DRUNK MIND SPEAKS A SOBER HEART: DRUNK TEXTING IN THE UNDERGRADUATE POPULATION

By

ALEXANDRA KILGORE

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Alexandra Kilgore presented on the 8th of May, 2014.

_______________________________
Keith Jenkins
Professor Directing Thesis

_______________________________
Grant Cos
Thesis Advisor

_______________________________
Pat Scanlon
Department Chair
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The purpose of this study is to investigate the motives behind undergraduate students’ drunk texting behavior. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to address the following questions: 1. What motivates undergraduate students’ drunk texting behavior? and 2. What is the significance of the medium?

A convenience sample of 58 students was taken online and in communications classes and revealed eleven motives for drunk dialing: Entertainment, Coordination, Confession of Emotion, Lack of Accountability, Lowered Inhibition, Sexuality, Social Upkeep, Convenience, Security, Censorship, and Privacy. These eleven themes were then grouped into three overarching, interacting motives: Relationships, Technological Availability, and Intoxication. These motivations are consistent with existing taxonomies but expand upon medium-specific gratifications sought by users.
Introduction

In today’s constantly-connected age, many college students can relate to the experience of waking up late on a Sunday afternoon—groggy, dry-mouthed, and with a throbbing headache to boot—only to roll over and face the judgmental glare of an LED screen and all-too-full SMS outbox.

Although the act of “drunk texting” (sending text messages while intoxicated and perhaps against the better judgment of one’s sober self) is not particularly well researched in the communication or human behavioral fields, it is nonetheless a prevalent and well-acknowledged phenomenon in popular culture amongst the college-aged demographic. As early as 2005, The New York Times and New York Post each published articles on so-called “texting under the influence” (Huhn, 2005; Lee, 2005). A year earlier, Virgin Mobile debuted a service designed specifically to prevent drunk texts wherein customers could request that the carrier block certain numbers until 6 AM. A quick internet search of the term turns up nearly 1.5 million results, spanning from compilations of the “most hilarious drunk texts ever” to lamentations over the lack of mobile applications designed to prevent such communication.

Definition

For the purposes of this study, “drunk texting” refers to the phenomenon of sending text messages while intoxicated that one would not have sent while sober.

Research Questions & Justification

Constantly evolving mobile technology has created a gap in existing research regarding the use of text messaging (not cell phones in general) for communication while users are intoxicated.
This study aims to establish the prevalence of drunk texting and seeks to identify why college students drunk text, specifically within the context of two questions: 1. What motivates undergraduates’ drunk texting behavior? and 2. What is the significance of the medium?

The research revolves around identifying the reasons behind text messaging (an asynchronous, computer mediated form of communication) as the chosen medium, as opposed to the more traditional “drunk-dialing” (voice calling), other mediums made available by cell phones (video calling, social media), or even face-to-face interaction. This perception of the audience as active participant in media choice is part and parcel of the Theory of Uses and Gratifications, which states that users are motivated to choose specific media to address specific needs.

From a cognitive-physiological perspective, Alcohol Myopia Theory helps to address the lowered inhibitions and impaired perception brought on by alcohol, as well as the selective reception of intoxicated individuals to social cues.

In addition to the Theory of Uses and Gratifications, a number of relevant communication theories also offer lenses for interpretation. Theories that fall under the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) umbrella help to distinguish texting from face-to-face interactions or more synchronous mediums. Especially useful is the Hyperpersonal dimension of CMC, which touches upon the self-selection and careful presentation of content provided by asynchronous, text-based mediums.
Literature Review

Ubiquity of Text Messaging

According to a 2011 Pew Internet survey, young adults are by far and away the heaviest users of both cell phones and text messaging services. Men and women age 18-29 send three times the amount of text messages per day than any other age group, averaging nearly 110 messages per day. Among this group, heavy text message users are also more likely to prefer text messaging over voice calls, with 55% of users in favor of texting (Smith, 2011).

According to Nielsen's 2013 data, smartphone proliferation in the United States is up to 65%. Among college-aged students age 18-24, smartphone ownership is nearly 80% (The Nielsen Company, 2013). The sheer ubiquity of these devices put endless mediums for communication and distraction at college students’ fingertips all day, every day.

Theory of Uses and Gratifications

Uses and gratifications (U&G) is a user-driven theory, which suggests that users select among competing media for those which best suit their needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). According to the theory, users are self-aware enough to be able to reliably report or identify their own motivations for selecting a given media. This is a departure from early communication research, which regarded the audience as a primarily passive consumer whose media use was divided into dichotomous categories: instrumental, or task driven, and intrinsic, those needs which are social or personal in nature.

Since its inception, uses and gratifications research has faced criticism and backlash from more traditionally-minded scholars. In his 2000 article, Thomas E. Ruggiero offers a
history of U&G research and asserts its utility in today’s computer-driven communications. Therein, he asserts that current and future models and taxonomies must take into account interactivity and asynchronicity as new frameworks for gratifications sought and obtained.

The primary assertion of Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch’s original U&G research is the shift away from the audience as a passive observer, instead focusing on the needs and gratifications users seek from different media. In the 40s and 50s, early research with U&G perspective was “primarily descriptive, seeking to classify the responses of audience members into meaningful categories” (Ruggiero, 2000) and lacked clear theoretical framework. The reliance of these studies on self-report, combined with an apparent disregard for the “social origin of needs” that draw audiences to specific media (Ruggiero, 2000) lead to continued criticism of the theory.

In the 1960s, U&G research was further refined, with authors seeking to define and operationalize social and psychological influences on media selection. Communication scholars sought to establish taxonomies of gratifications that might apply more generally to human interactions with media. In the next decade, theoretical framework evolved to take into account users’ cognitive and affective states at the time of selection (Ruggiero, 2000). In the 80s and 90s, this idea was further refined to allow for both high- and low-involvement audiences. Additional situation factors, such as expectations and ritualistic or habitual use on the part of users, also influence more modern U&G research.

In modern applications of uses and gratifications, researchers have continued to focus on the “sociological, psychological and structural variables” that influence audience choice. With the rise of the Internet and computer mediated communication, scholars have attempted to realign U&G theory with the unique offerings of this novel medium, namely:
interactivity, demassification, and asynchronicity. Interactivity, in particular, lends credence to the role of an active audience. In a web forum, for example, communication and information dissemination is wholly dependent upon user interactions (Ruggiero, 2000). Though “lurkers”, or non-participating members, may benefit from forums without direct interaction, the very existence of these mediums would not be possible without audience contribution.

Two theories that offer supplemental views of audience activity and autonomy are Dependency Theory and Deprivation Theory. Media Dependency theory suggests that audiences rely upon mediums for either information seeking or ritualistic use and are thereby dependent upon said mediums. This dependency affects users’ motives for use. Deprivation theory is a sociological theory that, when applied to communication and media use, studies the effect on audiences when certain medias are made unavailable to them. Certain audience members may feel more or less deprived based on their exposure, environment and social circumstances (Ruggiero, 2000).

The computer mediated aspect of text messaging, as well as the diversification of uses for smartphones (which now contain games, email, search engines, alarm clocks and countless other utilities), raises the same questions about asynchronicity and demassification as other modern mediums. In this way, text messaging offers an intriguing juxtaposition between traditional and modern uses and gratifications research. Additionally, the ubiquity of and reliance upon cellphones within the undergraduate population brings up the complication of dependency and ritualized use.

Applications of U&G
A number of studies have been conducted establishing taxonomies for uses and gratifications of cell phone users. From these studies, a number of trends in uses and gratifications sought have emerged. More recent studies (Leung and Wei, 2000; Ferris and Kleman, 2008; and Grellhoel and Punyanu-Carter, 2012) influenced perhaps by the increasing versatility of smart phones, have reflected a shift in gratifications sought.

Leung and Wei (2000) conducted a study to determine the differences in uses and gratifications sought by users of mobile phones versus traditional landline telephones. Motivated by research on conventional telephones, the authors identified gratification factors that addressed both intrinsic (personal, social) and instrumental (task-oriented) motivations. The authors used a probability random sample of 834 adults in Hong Kong, chosen from telephone directories, and administered phone interviews. In reflection of cellular telephone adoption rates at Hong Kong at this time, approximately half of the respondents (446) were cell phone users while the other half were not.

Leung and Wei’s study relied upon existing taxonomies for traditional telephones, with the addition of mobile-specific motives, which respondents rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The study examined 27 gratifications in seven categories: fashion/status, affection/sociability, relaxation, mobility, immediate access, instrumentality, and reassurance. Results of the study served to confirm gratification factors from the conventional telephone (sociability, instrumentality, reassurance) were applicable to cell phone use, while additional factors, specifically mobility and immediate access, were unique to mobile devices.

A prominent finding of the Leung and Wei study is the use of cell phones for instrumental purposes as a more frequent and stronger motive as compared to
conventional telephones. This is likely due to a number of factors. Though Hong Kong’s cell phone adoption rate in 2000 was significantly higher than the United States’ at that time (50% and 29% respectively), mobile phones were still a relatively new technology. Early adopters were predominantly businesspeople using the devices for instrumental, not intrinsic, purposes. Additionally, the novelty of cellular technology influenced its high price relative to conventional telephones. Intrinsic, social or non-essential communications could be conducted at far less expense to the user on a conventional telephone than on a cellular phone.

Ferris and Kleman (Ferris & Kleman, 2008) conducted a study to examine the motivations behind undergraduate students’ drunk dialing behavior. For the purposes of this study, “drunk dial” was defined as “making phone calls while intoxicated that you otherwise may not have made at that moment”. In Phase 1 of this two part study, Ferris and Kleman conducted an open-response survey to establish the motivations behind drunk dialing behavior “without any prompting or direction from the researchers”. In the fall of 2006, a sample of 385 students enrolled in a basic communication class participated in the study. Women (60.8%) were more strongly represented than men (39%). Of the 286 respondents who had drunk dialed others, the average number of drunk dials per month was 5.66. For those 366 respondents on the receiving end of drunk dials, the average number received per month was 6.37.

Using open coding, Ferris and Kleman identified ten common themes among respondents’ explanation of drunk dialing motivates: Lack of Inhibition, Coordination, Status, Boredom, Social Connection, Homophily/Reciprocity, Confession of Emotion, Lack of Accountability, Entertainment, and Sexual Initiation. These themes were used to create
the Drunk Dialing Motives Index (DDMI), which was then used in Phase 2. The DDMI consists of 45 statements grouped into each of the 10 thematic categories, which respondents rate on a Likert-type scale from 1-5 according to relevance to their own drunk dialing habits.

For Phase 2 of this study, in the fall of 2007, Ferris and Kleman presented the Drunk Dialing Motives Index (with categories removed and order randomized to prevent response bias) to 412 undergraduates enrolled in the same communication course. Again, the sample consisted of more women (59.2%) than men (40.8%), and a majority (89.3%) were Caucasian.

After analyzing the responses from Phase 2, the initial 10 categories were narrowed to 8 that were capable of predicting drunk dialing frequency: Entertainment, Confidence, Coordination, Sexuality, Relational Maintenance, Lack of Inhibition, Confession of Emotion, and Reconnection. Four of these were determined to be “individually significant predictors of drunk dialing frequency” (Ferris & Kleman, 2008). Entertainment, Sexuality, Lack of Inhibition and Confession of Emotion each significantly predicted the frequency of drunk dialing. In other words, those students who are motivated by these four significantly predictive factors tend to drunk dial more frequently than those who were not motivated by these reasons.

In Phase 2, Ferris and Kleman also sought to identify difference in men and women regarding drunk dialing motivation. Though there was no difference in drunk dialing frequency between the sexes, in all categories except for sexuality, women reported higher means. To explain this deviation, Ferris and Kleman conclude that while women are spurred to drunk dial due to alcohol's effect on communication (increased confidence,
higher self-disclosure), and for interpersonal reasons (relationship maintenance, reciprocity), “men are most motivated to drunk dial for sexual purposes” (Ferris & Kleman, 2008). This correlates with existing research, which suggests that men are more likely to be stimulated by alcohol, while women are more likely to be sedated (Fillmore & Weafer, 2004). This stimulation could be reflected in increased sexual arousal in men while intoxicated.

Though Ferris and Kleman touch briefly on text messaging and its implication on drunk dialing, they mention only that the positive or negative consequences of a drunk dial could be exacerbated in the event the drunk dial was recorded, via text message, voicemail, or some other medium.

Grellhesl and Punyanu-Carter sought to identify the uses and gratifications of text messaging sought by undergraduate mobile phone users (Grellhesl & Punyanunt-Carter, 2012). Grellhesl and Punyanu-Carter also examined sex differences in motivations for text messaging, asking “Are there significant differences in gratifications between undergraduate male and females who use text messaging?”

A survey was conducted with a final sample of 513 undergraduate students enrolled in a Communications class. Within the respondents, sex was fairly evenly represented (with 55% and 45% males and females, respectively). Respondents were primarily Caucasian (67%) and represented a mix of both under- and upperclassmen.

Using a questionnaire based on a 2005 study on the uses and gratifications of instant messaging, this study featured 47 questions rated on 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These questions were based on existing taxonomies and compared seven variables for motivation: socialization/affection,
relaxation/escape, accessibility/mobility, status, entertainment, coordination for business, and information seeking.

Immediate access and mobility ranked as the most significant motivation, followed closely by relaxation/escape and entertainment. Socialization/affection and status ranked as the least significant. The insignificance of status can be explained by the ubiquity of cell phone ownership. While owning a mobile phone may have been perceived as a status symbol a decade ago, as seen in Leung and Wei’s 2000 study, this is hardly the case in today’s mobile-driven world. Where socialization and affection are concerned, Grellhesl and Punyanu-Carter raise the idea that these needs are instead being met by social media and similar applications also available on mobile phones.

In comparing differences between men and women (though there exists some discrepancy in the ranking of motivations between each group), women were found to assign more significance than men to every motivation. Grellhesl and Punyanu-Carter suggest that perhaps text messaging allows women to fulfil “dual roles”, that is, to maintain connections and concern for the feelings of others and remain available to those others at all times, while simultaneously having the independence to pursue their own interests. Conversely, men may not feel the same pressure to balance personal and societal demands.

Alcohol Myopia Theory

A foundational body of literature and research in the study of alcohol and its effect on behavior can be found in Steele and Josephs’ Alcohol Myopia Theory (AMT). Prior to the creation of this theory, research efforts regarding the effects of alcohol and alcohol intoxication had returned varied and contradictory results. Studies had highlighted alcohol’s inducing aggressive behavior, as well as its increasing benevolence; both sedating
and arousing; alternately heightening and suppressing anxiety and stress; inflating self-image and inducing depression (Steele & Josephs, 1990). In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Steele and Josephs focused on the behavioral and psychological, rather than pharmacological, effects of alcohol intoxication.

To assess these effects, Steele and Josephs focused on alcohol’s impairment of perception and cognitive processes. In doing so, a clear trend emerged: in the event of an inhibition conflict, wherein an individual’s ability to process social and behavioral cues is reduced, alcohol renders us more susceptible to only the most immediate and salient cues, which increases the extremity of reactions (Steele & Josephs, 1990). The “myopia” or shortsightedness that alcohol induces limits one’s ability to process the more complex implications of one’s actions. Steele and Josephs explain this situation succinctly: “Alcohol makes us captive to an impoverished version of reality in which the breadth, depth and timeline of our understanding is constrained... a state in which one can see the tree, albeit more dimly, but misses the forest altogether” (Steele & Josephs, 1990).

This rather straightforward assessment of alcohol’s effect comes with a number of conditions, however. The essential criterion of this theory is the existence of an inhibition conflict. This conflict comes in the form of contradicting cues, whether internal or external, divided into two categories: provoking and inhibiting. Provoking cues are those which elicit a response, while inhibiting cues, which “require further processing to grasp” (Steele & Josephs, 1990), restrain actions and responses. Only the most salient cues in a given situation, typically those provoking a specific response, are apparent to the intoxicated mind. This lack of attention to consequence leads to an absence of reasoned decision making, favoring instead immediate action and reaction. Conversely, in instances where
there is no inhibition conflict, where provoking cues are weak for example, alcohol should not influence any more extreme behavior or reaction.

To test this theory, Steele and Josephs analyzed 34 studies on the effect of alcohol intoxication for the influence inhibition conflict on extremeness of response. Their findings revealed, unsurprisingly, that intoxicated individuals typically reacted with more extremeness than their sober counterparts. In correlation with AMT, intoxicated subjects in situations with high inhibition conflict reacted significantly more extremely than both sober subjects and intoxicated subjects in situations with low inhibition conflicts (Steele & Josephs, 1990). Steele and Josephs refer to this phenomenon as the “powerful mediating effect of conflict” (1990).

Steele and Josephs apply Alcohol Myopia Theory to two further degrees: the effect of alcohol on ego and self-perception, and its effect on psychological stress. Where self-perception is concerned, intoxication inflates the ego when self-evaluation relates to traits or dimensions that are valuable or important to the individual. This is yet another example of inhibition conflict, in this instance, between the “real” and “ideal” self. Intoxication prevents one from accessing information that contradicts one’s desired self-image (Steele & Josephs, 1990). Embarrassment and deficiencies are less accessible to the drunken mind when immediate cues instead provoke a favorable self-evaluation.

In the matter of alcohol and psychological stress, Steele and Josephs make a concise argument: in the presence of distracting activities, alcohol decreases the drinker’s attention to stress and worry (Steele & Josephs, 1990). Immediate activity takes attention away from stressors by virtue of narrowed perception. The authors dub this interpretation the attention-allocation model. In instances where a distracting activity is not present “and
stressful cognitions are salient, alcohol actually increases psychological stress” (Steele & Josephs, 1990). Again, alcohol’s effect of behavior and emotion is viewed through the lens of shortsightedness and decreased perception.

In summation, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding Alcohol Myopia Theory. First, alcohol can increase the extremeness of behavior in situations involving inhibition conflicts. Second, alcohol, in tandem with distracting activity, can decrease psychological stress. Lacking a distracting activity, alcohol serves to amplify salient stressors and thereby increases anxiety and depression. Lastly, “alcohol is a reliable means of self-inflation” (Steele & Josephs, 1990), especially when the traits being evaluated are personally important to the drinker.

Alcohol Myopia Theory offers a vital foundation for understanding the phenomenon of drunk texting. Most especially, AMT helps to explain the notion that text messages sent while intoxicated may not have been sent while sober. Alcohol’s ability to increase the extremeness of behavior can easily explain drunken communication; in situations where salient cues promote communication or interaction, individuals under the influence of alcohol are far more inclined to reach out, without regard for the consequences of their actions. For the drunk texter, the cell phone itself may serve as a provoking cue. The immediate availability of one’s address book, archived communications, photos and social networks all serve as provocation and therein promote interaction or communication.

Incoming text messages also allow ample opportunity for provocation. Take for example a situation wherein an undergraduate is attracted to his platonic female roommate. While intoxicated, he receives a text from her: “Hope you’re having a good night! ;)” Beside this message appears her very flattering contact photo. In his drunken
state, this message serves as a strong provoking cue: he should admit his attraction and proposition her. Sober, the student would quickly realize that this confession might have a number of undesirable consequences: an awkward living situation, an offended housemate. Under the influence of alcohol, however, these inhibiting factors are not apparent. This situation is a prime example of conflicting response pressures.

In the absence of a strong inhibition conflict, alcohol should not increase extremeness of behavior. Imagine the same scenario, but now, the student is due to move out of his apartment the following week. In this situation, alcohol or no, there is no major negative consequence to admitting his attraction to his roommate. Alternately, perhaps the student does not see the message from his roommate because he is busy engaging another young lady. In both instances, provoking or inhibiting cues are weak, and intoxicated behavior should more closely resemble sober behavior.

In examining the motivations behind drunk texting, it is vital to consider the shift in both motivations and actions when intoxication coincides with an inhibition conflict.

**Computer Mediated Communication**

In the past two decades, communication researchers have grown more and more interested in the characteristics of computer mediated interactions. As computer mediated communication (CMC) has become ubiquitous in our everyday lives, it has shaped the very nature of the messages we share, from conception and formation, to impressions and interpretations (Walther, 2011). Theories that fall under the vast umbrella of CMC are diverse and many and are evolving in tandem with the relentless advance of communications technology.
An early CMC theory, Williams and Christie’s Social Presence Theory (1987) suggests that various communications mediums vary in richness and their ability to transmit non-verbal cues. The theory purports that the less availability of cues a medium possess, the less involvement users will experience with one another (Walther, 2011). This theory has faced criticism and possible obsolescence as researchers have proved time and time again that relationships formed through computer mediated communications can be just as, if not more, intimate and fulfilling than those formed in the real world. This criticism has lent itself to the dichotomy between early, minimal-cue CMC (email, chat rooms and instant messaging) and next-generation CMC (social media, mobile applications), which features multimedia functions and therefore a greater capacity for cues (Walther, 2011).

Text messaging toes the line between first- and next-generation CMC. Though text-only upon its inception, users now have the ability to send pictures, videos, animations, emoticons and audio clips via SMS. Additionally, as smart phones continue to advance as multimodal communication devices, the division between minimal-cue and cue-rich media is continually blurred. Again, the ubiquity of text messaging and computer mediated interactions, especially among college-aged populations, poses interesting questions regarding the difference between face-to-face and limited-cue, mediated communications. As text messaging becomes more and more the flagship medium of youth, how will users discern the quality of their communications? What serves as their control?

These concerns are again compounded by Daft and Lengel’s Media Richness Theory (1986), which assesses a medium’s relative efficiency by examining four criteria: 1. the capacity of cues supported by the medium, 2. the immediacy of feedback provided by the
medium, 3. the extent to which the medium allows for natural language, and 4. degree of message personalization (Walther, 2011). Traditionally, face-to-face communication is considered the richest media, with decreasing degrees awarded to telephone calls, letters, professional correspondence and so on. Aforementioned low-cue communications may also be interpreted as more lean and therefore less effective media. This interpretation struggles when applied to modern, next-generation media. Walther uses email to highlight this point: though it allows for natural language, immediate response (especially in an age when email is pushed straight to the smartphones in our pockets) and customization, its low-cue nature labels it a less rich media (Walther, 2011). This perspective fails to take into account variation in user preference and values.

Enter Social Influence Theory. Established in 1987 by Fulk, Schmitz, Steinfeld and Power, this approach moves away from a strict definition of media richness and instead interprets richness as a “perceptually based phenomenon describing how expressively a media may be used” (Walther, 2011). This perspective ties nicely into the theory of Uses and Gratifications and its assessment of audience members as active, informed participants in their media choices. Similar to U&G, Social Influence Theory asserts that the richness, utility and effectiveness of a medium are determined by the social interaction of audience members, essentially: perceptions of the value of a given media are determined by one’s most strongly tied social group. The high value placed on text messaging by college-aged populations may indicate its status as a rich medium and therefore predict its perceived utility and preferred use.

A final CMC theory that is particularly useful in its application to modern communications is the Hyperpersonal Model. This model seeks to explain how users form
impressions of their communication partners by examining the ways CMC affects “cognitive and communication processes related to message construction and reception” (Walther, 2011). The model identifies four influential components of the communication process: 1. receiver processes, 2. effects among message senders, 3. characteristics of the channel, and 4. effects of feedback. On the part of the message receivers, CMC users may tend to “exaggerate the attributes of the message sender” (Walther, 2011). These exaggerated attributes tend to be favorable. Rather than delay forming an impression of a communication partner, users supplement their own conjecture to take the place of missing or omitted information. This omission is not surprising nor uncommon, as text-based CMC allows senders to selectively self-present. The visual anonymity associated with these media provides senders the opportunity to carefully construct messages that portray themselves in a favorable light, which in turn promotes positive reactions from receivers. Channel characteristics, especially the asynchronous nature of many CMC mediums allows for a further departure from traditional communication norms. Unlike face-to-face communication, CMC users have the ability to edit, revise and refine their messages, from content to word choice, before ever involving their communication partner. Users capitalize upon this ability to ensure that their message reflects desired intentions and impressions (Walther, 2011). The last dimension of the hyperpersonal model is feedback. Here, the theory suggests that the combination of carefully crafted messages, selective self-presentation and idealized impressions serves to compound upon itself to magnify the dynamics of each component. Senders craft preferential versions of themselves while communicating. Receivers are receptive to this favorable image and supplement it with an idealized impression of their own, responding with appropriate positive sentiment.
Thereafter, every instance of communication serves to further promote preferential reactions (Walther, 2011).

CMC has the distinct advantage over unmediated communications of smoothing over awkwardness, interruptions and other “undesirable interaction behaviors” (Walther, 2011). While a too-long pause may disrupt the flow of communication face-to-face, it may be easily managed and dismissed through CMC mediums. It is far less damning to send a quick text apology (“I didn’t see your message!”) than to explain to a present and irritated partner that you’d become momentarily too distracted by the hunky waiter, and could he please repeat himself?

What is perhaps most interesting about computer mediated communications, in light of the deception made possible in a media marked by omission, is the extent to which users are willing to disclose. Remarkably, disclosures of CMC users tend to be more intimate than their face-to-face counterparts (Walther, 2011). Users are emboldened by the medium: hidden behind a screen, they feel comfortable sharing more readily and intimately.

Simultaneously enhanced and selective self-disclosure, the lack of immediate demand for response (asynchronicity) and the capacity for editing and revision of communications each hold varied implications when applied to drunk texting. Armed with auto-correct and the ability to reread and revise a text message, drunks may be inclined to censor their own communications, perhaps to disguise their own intoxication. In another case, intoxicated, affectionate individuals might send a text messages to non-present friends (“Miss youuuu!”) in the wee hours of the morning, knowing that their otherwise intrusive communication does not demand a response until morning.
Methodology

This study addresses two research questions regarding drunk texting in the college population:

Research Question 1: What motivates undergraduates’ drunk texting behavior?

Research Question 2: What is the significance of text messaging as the medium?

Participants

During the spring of 2014, a convenience sample taken online and in three communications classes resulted in 63 responses. Participants were required to be students currently pursuing an undergraduate degree who had sent or received at least one drunk text. A small number of age outliers (non-traditional students) and individuals who did not text or drink self-excluded, while five more were excluded by the researcher, resulting in a sample size of 58. The sample was comprised of 26% men (n=15) and 74% women (n=43). The vast majority of respondents (n=54, 94%) were Caucasian, while the remaining 6% (n=4) included African American and Hispanic/Latino respondents. The mean age of respondents was 20.7 years.

Procedures

A ten question survey was modeled after Ferris and Kleman’s 2008 study examining drunk dialing motivations. The survey was open-ended to allow for as much flexibility in responses as possible. After providing informed consent, respondents answered questions regarding the frequency of their drunk dialing texting. For the purpose of this study, drunk texting was defined as “a text message sent while intoxicated that one would not have sent while sober”. The remaining questions addressed the motives behind drunk texting, asking participants to describe occasions when they had sent or received a drunk text, and to
indicate the motives they believe had prompted these communications. Departing from Ferris and Kleman’s original instrument, a final question asked respondents why they believed they had chosen text messaging over some other medium.

Data Analysis

The basis of this quantitative study is the use of open and axial coding to analyze, label, categorize and connect survey responses into specific themes. For this study, these themes represent distinct motives for drunken texting.

Through the process of open coding, data are broken down by “asking simple questions such as who, what, when, where, why and how” (Pandit, 1996). Data are then compared for similarities and grouped under the same conceptual label. Axial coding goes one step further by taking these fractured categories and making connections between them. These methods of coding have their basis in Glaser and Strauss’s Grounded Theory, where open and axial coding form the basis for theory generation. The hallmark of Grounded Theory is continuous comparative analysis, a process wherein data is classed into various comparison groups to be evaluated and tested against one another.

Because this study is exploratory in nature, analysis falls shy of fully implementing Glaser and Strauss’s theory, in that no definitive explanation or theory for the phenomenon of drunk texting is offered.

Results

In addressing Research Question 1, respondents’ motives revealed seven themes: Entertainment, Coordination, Confession of Emotion, Lack of Accountability, Lowered Inhibitions, Sexuality and Social Upkeep.
Entertainment is defined as drunk texting to amuse oneself or others. Coordination includes facilitating rides and meetings, as well as information seeking. Confession of Emotion is defined as drunk texting to share feelings with others. Lack of Accountability refers to the idea that intoxicated individuals are less responsible for their actions. Lowered Inhibitions is defined by the lowered reservations and regard for consequences of intoxicated individuals. Sexuality includes participants who drunk text to flirt, initiate sex or exchange salacious photos. Individuals who drunk text to reach out to non-present others or reminisce with old friends are motivated by Social Upkeep. A table of these themes, along with examples of each, may be found on page 37.

These motives parallel those found in Ferris and Kleman’s 2008 taxonomy, though there is some deviation in categorization. Boredom for example, has been absorbed into Entertainment, while Homophily/Reciprocity, Reconnection and Relational Maintenance have all been combined under Social Upkeep.

Examining Research Question 2 resulted in four distinct motives amongst respondents: Convenience, Security, Censorship and Privacy.

Participants who drunk text because their phone is always with them, because it is a familiar medium or because it is quick, unobtrusive and uninvolved are motivated by Convenience. Security includes individuals who drunk text to avoid face-to-face confrontations or who are emboldened by the medium. Censorship is defined by the selective presentation of self and editing of messages while intoxicated. Privacy refers to the ability of intoxicated individuals to send texts discreetly, without the risk of eavesdroppers or prying eyes.
Where open coding revealed eleven distinct themes, axial coding grouped these eleven into three overarching motivations: relationship, technological availability and intoxication. The relationships between these three motives are illustrated in Figure 1 (located on page 38). In some cases, only one of these motives is necessary to prompt drunk texting behavior—others require two or three. For example: alcohol itself is sufficient to reduce inhibitions and limit accountability. Confession of emotion, however, is the result of relationships and intoxication coalescing; while intoxication provides the courage to confront and confess, it is the circumstances of a drunk texter’s relationship with their communication partner that allows for emotions to have been suppressed in the first place.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to reveal the motivations behind undergraduate students’ drunk texting behavior, while also addressing the significance of text messaging as a medium.

In comparison to Ferris and Kleman’s 2008 study, the motivations behind drunk dialing and drunk texting are nearly identical. From this, it can be concluded than many of the motivations behind intoxicated communication are exclusive of medium. These tendencies are explained by Alcohol Myopia Theory: alcohol lowers inhibitions and increases the extremeness of reactions. Intoxicated individuals (in the presence of salient provoking cues) are more likely to confess suppressed emotion, reach out to friends they are reminded of, and disregard consequence in favor of immediate satisfaction.

Medium-specific motives behind drunk texting, however, prove unique and reveal how uses and gratifications sought by users influence media choice.
Privacy is an expected and unsurprising motive: users appreciate the ability to keep their conversations covert. Text messaging avoids the possibility of eavesdroppers listening in on a call, and is less public than interaction on social media. Given the oftentimes sensitive nature of drunken disclosures, this inclination towards discretion is to be expected.

Convenience is another common and predictable theme: undergrads are accustomed to being constantly within arm’s reach of their phones. They send more text messages per day than any other age group, and are wholly familiar with the medium. Respondents referred to text messaging as the “quickest, easiest and most common” form of communication available at their disposal. It was also described as informal (allowing for natural language), unobtrusive, and requiring less commitment than other mediums. This familiarity and habitual use brings with it the complication of deprivation theory: are ease of use and familiarity motivation enough to merit informed use, or do students simply text so often that they are dependent upon the medium? This complication raises another question: can intoxicated users be considered active and aware choosers of media, which is the base assumption of uses and gratifications theory? Alcohol Myopia Theory explains that intoxication limits cognitive processing, which could suggest that drunk texters are unable to make fully informed choices about their media selection. The effect of diminishing cognitive facilities on reasoned choices should be considered in magnitudes of scale: an individual who has had only one or two drinks possesses faculty enough to be considered an active audience member, while an individual who has consumed seven or eight alcoholic beverages is far less reliable.
Censorship offers a unique perspective on the preference of text messaging over traditionally richer mediums. Participants described the ability to “disguise how drunk you are” as a benefit of the medium. Users’ familiarity with text messaging, the auto-correct function and the ability to revise, rewrite, refine or reconsider a message’s content and syntax all provide opportunities for intoxicated individuals to carefully self-present and deliver an intentional message. Of course, one’s level of intoxication may inhibit the ability to critically edit a text. However, it may be still be easier to disguise intoxication via a mediated, text-based medium than face-to-face. Consider that typos may be more innocently dismissed than ruddy cheeks, slurred speech and an unsteady gait. The desire to conceal ones’ drunkenness can be explained by motives in the first portion of the study. Respondents described numerous situations wherein being drunk allowed them to share feelings and confess attractions that they felt while sober but were unwilling to disclose, a phenomenon captured by the colloquial phrase “A drunken mind speaks a sober heart”. While alcohol may provide the push needed to share pent-up feelings, such confessions may be easily dismissed by the receiver: “You’re drunk! You don’t know what you’re saying!” Disguising one’s level of intoxication allows the confessor to share their true feelings without complicating the validity of their admission.

Security is another motivation unique to mediated communications: users feel emboldened when interacting with a screen, rather than directly with their communication partner. A number of respondents stated that they preferred texting over other mediums because they do not have to see the face of the person with whom they communicate. The benefits of this separation were highlighted by a number of respondents who claimed that they “didn’t have to guts to call” and that it was “easier to hit send then say something out
loud”. Texting was described as less personal and less meaningful than more direct communication.

Another unique aspect of this motivation was the idea that text messaging provided an extra layer of protection by virtue of its limitations. Respondents explained that texts could be more easily misinterpreted, allowing for an “out” in the event a partner responds unfavorably. In the absence of facial expression, tone, and other non-verbal cues, angry outbursts or emotional confessions are more easily dismissed as a failure of the medium to convey a sender’s actual intent. Though lack of clarity is hardly ever considered a benefit to a communication medium, intoxicated individuals seem to appreciate the ability to retract a message without being held accountable for its content.

Although a majority of participant responses correspond neatly to the eleven themes presented here, two outlier motivations challenged such easy categorization: “To incite jealousy,” and “to get attention”. Both of these motives suggest a drunk texter’s desire to confirm their own self-worth. If this external validation relates to reputation and image, these motives could be classed as social upkeep, wherein drunk texters seek to confirm that people in their social network view them as desirable.

While considering the implications of text messaging as a medium, it is vital to consider the circumstances that allow for drunk texting to occur: the coinciding of intoxication, technological availability and relationships. These three factors create a “perfect storm”, wherein users have both the desire and ability to communicate while drinking. The portability of communications technology, the availability of alcohol on college campuses (note: the average age of respondents falls below the legal drinking age in United States), and alcohol’s ability to intensify the extremeness of our reactions all
combine to create an environment ideal for regrettable communication. Regret does indeed seem to be a common theme among drunk texters. Past the qualifying definition of drunk texting (messages that one would not have sent while sober), many respondents indicated that they were embarrassed of their own drunken outbursts, or made uncomfortable by the admissions of others. While constant technological availability is oftentimes considered a benefit of modern society, the ability for such around-the-clock connection may in fact be a hindrance when it allows us to reach out in cases where we probably should not.

Limitations

In considering additional research into the field of drunk texting, it is useful to consider the limitations of this study.

The relatively small sample size of this study, paired with a greater representation of women than men may limit the scope of responses.

Additionally, this survey relied heavily upon self-report of respondents. The basic assumption behind the theory of Uses and Gratifications calls into question whether intoxicated individuals can be considered active audience members. It may be useful to further research the extent to which alcohol limits the ability to recall motives and reasoning.

Implications for Future Research

Fortunately, the limited scope of existing research on the phenomenon of drunk texting allows for countless opportunities for further investigation and research. Distinctions in motivations between men and women may be investigated. Additional considerations might include the effect of alcohol consumption frequency on drunk texting, and the implication of preferred media on drunken communications.
As communications technologies continue to streamline, it is vital to evaluate audience perception of separation of media, as well as the relative richness of media. Preferences for media use, as well as gratifications sought may deviate from the expected if users place emphasis on characteristics not considered benefits of traditional media. Additionally, as the separation between media continues to blur (consider that Google provides—among countless others—applications for instant messaging, text message proxy services, email, a social network, video chatting, voice calling and mobile operating systems), it becomes necessary to identify where audiences differentiate between media. Are mediums so different if a user is able to access their text message logs through email, or make a voice call on the computer? Understanding user perceptions allows us to make informed choices about the media that so significantly impacts our daily lives.
Works Cited


Appendix

Questionnaire

The purpose of this study is to gain understanding of undergraduate students’ drunk texting motives. No information linking individuals to specific responses will be shared or publicized. If you have never sent or received a drunk text, or would prefer not to participate in this study, you are under no obligation to continue and are welcome to leave any or all survey questions blank.

For the purpose of this study, “drunk text” refers to a text message sent while intoxicated that one may not have sent while sober.

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to the researcher at any time during or after the administration of this survey.

Researchers: Alexandra Kilgore
Email: amk7707@rit.edu
Phone: 716-207-0414
Questionnaire

For the purpose of this study, “drunk text” refers to a text message sent while intoxicated that one would not have sent while sober.

Instructions: Please recall all occasions on which you have sent or received a drunk text.

1. Have you ever sent or received a drunk text?  Yes  No
2. How many times per month, on average, do you send drunk texts?  ______
3. How many times per month, on average, do you receive drunk texts?  ______

4. Please describe at least two occasions on which you have sent or received a drunk text. You are welcome to include as many occasions as come to mind:

5. Please list all possible reasons you believe you may have sent a drunk text:
6. Please list all possible reasons you believe others had for sending you a drunk text:

7. Please list all possible reasons you believe you have sent or received a drunk text, as opposed to using another medium (phone call, social media message, instant message, video call, etc.):
Demographics

Age: ____

Sex: Male    Female    Other    Prefer not to answer

Ethnicity:

☐ White
☐ Hispanic or Latino
☐ Black or African American
☐ Native American or American Indian
☐ Asian / Pacific Islander
☐ Other: ________________________
☐ Prefer not to answer

Thank you for your time and participation. Any questions, comments, concerns or feedback may be directed to the researcher, whose contact information is available on the first page of this survey.
### Table of Themes

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entertainment</strong></td>
<td>Drunk texting to amuse oneself and others</td>
<td>Sharing stories, alleviating boredom, reaching out “just to talk”, gossiping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coordination</strong></td>
<td>Drunk texting to facilitate meetings and seek information</td>
<td>Arranging rides, coordinate meetings, extending invitations, locating friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confession of Emotion</strong></td>
<td>Drunk texting to share feelings with others</td>
<td>Admitting attraction, expressing pent up anger, frustration or upset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of Accountability</strong></td>
<td>Drunk texting because alcohol lessens responsibility for one's actions</td>
<td>Allowing intoxication to take the blame for/excuse one’s actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lowered Inhibitions</strong></td>
<td>Drunk texting because one's regard for consequence is diminished</td>
<td>Feeling more confident while drinking, disregarding the implications of one’s actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexuality</strong></td>
<td>Drunk texting with sexual intentions</td>
<td>Exchanging salacious pictures, propositioning potential partners, flirting, attempting to “hook-up”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Upkeep</strong></td>
<td>Drunk texting to interact with one's social network</td>
<td>Reaching out to non-present others, reminiscing with old friends, expressing affection, responding to messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Convenience</strong></td>
<td>Drunk texting because it is quick, familiar and easily accessible</td>
<td>Sending messages because one’s phone is within reach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Security</strong></td>
<td>Drunk texting because one is emboldened by the medium</td>
<td>Gaining confidence from the lack of face-to-face interaction, “hiding behind a screen”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Censorship</strong></td>
<td>Drunk texting to share only specific information</td>
<td>Disguising drunkenness, editing messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Privacy</strong></td>
<td>Drunk texting to keep messages private</td>
<td>Sending messages discreetly</td>
</tr>
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Figure 1