



Full length article

Texting's consequences for romantic relationships: A cross-lagged analysis highlights its risks

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 June 2016

Received in revised form

20 January 2017

Accepted 26 January 2017

Available online 30 January 2017

Keywords:

Texting

Romantic relationships

Intimacy

Pphubbing

Smartphones

Conflicts

ABSTRACT

Advancing a theoretical model to explain the negative effects of texting on romantic relationships, we suggest that constant texting leads partners to attend to their cell phones instead of communicating with their significant other (Pphubbing), reducing through two different processes the perceived quality of a romantic relationship. These processes are: (1) conflicts erupting between couples due to texting behavior; and (2) lack of intimacy, stemming from texting activities that displace focus on the romantic partner. To test the model we conducted a two-wave, representative panel survey, separated by one year. A cross-lagged analysis of the two-wave panel demonstrates that frequency of texting leads to lower levels of perceived quality in relationships. This relationship militates against the argument that individuals in unhappy relationships turn to the phone to avoid being together with the partner. Additionally, results support the proposed model suggesting that both mediators -lack of intimacy and conflicts- have negative effects on perceived relationship quality over time.

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1. Introduction

Although often a primary reasons for text messaging is relationship maintenance (Faulkner & Culwin, 2005), and mobile communication research has traditionally shown that cell phone use can strength family bonds (Wei & Lo, 2006), facilitate friendships (Ishii & Wu, 2006) and build mutual support with their contacts (Campbell & Kelley, 2006), co-present phone use during social interactions has also been associated to lower levels of perceived relationship quality (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013). Recent studies have found that mobile phone use during proximal interactions is associated negatively with perceptions of socio-emotional closeness by the conversation partner (Misra, Cheng, Genevie & Yuan, 2016; Roberts & David, 2016). Moreover, individuals who see co-present phone use as more uncivil also present lower levels of trust towards those who multitask with their phones while interact with them (Abeele, Antheunis, & Schouten, 2016; Cameron & Webster, 2011). Similarly, Turkle (2011) argues that individuals who interact with second and third “ties” contacts while they communicate physically with others, feel themselves

closer to those with whom they share online information but distant with whom share a physical location.

In explaining why individuals strain so vehemently to connect with “third parties”, Hampton (2016) argues that smartphones expanded the concept of “mobility” afforded by the first generation of cell phones through which individuals could resolve communicational or functional tasks without being present (Katz & Aakhus, 2002), by integrating in everyday practices two social media affordances: “persistent contact”, the articulation and maintenance of contacts over time (e.g. classmates), and “pervasive awareness”, the constant broadcasting of these persistent contacts through a person-to-network model. Thus, using short and asynchronous communicational exchanges, users today prefers to interact without drawing from the time and resources required to maintain ties through other channels of communication (Hampton, 2016).

A concern is that this pervasive awareness culture, in which digital communication technologies constantly provide knowledge about the interests, location, opinions, and activities embedded in the everyday life events of individual's social ties (Hampton, 2016), is triggering conflicts between romantic partners as they are unable (or unwilling) to disconnect from their networks, in order to connect with their partners (Abeele et al., 2016; Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011; Hall & Baym, 2012; Roberts & David, 2016; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2014). Previous studies on romantic

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relationships have concluded that an important aspect of preserving positive and long-lasting relationships (Reis & Shaver, 1988) is the feeling that the partner cares about the other and will be responsive to his/her needs, regardless the situation (Murray, 1999). Thus, given that individuals are constantly receiving notifications through their phones and have become less involved in co-present interactions due to their simultaneous engagement on their phones, it is more likely that conflicts between romantic partners are being triggered by this perpetual availability (Miller-Ott, Kelly, & Duran, 2012), which in turn would reduce their perceived quality of the relationship.

A word recently added to our digital culture serves to illustrate this phenomenon: Pphubbing, short for “partner phone snubbing” (Roberts & David, 2016). A partner is Pphubbed when the significant other decides to attend the cellphone instead of communicating with him/her. In America 25% of married couples and 42% of unmarried in serious romantic relationships felt their partner was distracted by the cell phone when they are together (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014). This paper’s goal is twofold. First it aims to corroborate that there is a causal relationship between texting and lower perceived quality in a relationship between romantic partners. Secondly, it proposes two different processes through which constant texting can negatively affect that relationship: (1) conflicts erupting between couples due to texting behavior; and (2) lack of intimacy, stemming from texting activities that displace focus on the romantic partner.

1.1. Media as a causal variable

Previous studies have demonstrated an association between frequency of texting and lower relationship quality between romantic partners (Hall & Baym, 2012; Miller-Ott et al., 2012; Roberts & David, 2016; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). However, there is no evidence of the temporal ordering of the variables. Moreover, a negative correlation between texting and relationship well-being can be explained by either a causal link or through self-selection. In the first case, this constant form of communication would be conceived as an anti-social behavior that has negative implications for partners. In the second, texting would be perceived as an opportunity for individuals in a bad relationship to escape from the partner or avoid, psychologically and interactively speaking, being with the partner while they are sharing the same physical location. In fact, research about compulsive Internet use and romantic relationships (e.g. Kerkhof, Finkenauer, & Muusses, 2011) has integrated communication theories to explain why individuals may use media content as a way to escape from a bad relationship (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004) or to regulate their affective states (Zillmann, 1988). Thus, texting would be used as a mental retreat for partners who feel uncomfortable with their significant others (escapism), whereas mood management theory (Zillmann, 1988) suggests that people search for media to induce a positive mood, therefore partners who experience unpleasant situations may feel more motivated to use their phones to get into a better mood.

Consequently, according to the first argument, texting would weaken romantic relationship (the negative effect hypothesis), whereas in the second case, for individuals in unhappy relationships, texting involvement would be the result of their poor emotional mood state, and they would look for this “relief behavior” as it provides release from the partner. Thus, it would be the effect rather than the cause of the negative correlation between texting and relationship well-being. Therefore, a longitudinal study is a necessary step towards establishing a causal ordering of the variables, as it is equally conceivable that lower quality interactions trigger co-present phone use. Further, although there are some experimental work about texting and romantic relationships (e.g.

Abeebe et al., 2016), this type of research may not necessarily reflect the relationship between partners when they are forced to perform an instrumental task. Consequently, this would apparently be the first longitudinal study examining the relationship between texting and the quality of romantic relationships, which could help researchers to refine the knowledge about the direction of the effects.

1.2. The conflict explanation

For a strong, stable, and mutually satisfying relationship, partners must be there for each other (Roberts, 1982). However, more important than merely being in each other’s presence, it is how much actors focus on their significant others instead of themselves or are otherwise distracted (Davis, 1985). This includes what might be termed external and internal distractions (Leggett & Rossouw, 2014). Thus, when one partner uses the cellphone constantly, he or she might be less responsive to the other’s needs, which may produce that both parts feel a decrease in their relationship satisfaction, commitment and communication. Interestingly, “smart” phones seem to be creating thoughtless situations in which partners perceive that they have to compete with a machine in order to get the attention from the person who supposedly loves him/her most (Turkle, 2011). This behavior illustrates the “absent presence” dynamic described by Misra et al. (2016); and when romantic partners exhibit “divided attention” constantly during proximal interactions, they decrease not only their willingness but also their ability to spend quality time together. Thus, whereas research by Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach (2000) concluded that interpersonal interactions between partners are among the most important predictors of relationship satisfaction, Duran et al. (2011) found that frequency of disruptions caused by personal uses of phone were annoyances for partners during time they spend together, undermining their relationship satisfaction.

Valkenburg and Peter (2007) were the first to apply the time displacement theory to explain the deleterious effects of media use on relationship satisfaction. The theory situates media consumption and personal relationships at two ends of a continuum (McCombs, 1972). The authors argue that given the limited amount of leisure time available to individuals, use of media constrains the different communicative activities they can engage in; therefore, consumption on the “entertainment side” has taken away from the resources allocated at the other end, such as meaningful interactions with one’s spouse (Coyné et al., 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). In fact, Roberts and David (2016) concluded that technology interference (e.g., computers, TV, iPads, cell phones) caused conflict over technology use within romantic relationships: texting during a conversation with a romantic partner tacitly communicates that interacting with one’s partner is less important than what is available on the cell phone, which consequently affects negatively the interaction between them. Supporting this view, Przybylski and Weinstein (2013) found that interruptions and distraction caused by cellphone use creates conflicts in romantic relationships, and Coyné et al. (2012) concluded that as men’s videogame playing increased so too did relationship conflict over media. Although Chesley (2005) 10 years ago found that use of cell phones blurred work-home boundaries and increased negative mood while lowering family life satisfaction, this effect today appears even more disruptive as individuals have developed a fear of missing out (FoMO) events, experiences, and conversations happening across their extended social circles (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013). These forces have led individuals to internalize the use of their smartphones into daily routines inducing them to be constantly connected (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016).

The theoretical framework provided by symbolic interactionism

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