



## Research Report

## Gender and texting: Masculinity, femininity, and gender role ideology

Shirley Matile Ogletree<sup>\*</sup>, Joshua Fancher, Simran Gill

Texas State University—San Marcos, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666-4616, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Texting, although one of the newer forms of computer-mediated communication, has become very popular, especially among teens. This research, using self-report measures, explored college students' perceptions of texting, including texting's leading to relationship conflict and interfering with classes, as well as how attitudes towards texting were related to masculinity, femininity, and gender-linked (traditional)/gender-transcendent (nontraditional) attitudes. Our participants ( $n = 183$ ) more frequently used emoticons than abbreviations, especially vulgar abbreviations. Over 70% reported at least minimal texting interference with classes/college preparation, and over 60% indicated that their own or their significant other's texting contributed to relationship conflict. The only significant male–female difference was in sexually explicit messages received, but positive associations were found between more traditional gendered attitudes and texting interfering with studying/school, with relationship conflict, and, for men only, “sexting” and using vulgar abbreviations. Other findings included gender transcendence being negatively associated with the reported number of messages sent as well as being bothered by texting; femininity also predicted frequency of emoticon use. Our research suggests that individual differences in texting may be related to variables associated with gendered self-perceptions and traditional gender roles.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the more recent developments in computer-mediated communication (CMC) is text messaging. According to Ling and colleagues (Ling, Bertel, & Sundsøy, 2011), texting is particularly popular with teens and emerging adults. Using a dataset of 394 million messages sent by Norwegian users ranging in age from 10 to 90, Ling et al. (2011) found that nineteen-year-olds sent 80 times the number of texts that would be expected if individuals of all ages texted equally. Moreover, examining a subset of the data, 64.8 million texts sent to same-age individuals, Ling and colleagues concluded that same-age texting peaked at age 19 and then decreased with age every year from ages 19 to 25.

Similarly, teens in the U.S. reported a high volume of text messaging. According to the Pew Internet Project, based on telephone surveys of 800 nationally representative teens and one of their parents, 54% of 12- to 17-year-olds surveyed in 2009 indicated that they texted daily, up from 38% in 2008 (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). Of those teens who texted, half

reported sending at least 50 messages a day, and almost a third sent over 100 texts per day, equivalent to over 3000 text messages per month. From 2009 to 2011, the median number of text messages increased from 50 to 60 (Lenhart, 2012).

Since text messaging has quickly become an important part of the daily lives of many teenagers, parents as well as scholars have become concerned about possible effects. Areas of interest have included how cell phone use and texting might impact reading proficiency (Hofferth & Moon, 2012), formal and informal writing (Rosen, Chang, Erwin, Carrier, & Cheever, 2010), and sedentary behaviors and obesity (Leatherdale, 2010). The relation of college students' attachment styles to texting and sexting, sending text messages with sexually explicit material, has also been considered (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012).

## 1.1. CMC and gender comparisons

Another focus in communication research has involved gender comparisons. Gender differences have been reported related to a wide variety of forms, including computer-mediated communication such as e-mails and instant messaging (van der Meij, 2007) and video games (Ogletree & Drake, 2007). Gender comparisons related to texting have indicated that females text more than males. Based on a 2008 self-report survey, using a representative

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, 601 University Drive, Texas State University, San Marcos, TX 78666-4616, USA. Tel.: +1 512 245 3156.

E-mail addresses: [so01@txstate.edu](mailto:so01@txstate.edu) (S.M. Ogletree), [jlf89@txstate.edu](mailto:jlf89@txstate.edu) (J. Fancher), [sg1387@txstate.edu](mailto:sg1387@txstate.edu) (S. Gill).

national sample of 10- to 18-year-olds in the United States, Hofferth and Moon (2012) found that the number of messages sent by girls exceeded messages sent by boys for all age groups, although the comparison was significant only in the upper age groups (13- to 15-year-olds and 16- to 18-year-olds). Older girls, 14–17 years of age, in the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported a median of 100 text messages per day, compared to the older boys' median of 50 (Lenhart, 2012). Similarly, Leatherdale (2010), using self-report data from a sample of students in fifth to eighth grades in Ontario, Canada, found that females, compared to males, spent more communication time (using the phone for talking and texting) per day.

Furthermore, differences in texting styles have been noted. Rosen and colleagues (Rosen et al., 2010) found that females, answering questions on Survey Monkey related to daily electronic communication, were more likely to report using “smilies” and special characters like “frown” to denote or intensify emotional states than were males. Similarly Tossell et al. (2012), analyzing 158,098 iPhone text messages, reported that females were more likely than males to send and receive messages with emoticons and had a higher “emoticon-to word ratio”, although only about 4% of text messages contained emoticons.

### 1.2. CMC and gender roles

In addition to male/female participant comparisons, variability within males and females based on masculinity and/or femininity may be relevant to communication styles. In research with undergraduates at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Palomares (2004) found that gender schematic men and women, versus androgynous and undifferentiated men and women, were more likely to use gender-typical language in e-mails after reading paragraphs making their own gender salient. Perhaps gender-related characteristics, such as masculinity and femininity, would also be relevant for other college students who send text messages.

A related concept is the extent to which individuals agree with traditional gender roles. Gender-linked, compared to gender-transcendent, attitudes (Baber & Tucker, 2006) might be expected to impact traditional gendered behavior when texting. In other words, women with gender-linked (traditional attitudes) compared to women with gender transcendent (egalitarian gender role attitudes), might differ in texting styles. Similarly, gender-linked (traditional) men may differ from gender transcendent (egalitarian) men in texting styles. For men and women with more gender-linked attitudes, traditional gendered socialization could impact texting, particularly related to sending and receiving text messages with sexual content.

Girls are being socialized to be sexy, with messages imparted at young ages (Levine & Kilbourne, 2008; Starr & Ferguson, 2012). Boys also may be impacted by societal messages related to pressure to engage in sexual intercourse. In a review of sexual socialization messages in different kinds of mass media, Wright (2009) reported that prime-time television shows portrayed masculinity in men as being “related to their sexual ‘conquests’” (p. 185). In a similar vein Morgan and Zurbriggen (2007) found that 92% of female participants in the U.S. who were interviewed about an initial dating relationship described males' interest in being sexual; additionally, women tended to see this sexual interest as “their partner's ‘being a guy’” (p. 532). Male participants, though, described their female partners as setting boundaries or limits related to sexual behaviors. In other words, female adolescents are socialized to be sexy but not sexual while male adolescents may be more likely to engage in sexting because of pressure to be sexual to prove their masculinity. Moreover, those adolescents with more traditional, gender-linked attitudes may be more impacted by the respective socialization associated with their

gender; males and females with more gender-linked attitudes could be expected to be influenced to a greater extent by societal messages related to male–female sexuality.

Furthermore, the “tough” and “rough” persona associated with masculinity may also be related to cursing. Based on research assistants' observations, Jay and Jay (2013), for example, found that males, compared to females, more frequently cursed. Men higher in gender-linked attitudes may be more likely to use vulgar abbreviations compared to women and men with less traditional attitudes.

### 1.3. The present study

The purpose of the present research was to further explore texting among a sample of college students. In addition to questions assessing texting, we included measures of masculinity, femininity, gender-linked attitudes, and gender transcendent attitudes.

Based on the limited past research and gender role expectations, we made the following predictions:

- (1) Females and more feminine individuals were predicted to send more text messages and use more emoticons. In other words, women were hypothesized to send more text messages and use more emoticons than men, and femininity was hypothesized to be a positive predictor of the number of text messages sent and number of emoticons used. More feminine individuals, regardless of being male or female, would send more text messages and use more emoticons than individuals scoring lower in femininity.
- (2) Men, compared to women, and individuals, regardless of participant sex, who scored high in masculinity were predicted to send and receive more text messages with sexual content (sexting) as well as use more vulgar abbreviations. In other words, masculinity scores regardless of sex were hypothesized to be positively associated with sexting and with using vulgar abbreviations.
- (3) Related to differential socialization for males and females, gender-linked attitudes in men were hypothesized to positively predict both sending and receiving “sexting” as well as vulgar abbreviation use. However, gender-linked attitudes in women were hypothesized only to predict sending sexually explicit texts.

Although we were also interested in exploring other aspects of texting, such as college students' texting during class, we did not find related research leading us to make specific predictions.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Students (40 men, 143 women) in a life-span developmental psychology class at a central Texas, USA, university participated as an extra credit option. Most participants were 25 years of age or younger (94%) and described their socioeconomic status as upper-middle, middle, or lower-middle class (92%). Participants reported their ethnicity as Caucasian (53%), Hispanic (34%), African–American (7%), Asian (3%), and “other” (2%).

### 2.2. Materials and procedure

After responding to four demographic questions, students completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1977), 35 questions about texting, the Social Roles Questionnaire (SRQ;

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