

Middle Schoolers' Texting Behaviors: A look at Individual Differences and Parental Attachment

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The present study was conducted to assess individual differences in middle schoolers' texting behaviors. Individual difference variables of interest were attachment to parents, gender, and age. Participants were recruited from a public middle school in Florida, and received permission from their parents to participate in this study. Once they provided their assent, they completed several self-reports which assessed the frequency and endorsement of texting behaviors, and their attachment to parents. The texting scale that was included for this study is based on a six sub-type texting scale which was normed on multiple groups of college students in Florida and derived from factor analyses. This scale included sub-types which were not relevant to middle school students (e.g., middle schoolers cannot drive, so questions specific to texting and driving were not included). For this study, the four relevant sub-types were included: (1) Social Connection Texting – texting to socially connect with others (2) Escapist Texting – texting to withdraw from the current environment or social situations, (3) Distracted Texting – texting in environments which distracts the user or others around them, (4) Audacious Texting – texting without regard for social or sexual norms which may be perceived as rude or aggressive. The attachment scale included questions that assess the degree to which participants show mutual trust with their parents and quality communication with parents, but also the degree to which they feel resentment or alienation from their parents. Also, participants were asked about their attitudes regarding parental influence on their technology habits, for example, “My parents ask to see my text messages,” or “If my parents read my text messages, I do not like it.” All research was conducted on-site at the middle school, so as to ensure that parental influence on participant responses was minimal. Results generally indicated that, as middle schoolers felt angrier with or alienated from their parents, they tended to text more across all four sub-types of texting that we measured. Additionally, students who did not like that their parents read their text messages reported higher frequency texting across all four sub-types of texting. Furthermore, female participants, and those higher in class rank (e.g., 8th grade) showed more frequent texting in general. Further analyses indicate that gender was a significant moderator variable for grade level, such that those who were female and higher in class rank tended to report disproportionately high texting frequencies as compared to the rest of the sample. These results provide a glimpse into an under-studied population, with most research gravitating toward problematic topics such as sexting and cyberbullying. Additionally, moderation analyses reveal some distinction among the four sub-types of texting with respect to individual differences, parent attachment, and attitudes toward parental involvement in technology use. Future research may seek to examine these differences in young populations with respect to other kinds of technology, such as video game play or social media use. In sum, this study supports the notion that technology behaviors reveal underlying psychological differences.