ARE YOU THERE? DO YOU CARE?: HOW PERCEIVED TIME LENGTH OF TEXT MESSAGE RESPONSES EFFECTS ONES PERCEPTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

By

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A Paper submitted
In partial fulfillment of the
Bachelor of Science degree
In Communication (Advertising & Public Relations)

Degree Awarded:
May 23, 2014
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“ARE YOU THERE? DO YOU CARE? HOW PERCEIVED TIME LENGTH OF TEXT MESSAGE RESPONSE TIME EFFECTS ONES PERCEPTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP”

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The purpose of this study is to investigate if both message response time and the ability of knowing when someone has read a message and how long it takes for the response effects how one perceives the relationship in aspects of trust, interest, honesty, sincerity and getting along.

The methodology used for the study was a convenience sample of 115 participants. An online survey was created and posted to an online social media website. There were four different versions of the survey and each consisted of a text conversation, a series of Likert scale questions and a series of demographic questions.

The study found that perceptions of relationships are generally more positive with quicker response times than longer response times.
Introduction

You send someone a message and they respond in two minutes. What do you think? You send someone a message and they respond in seven hours. What do you think? You send someone a message and you’re aware they have read it and they respond in one minute. Now what do you think? You send someone a message and you’re aware that they have read it but they respond three hours later. What now? I’m sure many of us prefer a quick response versus a lengthy one, and I’m sure many of us like the accessibility of knowing when our message has been read or opened. But do we react differently to the respondent or do we perceive the relationship or situation differently if it’s the latter?

In present day society, text messaging and smart phones have made messaging, in both texting and email outlets, extremely easy and accessible, and one might wonder if response time is actually a significant factor in messaging.

Many researchers have been interested in and looked at smart phone usage and the phenomenon of texting. Tulane and Beckert (2013) concluded that almost all teenagers use text messaging on their cell phones and it is a significant factor in an adolescent’s connection to their generation. They say that adolescents also consider texting as their primary source of communication, which could be a reason why people rely on their text messages to keep their relationship afloat. This study will examine the perceptions one has of a relationship based on response time and length of time between the viewing of a message and the response.
Literature Review

Smart phone and texting usage has been a popular topic for researchers, and lots of people are interested in finding out why computer-mediated communication has nearly taken over, and why so many people rely on texting to maintain relationships. Researchers also wonder how different people react to certain texting situations, and how texting has changed today’s society. The Hyperpersonal Model is a theory that relates well to the research regarding the texting phenomenon. This model was proposed by Walther (1996) and it states that computer-mediated communication (known as CMC) has progressed through three phases: impersonal, to interpersonal to hyperpersonal. It started as impersonal because CMC was mostly used for connecting large computers with one another to communicate very simple messages or emergency information across large distances. It then progressed to interpersonal when it was being used more and more on a daily basis for relaying daily messages. Lastly, CMC evolved into being hyperpersonal because it is said to surpass the affection and emotional level of face-to-face communication because of the amount of disclosure and the ability to edit self-presentation. Walther believes that CMC can exceed face-to-face communication. He argues this because it has communication advantages such as edited self-presentation, connection to other media outlets, and that greater levels of intimacy can be achieved because there is a higher likelihood of disclosure. Walther’s study (1996) builds on prior research done by Lea and Spears (1992; Spears and Lea, 1992) who predict that in the absence of face-to-face cues and prior personal
knowledge of the person, whatever subtle social context cues that appear in CMC have
great value. This relates to the question of how response time may affect the perceived
meaning of the nonverbal signal and the effect the message response time has on the
relationship.

Chenault (1998) suggests that emotion is present in CMC and it is unavoidable
because people bring their real-life problems and personalities with them wherever they
go. The study states that many prior researchers made assumptions while studying
CMC and assume that CMC relationships are casual, temporary, false and lack
emotion. But as relationships grow and progress into more serious relationships, they
“gradually move toward deeper areas of their mutual personalities through the use of
words…” (Altman and Taylor, 1973) which cannot be avoided in text. Therefore, there is
much disclosure in CMC, and it is not limited to face-to-face interaction.

Jansen and Janssen (2013) look closely at how bad news is perceived based on
the channel it is received. They look at e-mail (CMC) versus voicemail. The study found
that messages with an indirect structure, an explanation followed by the bad news, was
more valued than a direct message, bad news followed by an explanation. The indirect
structure is preferred by CMC. Similarly, Walther (2007) states that users exploit the
technological aspects of CMC in order to enhance the message they plan on sending in
order for a good impression and to facilitate the desired relationship. The research also
examined the different aspects the writer took into account while writing the message
such as message composing time, language, sentence complexity, tone, and the
relationship level with the receiver. Paltoglou (2013) considered emotional responses to
long, informal text and predicted the emotional responses of online communication on the dimensions of valence and arousal.

Morey (2011) conducted an online survey of undergraduates in dating relationships and examined how attachment was related to communication technology use within their intimate relationship. The participants reported on their attachment style and the frequency of the relationship communication through all outlets including in person, phone call, texting, and social media sites. Texting was the most frequent medium of communication with the participants. CMC was linked to positive relationship qualities, but once accounting for attachment, only moderate effects were found.

As far as studies that looked at not only the phenomena of texting, but actually delved into CMC and message response times, Kalman, Ravid, Raban and Rafaeli (2006) conducted a study that investigated response latencies in computer-mediated communication by analyzing messages in three data sets. They examined email responses by corporate employees, responses from university students in online course discussion groups, and responses to public online postings on a commercial information market. When looking at recorded emails of 144 employees from the Enron Corporation (business people), they focused on the timestamp of the original email subtracted from the timestamp of the email’s response. For this study, they only looked at emails that received responses. They collected 15,815 response latencies. The second data set was university forums (students) and they collected data from eight regular semester and four summer semesters from 1999 to 2002 and collected 115,416 response latencies. For the third data set, they collected 40,072 responses on “Google Answers”
(varied Internet users) where certified responders provide paid answers to questions posted by the users. They collected these latencies over a period of 29 months from 2002-2004. They used a binning method and put all the response latencies into bins and plotted them on a log-log graph and did a regression analysis. The study found that the Enron emails had an average response latency of 28.76 hours, the university forum had an average response latency of 23.52 hours, and the Google Answers had an average response latency of 1.58 hours. The distribution analysis of all three of these outlets showed a similar distribution of response latencies based on the average response latencies of the individual data sets. Therefore the findings point to common chronemic characteristics of asynchronous CMC.

Walther and Tidwell (1995) did a similar study that looked at CMC, which lacks nonverbal cues, and how it affects the nature of interpersonal interaction via the medium. The study states, though, that CMC can convey nonverbal cues in terms of chronemics that can affect interpersonal perceptions of CMC senders and receivers. They, too, looked at email timestamps and assessed two time variables: the time of day a message was sent and the time lag until a reply was received. The subjects of this study were 160 regular email users. The subjects filled out paper questionnaires and the respondents read and reacted to one of four different version of a pair of email transcripts. The first page had the messages and a manipulation check where the respondents answered questions about the authorship of the messages (when the message was sent and how much time passed before the response). The third through final pages of the questionnaire had a 5 interval Likert scale designed to assess the
perception of the sender’s or responder’s behavior in aspects of several sub dimensions of intimacy and affection. The data yielded three factors in order to obtain the best empirical definition of the potential relationship. The reliabilities were: dominance (assertion and dominating the conversation and the relationship), equality (treating your partner as an equal), and attempted influence (such as persuasion, seeking favor and gaining approval). The investigation found that there is a three-way interaction between message content, time sent (time of day), and time replied affecting intimacy. They found that not only does the time of day the sender sends the first message affect the perception of the sender’s intimacy, but so does that of a prompt or a slow response. The study also states that the effect of reply speed along with message content and time of origination also affected the interpretations of the messages. It was predicted that a nighttime message would be considered highly intimate, but results showed that it was only considered intimate if the message was associated with a slow reply, and then a daytime message with a quick reply was considered more intimate than a daytime message with a slow reply. Also, the sender was considered more influential if the message sent at night had an immediate response. Overall, a message with a slow reply is considered to be more intimate.

The 1987 study by Burgoon and Hale created a sequence of 12 characteristics believed to be exchanged in interpersonal messages that define the relationship at hand. The 12 factors are (1) dominance and submission, (2) emotional arousal, (3) composure-noncomposure, (4) similarity and dissimilarity, (5) formality-informality, (6) task vs. social orientation, (7) intimacy and subcomponents of intimacy, (8) depth-
familiarity, (9) affection/attraction, (10) inclusion-exclusion, (11) trust, and (12) intensity of involvement. Graduate students from a seminar in relational communication contributed items (messages) from relational partners that represented statements they could make to one another. The resultant pool of 32 items were put on a Likert scale with a range from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The subjects were broken into two groups: respondents and observers. The respondents were asked to say what types of messages (verbal and nonverbal) they thought the other person was trying to communicate such as “He/she is interested in talking to me” and the observers were asked to watch one participant and rate what messages (verbal and nonverbal) they thought the participant had communicated to their partner. The study found that as the violator’s nonverbal (CMC usage) behavior became more immediate (quick responses), the respondents rated the violator as more intimate, involved inclusive and less detached.

Based on all the prior relatable research that has been conducted, I wish to conduct research of my own and use the secondary research given to consider text response time of the texts being sent and how the length of time before the response as well as the length of time between viewing the message and the response time effects ones perception of the relationship.

This study aims to answer the research questions as follows:

• RQ1. How does time length of text message response effect ones perception of a relationship?
RQ2. Does the length of time between the read time of a message and the message response effect one's perception of a relationship.

Methodology

In order to answer these research questions, a survey was conducted with the independent variables being message response time and message read time and the dependent variable being the perception of the relationship. The participants of this study were chosen by convenience sample. The study was conducted online through an online survey creator and was posted to an online social media website.

Procedure

Participants were asked to choose one of four survey versions to complete. All four versions have the same conversations as well as the same Likert scale questions. Version one’s (see appendix 1.1 for survey versions) conversation has no read receipt and has quick responses and version two has no read receipt with long response times. Version three has a read receipt with quick response times and version four has the read receipt with long response times. After viewing the selected version, participants were taken to the survey and asked a series of questions regarding the viewed conversation.

Measures

There were five Likert scale questions asked on each survey version. The participants were asked to answer these Likert scale questions ranging from the choices of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. The first scale asked
if the participants thought that Lynn and Mark, the two people in the texting conversation are honest with one another. The second asked if Mark and Lynn are sincere with one another. A third asked if Mark if Lynn are getting along. The fourth asked if Mark and Lynn are interested in talking with one another. Finally, the last asked if Mark and Lynn trust one another. In order to easily measure these results, a Chronbach’s Alpha test was run to measure the internal consistency of the items being measured on the scale. The items measuring honesty, sincerity, getting along, interest and trust were combined to form one measure of individual’s perception of relationship ($\alpha=.864$).

Responses to the questions were a variety of Likert-scale responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree after the participants has viewed the short texting conversation between a male and a female who are in an intimate relationship. They were also asked demographic questions, but the respondents remained completely anonymous.

The sample size for this investigation was 160 people, but due to skewed responses, it was necessary to take a random sample of the responses for survey version three in order to even out the survey version responses. The results of this study only used 115 of the responses- 34 responses for survey one, 23 responses for survey 2, 34 responses for survey three and 24 responses for survey four. The majority of the respondents were ages 21 and 22 (19.1% each) but the respondent ages ranged from 18 to 75. The females made up 88.7% of the respondents and 87.8 were Caucasian, 2.6% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.7% were Hispanic or Latino, and 3.5% chose not to answer their ethnicity.
Results

An independent-samples t-test was calculated to examine how time length of text message response effected ones perceptions of a relationship. A significant difference was found (t(3.00 = .004, p < .05) such that “Quick Response/No Read Receipt” (M=3.69, SD=.60) was greater than “Long Response/No Read Receipt” (M=3.15, SD=.73). This means that those who viewed survey one (quick response times, no read receipt) saw the relationship as more positive than those who viewed survey two (long response times, no read receipt) in terms of perception of relationship.

An independent-samples t-test was calculated to examine how the length of time between the read time of a message and the message response effected ones perceptions of a relationship. A significant difference was found (t(2.432) = .018, p < .05) such that “Quick Response/Read Receipt” (M=3.39, SD=.62) was greater than “Long Response/Read Receipt” (M=2.95, SD=.78). This means that those who viewed survey three (short response times with read receipt) saw the relationship more positively than those who viewed survey four (long responses with read receipt) in terms of perception of relationship.

Discussion

Summary

This study found that the participants who viewed “Quick Response/No Read Receipt” had a more positive perception of the relationship in aspects of honesty,
sincerity, getting along, interest and trust than the participants who viewed “Long Response/No Read Receipt”. Therefore those who viewed “Long Response/No Read Receipt” had a more negative perception of the relationship than the survey that had quick text message response times.

The study also found that the participants who viewed “Quick Response/Read Receipt” had a more positive perception of the relationship in aspects of honesty, sincerity, getting along, interest and trust than the participants who viewed “Long Response/Read Receipt. Therefore those who viewed “Long Response/Read Receipt” had a more negative perception of the relationship than the survey that had the quick text message response times with read receipts.

What one may conclude from these findings is that when communicating with others through a computer mediated outlet such as texting, emails, online discussions or forums, the perception of the relationship of those communicating is being judged based on time. Not only has it been found that the length of time between responses comes in to play, but so does the length of time from when the message has actually been viewed and when the response is sent (if applicable).

*Future Research*

For future researchers, it is suggested that real life conversations be gathered and used for the survey. It would also be beneficial to investigate and compare different outlets such as email, texting, online forums etc. as seen with the study conducted by Kalman, Ravid, Raban and Rafaeli (2006). With doing this, you could investigate if these different outlets have different perceptions of relationship based on response time.
and if those times vary based on the outlet being used. Future researchers may also be interested in looking at the correlation coefficient to determine if there is a stronger correlation in the perception of relationship with messages that have a read receipt/the accessibility of knowing when the message has been viewed versus those that do not. A further area of study could be to investigate the impact that gender has on response time and relationship perception.

Appendix

Appendix 1.1

*Focus group 1/Survey 1 – “Quick Response/No Read Receipt”*

Lynn and Mark have been dating for two years. Below is a text message conversation between the two of them:

Mark: So how is your day off going? **Delivered (2:35PM)**
Lynn: It’s pretty good. Kinda boring **Delivered (2:37PM)**
Mark: Well I’m excited to see you later **Delivered (2:41PM)**
Lynn: Me too **Delivered (2:44PM)**

Based on the above conversation:

Mark and Lynn are honest with one another
Strongly Agree_____ Agree_____ Neutral_____ Disagree_____ Strongly Disagree_____

Mark and Lynn are sincere with one another
Strongly Agree_____ Agree_____ Neutral_____ Disagree_____ Strongly Disagree_____

Mark and Lynn are getting along
Strongly Agree_____ Agree_____ Neutral_____ Disagree_____ Strongly Disagree_____

Mark and Lynn are interested in talking with one another
Strongly Agree_____ Agree_____ Neutral_____ Disagree_____ Strongly Disagree_____

Mark and Lynn trust one another
Lynn and Mark have been dating for two years. Below is a text message conversation between the two of them:

Mark: So how is your day off going? Delivered (2:35PM)
Lynn: It’s pretty good. Kinda boring Delivered (5:02PM)
Mark: Well I’m excited to see you later Delivered (5:03PM)
Lynn: Me too Delivered (6:05PM)

Based on the above conversation:

Mark and Lynn are honest with one another
Strongly Agree____ Agree____ Neutral____ Disagree____ Strongly Disagree____

Mark and Lynn are sincere with one another
Strongly Agree____ Agree____ Neutral____ Disagree____ Strongly Disagree____

Mark and Lynn are getting along
Strongly Agree____ Agree____ Neutral____ Disagree____ Strongly Disagree____

Mark and Lynn are interested in talking with one another
Strongly Agree____ Agree____ Neutral____ Disagree____ Strongly Disagree____

Mark and Lynn trust one another
Strongly Agree____ Agree____ Neutral____ Disagree____ Strongly Disagree____

Your age________
Your gender______________
Your ethnicity__________________
Mark: So how is your day off going? (2:35PM) **Read at 2:36PM**
Lynn: It’s pretty good. Kinda boring (2:37PM) **Read at 2:39PM**
Mark: Well I’m excited to see you later (2:39PM) **Read at 2:41PM**
Lynn: Me too (2:43PM) **Read at 2:44PM**

Based on the above conversation:

Mark and Lynn are honest with one another
Strongly Agree_____ Agree_____ Neutral_____ Disagree_____ Strongly Disagree_____

Mark and Lynn are sincere with one another
Strongly Agree_____ Agree_____ Neutral_____ Disagree_____ Strongly Disagree_____

Mark and Lynn are getting along
Strongly Agree_____ Agree_____ Neutral_____ Disagree_____ Strongly Disagree_____

Mark and Lynn are interested in talking with one another
Strongly Agree_____ Agree_____ Neutral_____ Disagree_____ Strongly Disagree_____

Mark and Lynn trust one another
Strongly Agree_____ Agree_____ Neutral_____ Disagree_____ Strongly Disagree_____

Your age_________
Your gender__________________
Your ethnicity________________

Focus group 4/Survey 4 – “Long Response/Read Receipt”

Lynn and Mark have been dating for two years. Below is a text message conversation between two of them:

Mark: So how is your day off going? (2:35PM) **Read at 2:37PM**
Lynn: It’s pretty good. Kinda boring (4:56PM) **Read at 4:57PM**
Mark: Well I’m excited to see you later (5:01PM) **Read at 5:04PM**
Lynn: Me too (7:47PM) **Read at 7:50PM**

Based on the above conversation:

Mark and Lynn are honest with one another
Strongly Agree_____ Agree_____ Neutral_____ Disagree_____ Strongly Disagree_____
Mark and Lynn are sincere with one another
Strongly Agree____  Agree____  Neutral____  Disagree____  Strongly Disagree____

Mark and Lynn are getting along
Strongly Agree____  Agree____  Neutral____  Disagree____  Strongly Disagree____

Mark and Lynn are interested in talking with one another
Strongly Agree____  Agree____  Neutral____  Disagree____  Strongly Disagree____

Mark and Lynn trust one another
Strongly Agree____  Agree____  Neutral____  Disagree____  Strongly Disagree____

Your age_________
Your gender________________
Your ethnicity________________

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DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.019


