face interactions is crucial in this study given the growing concerns over students' ability in interpersonal communication skills. Despite the widespread use of text messaging, there is a significant knowledge vacuum about how texting usage affects basic day-to-day interpersonal interactions. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the potential effects of text messaging on students' general communication competency as well as strategies for improving their ability to strike a balance between digital and in-person communication.

Text messaging has become a dominant communication mode, especially among university students. According to Pew Research Center's first survey of smartphone ownership, it stated that 97% of the majority of Americans own cell phones for certain purposes. Other than that, the number of people that own a smartphone has increased from 35% in the year 2011 until 85% nowadays (Smith, 2021). Its convenience and accessibility have led to increased reliance, potentially impacting interpersonal skills. Research suggests both positive and negative consequences, including reduced face-to-face interaction, altered communication styles, and potential effects on academic performance and mental health. Besides, several studies have also reported the impacts of texting among students such as texting while driving, bad sleep habits, lower academic performance and sexting. In short, these observational studies, seeking support via text messaging are proven to have fewer benefits compared to actual social support.

1.1 Research Problem

The increasing prevalence of texting as a primary mode of communication has raised concerns about its impact on interpersonal communication skills. Text messaging enables university students to engage with others without the need for face-to-face interactions. While some studies acknowledge the benefits of text messaging in fostering social connections among students (Tang & Hew, 2022), research has also indicated that digital communication can reduce the frequency of physical meetings and social outings, even leading to less verbal communication overall. A survey conducted by Harris Interactive and Teenage Research Unlimited highlighted that although online communication can bring people together, it can also become the dominant method of interaction, potentially replacing real-life interactions and causing overdependence on digital platforms (Tabares, 2023). Prolonged screen time due to extended use of social networking applications can



negatively affect real-world interpersonal communication, distracting university students from important tasks and hindering their ability to engage in face-to-face interactions.

Thus, it is crucial to identify the challenges associated with excessive texting and its potential consequences on individual communication abilities. Text messaging may interfere with the development and practice of essential interpersonal communication skills in students' daily lives. In particular, students may become less adept at interpreting nonverbal cues such as tone of voice and facial expressions, which are often absent in text-based communication (Ruben et al., 2021). This study specifically investigates the potential effects of texting on university students' interpersonal communication skills and explores ways to mitigate its adverse impact on their ability to engage in meaningful face-to-face interactions.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the impact of text messaging on the interpersonal communication skills of university students. Specifically, the research seeks to determine how texting influences social interactions among this demographic. By examining the factors that contribute to the preference for texting over face-to-face communication, the study will identify potential areas of concern regarding the development of interpersonal skills. Furthermore, the research will assess the specific communication skills that may be affected by excessive texting habits.

1.3 Research Questions

The study will explore the following questions:

1. To what extent does text messaging impact the social interactions of university students?
2. What factors contribute to the choice of texting over face-to-face communication among this population?
3. How do texting habits influence the development of various communication skills among university students?

1.4 Significance of the Study

Understanding the relationship between texting and interpersonal communication is crucial for addressing potential negative impacts. This research provides insights for students and educators to promote balanced communication habits and mitigate the challenges posed by excessive texting.



2.0 Literature Review

Text messaging has revolutionized communication practices, particularly among university students, who rely heavily on digital platforms to stay connected. In today's digitally driven world, the average global screen time has increased significantly, with individuals spending an average of over 6 hours and 58 minutes per day on their screens. This trend is even more pronounced among Generation Z, who reportedly spend an average of 9 hours per day using various devices (Howarth, 2023). The convenience, speed, and immediacy of text messaging have made it a dominant form of communication in this demographic, which has implications not only for their social habits but also for their cognitive and interpersonal development.

Text messaging allows individuals to maintain social connections regardless of physical distance, offering a form of communication that is accessible and immediate. This is particularly valuable for university students who often balance busy schedules of academic, social, and work responsibilities. Texting provides a practical and effective means for maintaining relationships, whether with peers, family, or colleagues. Moreover, research has shown that text messaging can offer emotional support, foster intimacy, and serve as a valuable tool for individuals seeking to maintain social bonds. In particular, it is instrumental in helping students who experience anxiety or social difficulties express themselves in a manner that feels less intimidating than face-to-face interactions (Agnihotri, 2022).

However, despite these advantages, there is growing concern about the potential over-reliance on text-based communication and its impact on interpersonal skills. Excessive use of text messaging can limit opportunities for in-person interactions, which are critical for developing effective communication skills. Interpersonal communication skills, such as active listening, verbal and nonverbal communication, empathy, and conflict resolution, are essential not only for personal relationships but also for academic and professional success. Developing these skills is particularly important for university students, who rely on interactions with their peers and professors to build and refine their communication abilities. The capacity to read and respond to nonverbal cues, in particular, plays a crucial role in effective communication, as it allows individuals to interpret others' emotions and intentions. However, text-based communication, by its very nature, eliminates these nonverbal elements, raising concerns about its long-term effects on communication competence (Chew & Ng, 2021).

Theoretical perspectives, such as the cues-filtered-out theory, provide valuable insights into how the absence of nonverbal cues in text-based communication may hinder interpersonal



skill development. This theory posits that communication through digital, text-based mediums strips away essential nonverbal signals such as body language, facial expressions, and vocal tone, which are vital for accurately interpreting messages and engaging in meaningful interactions. As a result, individuals who predominantly communicate through texting may experience diminished social presence and are more likely to encounter misunderstandings due to the absence of these cues (Chew & Ng, 2021). Over time, these limitations can contribute to deficits in critical communication abilities, such as active listening, the ability to convey empathy, and effective verbal expression, all of which are essential for building strong interpersonal relationships.

Text messaging also fosters a communication style that is often brief and informal. While this may be useful in fast-paced exchanges or casual interactions, it can inadvertently encourage superficial communication habits. The brevity and immediacy of text messages may lead individuals to prioritize speed over substance, reducing opportunities for thoughtful, in-depth conversations. This shift in communication style has raised concerns that students may be less inclined to engage in meaningful dialogue, whether in social, academic, or professional contexts. Furthermore, the constant availability and use of text messaging can contribute to feelings of distraction or divided attention, making it more difficult for individuals to engage in sustained, focused conversations when needed.

This study aims to investigate the potential negative impacts of excessive text messaging on university students' interpersonal communication skills. Specifically, the research seeks to determine whether an increased reliance on texting correlates with a decline in critical communication abilities, such as active listening, verbal expression, and the recognition and interpretation of nonverbal cues. The core hypothesis of this study is that frequent use of text messaging may contribute to a degradation of these skills, ultimately affecting students' ability to engage effectively in face-to-face interactions. A quantitative approach will be employed to examine the relationship between the frequency of text messaging (independent variable) and the proficiency of interpersonal communication skills (dependent variable) among university students.

The cues-filtered-out theory serves as the theoretical underpinning for this research, providing a framework for understanding how the absence of nonverbal cues in text-based communication can hinder the development of essential social skills. The study will collect data on text messaging habits and assess students' interpersonal communication abilities through surveys and assessments that measure their proficiency in areas such as active listening, empathy, conflict resolution, and nonverbal communication. By examining these relationships, this research will contribute to a better understanding of how the widespread



use of text messaging may be shaping the communication habits and skills of university students. Additionally, it will offer insights into the broader implications of digital communication practices on social development, highlighting the importance of maintaining a balance between digital and face-to-face interactions.

Therefore, while text messaging offers numerous benefits, including convenience and emotional support, its potential impact on interpersonal communication skills cannot be overlooked. As university students increasingly rely on digital platforms for communication, it is essential to consider the potential trade-offs involved, particularly the risk of diminishing nonverbal communication abilities and active listening skills. Understanding these dynamics is critical for fostering well-rounded communication skills that will serve students in both their personal and professional lives. This study seeks to provide valuable insights into these issues, offering a nuanced exploration of the relationship between text messaging and interpersonal communication in the university student population.

3.0 Methodology

The research methodology comprises two sections: quantitative and qualitative methods. Both research designs were used to examine the relationship between text messaging and interpersonal communication skills among university students.

For the quantitative method, a questionnaire with three sections was administered to 100 undergraduate students via Google Forms. Section A collected demographic data, Section B assessed text messaging habits using a Likert scale, and Section C measured perceptions of text messaging and interpersonal communication. Data was collected using convenience and purposive sampling techniques to target specific student groups.

Additionally, a qualitative method involved online in-depth interviews with two professional communicators in relevant fields: Assoc Prof Dr. Padma Priya Pillai, Associate Dean (International) School of Arts, Sunway University and Dr. Ong Ai Ling from the School of Media and Communication, Taylor's University. The objective of the interviews was to analyze the role of text messaging in shaping online social dynamics and relationships among university students. Furthermore, the interviews explored the impact of instant messaging platforms on the development of virtual communities and support networks, as well as provided insights into how students can leverage social media and text messaging to foster connection among their peers.



4.0 Data Analysis

According to the demographic information, it shows that 59.6% of respondents are female, while 39.7% are male. Respondents are divided into five age groups, with the largest being 18-29 year olds, representing 137 individuals. Most respondents are undergraduate students. 85.4% of them are active texters, indicating frequent messaging in their daily lives. This explains that university students frequently send and receive messages in their daily life.

The survey explored texting habits and social interactions. A majority, 37.5%, agreed that texting negatively impacts face-to-face communication, while 33.8% strongly agreed. Additionally, 52.2% of respondents admitted they immediately check their phone when receiving notifications. Most of the respondents, in which 41.9%, believed that screen time exceeding six hours is concerning.

Regarding public speaking anxiety, 49.6% agreed they feel nervous in face-to-face situations, and 44.9% felt texting has affected their nonverbal communication skills. Furthermore, emojis are commonly used, with 96.3% saying they include them in texts to express emotions more effectively. However, 58.5% agreed that text messaging conveys emotions well, and 131 respondents acknowledged that text messaging can lead to miscommunication.

Text messaging also plays a role in personal relationships, with 50.7% believing it improves them. Despite this, 87.5% of respondents prefer face-to-face communication when discussing important matters with family, and 72.8% favor the same with friends. Overall, the findings highlight a preference for face-to-face interactions despite frequent texting.

5.0 Discussion

This research seeks to explore the ways in which texting affects university students' interpersonal communication skills, a critical area of inquiry in today's digitally saturated world. With over five billion users globally relying on SMS as a primary communication tool (Lindner, 2023) and a staggering increase of 7,700% in the number of text messages sent from 2007 to 2017 (Rufferty, 2017), texting has become an indispensable medium of interaction. It offers unparalleled convenience and accessibility, enabling people to maintain social connections effortlessly. For university students, in particular, text messaging provides an efficient, low-pressure way to communicate, which is especially beneficial for those who may struggle with social anxiety or time constraints (Tang & Hew, 2022). However, while



texting undoubtedly facilitates connection, its influence on students' interpersonal communication skills is multifaceted and not without challenges.

Through a quantitative survey administered to students at the International University of Malaya-Wales, this research delved into the complexities of texting as it relates to interpersonal communication. The survey findings suggest that while texting can indeed foster social bonds and reduce social anxiety by providing a less intimidating communication medium, it simultaneously poses significant risks to the development of critical face-to-face interaction skills. Specifically, students who rely heavily on texting may experience a decline in their ability to engage in real-time conversations, read body language, and interpret nonverbal cues—skills that are essential for building deeper and more meaningful relationships.

In an effort to disseminate these findings and raise awareness, the research team organized a webinar titled “Unlocking the Power of Text Messaging – Awareness and Impact Among University Students.” This event featured a panel of experts who provided insights into the nuances of this digital phenomenon, discussing both its benefits and its drawbacks. One of the core discussions focused on how texting's convenience often leads to over-reliance, which can interfere with students' academic performance and social development. Key findings from the study highlighted the accessibility and emotional expression texting affords, particularly through the use of emojis, which can mimic some aspects of nonverbal communication. However, the absence of physical presence and more nuanced nonverbal signals, such as tone of voice or facial expressions, poses limitations. These missing elements can hinder the development of crucial interpersonal skills like empathy, active listening, and conflict resolution.

Furthermore, excessive use of text messaging can lead to digital distractions, a growing concern within academic settings. A recent study by Perez-Juarez et al. (2023) found that prolonged engagement with digital devices for communication purposes can impede academic focus, contributing to lower performance in tasks that require sustained attention. In line with this, our research also suggests that students who spend extensive time texting may struggle to maintain concentration during in-person interactions, as their attention becomes fragmented between the digital and physical worlds.

In light of these findings, it is clear that striking a balance between digital communication and face-to-face interaction is essential. While text messaging offers undeniable benefits in terms of convenience and emotional expression, particularly for quick exchanges or maintaining long-distance relationships, it cannot fully substitute the depth and richness of face-to-face



interactions. Physical meetings allow for more meaningful conversations, where emotions can be better conveyed, and empathy can be more effectively communicated through gestures, eye contact, and tone of voice. Thus, encouraging students to prioritize in-person conversations—especially for more intimate or complex discussions—can lead to healthier, more robust communication habits.

The increasing concern over the impact of digital consumption on human relationships has led to a growing emphasis on the importance of digital detoxes and technology breaks. These practices allow individuals to disconnect from their devices, fostering greater attention to real-life interactions and relationships. By promoting these strategies, educational institutions can play a pivotal role in helping students reclaim their focus and develop well-rounded interpersonal skills that will serve them in both personal and professional contexts.

As researchers, understanding the intricate interplay between technology and interpersonal communication is critical in today's fast-paced digital environment. This research contributes to that understanding by revealing how texting, while advantageous in many respects, can also pose significant challenges to communication skill development if overused or relied upon excessively. The ultimate goal is to equip individuals—particularly university students, who are at a formative stage in developing their communication abilities—with the knowledge and tools necessary to navigate the digital age effectively. By fostering a more mindful and balanced approach to communication, we can empower individuals to cultivate interpersonal skills that enhance their relationships, careers, and overall well-being.

In conclusion, while text messaging has transformed how we connect with one another, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations, particularly when it comes to interpersonal communication. The research findings underscore the importance of moderation and suggest that combining the convenience of texting with the richness of face-to-face interaction will lead to more effective and fulfilling communication experiences. As we move forward, further research into the long-term effects of texting on interpersonal skills is warranted, especially as new forms of digital communication continue to evolve. Ultimately, empowering individuals to develop strong, adaptable communication strategies will be vital for thriving in both digital and real-world interactions.

5.1 Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from the study highlights a number of gaps that can be addressed and further examined by future research with regards to the impact of text messaging on interpersonal communication skills among university students. Future studies should achieve a larger sample size that is more representative of the focus group by incorporating a wider range of



ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses and geographic locations. It is ideal to conduct statistical power analysis to find the accurate sample size for the future studies.

A mixed-method study may be conducted by gathering and examining both quantitative and qualitative data. This method enables researchers to further investigate connections and complexity in the study of potential impacts of text messaging. It provides a solid foundation and thorough comprehension of a particular issue. It offers a better way to integrate advantages of both quantitative and qualitative data and minimize the drawbacks. To put it another way, researchers are able to address research problems with adequate depth and breadth when they employ mixed-method study.

Additionally, the widespread use of text messaging has significantly altered the way individuals communicate, especially among younger generations. Effective communication is crucial for organizational success, as it enhances efficiency and productivity. This is particularly important for Malaysian university students, whose academic and professional futures increasingly depend on strong communication skills. To address the potential negative impacts of text messaging on interpersonal communication skills, it is essential to implement a communication curriculum in universities. Universities' courses often rely heavily on text-based instructions, which fails to adequately prepare students for the complexities of real-world communication. Communication courses should be implemented to prioritize practical and interactive learning experiences that emphasize nonverbal communication, emotional intelligence and adaptability.

In most of the modern businesses, individuals are expected to be proficient in both written and vocal communication across a range of platforms, such as emails, video calls, and in-person meetings. For example, developing a comprehensive communication curriculum with more practical exercises, such as group conversations, role-playing or scenarios that require interpretation of body language and tone. This can improve the communication skills of students, and better position them for their professional careers in the future. By implementing these changes, universities can ensure that their graduates are well-prepared to navigate the challenges of the modern workplace and succeed in their personal relationships.

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