y do tngrs luv 2 txt msg?¹

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Abstract: "Text messaging" — using a mobile phone to send a message — has changed how teenagers use wireless phones to communicate and coordinate. While the media reports rapid growth in text messaging, less is known about why teenagers have adopted it. In this paper, we report findings from a study of teenagers’ text messaging practices. Specifically, we show that teenagers use text messages to: arrange and adjust times to talk, coordinate with friends and family, and chat. Moreover, we argue that the reasons teenagers find text messaging quick, cheap, and easy to use, are grounded in their social context. Finally, we show that teenagers encounter three problems when text messaging: understanding evolving language, determining intent from content, and addressing messages.

Introduction

In the UK, many people call friends and family on Christmas Day to wish them seasonal greetings. Typically, this leads to heavier than normal call volumes. Last year something different happened on December 25th: mobile phone networks experienced heavy loads. It was not voice calls that congested mobile networks but rather text messages creating the heavy volume (Verkaik, 2000).

To many this will not come as a surprise, because “text messaging” is a recent communications phenomenon. Text messaging — using a mobile phone to send a message — has changed mobile phone usage. Originally expensive voice-calling devices, mobiles have become mini-terminals for text-based communications, and

¹ Why do teenagers love to text message?
now something that was originally designed as “spare” bandwidth has become a popular way to interact with others.

In Europe, teenagers have been among the quickest to adopt text messaging. It is a common sight to see teenagers typing away furiously on their mobiles. One type of service plan, known as "pay-as-you-go," has fueled the growth of mobile ownership among teens. Pay-as-you-go plans have three advantages for teenagers: first, they do not require credit checks; second, they help the teenagers manage their expenses because costs are managed up-front through the purchase of vouchers; and third, those vouchers are available everywhere, making it easy for teenagers to get them. As pay-as-you-go plans made mobile phone ownership possible for teenagers, so these teenagers began using text messages to communicate.

The Rise of Text Messaging among Teenagers

Text messaging uses the Short Message Service (SMS) capacity built into the Groupe Spéciale Mobile (GSM) wireless standard (Newton, 2000). Text messages can be up to 160 characters in length and sent from any mobile to any other wireless phone on the GSM network. It is also possible to send text messages from the Internet to mobile phones.

SMS was deployed with the first GSM networks, and the first text messages were sent in the early 1990s. Initially SMS capacity was used infrequently. The explosion in usage came later, as Rautiainen and Kasesniemi (2000) describe in their own study of mobile practices:

A significant change took place in the spring of 1998. Suddenly, instead of talking about calling and changing color covers on their mobiles, all the teenagers wanted to give their views on text messaging. In a few months the number of text messages sent attained the number of calls made and surpassed it. (Rautiainen & Kasesniemi, 2000).

Groups who track SMS usage rates support Rautiainen and Kasesniemi's observation. For example, the Mobile Data Association (2000) — which tracks SMS usage in the United Kingdom (UK) — reports that UK residents sent 90 million text messages in August 1999. One year later, in August 2000, UK residents sent 560 million text messages; by November 2000, it was 680 million. What makes these numbers more significant is that UK residents do not use SMS as frequently as residents of other countries including the Philippines, Finland and Germany.

In Europe, teenagers were among the earliest and biggest users of text messaging. Reports from Scandinavia show that teenagers have adopted text messaging, despite the potential limitations of the system itself, for example, the poor user interface (Ling, 2000; Rautiainen & Kasesniemi, 2000). Media reports confirm this rise in usage, but offer little systematic examination of why teenagers use text messages. Moreover, other than Ling's (2000) usage analysis, research